

Matter and poverty

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Accumulation of matter is one of the most recognizable signs of poverty. The poor lives close to the earth, this is his only property and he will use it to build his shelters, his rooms, or his utensils. The clay or mud constructions, moulded with a great amount of material, are found in primitive villages, but any situation of extreme poverty will also be also by an accumulation of matter whatever its quality and origin. On the other hand, poor people often have a unique skill for material labour leading to the development of a peculiar constructive technique and craftsmanship. Matter is thus transformed beyond the limits of this strict material condition to become something of a higher lever, something different, an industrial product or even an art work. But poverty can also run the inverse path, that of an activity operating from the manufactured products toward pure material. Poor people try in different ways to obtain manufactured objects or even art works to bring them back to their original material condition, as it happens with gold or silver, to gain an economic profit. A situation of poverty not related with the accumulation of matter seems inconceivable and this is particularly evident in our developed societies, where a beggar is recognized in any street by his pile of clothes, shoes, and any sort of personal property which he moves from one place to the other.

The identification between matter and oppression, when this is a consequence of misery, has appeared in different forms, some as literally as that of the film *Der Golem*, directed in 1920 by Paul Wegener, with the architect Hans Poelzig, the sculptor Marianne Moeschke and the scenographer Karl Richter as stage-managers. In *Der Golem*, the main character, a clay giant, is identified with the small village where the facts occur. This village is built along a narrow main street, where massive buildings with pointed windows and free forms suggest a sort of metamorphosis of their bent façades, their twisted roofs or their unstable towers. The massive, the solid, is a necessary condition for the expression of a mute film where the built landscape must be able to speak as much as the characters. But we find especially in *Golem*, the clay giant, the real capacity of pure matter to become a liberation agent. Matter can be activated to become a living thing, but it can also be deprived of this life and returned to its original inert state. Between these two opposite poles, liberation and oppression, the inhabitants of the village live their lives, in an inexorable circle reproducing once again their conditions of misery and submission. The giant, being originally only a pile of clay, is activated by the word of a wizard and becomes a living creature. But, when he has developed the required task, the aim of the people is to bring him back to his previous state of pure material, in spite of his resistance. The constructions of the poor are always menaced by their own destructions, in an everlasting cycle characteristic of the very condition of poverty. The continuing menace of natural disasters or of those produced by men will annihilate, in one way or another, the work applied over matter to transform it and make it live. And the destruction of life will also annihilate any hope of a final liberation of poverty. There only remains to begin all over again.

Hans Poelzig builds for *Der Golem* a scenography without a precise geographical or historical reference, although clearly evoking medieval or gothic forms. His architecture is grounded in its material condition, so that it can be manipulated and strongly distorted. There is a great difference between the exterior and the interior of the buildings, separated by thick layers of mud shaping the cave-like houses and also the only public area, the meeting place for a population overwhelmed by tyranny and magic. The big arch closing the main street expresses the physical limit of the city, which is also vertically enclosed by the chimneys and the irregular sloped roofs of the buildings. Architecture tries to be the expression of a closed society in which the giant Golem will only momentarily be alive, because that same society will demand and bring to an end that vital impulse to return to the

original inert matter. The man of clay obeyed the orders of his creator, but he will soon stop doing so and according to its inner impulses will wildly walk through the village menacing their inhabitants. A little girl will finally extract the life capsule from the body of the giant and he will lay dead on the ground.

Golem, the man of clay, is a giant and the very bigness of the giant indicates the danger of matter beyond its own dimensional limits, or when matter is not restrained by human will. *Golem*, a creation of man, behaves as an uncontrolled force of nature, as a volcano, a flood, or a storm, which are animate but not living, in Thorstein Veblen's terms. In this sense, the giant is as menacing and as destructive as these natural disasters, which frequently affect to the poorest and vulnerable populations. And in both cases, the accumulation of matter will be the most destructive and uncontrolled agent, as it will annihilate the life of people, their homes, their harvests, and their means of subsistence. Matter will only add more poverty to poverty.

It is a significant fact that many intellectual discourses on modernity identify the concept of modernity with that of a classless society and that, at the same time, invoke poverty as a distinct mark of the new man, free from the servitudes, the forms, and the uses of the past. Thus, Walter Benjamin asserts that the new steel and glass architecture fulfils the expectations of the modern condition as, in his own words, this architecture is the true expression of the new poverty typical of the new civilization and advances the accomplishment of a transparent and classless society. That is, Benjamin appeals to the material condition of architecture and the new materials as distinctive marks of poverty, but a poverty corresponding to the whole society, not only to its lowest and more oppressed levels. Material poverty means also liberation, nor because man has been liberated from his dependence of matter, but because some materials have been substituted by other materials, the opacity and heaviness of clay have been substituted by the lightness of steel and the transparency of glass. The will for comfort characteristic of the past is abandoned as the new poverty must be sober and cold and human habitation is open and transparent, almost naked, as it is equal for any man whatever his social strata. In this way, modern poverty is tied to material, to the new materials, but it is a chosen condition, nor an imposed one, or at least it is accepted as inevitable by the new man.

It is important to notice that the notion of poverty can be found both in the discussions on primitive art and society and in the different approaches on the distinctive features of modernity and that poverty always has to do with matter. Poverty can be either accumulation or deprivation, but in any case it involves an aesthetically positive quality in opposition to the negative character of any sort of wealth; poverty is real and sincere, while wealth is false, deceitful, and useless. Nevertheless, poor people are always willing to emulate and reproduce both the uses and the constructions of the wealthy class. In this is particularly evident in the materials they use, adobe brick walls are substituted by concrete walls, and mud roofs are substituted by wooden structures as a first step in the climbing of social rank, followed by a use of more refined surface materials or any sort of decoration imitated from old models. The qualitative change involved in the so called modern poverty does not only consists in the use of new materials, but in giving up any sort of craftsmanship applied on traditional materials. It also involves the absolute alienation of man and his habitation on which man does not exert any material control, as he has resign craftsmanship in favour of industry. The new poor, as the primitive poor, depends on matter; but he will not be in contact with it, he will not work on it, and what is most important, he will not possess it.

One of the most expressive images of that new modern poverty can be found in an interior by Hannes Meyer

dated in 1926. It consists on a furnished room with a folding chair, a mattress laid on four wooden legs, a gramophone, and two small bookshelves hanging on the wall. Both floor and walls are mere canvas, while the furniture is made of wood, metal or synthetic materials. Hannes Meyer, in an essay written that same year 1926 *“Die Neue Welt”*, says that in the new houses we must use new materials, bare materials such as aluminium, reinforce concrete, glass, linoleum or plastic, without any local or crafty reference, international and industrially produced materials. And, as it is shown in the above mentioned interior, he identifies the house with its components; electric bulbs, folding chairs, rolling tables, bath tubs, and gramophones. Neither personality, nor comfort, nor even soul, are the ultimate purpose of a domestic construction, as they depend on the behaviour of men and not on Persian carpets or paintings on the wall. In this way, as an architect, Meyer expresses his radical answer to the demands of a new society and a new man; he promotes the bareness and industrialization of human habitation, exhibiting both an ethic and an aesthetic of poverty.

Almost at the same time that these ascetic and impersonal interiors were presented as models for the new house, nor only by Hannes Meyer but by Walter Gropius and other members of the Bauhaus, a new and opposite trend worked on the accumulation of materials as an artistic procedure. That is the case of Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbild o Merzbau*, where a series of objects and fragments are piled together to constitute a shapeless ensemble closely tied the personality of its builder. Worthless materials, although charged with echoes or personal experiences, are placed one upon the other to form a pyramid or a grotto in which the distinctive conditions of poverty are also reproduced as an accumulation of any sort of remains. Its antecedent, the so-called *Plasto-Dio-Dada-Drama* by Johannes Baader, exhibited in the Dada Fair of 1920, was a three-dimensional collage made of trash and built with the intention of being an allegory of its own country, Germany, and a parody of the monumental architecture of Russian Constructivism, especially Vladimir Tatlin's Monument to the Third International

Although the claim for a new poverty coming from the intellectual representatives of architectural modernity was made in opposition to the buildings and the interiors of the 19th century bourgeois class, full of expensive materials, wealthy fabrics and works of art, the fact is that this modern poverty is quite different from that real poverty of those condemned to a social exclusion, either for their geographic location or their absolute lack of resources. The achievement of a classless society will be the result of the wealthy voluntarily renouncing to a bourgeois way of life more than of a social progress of the poor, unless a total revolution would destroy all economic differences. Or even more, it will arise from a transformation of the middle-class, as this is the only capable of promoting and assimilating the ethic and aesthetic changes brought by artistic and architectural modernity. Nor the members of the wealthy class, with their privileges and customs, nor the lower class people, preoccupied with the problems of daily subsistence, will yield to the demand for any innovation. Then, the question is why the idea of poverty is considered a mark of the new times, of a classless society, and whether this idea of modern poverty has become a state of mind instead of a mere economic condition, although maintaining the original relationship between matter and poverty.

The coexistence of an accumulative poverty and an ascetic poverty is found in the discourses and also in the works of 20th century avant-gardes. Both the film *Der Golem* and Baader's *Plasto-Dada-Dio-Drama* were made in 1920, and are geographical and historically very close to Hannes Meyer or Walter Gropius's interiors. The accumulation of shapeless and hand-worked matter occurred at the same time than the exhibition of bare and cold materials industrially produced. And in both

cases poverty is invoked as the ultimate reference for those works, intended to be a true expression of their epoch. Within the field of philosophy, Marxists authors defend opposite options concerning the two trends struggling to dominate modernity: functionalism and expressionism. While Benjamin upholds the sobriety, transparency and bareness of an industrially produced architecture, along with Luckács considering expressionism as a decadent movement, Ernst Bloch appreciates the warmth and seclusion as values of expressionist architecture, for him the only architecture with a utopian potential to anticipate the realization of a different and better future.

Beyond the chronological limits of modern manifestos and the dominance of functionalism in modern architecture for some decades, the discourses on poverty as a distinctive condition of the new man and the call for the accomplishment of a classless society came to an end. Nevertheless, although the term poverty ceases to be part of the architects' discourse, its use being restricted to local and particular situations, the influence of the previous debate unconsciously penetrates in the architectural proposals of the second half of the 20th century, both those continuing the modern tradition and those breaking and being critical with modernity. Without this underlying thinking on poverty the work of Buckminster Fuller, Robert Venturi or even Philip Johnson, for instance, would be difficult to understand. And beyond architecture, the discourse on poverty seems to be fundamental for some artists who, as Donald Judd, work in the boundaries of the discipline.

The heritage of modernity compels to accept poverty as a hallmark of the new times and, as Ernst Bloch says, to recognize that poverty is an inevitable condition of the new man, whatever the meaning assigned to the term poverty. From the exhibition of materials in the works of the New Brutalism to the interest in the constructions of the primitive people such as the *Dogon*, from the technological utopias to the new forms of habitation offered by the utopian movements of the sixties, all of them demand from their creators and their public a tacit agreement on poverty as an inevitable and also desirable situation of our world and the world to come. John Cage, taking the musician Erik Satie and the writer Henry David Thoreau as his references, has explicitly formulated the necessity of working from and toward poverty, poverty as the ultimate aim of any artistic activity and also as a state of mind.

To assume that any architectural work is or must be conditioned by a new poverty would mean that we have given up anything related with wealth, luxury, and with superfluous or ostentatious objects. But that is no the case. In the first place, because the two concepts of poverty accuse each other of being a mere disguise of the tastes of ruling class, and in the other hand because both ways of thinking poverty are called to coexist. Architecture has found again immense expressive possibilities in the accumulation of matter and in the exhibition of its physical qualities, both by using natural materials and traditional building methods as exploiting the qualities of industrial materials. But in any case, this poverty expressed in the buildings has nothing to do with the house of man, as it has acquired a collective, a social meaning.

This occurs in many contemporary public buildings which cover their façades and interior spaces with natural materials, but mainly occurs when certain increasingly frequent gatherings of people spontaneously build some sort of instant neighbourhoods resembling the slums of the deprived outskirts of a town, but set up in the most important and visible areas of the city. These places are shaped as the disorganized and amorphous outer districts, making use of any sort of material serving as shelter or identification of their inhabitants. Piles of old boards, canvases or plastic appliances are used to build complex structures full of complicated electrical utilities and

electronic devices or household machinery to bring warmth and comfort to the population settled in them. Cloths are scattered all over the place or hanged to be a protection against the wind, and amidst all this continuous agglomerate the only voids left are those used for circular assemblies.

It is difficult to have a social explanation for this sort of spontaneous settlements as it is difficult to understand them as pure architecture, as pure form, beyond their will to exhibit the most characteristic hallmarks of poverty in the most emblematic areas of the cities. Any protest or demand movement carried on by urban population tends to assume as its physical form and social agglutination these spontaneous camps or neighbourhoods showing the most recognizable signs of poverty, through an accumulation of a great amount of material. This proliferation of urban camps, some temporary but some intended to be permanent, makes evident that social exclusion is no longer an individual question, and that poverty assumed as the ethic of the modern man can not merely be the revolutionary ideal of a few or the anti-materialistic manifesto of an intellectual group. It makes visible the severe conditions of material poverty of an increasing number of human beings, living in so many places of our civilized world.

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MATTER
POVERTY
MATERIAL
ACCUMULATION
MODERNITY
SOCIETY