

BOOK REVIEW

John Shannon Hendrix

Architecture and Psychoanalysis: Peter Eisenman and Jacques Lacan

New York and Bern: Peter Lang, 2006, 252 pp., 26 figs., £23.30

ISBN-10: 0820481718, ISBN-13: 978-0820481715

This book is about interpreting Peter Eisenman's practice, both his texts and design projects, in the light of psychoanalytic theory. Architecture and psychoanalysis are both about structuring experience and situating the subject of perception in a world that makes sense to the subject. Presumably, therefore, a psychoanalytic approach may open up questions that are important for architecture. The reason for writing a book such as this one is to show that Eisenman's practice is a reflection of something deeply human and a reflection of a certain period of twentieth-century thought, in order to attribute to it a certain form of humanism (or anti-humanism) and a place in the edifice of intellectual history.

Architecture and Psychoanalysis: Peter Eisenman and Jacques Lacan draws parallels between key concepts in the writings of Eisenman and Lacan, in the way that Eisenman and Derrida drew parallels in the late 1980s and early 1990s between their own writings. Because Eisenman rarely refers directly to Lacan, the book has two strategies. It either builds bridges indirectly via other thinkers such as Chomsky or Derrida, to whom Eisenman refers, or directly between Lacan's concepts and Eisenman's formal design strategies such as displacement or scaling. For instance, parallels are drawn between Lacan's *objet petit a*, Derrida's *différance* (with an "a"), and Eisenman's "absence of presence"; and between the unconscious (of Freud or Lacan; they are different but not enough to matter in this text), Chomsky's deep grammar and Eisenman's syntax. To do so, Hendrix goes directly to Lacan's most difficult papers (*chapeau*), including "The function and field of speech...", "The agency of the letter...", and "The subversion of the subject...", which constitute Lacan at his most linguistic; and avoids the more accessible Seminars.



ARCHITECTURE AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Peter Eisenman and Jacques Lacan

JOHN SHANNON HENDRIX

So how do we read John Shannon Hendrix? He is incredibly well-read across the history of western philosophy from the pre-Socratics to Hegel, to structuralism, to deconstruction. He sees glittering resemblances wherever he looks. His imagination seems to be captivated by the Same and the Different. But instead of a great cross-disciplinary expedition, we are too often left with simple statements of equivalence. First Hendrix identifies oppositions: Chomsky's surface vs. deep grammar; Lacan's Symbolic vs. Imaginary ego (not an opposition Lacan uses); Freud's conscious vs. unconscious; Cusanus's sensible vs. intelligible worlds; Saussure's signifier vs. signified; and Hegel's particular vs. universal. Then he stacks these oppositions as if deep structure in linguistics corresponds to the unconscious in psychoanalysis. There may be lines of thought that link them, but these have to be argued, not simply stated. Whether the unconscious is like deep structure depends upon how Hendrix works though the unconscious and deep structure. Interdisciplinary arguments are constructed, not natural. These arguments are not like draining the Zuyder Zee and seeing what turns up in the sediment; rather, the relations between the unconscious and deep structure have to be constructed by the author. When you explain an idea by relating it to another, you should extend its reach. Instead, too often we are left with correspondences that are not properly introduced and contextualized; that are hastily stated, often repeated, never explained or illustrated. It is never made clear why they are important either to architecture or psychoanalysis.

Lacan supports his theses on desire, identity, and signification by diagrams that are not mentioned in the text, let alone illustrated. Nor do we learn much about Eisenman's practice. Eisenman's diagrams are referred to but not included. Although the interior of Eisenman's Aronoff Center is illustrated and referred to repeatedly, it is never described; and it is never explained how it invokes the Lacanian gaze or split subject, or even how it instantiates the claims that Eisenman makes of it. Because Hendrix worked in Eisenman's office, we could expect some insight into particular projects. Instead we are told about scaling, displacement, revision, and other recursive design processes as complete abstractions (and informed that these are analogous to dream work, without explaining how dream work works).

These continually repeated equivalences between concepts have the effect of producing a text encrusted with presence, as if Hendrix were trying to render fully present the whole history of western philosophy in the mind of the reader. There is no progression in the text. Nothing is left behind, elided, lost; and nothing new is encountered. When a text is oriented between Derrida (the absence of meaning) and Lacan (the vanishing of the subject), it seems paradoxical that it seems to share with logocentric philosophies the aspirations for full presence.

Lacan insisted that you had to read Freud's text (and presumably Lacan's) as if he were writing about himself. Thus Lacan turned an oft-heard criticism of Freud on its head. Far from reducing its relevance – so Lacan claimed—this subjective reading was the basis for its authenticity and hence the truth and universality of analysis. Only then did a text on subjectivity cease to present the contradiction that it treats its subject matter objectively. All texts are subjective; some mask it better than others. We are never outside our subjectivity, even those who repudiate analysis. We can always ask about a text (or art or architecture, or science stripped bare, even) wherein lies the desire of its subject, the author, or – what is essentially the same question – how it situates its author in the field of the Other. Architectural research into psychoanalysis is still in its early days and has arguably not yet found its grounds as a discourse within which it can speak with confidence. We need to support each other. We have to regard this text as expeditionary.

Lorens Holm
School of Architecture, University of Dundee