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Deconstructions

Stefano Marino[*] Ines Tolic[**]

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1. Deconstruction as theory and practice, 'spectre' and 'fashion'

Paraphrasing the famous opening words of *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels ("A spectre is haunting Europe")[1] we might be tempted to thought-provokingly say that another 'spectre' has haunted the institutions of philosophy, arts, literature and humanities in the last decades, especially between the mid 1970s and the late 1990s: the 'spectre' of deconstruction. After all, Jacques Derrida, the theorist of deconstruction *par excellence*, dedicated one of his most important and well-known books precisely to the question of 'the spectres of Marx.'[2] By using the word 'spectre' we refer here to the diffusion of deconstruction in a variety of different fields at the same time "far away and so close" from each other (freely adapting here to our purposes the title of a famous film by Wim Wenders) as a disquieting presence that 'messes up' and 'disorients' usual research practices and common ways of thinking, starting from the very concept of 'Presence' through which Derrida, as is well-known, recognized and deconstructed the origin of the 'phonologocentrism' of Western metaphysics.

Now, if the haunting presence of such a radical and disquieting philosophical doctrine in a great variety of different theoretical and practical fields, and also in a great variety of different institutions (from University faculties and departments, to institutions connected to the various arts, etc.), may have contributed to confer to deconstruction the physiognomy and the status of a 'spectre', it must be also said that especially in certain periods the same process also contributed to make deconstruction seem similar to a 'fashion trend'. It is obviously impossible and imprecise to immediately and non-problematically associate deconstruction to philosophical hermeneutics, given that the Derrida/Gadamer controversy remains one of the key-moments in the philosophical debate of the 1980s, and given that it is perhaps possible to include American literary deconstructivism in a history of hermeneutics broadly understood but certainly not deconstruction in the strict sense.[3] However, if philosophical hermeneutics between

[*] Università di Bologna (Italy); ✉ stefano.marino4@unibo.it

[**] Università di Bologna (Italy); ✉ ines.tolic@unibo.it

1. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (London: Verso, 2012), 33.
2. See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
3. See Maurizio Ferraris, *Storia dell'ermeneutica* (Milano: Bompiani, 1997), 381.

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the mid 1980s and the late 1990s (to follow a famous definition by Gianni Vattimo) aimed to be a new *koiné* or common idiom of Western culture,[4] perhaps we can say that deconstruction, although it did not celebrate itself as a new *koiné*, nevertheless benefitted from an analogous extraordinary fame and diffusion which gave it the appearance of philosophical fashionability.

In the past few centuries, fashion has often been exclusively defined in terms of clothing, but it is possible to understand it in a broader way. Following Simmel's theory, for example, fashion can be defined as "a universal phenomenon in the history of our species" grounded on the relation between "imitation of a given pattern", on the one hand, and "the need for distinction, the tendency towards differentiation", on the other hand. It is thus understandable as "a particular instance among the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in a unified act the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and variation."[5] Simmel's more general definition suggests that certain phenomena, characterized by imitation of a given pattern and simultaneously by a drive to differentiation (in order to obtain at least a partial individualization rather than a complete assimilation to the imitated model), may well occur in fields that at first sight we would not associate with 'fashion' *per se*, such as philosophy or architecture. As has been noted,

> fashions naturally also exist among academics and intellectuals. They have to do with which subjects are 'in' and which are 'out', which approaches are 'sexy' and which are not. It would be naïve to believe that all this is governed by completely rational considerations, since it is just as much a question of constantly shifting taste. There is really no big difference between clothes and philosophy in this respect, although philosophers react more slowly than those in the world of fashionwear. [...] To say that philosophy does not change solely for rational reasons, but quite often for the sake of change itself, is to concede that philosophy too, at least partially, is subject to fashion.[6]

A quick look at the history of the diffusion of deconstruction (or its 'dissemination', to use a key-concept of Derrida's own philosophical terminology) clearly shows the existence of a great number of such phenomena of imitation/differentiation that can be associated with a Simmelian conception of fashion. In a similar way, a quick look at the 'history of effects' (to invoke a key concept of Gadamer's hermeneutics) of deconstruction in the last decades shows that, as often happens with fashion, and in general with questions of taste and beauty, a clear and unbridgeable divide emerged between those who loved deconstruction and those who hated it: between those who saluted Derrida as the first and only philosopher who had recognized the origin of certain philosophical problems that had characterized the entire development of Western metaphysics from Parmenides to Heidegger; and, vice-versa, those who strongly criticized him as the founder of a vague, imprecise and 'foggy' way of philosophizing. According to a famous caustic sentence by Hilary Putnam, "trying to criticize deconstruction is like trying to have a fistfight with a fog" because, "although Derrida does not disdain argument, some of his followers seem to scorn it."[7] Anyway, it is important to note that, although Putnam's critique explicitly addressed 'deconstruction', its real target is more precisely identifiable with what we may call 'deconstructivism', as also testified by Putnam's quite clear distinction between Derrida (whose philosophy he did not appreciate but nevertheless respected and indeed took seriously into consideration and critically examined) and 'his followers' — in a sense perfectly consistent with our previous discourse on the existence of 'fashions' and the dynamics of fashionable imitation/differentiation in the field of philosophy.

4. See Gianni Vattimo, *Oltre l'interpretazione. Il significato dell'ermeneutica per la filosofia* (Rome—Bari: Laterza, 2002), 3.

5. Georg Simmel, *On Culture: Selected Writings* (London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997), 188–189.

6. Lars Svendsen, *Fashion: A Philosophy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 15–16. For a broader and theoretically more rigorous inquiry into the philosophical significance of fashion, with a special focus on its relevance for aesthetics rather than ethics or politics, see Giovanni Matteucci, *Estetica della moda* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2017).

7. Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 109.

2. Revolution, evolution, metamorphosis, fashion...

Among the different fields in which the theory and practice of deconstruction has 'disseminated' itself throughout the decades, in the present context it is especially important to focus our attention on architecture. In 1999 the editor-in-chief of the journal "Lotus" invited Bruno Zevi, a preeminent critic and historian of architecture, to offer some observations on "the constellation of experiences that we can connect to the development of 'new sciences' and to the break of classical rational patterns."[8] Zevi accepted this invitation with enthusiasm and used this opportunity to announce the dismissal of "leveling desires" in architecture:

> I don't think that, among architects and critics, there are more than fifty people who have understood the unprecedented, colossal revolution that has happened in the last decade of the second millennium. [...] this phenomenon is so overwhelming that it can generate a sense of fear and inspire a sense of caution.[9]

The official beginning of this 'colossal revolution' can be traced back to June 23, 1988, the day in which Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley inaugurated the exhibition *Deconstructivist Architecture* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[10] From that day on, and for the following two months, the research and projects of such architects as Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Coop Himmelb(l)au and Bernard Tschumi were presented in the context of a common critical and institutional frame. Notwithstanding Wigley's contemporaneous work on deconstruction,[11] it was not Jacques Derrida's philosophical conception but rather "reference to the dynamism and formal instability of Soviet Constructivism" that was to function as the glue that connected the works at the exhibition. The fascinating reference to the latter, suggested by Johnson and further developed in the catalogue by Wigley, "significantly contributed to seal a provisional and unlikely union between figures and views that were already radically different from each other."[12] In short, the works exhibited at the MoMA could not be considered representative of a movement, a style or a system of beliefs but, if anything, one was allowed to understand them as "a concatenation of similar strains from various parts of the world."[13] According to Mary McLeod, the 'strains' of these architects could be interpreted as a "vehement reaction against postmodernism and what are perceived as its conservative dimensions: its historicist imagery, its complacent contextualism, its conciliatory and affirmative properties, its humanism, its rejection of technological imagery, and its repression of the new."[14]

The burst of a dissatisfaction with postmodernism partially overlapped with the introduction of *digital design technologies* in architectural firms. As is well-known, it was thanks to the opportunities afforded by the computer-aided design software Catia, typically used in aeronautic industries, that Frank Gehry was able to design and build the iconic Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (1997). In the early years of the new Millennium the progress made possible by the tools of digital modeling became clear and so, between 2003 and 2004, the Centre Pompidou in Paris organized the exhibition *Architectures non standard* and published a namesake publication, which both attempted to bring into focus the complex scenarios that had progressively developed[15]. Two equally relevant conferences took place in 2004: in

8. Pierluigi Nicolin, cit. in Delfo Del Bino, *Decostruttivismo e Architettura* (Florence: Angelo Pontecorboli Editore, 2009), 130.

9. Bruno Zevi, "Dopo cinquemila anni: la rivoluzione", *Lotus International*, n. 104 (March 2000): 52.

10. On the (controversial) origin of this exhibition, see Alba Cappellieri, *Philip Johnson dall'International Style al Decostruttivismo* (Naples: Clean Edizioni, 1996): 31–35.

11. Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995).

12. Alessandro De Magistris, "Zaha Hadid e il ritorno dell'Avanguardia russa negli anni Settanta", in *Zaha Hadid e l'Italia*, ed. by Pippo Ciorra and Margherita Guccione (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017), 52.

13. Philip Johnson, "Preface", in *Deconstructivist Architecture*, eds. by Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 7.

14. Mary McLeod, "Architecture and Politics in the Reagan Era: From Postmodernism to Deconstructivism", *Assemblage. A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, n. 8 (February 1989), 43.

15. Frédéric Migayrou, *Architecture non standard* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2003).

September *Non-Standard Praxis: Emergent Principles of Architectural Praxis* was organized at the MIT, and in November *Devices of Design* was held at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. The 9th International Exhibition of Architecture in Venice, curated by Kurt W. Forster and suggestively titled *Metamorph*,[16] overlapped with these events. This edition of the Biennale was particularly relevant because of the eloquence with which the curator explained that, "in the last quarter-century or so, architecture has not only changed, as it always does, in diverse and often unpredictable ways, it also has begun to transform itself."[17]

The fact that a 'metamorphosis' was taking place was clear to anyone who had the opportunity, in 2004, to walk along the Corderie of the Venetian Arsenale. In the half-light that pervaded that space, visitors of the Biennale had the opportunity to admire architecture's 'new clothes', the shapes of which were dominated by fluid forms and continuous surfaces. Looking at the exhibited projects, one could deduce that the contemporary era had a dynamic and captivating character comparable to the Mercedes Benz Museum in Stuttgart (UN Studio), and that it was both global and welcoming like the National Theatre in Beijing (Paul Andreu). Since both these works were to be completed only a few years after the exhibition, one might be tempted to say that, for the moment, the new architecture only existed in the world of digital representations that had made it possible. Among the almost 200 projects presented at the exhibition, only a few still shared something of the revolutionary spirit that had enlivened the works presented at the MoMA. On the basis of the final result, the correspondent of "La Nuova di Venezia" declared that deconstructivist architecture had died in Venice.[18]

The exhaustion of a revolutionary impulse and the now almost obligatory recourse to new technologies resulted in a new kind of architecture that, "far from finding itself in a crisis, [was] reacting creatively and pragmatically to increasingly rapid cycles of change and [could] thus continue to assert its social relevance". In fact, some observers claimed that it was "an optimistic, realistic — and also beautiful Biennale."[19] The 'beauty' of *Metamorph* and its works can be largely attributed to the decision to exhibit buildings realized for the "rich and powerful", who desired to endow themselves with an image that would be recognizable on a global scale.[20] A number of prestigious cultural institutions, which had decided to adopt an image that might be coherent with the contemporary architectural trends, took part in the above-mentioned competition for global visibility. Among many possible examples, let us mention just the elegant Museum of the 21st century in Kanazawa, designed by the SANAA duo, the uncompleted project by Jean Nouvel for a Guggenheim in Tokyo, or the 'topographical' Paul Klee Centre in Bern by the Renzo Piano Building Workshop. Although very different from each other, all these works are extraordinary accomplishments — i.e., capable of generating a long-lasting media resonance in the globally networked space of the contemporary age. "These buildings are clearly not things (*cose*), or better houses (*case*), for everyday life", as Alfredo Zappa observed in "Costruire."[21]

The 2004 Biennale made it explicit that technologies, materials and innovative production processes had already acquired the capacity to provide architecture with unprecedented opportunities from a formal point of view, almost to the point of simulating the softness of a fabric or the fluidity of a dress. Quite conveniently, the SHoP group used such terms as "pleating" and "seaming" to describe the creative process adopted in designing the expansion of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.[22] The idea that fashion and architecture had started to use a common vocabulary was investigated in more detail a few years later. In fact, in 2006 Brook Hodge organized an exhibition eloquently entitled *Skin and Bones: Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture*. According to the curator, a process of gradual convergence of the two arts had begun in the 1980s, when "designers in both fields" started to strive "for

16. *Metamorph. 9. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura* (Venice: Marsilio, 2004).

17. Kurt W. Forster, "Thoughts on the Metamorphoses of Architecture", in *Log*, n. 3 (Fall 2004), 19.

18. Manlio Brusatin, "Sulla morte del Decostruttivismo", in *La Nuova di Venezia*, 6 November 2004, 8.

19. Matthias Boeckl, "Renaissance of Building", in *Architektur.aktuell*, October 2004, s.p.

20. Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful Shape the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

21. Alfredo Zappa, "Blob hyper-pomodori e dintorni", in *Costruire*, n. 258 (November 2004), 122.

22. *Metamorph. 9. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura. Traiettorie*, cit., 227.

liberation from convention that involved experimentation with new forms and an openness to ideas and techniques from other disciplines to inspire radically different approaches to design."[23] In outlining and emphasizing the existence of certain analogies, the term 'deconstruction' started again to play a key role, functioning now as the lowest common denominator between the two arts. For the exhibition, Brook Hodge consulted with Mark Wigley among others and later stated in the catalogue that, although "fashion designers and architects may not have adopted ideas of deconstruction for the same reasons or from same sources", it nevertheless remained true that "these tendencies emerged in both practices at about the same time."[24]

The "liberation from convention" stressed by Hodge may suggest the opportunity to establish here a comparison with the above mentioned "dismissal of leveling desires" praised by Zevi in his article on "Lotus". Although working in completely different contexts, these two authors conceived the practices of architects and (fashion) designers in the 1980s as a form of emancipation from all restraints in favor of individual creativity. For Zevi, in particular, the Deconstructivist 'strains', exhibited at MoMA by Johnson and Wigley, had finally cut this discipline loose from the weight of "five thousand years of authoritarianism". Architects no longer needed to respect "rules, orders, rhythms, balances, symmetries, repetitive cadences, prescriptive models, imitation of forms or dogmas". Finally, architects were done with "T-squares, rulers, drafting machines, compasses."[25] This freedom of expression, enhanced by the use of new technologies and emphasized by advantageous economic conditions, gave rise to a new design approach within the discipline. At the beginning of the new Millennium McLeod noted that:

> Theorists who attracted packed halls only five years ago are now facing empty seats. A decade ago, students prided themselves on struggling through Derrida and Deleuze; now, a few buzz words suffice. There is a general sense that architecture theory has run out of gas, that the exciting venues are elsewhere: computers, new technology, and, now most important in this boom economy, building.[26]

Through various vicissitudes, with some highs and many lows, the wave of relative economic stability and architectural activity continued until September 15, 2008. On that day, as is well-known, the Lehman Brothers firm went into bankruptcy and this event started a crisis of global dimensions. That event and its consequences impacted architecture as well and thus, in the following years, designers undertook a process of realignment with the changed economic and socio-political context. In order to try to understand this new direction, one can simply take a look at the titles of the Biennales after 2008. What emerges is a renewed attention paid to the social role of architecture (*People Meet in Architecture*, 2010), to the importance of sharing (*Common Ground*, 2012) and, above all, to the need to rediscover the very basis of the discipline (*Fundamentals*, 2014).

3. New deconstructions[27]

In the wake of deconstruction's 'peak-fashionability', it is now surely worthy of serious attention on many levels, more precisely investigating it both from a strict and rigorous philosophical perspective and from the point of view of its multi-layered and fascinating diffusion in a variety of cultural fields that also include fashion in the strict sense (i.e. in connection to clothing). The question of the use of the notion of deconstruction by several fashion designers is surely a question particularly interesting

23. Brooke Hodge, "Skin+Bones. Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture", in *Skin+Bones. Parallel Practices in Fashion and Architecture*, ed. Brook Hodge (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 11.

24. Hodge, "Skin+Bones", 15.

25. Zevi, *Dopo cinquemila anni*, 52-53.

26. Mary McLeod, "Theory *and* Practice", in *Assemblage. A Critical Journal of Architecture and Design Culture*, n. 41 (April 2000), 51.

27. Although responsibility for the contents of this Introduction is shared by both authors, the section "Deconstruction as theory and practice, 'spectre' and 'fashion' " was written by Stefano Marino, while Ines Tolic wrote "Revolution, evolution, metamorphosis, fashion ...". Finally, the chapter "New deconstructions", presenting the contributions of the present issue of "ZoneModa Journal", was written by both authors.

for the readers of a publication like "ZoneModa Journal". The contributions collected in the present monographic issue on deconstruction, all focused on an understanding of the latter as both theory and practice, aim to analyze and investigate (without any ambition of completeness, given the breadth and complexity of this topic) the situation of deconstruction in our time, especially inquiring into some of its implications, connections and ramifications in such fields as philosophy, fashion, art, design, gender studies and music.

Starting from the 'disciplinary map of deconstruction' provided by Pietro Terzi at the beginning of the present volume, the contributions included in this issue then analyze deconstruction in relation to the question of space (Francesco Vitale), and subsequently focus on the relation between deconstruction and fashion (in the articles of Pierpaolo Lippolis, Maria Skivko, Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, Nicole Di Sandro and finally Vittorio Linfante), with special focus on questions of gender and music in the contributions of the last two authors. Finally, alongside the properly essayistic/scientific works included in this issue of "ZoneModa Journal", the section entitled "Backstage" includes different, and no less interesting, materials, such as interviews, book reviews and notes.

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