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HOW CRITICAL IS CRITICALITY?

The Critical Project in Architecture and the Humanities

Since the publication of the essay *The Doppler Effect* by Sarah Whiting and Bob Somol in 2002, architecture's criticality once more stands at the epicentre of architectural debate. This questioning of criticality is hardly a surprise, given the fact that most design gestures nowadays fulfil an affirmative role with respect to their political and social surroundings. It seems like the potential criticality of architecture—for example, the ability of architecture to be critical with respect to social developments—has become more and more a matter of armchair debates among experts.

That this was not always the case becomes clear from an interview I held with the Dutch architect Gijs Wallis de Vries, who is today a theory professor at the technical university of Eindhoven in the Netherlands. While reflecting upon his student years, Wallis de Vries remembered how his aim was to distance himself from the existing design practice. "We believed", said Wallis de Vries, "in the possibilities of theory and criticism because we thought that the insights gained from these disciplines were indispensable for an architect to manage in a changing world".[1] And so, Wallis de Vries no longer studied Le Corbusier, Berlage or other architectural heroes, but instead he studied the work of 'difficult' intellectuals such as Foucault and Barthes. This was not an attempt to become an erudite architect, so explained Wallis de Vries. Rather, studying theory was a strategy to take a step back from the architectural practice: to reflect, from a distance, upon its traditions and conventions, helped by the analytical instruments provided by progressive branches of science. Nowadays the ideals of Wallis de Vries seem further away than ever. The "theoretical delirium" of the 1970s and 1980s is over, exchanged for an attitude that is far more pragmatic. The uncertainty about architecture's critical function seems to mark the most recent age in architecture. However, what I want to highlight in this paper is that the current debate is but a phase in a discussion which has been going on for over thirty years in architecture. Moreover, this discussion is not only an architectural concern, but a concern of society at large. In the past decades in such divers academic disciplines as Sociology or Literary Studies people have tried to find new critical tools and to give new life to the "critical project". In fact, this is what very divers thinkers such as Derrida or Deleuze have in common: the work of these people can be seen as different attempts to overcome the reductivism and perhaps also naïveté of *oppositional criticism.*

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[1] Interview held with dr.ir. Gijs Wallis de Vries, University of Technology Eindhoven, Faculty of Architecture, The Netherlands, October 2005.

To gain an insight in the problems of oppositional criticism we should return to 1923, the year in which the Frankfurter Schule was founded as an independent institute for neo-Marxist science.[2] Disappointed by the failing revolution of the working class in Europe, the researchers of the Frankfurt *Institute für Sozialforschung* set out to develop new instruments of analysis so that social reality could be studied more acutely. They attacked 'traditional science', formulating an alternative they called 'critical theory'. One of the pillars of critical theory was the rejection of positivism, which looks for 'positive facts' in social reality to be detected by a strictly neutral observer. Instead, they believed that there was no strict neutrality in dealing with social, political or cultural matters. Instead of claiming a false objectivity, the researcher should be 'honest' and declare what is his or her own position vis à vis the object under analysis: he or she should be aware of personal interests, of desires, opinions and dependencies as they necessarily conflate with the object that is studied. In fact, for the Frankfurters, the researcher could not possibly be neutral, since his or her task was always emancipatory: to end unjust practices, or at least to contribute with one's research to that ending. In other words, science had a normative connotation. This had far reaching consequences for the choice of themes they considered suitable for scientific research: critical research was not about *facts* or *things* in the world, but about *values*: about opinions, ideologies and cultural convictions.

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[2] This paragraph is based upon: René Boomkens: *Topkitsch en slow science, kritiek op de academische rede*, Amsterdam 2008.

However, towards the end of the 1930s something changed in the outlook of the Frankfurters.

In 1944 Horkheimer and Adorno wrote the book *Dialectics of the Enlightenment*. This is perhaps the most dark and gloomy book that has been written in the twentieth century. Driven by the tragic ways of history, Horkheimer and Adorno had by now lost what had always been the motor of their intellectual energy : the belief that Enlightenment would contribute to the betterment of human life. Following dialectical argumentation, Horkheimer and Adorno became convinced that Enlightenment had turned its powers against itself: instead of leading to emancipation, reason had subjected man to an instrumental and cruel calculus. It is also here that their criticism became in the true sense of the word *oppositional*. This becomes clear in the most influential essay of the book which deals with the so-called 'culture industry'. This notion refers to what Horkheimer and Adorno saw as the growing standardisation and industrialisation of culture. In the mass culture against which Adorno and Horkheimer protested, culture was reduced to a 'package': it was offered as a calculated, tailor made unity in which everything was said, done and organised for the consumer. Culture had become an industry, suited for the world of capitalism. This led Horkheimer and Adorno to oppose to popular music, even though in the 1960s critical engagement was expressed through this medium—think of the protest song. However, for Adorno popular music only turned the suffering of the world into a form of "Warenkonsum": into a form of amusement and consumption. It was therefore the most perverse of all forms of 'industrial culture'.

However, at the same time reality proved Adorno and Horkheimer wrong. In the 1960s, when their book was finally read by a wide audience, the opposite of what they had prophesized was happening. Through such new media as radio and television and though new cultural genres such as pop music, people developed a new critical conscience about their own role in society. Cultural in general became an important means to criticize society: its outdated hierarchical character for example, or the issue of false authorities and the political abuse of scientific knowledge. The new popular culture did not produce a passive audience, but on the contrary a highly active one. In the face of a complex and manifold reality, oppositional criticism had become deeply problematic.

Modern criticism was born out of a struggle against the absolutist state and so closely connected to the goals of the Enlightenment. Since its early days, there have been two ways of 'doing' cultural criticism: a broad and a narrow way. Early critics such as Denis Diderot (1713–1784) were moralists who developed a discourse that covered a wide range of topics, including art, politics and society. In the nineteenth century, criticism became more narrowly defined as critics specialised as reviewers working for newspapers: this meant bringing disciplinary issues to the fore, while social and political issues receded to the background.[3] However, the commercialization of culture in the 1960s made a single-disciplinary criticism implausible. In 1972 Stuart Hall broke away from the comparative literature department of Birmingham University to found the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Hall reacted to the commercialization of culture in the 1960s by starting a broad critique that would expose the linkage between culture, society and politics. Like the Frankfurters some forty years earlier, Hall was convinced that this movement was necessary in order to develop the proper instruments to understand reality. In fact, the failure of oppositional criticism had led to a debate, or better said, a constant search for new instruments to understand reality and intervene in it. Something which may be called 'The Critical Project' was now born, as the need for criticism to constantly re-invent itself, by way of self-criticism and a constant adaptation of its instruments to the new demands of reality. Stuart Hall departed where Adorno and Horkheimer had left him in the 1960s: if culture has become an industry, than one should acknowledge the active participation of that industry in society, claimed Hall.[4] Culture was not only a matter of 'false consciousness' as traditional Marxist theory would have it, but an active force which constituted society. However, it was also on this point that cultural criticism met with problems in the 1970s. In fact, what is the status of cultural criticism if one acknowledges one's participation in that which is criticised? As Richard Johnson, successor to Stuart Hall in Birmingham, wrote: "cultural studies is necessarily … implicated in relations of power. It forms a part of the very circuits it seeks to describe."[5] Cultural criticism was not merely an observer but just as much an offender. The uncertainty that resulted from this insight ultimately weakened cultural studies. If oppositional criticism was not the answer, the alternative had not yet been found.

Meanwhile in architecture the discourse in the 1970s was dominated by a critique of the utopian character of modern architecture, regarded as an authoritarian and changeless image of ‘liberated society’. An interest in so-called ‘reality’ now took the place of the fascination for utopia. It was once more the need to really grasp reality, and find the instruments for it, that was at stake. This need could take different forms: for example, the focus on subcultures, on the mundane and popular. This was the theme of Venturi and Scott Brown’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) and also of Koolhaas’ *Delirious New York* (1978). However, the discrediting of utopia also led to a growing uncertainty about the role of criticism. In fact, if criticism did not serve the arrival of a Brave New World, than what was its purpose?

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[3] This paragraph is based upon: Tahl Kaminer: "Undermining the Critical Project: The post-critical 'third way' and the legitimating of architectural practices." In: *The Architectural Annual 2004-2005*, Delft University of Technology, Delft, the Netherlands, pp. 70–73.

[4] See Heinz Paetzold: "Cultural Studies als Herausforderung für die philosophische Ästhetik". In: Melanie Sachs, Sabine Sander (ed.).: *Die Permanenz des Ästhetischen*, Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 181–196.

[5] Tahl Kaminer, 2005, p. 72, quoting: Robert Hewison: *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940*, London 1995, p. 207.

In many ways the architectural discourse of the 1980s and 1990s resembles the agenda of cultural criticism in the 1970s. For example, in studies such as *Mutations* (2000) or the *Harvard Design School of Shopping* (2001) what is proposed is a demolishing of cultural hierarchies so as to place shopping malls side by side to museums and public institutes. However, at the same time there is also a large difference with respect to the 1970s. The language used in the Koolhaas studies is only *seemingly* critical: where cultural studies studied mass culture in order to criticise society, there the balance in the work of Koolhaas seems to have shifted towards a legitimation of consumer society—the so-called Yes regime.[6] Nowadays, the acceptance of current reality is the starting point of many theoreticians. They stress the futility of trying to transform reality; at most, they suggest a vague idea of influencing society ‘from the inside’, but more often their work tries to ideologically legitimize current architectural practice.

However, this development is not only caused by events in the architectural world. The lack of criticality also reflects the vicissitudes of the larger ‘Critical Project’. In the 1980s the need to once more give new life to the notion of criticality led a number of novel approaches by such brilliant philosophers as Derrida and Deleuze. However, as fascinating as their theoretical insights were, in practice their propositions also had a dangerous side. The danger of poststructuralist and deconstructionist approaches was that it questioned not only the status quo but also its alternatives. Stating that there is no solid ground goes for the dominating ideology but equally for the feasibility of its alternatives. Also, putting emphasis on transgression often had the paradoxical result that people felt threatened by it and so re-affirmed the boundaries existing in society. Most of all, the formulation of an effective critique was made problematic by the disappearance of the human subject as an active agent constructing society. In this context, most of the so-called "post-critics" ended up affirming the status quo. The theoretician Roemer van Toorn most clearly expresses the struggle of the so-called post-critics. First, his work expresses an uneasiness with the current lack of criticality. However, at the same time he rejects any form of adverse, oppositional criticism. He writes: "The either/or world has become an illusion", and "There is no longer any sympathy with the permanent criticism of society or with the paralyzing impossibility of making a better world."[7] However, if utopia is not an option, and the acceptance of reality is not acceptable either, then what choices are left? The position of Van Toorn also reflects the world in which we live. The opacity of developments which created contemporary society and the lack of feasible alternatives seem to lead the post-critics to emphasize the organic character of society. Society grows automatically as a branch of nature: thus, the manner in which society is tangibly a result of actions and decisions by groups and individuals is obscured. Again, it is the human subject as an active agent constructing society that seems to be absent in this discourse. There are many ways in which post-criticism can be criticised. For example, the insistence on reality is at least naïve: isn't reality different for different groups, different classes, different nations? Reality is always a matter of interpretation. In this context, while tackling 'the real', postcriticism simply seems to remove the most difficult questions from the agenda. As Stan Allen put it, "The point for the anti-theorists then, is just to get on with what we do, without all this distracting fuss about theory".[8]

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[6] Silke Ötsch: “Des Königs neue Firma. Inside the global ¥€$ … and how to get out”, *GAM, Architectural Magazine Graz*, 04 “Emerging Realities”, pp. 1–13.

Post-criticism seems to confront us with the essence of criticality. The premise of the Critical Project has been the betterment of society by providing a systematic critique of its structure, its ideology, its system. This was also the goal of critical theory, rather then the dissemination of knowledge, which was only a matter of secondary importance. The advantage of oppositional criticism was that it made such a critique possible. In fact, one of the advantages of dialectics, of its thinking in thesis and antithesis, was that it actively pointed towards the possibility of an opposite way of living. The question is whether post-criticism is able to deliver such a critique and to open up such an opposite horizon. If not, the question for me is whether criticism in our society still exists.

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[7] Tahl Kaminer, 2005, quoting: Roemer van Toorn: "The Society of The And (An Introduction)," *Hunch*, 1, 1999, p. 90.

[8] Idem, quoting: Stan Allen: *Practice: Architecture, Technique and Representation*, (Australia; the Netherlands, 2000).