

Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2008, 239 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0262720519

Keith Bresnahan

Volume 34, numéro 1, 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069504ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069504ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bresnahan, K. (2009). Compte rendu de [Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2008, 239 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0262720519]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 34(1), 98–100. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069504ar>

Book Reviews

Comptes-rendus de livres

Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2008, 239 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0262720519.

Early on in *Histories of the Immediate Present*, Anthony Vidler relates an anecdote from his early days as a student at Cambridge in the 1960s. At his first tutorial with Colin Rowe, in Rowe's modernist apartment, the young Vidler is handed a copy of Emil Kaufmann's *Architecture in the Age of Reason*, directed toward a folio of Colin Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus* lying open on the floor, and struck by an "enigmatic" question suddenly posed to him by Rowe: "Well, and what do *you* make of *concatenation*?" This little story is relevant in a number of ways to our understanding of Vidler's recent book, which traces the vicissitudes of the postwar historiography of modern architecture through the careers of four of its pre-eminent practitioners: Emil Kaufmann, Colin Rowe, Reynier Banham, and Manfredo Tafuri.

In the first place, it situates the author himself within the history he recounts; since much of this history centers on the relationship between authors and their audiences, and professors and their students, it is helpful to derive a sense of Vidler's own position in this history, as someone whose intellectual trajectory was shaped by the debates set out in the book. Vidler, who is Professor and Dean of the school of architecture at Cooper Union in New York, has spent much of his career revisiting the eighteenth-century subjects of Kaufmann's work, particularly Claude-Nicolas Ledoux. Vidler began his studies in architecture with Rowe, studied architectural history at a moment when it was being transformed by Banham's work, and engaged in a long-standing intellectual collaboration and friendship with Tafuri.

Histories of the Immediate Present traces the ways in which a suspension of historical references in the modern movement, or its alleged autonomy from history itself, gave way in the postwar decades to critical reassessments of modernism's legacy. It explores the problematics of historicizing modern architecture at a moment in which questions of history, repetition, and modernist citation were returning to the forefront of design, a moment in which allegiances to a particular vision of architecture in the present were promulgated through the writing of history. Vidler states at the outset that his interest in writing this book was "in the ways in which histories of modernism themselves were constructed as more or less overt programs for the theory and practice of design in their contemporary context" (1). This model, in which an author takes the writing of history or criticism as an invitation to engage in partisan intervention in contemporary debates to promote or denigrate elements of current or future design, was famously denigrated by Tafuri as

"operative criticism." Vidler's gambit in this book is to make "operative criticism" into an inevitable, and even positive, aspect of historiography.

The idea that historians would have interpreted the past in terms of the present, in order to advance particular value-claims, is not particularly shocking; to all but those who stubbornly adhere to a belief in the possibility of historical objectivity, it is a commonplace that historical narratives are subjective accounts, shot through with the desires and biases of the historian. The value of Vidler's book is to explore the *ways* in which an adherence to a particular value as the driving force behind architecture and a desire to read the present in terms of the past in order to advance a particular agenda shaped the work of his four historians (Tafuri included), and postwar architectural debates more generally. Vidler singles out a central concern in the work of each historian, showing how the allegiance of each to a particular vision of architecture shaped their readings of modernism. For Kaufmann, this was the "autonomy" that connected Ledoux's work to that of I.e. Corbusier; for Rowe, the continuation of mannerist (Palladian) complexity and spatial ambiguity in modernism; for Banham, a techno-modernism rooted in the Futurist valorization of the machine; and for Tafuri, a "Renaissance modernism" situated in the dialectical tension established between Brunelleschi's technical innovation and Alberti's cultural nostalgia.

Rowe's "enigmatic" question about concatenation also resonates throughout Vidler's book. In one sense, this question speaks to the shift in architecture identified by Kaufmann from a baroque compositional unity of elements to Ledoux's "pavilion system" of independent but associated volumes. For Kaufmann—reading Ledoux's architecture in terms of Kant's "autonomy of the will"—this move initiated the modern articulation of an "autonomous architecture." The question of autonomy, which Vidler interrogates most fully in the chapter on Kaufmann, recurs in the context of the other sections of the book, particularly in terms of modernism's alleged autonomy from the historical legacy of architectural development. In another sense, concatenation, or rather what Vidler *makes* of it, is relevant to the structure of *Histories of the Immediate Present*; the book consists of four more or less independent case studies, each focused on a single historian, which could easily be read as stand-alone essays. While there are connections between the essays, as there were between many of the figures who feature in them, the overall effect is more one of variations on a theme, rather than a linear argument that builds throughout the book. In this sense, we might see Vidler's text as enacting a written analogue to the loose unity of associated but independent elements Kaufmann saw in the late work of Ledoux.

This is not to say that *Histories of the Immediate Present* does not work as a book; on the contrary, its essayistic style and partial coverage of this history (based in Vidler's personal affinities with these thinkers) is one of its great strengths. Avoiding a panoptic survey of modernist historiography, Vidler's short, eminently readable book relies rather on close study and assiduous mining of the historical archive to bring out hidden connections and draw often "minor" texts into a broader narrative of this history, to great and often fascinating effect. Indeed, what sets this book apart from one like Panayotis Tournikiotis's valuable *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, with its much more comprehensive treatment of the field and focus on the structural comparison of canonical publications, is Vidler's treatment both of the intellectual contexts in which texts were written and the individual personalities of their authors.

At times, the weight of evidence dredged up in Vidler's historical detective work threatens to subsume his narrative, or leads the reader into obscure corners of this history without particularly substantial payoff, as when the rediscovery of a photograph of the neoclassical Liverpool dock buildings, lost or displaced from James Stirling's fifth year thesis (completed under Rowe's supervision), is deployed in support of the assertion that "Stirling was interested in regional and regional-classical architecture from the outset and was not, as the myth would have it, drawn into it by the young Leon Krier" (102).

In most cases, though, Vidler's archaeological recuperation of texts, artifacts, and debates from this period results in significant revisions to established histories. We see, for example, the unacknowledged significance of Kaufmann for the other three figures (as well as others, such as Philip Johnson); Nikolaus Pevsner's pervasive influence on postwar historiography not only through his canonical *Pioneers of Modern Design*, but also through public lectures and pseudonymously written articles for the *Architectural Review*; tensions and growing differences between student and teacher (in the cases of Banham and Pevsner, of Rowe and Rudolf Wittkower); and the continuity of Tafuri's early work as an architect with his later thought. Vidler also traces the previously unrecognized influence on Banham's work of Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*, which emerges as a crucial source for his late *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*—itself a vastly underappreciated work whose importance for contemporary architectural thought Vidler does much to restore, in what is perhaps the book's strongest chapter.

If Vidler can be seen as championing "operative" history, either as a mode of writing in itself or as revelatory for understanding the character of postwar architectural historiography, one might with good reason ask, what are the stakes of this book in the debates of his own immediate present? That is, as he asks in the introduction to this work, "What kind of work

does or should architectural history perform for architecture, and especially for contemporary architecture?" (3). An answer, albeit a provisional one, might be sought in the book's concluding chapter, "Postmodern or *Posthistoire*?"

In this provocative conclusion to the book, Vidler appropriates the concept of *posthistoire* (or posthistory) from the work of postwar European historians (the term itself is of nineteenth-century origin), where it refers to the state of things following the terminal development of cultural forms after which nothing remains but to perfect and reiterate existing forms, further progress being impossible. Vidler employs the notion of *posthistoire* to perform a radical revision of postwar histories of architectural modernism as well as of the entire phenomena of postmodernism, situating both as aspects of *posthistoire* thought. Thus Rowe's late work shows us, Vidler writes, "a critic who believed that everything had already happened, one who might well be placed among those of the generation of 1945 who, fatalistically or dispassionately, found solace in the belief that the epoch of history had ended in *posthistoire* repetition and impasse" (98). This same claim might, he suggests, be applied to the histories of his other protagonists, whose views on modernism all "imply that history had in some sense come to completion. If the end might be predicted, or indeed had arrived, then the future was to be bereft of all but repetition" (194).

Postmodernism, for its part, appears here not as a style or movement based on the revival of historical citation starting in the 1970s, but rather as "a special moment in *posthistoire* thought or, better, as a special case of *posthistoire* thought in architectural terms" (197). Understanding it as a case of the *posthistoire*, Vidler traces a long trajectory of postmodernism back into the nineteenth-century antimodernist urbanism of Camillo Sitte and forward into New Urbanism and various other historicisms of the 1990s. Situating postmodernism and modernist historiography within posthistorical thought allows Vidler to detach these from tired characterizations as being "for" or "against" history (i.e., modernism was anti-historical, postmodernism was a return to history, or inversely, modernism recognized the power of history, postmodernism was facile historical citation) and view them against a longer history of tensions between progress and reversion, innovation and stalemate.

This would also, he suggests, necessitate a new approach today to both the writing of architectural history and to architectural practice. Eschewing the classification of style or movement (or their citation in architectural practice), this model "would look for places where the uncomfortable questions of form and program with respect to society and its political formation were asked; where irresolution rather than resolution was assumed; where projects were started but left unfinished, not as failures but as active and unresolved challenges; where

disruptions from outside the field inconveniently questioned the verities of established practices; where the very forms in which we conceive of history itself have been put into question" (199). This thread, which closes the book, aptly has the quality of a manifesto: like the protagonists of his study, Vidler has produced his own operative account, using the writing of history to send a message to the architects and historians of our own immediate present.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada during the writing of this review.

KEITH BRESNAHAN
University of Toronto

Margaret Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*. University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007, 204 pp., 20 colour and 12 black-and-white illus., paper \$40 U.S., ISBN 978-0271029719.

Margaret Iversen's *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* is an ambitious contribution to theories of art beyond the pleasure principle. Setting the theorists invoked in the book's title, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes, in dialogue with artists Edward Hopper, Salvador Dalí, André Breton, Robert Smithson, and Maya Lin, Iversen outlines "the contours of a tradition of twentieth-century art that touches on the traumatic core of human 'being'" (6). More specifically, she aims to figure the workings of the death drive in twentieth-century art practice and theory, following Freud's own formulation of this psychological concept in his 1920 essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." *Beyond Pleasure* argues that there has been a shift in psychoanalytic aesthetics, away from theories of narcissistic mirroring and toward theories of anamorphic anxiety, and tracks both the history and value of this shift.

The book comprises eight chapters: "Introduction: From Mirror to Anamorphosis"; "Uncanny: The Blind Field in Edward Hopper"; "Paranoia: Dalí meets Lacan"; "Encounter: Breton meets Lacan"; "Death Drive: Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*"; "Mourning: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial"; "The Real: What is a Photograph?"; "Conclusion: After *Camera Lucida*." As she explains, however, Iversen in fact worked in the opposite order: beginning with a reading of *Camera Lucida* (1980), she was drawn to Lacan's analysis of the register of the real and the mechanism of the gaze, back through the surrealists, and finally to Freud. Given this trajectory, it is perhaps not surprising that Iversen frames her text as a reaction against a "dominant conception of the image widely promulgated in the 1970s and 1980s" (6), a conception informed largely by incomplete readings of Lacan and Louis Althusser in the domain of film theory. Iversen is at particular pains to correct an entrenched misreading of Lacan's article on the "mirror stage" of infantile development which holds that the child's perception of an illusory image of ideal selfhood is a wholly affirming experi-

ence. Lacan's mirror stage is also "a conflicted domain fraught with anxiety and paranoia" (8). Thus the "anamorphic paradigm of psychoanalytic art theory" (13), as Iversen understands and practises it, attends to that which must be abjected from spectatorial theories predicated on this idea of happy identification. Indeed such theory assumes that the "smooth running of the pleasure principle is disrupted by something internal to the system itself" (13). Iversen's overarching concern in *Beyond Pleasure* is to examine the structures and styles of that disruptive "something" which Freud first described.

Chapter two situates Hopper's paintings in relation to Freud's theory of the uncanny, emphasizing the "blind field" in Hopper's work: "the space implied by the composition, but not shown, which incites an anxious reverie in the spectator" (14). Avoiding any "narrow interpretation of the uncanny that ties it too closely to castration anxiety" (20), Hopper's uncanny is here theorized as a manifestation of the death drive, an unconscious compulsion to repeat "powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle" (26). As those familiar with Freud's anecdote of the fort/da game know, the concept of a "repetition compulsion," its relation to trauma and the death drive, was central to "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." Hopper's use of a blind field, working to destabilize not only the viewer but the composition itself, his vertiginous angles, and his "indirect representations of unrecalable memories, banal but too-clear screen scenes of traumatic events" (35), all create uncanny effects that are themselves evocations of the death drive.

Chapters three and four trace mutual forces of influence between Lacan and the surrealists, particularly Dalí and Breton during the 1930s. Iversen argues for direct connections between Dalí's *The Tragic Myth* (the Spanish surrealist's analysis of Jean-François Millet's *The Angelus* of 1857), Lacan's work on paranoia and the mirror image, Breton's *Mad Love* (1937), and Lacan's later "conception of the *objet petit a* and the missed encounter with the real" (39). She also foregrounds her intention to take *The Tragic Myth* "a good deal more seriously" than other critics have done, "considering its form, its language, its argument, its precedents, and its implications" (42). Dalí's method of "paranoiac-critical interpretation," "which involved