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Traces of Invisibility: Readings From Artistic Records

Abstract. *This research presents the concept of ambiance with its roots in user's or beholder's point of view. We believe that in this relation with inhabitant perception, ambiance gathers visible space perception together with layers of invisible space interpretation. Therefore, we introduce Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idea from L'Œil et l'Esprit (1960) that argues the importance of art experimentation as a form to understand the relation between visible and invisible, and we advocate that art production and art interpretation bring up new space readings that enrich space comprehension beyond the visible and the Cartesian thinking. This paper presents two examples, through a series of works of art: Cartuxa Monastery, Felipe Terzi and Giovanni Casale (1587-1598) and Miguel Bombarda Panoptic Hospital, José Maria Nepomuceno (1892-1896).*

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Introduction

“Meaning is invisible, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework (membrane), and the in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible. [...] The sensible, the visible, must be for me the occasion to say what nothingness is. Nothingness is nothing more (nor less) than the invisible. Start from an analysis of the total philosophical error which is to think that the visible is an objective presence (or the idea of this presence) (visual picture).” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968)

What is the invisible in architecture? What relationship does it establish with the visible? What motivates, determines and conditions our experience of visibility and invisibility? Maurice Merleau-Ponty elaborated between 1959 and 1960, in his latest work *Le Visible et l'Invisible*, a work he left incomplete and would be posthumously published, about the relationship between the visible and the invisible. For Merleau-Ponty, the task of philosophy is to question the founding distinction between body and mind, establishing the inseparable links between perception and reflection. If the subject of perception is inseparable from the perceived thing, what he calls the “enigma” of the “body” as both “seer” and “visible,” then the invisible cannot be merely what is not visible or what escapes visibility regimes, but their own condition of possibility. In his latest works, he assumes the problematic but inescapable dimension of this relationship, a fundamental non-coincidence between the sensitive experience and the conceptual understanding sought in what he defines as “silence of

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language,” implying the invisible manifestations of “latent” or “hidden” that support and structure the visible. In 1960, he published the short essay *L’Oeil et l’Esprit* where he affirms the centrality of the experience of art in this “intertwining” between the visible and the invisible. Here, Merleau-Ponty begins by distinguishing art from science, art relates to the lived and living world, the body and existence, while science takes the world as an object of knowledge “dissociated” from the existing subject, in order to identify laws beyond phenomena. In *L’Oeil et l’Esprit*, Merleau-Ponty gives the example of the water, a viscous and shiny element, about which we cannot say that it is in space: it is not elsewhere, but it is also not in the pool. It inhabits it, materializes there, but it is not contained there, and, if we look up at the cypress screen where the weave of reflections plays, we cannot dispute that the water also visits it, or at least sends it there its active and expressive essence. It is this internal animation, this irradiation of the visible that the painter seeks under the names of depth, space and color (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 37-38).

What interests us here is this structural relationship that links the visible to the invisible in the experience of the world, a relationship in which memory and creation have a fundamental role in the revelation of invisibility in the visible itself. The speculation is based on two case studies selected from their artistic representations, producing analytical and critical readings that open up the works. These examples of invisibility in architecture will be understood through the interpretation of its records in film, photography, drawing and illustration. The following examples explore, through art interpretation, some invisible reading possibilities that compose their space ambiance, a more complete and intricate space compression, that go beyond the visual, material and Cartesian comprehension.

Cartuxa Monastery, 1598



Figure 1. Covers Deserto/Nuvem, Francisco Sousa Lobo, 2017

The Stay

In 1960, after 126 years of profane life following the *Extinction of Religious Orders*, Vasco Maria, Count of Vilalva and Cartuxa Monastery and estate heir, sends a messenger to *La Grande Chartreuse* to invite the original inhabitants to return to their home. This messenger carried a book in his hand, a detailed building restoration record, made by *Portuguese General Directorate of National Monuments*. The building was

designed at the end of the 16th century by Giovanni Casale and Filippo Terzi to produce an invisible world of closure. This beautiful book documents the renovation, presenting in parallel and from the same angle, photographs of the physical state before (1948) and after (1951) the intervention. It emphasizes the attempt to imitate and replace the original layout. This important historical record witnesses the incredible history of Cartuxa Monastery, a history that somehow ended with the recent departure of the last monks.

Some, like Jack Kerouac, try to live by looking for something outside of themselves, *On The Road* (1957), while others, like Georges Rodenbach, look for it inside, in *Le Règne du Silence* (1891). Through these two ways of life, we find many of the great journeys we know. Cartuxa is a journey and resists to an existence in the continuous and connected world. Cartuxa is like a silent capsule of pure existence. Its walls carefully draw this silence and prepare the body for the journey into your skin, into your soul.

Francisco Sousa Lobo, in his double book in comics, with two covers and two titles, presents the duality between concept and experience, between the order spatial rule and his personal experience in the monastery. The experience of staying inside Cartuxa reflects exactly his interior trip. It is a personal and dichotomous reflection that wanders between doubts about his own religiosity and his worldly existence: "First there is the desert, or the Alentejo; then the walls of the monastery, then the walls of each cell; and then the skin of each cartridge. Inside the last, only god knows what's going on - inside the heart of each Carthusian." The duplicity of the author's response is surprising, the temporal and mundane versus the spatial and metaphysical. The dilemmas irresolution is transferred to the conceptual and material construction of the book, in two parts that are inseparable, but opposed, without crossing. The open plan of the double page versus the narrative sequence of the squares, self-reflection confronts dialogue in two inseparable books. As he tells us, "Cartuxa is not visited, it is Cartuxa who visits us."

Let us return to Rodenbach, to analyze Daniel Blaufuks' *Prece Geral* (2015), a work carried out on another rare visit and stay at Cartuxa Monastery: "*Les chambres, qu'on croirait d'inanimés décors, - Apparat de silence aux étoffes inertes - Ont cependant une âme, une vie aussi certes [...] Les chambres vraiment sont de vieilles gens Sachant des secrets, sachant des histoires, - Ah! Quels confidentes toujours indulgents! - Qu'elles ont cachés dans les vitres noires, Qu'elles ont cachés au fond des miroirs Où leur chute lente est encore en fuite Et se continue à travers les soirs, Chute de secrets dont nul ne s'ébruite!*" Blaufuks captures exactly the expression of these mute inhabitants, an intellectual and elevated sense of suspended time, through a spatial displacement that spells out a greater truth by concentrating on some scarce objects that inhabit each space. There is also an explicitness of some kind of ritual, not merely sacred, but also profane, showing the time flow in space of the life inside Cartuxa. The artist's vision is like a close-up of a secret camera that questions Carthusian mundane side of the spiritual experience. Blaufuks presents the exact moment of a framework, in which we can see the real, everyday and familiar things in a certain way, but which clearly involve us, due to its almost macro-photographic proximity.

Blaufuks and Sousa Lobo present experiences interiorizing the mystery of this closed and circumscribed space. Because they are faithful images to the experience of reality, these representations transcend the real. They do not represent reality as it is. Rather, it is the reality that is observed here according to the fidelity of its interpretations, crossed by their own experiences. Therefore, these representations cannot

be understood only as records of an external reality, but as constructions of their inner journeys of personal discovery and of capturing the mystery of this sacred place.

Miguel Bombarda Panopticum, 1896



Figure 2. João César Monteiro, Still
Recollections of the Yellow House,
1989

Observer and Observed

Five days before *April Revolution*, João César Monteiro published in *Cinéfilo* his interview with António Reis on the occasion of *Jaime* premiere. Between documentary and fiction, the film construes with great intensity the life and work of Jaime Fernandes, an artist interned in the Security Pavilion at Miguel Bombarda Hospital, since 1938. If the empathy between the two filmmakers is evident - until then they did not know each other -, the interview reveals the intentions of Reis in approaching the artist's life, who he had never known. In the film, Jaime returns to the places he inhabited, mainly the Security Pavilion and his childhood village in *Beira*, which intersect with the artist's works. The filmic environments are activated by the chromatic treatment of images and work of sound. Later, César Monteiro will film in the same building the final scenes of his award-winning film *Recollections of the Yellow House* (1989), the first work of his famous trilogy around his alter ego João de Deus. But, taking into account what interests us here, how do Reis and César Monteiro interpret the space of the Security Pavilion?

The Security Pavilion is a pure panopticon that was built in 1896 at Rilhafoles Hospital which had occupied since 1848 an old convent to implement the country's first psychiatric hospital. In 1892, the doctor and alienist Miguel Bombarda had assumed the direction of the institution, becoming responsible for the construction of the Security Pavilion, a project designed by architect José Maria Nepomuceno. The panopticon disciplinary model was a proposal by reformist thinker Jeremy Bentham in 1791, a system of behavioral surveillance and body control. In Rilhafoles it is not known whether this typology was adopted by proposal of the doctor or the architect. A convinced republican, Miguel Bombarda would suffer an attempt of assassination by a patient in his office in Rilhafoles, tragically dying few days after at S. José Hospital on October 3, 1910, two days before the Republican Revolution. The Hospital adopted his name then on.

The Security Pavilion is the main space in the first part of Reis' film. Filmed from the cell, in the position that would be Jaime's, we observe the open courtyard with the presence of human figures in sepia tones, as in old photographs. Framed by the door circle dark background, it is from inside that Jaime's vision is constituted. Poetry on the threshold of abstraction captures characters and shadows, sometimes indistinguishable from one another, wandering through the whiteness of the endless circular

wall. The choreography melancholic beauty, with the slow movement of the camera and without any sound, captures the courtyard as if inhabited by ghosts, filmed as “frieze sculptures,” in the words of Reis. Jaime is reflected in his fellows, in their daily gestures, bodies in idle suspension or infinite waiting. Some inmates look out from the entrance closed gate. In the center of the courtyard, where briefly there was a small watchtower - only registered in a photograph published in 1899 - is now a fountain, filmed in black & white shot ascending to the sky. Color enters in an upper courtyard panoramic view, assuming the position of an outside observer, followed by an almost blind exterior building wall and several interior spaces, such as the refectory, collective dormitory and bathroom, filmed with a sense of intrusion with a low-pitched camera. For Reis, panopticon space is a shadow theatre punctuated by sublimated men as Jaime.

César Monteiro himself returns to the Security Pavilion a decade and a half later in his film *Recollections of the Yellow House*. In the final scene, the filmmaker gives us a full and purposeful interpretation of the panoptic space, assuming an opposite perspective to that presented by Reis. A continuous 360° plane filmed from the center introduces the point of view of panopticon invisible observer, where the surveillance watchtower was positioned, following the accelerating course of João de Deus circular turn. The idea of circularity is manifested in the coincidence of the place of departure and arrival, a movement of inertia, a time as the character says to “think.” The interiorization of the simulated control device is João de Deus path to freedom, his proof of sanity before the disciplinary system of exclusion. The entrance gate opens to him, who leaves the panopticon to fulfil the “go and give them work” intent, reflected in João de Deus’ final analogy as Murnau’s vampire Nosferatu rising in old Lisbon.

Conclusion

In all of these authors’ interpretations, we can find political, social and psychological readings of territorial and architectural conditions. The subjective potential of space is presented in this paper through the creative interpretations of each artist. Merleau-Ponty claims the relevance of the freedom of the artistic approach. We try here through reading of such approaches to understand the constitution of a space at the border between the conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious that allows just the unfolding of time. Following Merleau-Ponty, ambiance is not just the visible but the inscription of invisibility in the real and material. Through the artist’s work, the invisible becomes visible, but this invisible is an immanent invisible, interior to the artist himself. As if the pictorial world to which he gave birth were the manifestation of his “inner world,” a world made up of the impact left in him by the encounter with the visible, with the sensitive world.

In the case of Cartuxa Monastery, we understand the solitude atmosphere as we were living in it, not because we have the visual framework, but because we understood artists/visitors’ sensibility to that sensation. The freedom of Francisco Sousa Lobo and Daniel Blaufuks artistic experience and readings represent here the possibility of transgression of the visible. The same happens through João César Monteiro endless circular space reading and through António Reis bodies in idle suspension or infinite waiting. In this sense, space and ambiances do follow more than the current architectural rules of understanding, asking for a more penetrating relation between conception and use, between author and inhabitant.

Artistic readings bring another layer regarding the user experience of places and contribute to the rewriting of our understanding of space and architecture. In this sense, ambiance adds understanding to the existence of the architectural object.

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