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The Historical Project of “Modernism”: Manfredo Tafuri’s Metahistory of the Avant-Garde

for Hayden White

This essay focuses on the writings of the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, the central figure of a group of historians and theorists at the University of Venice’s School of Architecture, including the philosopher and future mayor of Venice Massimo Cacciari, the philosopher Franco Rella, and the architectural historian Francesco Dal Co. It considers how his works dealing with the avant-garde, especially *Architecture and Utopia* and *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, develop a historical-critical method to identify and explicate the gap between the evolution of ideologies of the avant-garde and their translation into a repertoire of techniques that have divergent histories and social meanings than those posited by avant-garde ideologies. In doing so, I argue, Tafuri is not just offering an “ideology-critique” of modernism, revealing how the avant-garde failed to fulfill its postulated social and aesthetic goals. He is also arguing metahistorically, that via a cunning dialectic of the avant-garde, twentieth-century capitalist modernity weaves an ideological fabric of modernism and interleaves it into the effective structure of reality, through the practices of architecture and urbanism. Thus, for Tafuri, “modernism” becomes a relevant term of periodization, not because of the historical veracity of any orthodox art historical narrative of the succession or progressive evolution of modernist forms, but insofar as “modernism” designates the symptomatic tension between the progressive history of avant-garde forms and the heterogeneous technical history that represents how the avant-garde’s formal programs were actualized. Although Tafuri’s specific objects of critique—ranging from urban utopias, social democratic urban planning, technocratic modernist architectures, modernist design, and semiotics—are no longer as strongly in the center of current discourse as they were at the time of his writing in the 1960s–1980s, his metahistorical methodology retains its actuality. It remains pertinent, I argue, to diagnose the specific forms of “modernism” that contemporary society still articulates and to specify possibilities of contemporary historical critique.

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Between the early 1960s and his untimely death in 1994, Tafuri deployed a restlessly evolving, complex framework for historical study of the disciplines of architecture and urbanism, and the related theories and ideologies of architects and urban planners, focusing with special intensity on the theories and practices that emerged within the 20th-century with the architectural avant-gardes and the international modern movement. Even among his writings that have appeared in English translation, there are four major books that focus directly on twentieth-century modernist concerns: *Theories and History of Architecture* (originally published in Italian in 1968), *Architecture and Utopia* (originally published in 1973), *Modern Architecture* (with Francesco Dal Co, originally published 1976), and *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (originally published in 1980).¹ For readers of Italian, there is a much wider range of articles and books by Tafuri and his followers, including the influential Marxist theory and research journal he edited in the late 1960s, *Contropiano*, which included key essays by Marxist theorists such as Antonio Negri (on John Maynard Keynes), Massimo Cacciari (on the origins of negative thought), as well as by Tafuri (on the critique of architectural ideology) and Tafuri and his circle's numerous essays and colloquia in Venice on topics including Red Vienna, Soviet architecture, Michel Foucault, and the European artistic and architectural avant-gardes.² Tafuri should, thus, be an important general point of reference for scholars of modernism, even outside of the disciplines of architecture and architectural history. Yet of its most influential thinkers, only Fredric Jameson has made extended

¹ Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, New York: Harper and Row, 1980; Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1976; Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf, New York: Rizzoli, 1986; Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987.

² See, for example, Antonio Negri, "La teoria capitalistica nel '29: John M. Keynes," *Contropiano* 1:1 (1968), 3-40; Massimo Cacciari, "Sulla genesi del pensiero negativo," *Contropiano* 2:1 (1969), 131-200; Manfredo Tafuri, "Per una critica dell'ideologia architettonica," *Contropiano* 2:1 (1969), 31-80; *Vienna Rossa: La politica residenziale nella Vienna socialista, 1919-1933*, ed. Manfredo Tafuri, Milan: Electa, 1980; Manfredo Tafuri et al, *Socialismo, città, architettura: URSS 1917-1937*, Rome: Officina, 1971; Massimo Cacciari, *Metropolis*, Rome: Officina, 1973; Massimo Cacciari et al, *Il Dispositivo Foucault*, Venice: Cluve Libreria Editrice, 1977; Giancarlo Buonfino, Massimo Cacciari, and Francesco Dal Co, *Avanguardia Dada Weimar*, Venice: Arsenale Cooperativa Editrice, 1978.

reference to Tafuri's work, above all, in his important essay "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology."³

Architecture has its own peculiarities as a discipline that defines its specific place in a broad historiography and critical theory of modernism. As a particular and perhaps idiosyncratic instance of modernism's development and persistent afterlife, it may offer a relevant perspective from which to gauge broader similarities with and differences from conceptions of modernism oriented towards artistic media such as visual arts, performance, or literature. Although this essay concentrates on Tafuri's views on, especially, 20th-century history of architecture and urbanism and the corollary concepts of architectural modernism and avant-garde, it is not, however, solely because of his contributions as historian of modern architecture that I have made Tafuri the focal point of this essay. Three other considerations have shaped my choice of topic.

First, Tafuri set architectural modernism and avant-gardism within an exceedingly broad interdisciplinary prospect that sought to relate the discipline-specific formal and technical problems and ideologies to a theory of *modernity* that encompassed both the theory of capitalist development in Marx and the theory of institutional and cultural rationalization in Max Weber, as well as the broad trajectory of sociological and philosophical thinking about modernity's transformative effects on individual and collective experience, ranging from Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche to Sigmund Freud, Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Michel Foucault. Additionally, Tafuri was strongly attentive to how architectural problems of form and formal "language" found a wider context in the various 20th-century formalisms that evolved in structuralist and semiological theories in linguistics, anthropology, psychoa-

³ Fredric Jameson, "Architecture and the Critique of Ideology," in *Architecture Criticism Ideology*, ed. Joan Ockman, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985, 51-87. For recent work on Tafuri, mostly from within the field of architectural history, see: Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1999; Andrew Leach, *Manfredo Tafuri: Choosing History*, Ghent: A&S Books, 2007; Anthony Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008; Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010; Marco Biraghi, *Project of Crisis: Manfredo Tafuri and Contemporary Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013.

analysis, literary and art-historical study, and other cultural disciplines.⁴ I would thus argue that beyond his specific contributions to architectural history, Tafuri should be seen an exemplary methodological resource for today's "new modernist studies," which has emphasized a comparative, trans-disciplinary and trans-national contextualization of modernist works that might earlier have been looked at primarily within single-media, national, and relatively more restricted social- and intellectual-historical frameworks.

Second, Tafuri's extraordinary contextual range as a scholar also extended temporally back to the late Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and Enlightenment contexts. He discerned anticipations of 20th-century modernist phenomena already within the long wave of modernity that dated back, in his view, to Quattrocento Italy, with Brunelleschi's and Alberti's confrontation of the historical residues of the medieval city and a new interventive architecture montaged out of quoted fragments of a rediscovered classical idiom. Even more poignantly, Tafuri devotes the first two chapters of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, his most wide-ranging study of 20th-century modernism and avant-garde, to the 18th-century Roman artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi: an essay on Piranesi's montage of fragments in the *Carceri*, the *Campo Marzio*, and the *Cammini* where Tafuri claims Piranesi constructs a "utopia of dissolved form" and hence become a founder of "what would emerge as the ethic of the dialectical becoming of avant-garde art," its self-renewal by continuous self-destruction⁵; and, successively, an essay on Sergei Eisenstein's analysis, in very late lectures from 1946-47, of Piranesi's *Carceri* as a model of the "ecstasy" of exploded form that reveals the dialectical tensions within apparently stable spaces, which both Piranesi's precinematic montage and Eisenstein's cinematic montage help to disclose.⁶ Although I will not discuss at length this dimension of deep historicity in Tafuri's work, it offers an important reminder that the relative "presentism" of modernist studies that limits our appreciation of the *longue durée* of artistic modernism's complex responses to a European modernity evolving over several centu-

⁴ See, for instance, the chapters "Instruments of Criticism," in *Theories and History of Architecture* 171-225; "Architecture and Its Double: Semiology and Formalism," in *Architecture and Utopia* 150-169; and Part Three of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, entitled, after Hermann Hesse's novel in which a spiritual elite plays an enigmatic, intransitive game with abstract elements, "The Glass Bead Game," 267-304.

⁵ Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, 54.

⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, "Piranesi or the Flux of Form," in *Nonindifferent Nature*, trans. Herbert Marshall, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 123-154.

ries before reaching an inflection point in the late 19th-century. Tafuri drew upon a wide range of historical examples to estrange and defamiliarize the modern present and to unsettle modernism's self-conferred privileged status, bought at the cost of its own dehistoricization.

Lastly, Tafuri was extraordinarily self-conscious about historical method, and restlessly adapted his historiography to new objects, new contexts of writing, and new intellectual influences over the three decades of his mature work. Hence Tafuri is not only an exemplary practitioner in the writing of the history of architectural modernisms and avant-gardes and of their broader context in the artistic and political vanguards of the twentieth century; he is also an extraordinary source of metahistorical reflection on the problems and possibility of historicizing modernism. A key motivation for this metahistorical reflection is, Tafuri suggests, the very complexity and convention-breaking nature of modernism, which has made close attention to empirical detail a precondition of adequate conceptualization and criticism. Although he is critical of the empiricism of the architectural criticism coming out of the modern movement, he unequivocally affirms his preference for its nimble attention to new facts over the rigidity of static theoretic frameworks. In his introduction to the 1976 edition of *Theories and History of Architecture*, Tafuri writes:

The criticism of modern architecture has been obliged to proceed, almost until today, along rails laid on unprejudiced empiricism: perhaps this was the only viable route as, too often, the art of our century has jumped the fence of ideological conventions, of speculative foundations, of the very same aesthetics available to the critic. So much so that the only authentic criticism of modern art came, especially between 1920 and 1940, from those with enough courage not to derive their analytical methods from existing philosophical systems but from direct and empirical contact with the thoroughly new questions of the avant-gardes.⁷

Tafuri means in architecture critics such as Nikolaus Pevsner, Siegfried Giedion, Karel Teige, Alfred Behne, and Giulio Carlo Argan, and in the broader ambit of modernism figures such as Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Sergei Eisenstein, Viktor Skhlovsky, and Carl Einstein. His constant, intense metahistorical reflection on the nature of modernist architectural histories, the divergences between

⁷ Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, 5.

architecture's ideological functions and its material forms, and the multivalent forces that converge and diverge around these may inspire similar reflections in other areas of new modernist studies as well.

In the remainder of my essay, I will survey three interrelated, but varying frameworks in which Tafuri addresses the problem of writing critical history of modernism. The first, related most closely to *Architecture and Utopia*, I call the "utopia-as-ideology" problematic. In this approach, Tafuri adopts a critical stance towards modern architecture in relation to the broader capitalist development of twentieth-century urban space and production, which in his analysis renders 20th-century architecture's social pretensions increasingly unreal, distant from capitalism's effective actuality, hence, in a pejorative sense, "utopian." The second I call Tafuri's "concrete / abstract labor" problematic that he most closely explored in the two-volume historical study *Modern Architecture*. Tafuri frames this problematic as a matter of a loss of identity of the concrete activity of the architectural discipline along with a set of attempts to renew architecture by remaking, as he puts it, "the organizational structure of the intellectual labor involved in dealing with the construction of the human environment."⁸ Lastly, I will discuss Tafuri's further considerations of modernism in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, under the sign of what he called "the historical project," which includes and modulates the first two with further new complications. The historical project takes up the dissonant architectural ideologies, techniques, and the organizational forms of abstract labor, discerning and accentuating the gaps that exist between them in field of historical phenomena and artifacts. Only in this way, Tafuri argues, may historical writing "project" the fragmentation and crises of the plurilinguistic real beyond the limits of disciplinary ideologies into the domain of valid critical knowledge.

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I first, however, want to remark the intersection point between these three otherwise different critical optics: their common focus on modernism as a paradoxical and problematic historical object, an object of historical research and criticism that is constituted and defined by *anti-historical* impulses, according to Tafuri. As he wrote in 1976, noting a troubling resonance between the legacy of the artistic avant-garde early in the century and the theoretical horizon of his own time:

⁸ Tafuri and Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, 7.

To discover that this ideal area is all based on anti-historical knowledge and activity might frighten or disconcert. But we shall be far less disconcerting if we try to go further, to dig deeper into the phenomena and not be led by inadequate ideological pulls.

Has modern art not presented itself, from the very beginning, in the European avant-garde movements, as a true challenge to history? Has it not tried to destroy not only history, but even itself as an historical object?⁹

In his early essay, "Modern Architecture and the Eclipse of History," Tafuri offers a variety of specifications of what he means by this anti-historicity. First, noting Walter Gropius's refusal to institute a history course as part of the Bauhaus's curriculum, Tafuri sees a modeling of designed space or object on technology, which reduces its duration to a rapidly consumed present, which in turn undermines its capacity as a vehicle of historicity. "If architecture must model itself on technological reality," Tafuri writes—

so intimately as to become an *epistemological metaphor*, if it reduces to pure perception the structures of visual communication, if it tends to become pure object, and, even, pure industrial object, it is clear that one cannot even begin to question its historicity.¹⁰

Tafuri discerns in the most extreme instances of the modern movement in architecture an operation not solely of turning away from history, but furthermore of an active subduing and cancellation of historical traces, by overwriting them in the technified code of the present. The past represents a threat to be contained and overcome, because its alterity challenges the abstract value that disposes as a coordinated order the power of technology, administrative control, and capitalist production. "The *extinction of the past* by a present raised to the status of new value," he writes—

is merciless. Artistic production is not, then, *consumed* by the inevitable adjustment of the public to the forms, but it is born with the precise purpose of being rapidly consumed: the condition necessary to reach this objective is the contem-

⁹ Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

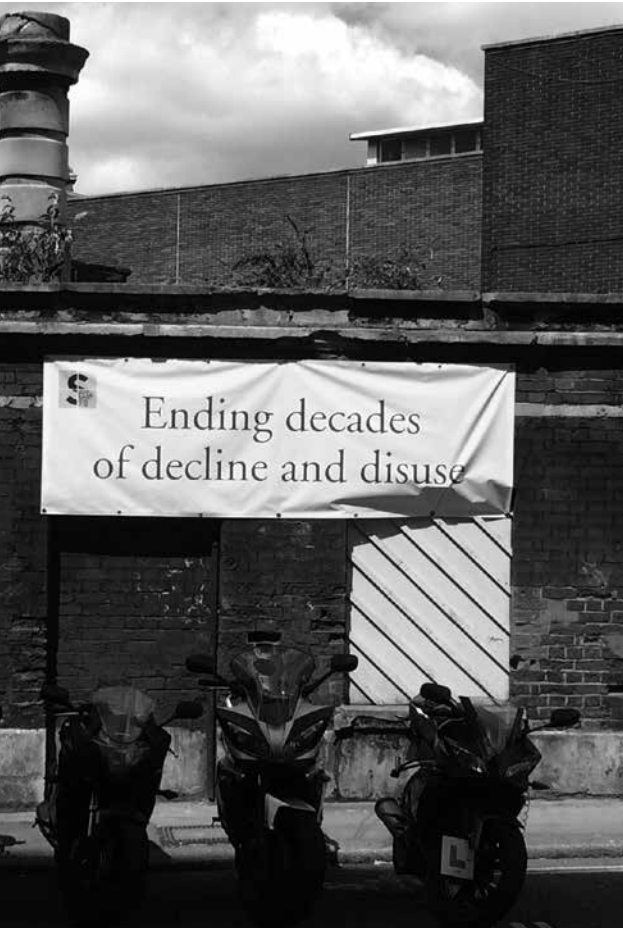


Figure 1: Smithfield Market area, London, June 2014. Photograph by the author.

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porary consumption of the entire past, whose presence carries the memory of an extinct way of producing *values*, a disturbing and dangerous memory because of the illusion of the possible return to a sacral conception of artistic activity. This is the reason why all avant-garde movements see in history a *danger* for modern art.¹¹

This danger of history has a specific valence for modern architects: the problem posed by the pre-existence of the historical city, especially regarding the preservation or transformation of the historic centers (**Figure 1**).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

Figure 2: Le Corbusier, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 2013. Photograph by the author.



Thus, Tafuri writes, “Both Le Corbusier and Wright—leaving aside, for the moment, the obvious differences that separate their global conceptions of the modern city—take a phenomenon for granted: the historical centres, if used as ‘pieces’ of the contemporary city, *are dangerous to life*.”¹² Along with their tangible alterity in time, the danger lies in their undoubted structural density and coherence, which nevertheless is opposed to the principles by which the modern structure is organized (**Figure 2**).

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¹² *Ibid.*, 48.

Hence, they haunt the anti-historicity of the modern with its own shadow of becoming and passing-away, the contingency of its supposedly timeless and rationally founded structure: “The entire historical texture is a structure, quite apart from its stratifications. Or, rather, it is a structure that somehow is defined, *negatively*, by contraposition to another structure: the, even though only hypothesized, structure of the modern city.”¹³ In the end, the modern architect is caught between two irreconcilable relations to the historical city, which drive an unsteady oscillation in modernist architectural ideology between the past as a neutralized model and the past as a burden to be overcome by the technological present of production. As Tafuri expresses these alternatives:

A. In a certain light [historical textures] are considered models, in the sense of figural values that, although unrecoverable as such today, can show the contemporary urbanist the need to translate into a coherent linguistic system the confused, though vital, indications offered by the ephemeral worlds of the non-representational and consumable objects of technological reality: Le Corbusier’s continuous references to the ancient urban spaces in his self-publicity, are clearly to the point.

B. As, however, the poetic of the changeable—directly related to the incessant and rapid mobility of the new structure of the capitalist production cycle—is at the base of the hypothesis of new urban structures, it is the value of permanence, immutability, a-temporality of the ancient towns that are seen as dangerous challenges to modern urban planning and as a dangerous opponent. (This *danger* has a concrete meaning, beyond its merely ideal one; both Wright and Le Corbusier refer to the invisible chaos resulting from the forced injection of modern mobility into the old textures.)¹⁴

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Anyone who has experienced the traffic snarls in, say, Naples’s historic center knows just what Tafuri means. When we consider how much the mobility of automobile circulation was a part of Le Corbusier’s modernist ideology, we see the catastrophic implications of Naples historic hive of dark alleyways and dense market-streets.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

I return now to the first of these problematics, the reading of modern architecture as an ideologically functioning "utopia." What does this mean for Tafuri? There are three basic assumptions embedded in this framework, none of which is simply axiomatic; each rather entails strong theoretical claims. First is that the gradual emergence of the concept of the "city" in modernity—and Tafuri means from the Renaissance on, but especially with the Enlightenment city as a space that may be conceived as a planned totality—undermines traditional notions of architectural form as a closed, static entity, and put its value into crisis. Architectural form is dissolved into a function of a larger, more encompassing framework of city planning and construction. The notion of the modern city as a site of technological production, distribution, and consumption intensifies this crisis, by making architecture just "a mere link in the production chain" and an element in what Tafuri calls "the merciless commercialization of the human environment."¹⁵

Second is that the techniques of modern visual communication—Tafuri means, following Walter Benjamin, photography, cinema, advertising, and so on—imply that ideology can no longer be considered only a matter of "false consciousness" or "distorted ideas" discursively represented, but also refers to a systematically distorted structure of experience that can be non-discursively embodied in a pluridimensional environment of signs, spaces, objects, structures, and bodies. Here Tafuri offers his own contribution to innovations in the Marxist notion of ideology that include György Lukács's concept of reification, Walter Benjamin's investigations of cities as collective dream-structures, the notion in Theodor Adorno that culture industry translates commodity-structure into cognitive and affective schemata that preform contemporary experience, Guy Debord's idea of the society of the spectacle in which social relations have been transformed into images, and Louis Althusser's formulation of ideology as the normal unthematized background of lived relations to the social order, the "imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence." For Tafuri, notably, the concept of "the city" itself becomes one of the most important sites of modern ideological articulation and mass mediatization through the emerging technical media of visual communication (Tafuri was one of the early European readers of Walter Benjamin's work). The city is the pivotal notion around which modern architecture and urbanism pitched its ideological positions; it is

¹⁵ Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 42-43.



Figure 3: The Journal *Vesch Objet Gegenstand* 3 (1922). Photograph by the author.

one of the key “imaginary” relationships through which individuals experience their relation to the complex conditions of managed capitalism; but also, dialectically, these ideologies of the city take on, in complicated ways, effective reality in the built environments and lived experience of city spaces. Modern architects and planners, equipped with a fertile set of city-ideologies and new experiences of modernity, sought to translate these, with greater or lesser degrees of success, into built city-spaces of lived experience. In turn, the structures and fissures they thus introduced into city-space, the stratified results of their successful and failed or partially-realized interventions into the historical fabric of cities, became the materialized embodiment of their discontinuous and contradictory city-ideologies.

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Lastly, Tafuri argues that the various connotations that were layered into the ideological discourses of the “city”—architectural, urbanistic, but also the artistic and literary discourses of the avant-garde from Baudelaire and Rimbaud through Döblin and Dos Passos—were ways of taking up as “raw material” the disorder of capitalist production and distribution and ideologically transmuting them into innovative forms that both registered and redeemed the chaos of the modern city. In this context, for the short-lived period of upsurge of the classical avant-garde, “form” could take on a utopian valence in which the anarchic

crisis of values in the social world were transfigured into new, self-positing and self-referential linguistic or language-like relational systems of value, not functional yet in the actually-existing world but speculatively anticipating the norms of a "new age," a "new world," or a "new man." Moreover, this utopia of form evolves over time as well, from the organic dreams of expressionism or the informal montage of dada and surrealism—which in Tafuri's formulation individualize and protest or symbolically compensate unsatisfied human needs¹⁶—towards the rationalist "ideologies of the plan" that one finds in 1920s radical avant-gardes including the Bauhaus, Russian Constructivism, De Stijl, and "Nouveau Esprit" (**Figure 3**).

In the last turn of the dialectic, Tafuri writes, "This phase in turn is put in crisis and supplanted when, after the crisis of 1929, with the elaboration of the anti-cyclical theories and the international reorganization of capital, and after the launching in Russia of the First Five-Year Plan, architecture's ideological function seems to be rendered superfluous, or limited to rear-guard tasks of marginal importance."¹⁷ Drawing upon his background in the journal *Contropiano*, especially Antonio Negri's important essay on the role of Keynes in the adaptation of capital during the global depression of the thirties,¹⁸ Tafuri argues that in the face of a still-unplanned capitalism, avant-garde ideologies could project artistic form as *anticipatory* of a rational, planned social order. Consider, for instance, El Lissitzky's constructivist visual fairy tale *Of 2 Squares*, in which the collision of two geometrical forms allegorically provides the genesis of a new global constructivist order. But once the attempt to control the social totality through planning became a factual, present aspect of societies from Keynesian "New Deals" to fascist autarchies to Soviet planned communism, the anticipatory, utopian, critical energies went out of these programs. At best they continued to provide ideological sustenance and design aesthetics for the state and economy in their actually existing organization, as for example with the comparatively feeble futurism and the neo-classicism *Romanità* of Italy in the 1930s under Mussolini

¹⁶ Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

¹⁸ Antonio Negri, "La teoria capitalistica nel '29: John M. Keynes," *Contropiano* 1:1 (1968), 3-40. A translation of a revised version of this essay appears as "Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State," in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 22-50.



Figure 4: Palazzo della civiltà del lavoro, EUR Rome. Photograph by the author.

(**Figure 4**). At worst, such utopian projects simply became irrelevant and were consigned to the trashbin or archive.

Tafuri's *Architecture and Utopia* dated back, in its basic problematic, to the militancy of the late 1960s and Tafuri's collaboration with the young militant intellectuals around *Contropiano*, such as Cacciari, Negri, and Mario Tronti, and indeed, as Tafuri explicitly notes, it is a "reworking and sizeable enlargement" of the essay "Per una critica dell'ideologia architettonica" published in 1969 in *Contropiano*.¹⁹ By 1976, with his publication of *Modern Architecture* with Francesco Dal Co, Tafuri had partially reconsidered the intransigently negative tone of *Architecture and Utopia*'s critique of modernist architecture and art, and added new theoretical nuances to his historical methodology. In this two-volume work, spanning from the mid-19th-century to then-current neo-avant-garde and early postmodernism, he puts the emphasis on the new dialectic of concrete and abstract labor that modern architecture projected and, to an extent Tafuri previously did not acknowledge, helped to actualize. What had earlier appeared as a binary confrontation of modern architecture's naïve utopia of form against the hard destiny of capitalist production, bureaucratic administration, technology, and planning, now takes shape as a differentiation and renovation of intellec-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.

tual labor in confrontation with the new social space of the managed society. Tafuri writes:

What is involved is a restricting of intellectual labor as the communicative pregnancy of the "objects"—the buildings built—tends to fade away while new importance is assumed by the organization of the sphere of production and by the control and administration of the urban complex. That no guarantee of political action as such is implicit in such new organizational tasks will be evident in the pages that follow. Yet there can be no doubt that inherent in them are unprecedented relationships between intellectual labor and socio-economic development, even if the terrain in which such relationships are born is rife with nostalgic regressions and utopias we could happily do without.²⁰

Tafuri introduces here a kind of "cunning of architectural reason," regarding which it no longer suffices to point out that various architectural ideologies proved to be deluded in their utopian pretensions and expectations. Here Tafuri admits that despite these illusions, and under the protection of their ideologically veil, architecture carried out socially consequential invention and change. As if addressing his former position, Tafuri argues that these utopian errors were not deviations from "real history"; they were constitutive and, dialectically, even effective impulses for this history, which is unthinkable apart from the genealogical stratification of utopian anticipations and false-starts:

Yet these regressions and utopias must also be seen as part of history, in confrontation with the cities of the enemy that they leave intact and with the prospects for the future to which they are willfully blind. The time is past when there might have been some point in crying scandal at ideological mystification: what matters now is to try to understand the historical reasons responsible for it.²¹

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Lastly, he goes on to note that he and Dal Co avoid, outside of quotation and similar references, generalizing terms like "the modern movement," since these tend to cover over the multiple, interwoven, but irreducible histories of which the genealogy of modern architecture is composed.

²⁰ Tafuri and Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*

One of the key differences in the approach taken in Tafuri's later work, programmatically set out by "The Historical Project" introduction to *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, is a detailed confrontation with the historical studies of Michel Foucault, who in the late 1970s came to Venice for colloquia including Tafuri, Cacciari, Rella, and others of the Tafuri circle. His engagement with Foucault reinforced Tafuri's anti-utopian historical stoicism in the face of contradiction, multiplicity, and unresolvable antagonisms—a stance that had already been nurtured by his circle's engaged reading of Nietzsche and Max Weber,²² and that found a kindred spirit in Foucault's singular combination of radicalism and disenchantment. In "The Historical Project," Tafuri offers a sort of implicit self-criticism, for his overly exclusive focus on architectural ideologies, which in turn led to an overly unitary account of the modern development he had set out to critique. "Architecture itself," he writes—

inasmuch as it is an institution, is anything but a unitary ideological block: as with other linguistic systems, its ideologies act in a highly nonlinear fashion. So much so that it is legitimate to suspect that the very criticism of architectural ideology—as it has been conducted up to now—has only reckoned with the most obvious and immediate aspects of that ideology: the refusals, repressions, and introspections, which run through the body of architectural writing.²³

Simply shifting from a focus on texts to contexts, however, is not sufficient to open up the historical object and critically shatter its apparent but deceptive coherence and continuity with "precursors" and "successors." Here, the influence of Foucault's "archeology" on Tafuri's historiographic idiom becomes apparent:

The context binds together artistic languages, physical realities, behaviors, urban and territorial dimensions, politico-economic dynamics. But it is constantly broken up by subterranean ideologies that nevertheless act on an intersubjective level; it is broken up by the interaction of diverse techniques of domination, each of which possesses its own untranslatable language.²⁴

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²² Especially influential were the analyses of Massimo Cacciari, "Sulla genesi del pensiero negativo," *Contropiano* 2:1 (1969), 131-200; and "Aforisma, tragedia, lirica," *Nuova Corrente* 68-69 (1975-76), 464-92.

²³ Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

The task of the historian is not to reduce these languages and the borders between them to a common denominator, whether formal or contextual, but rather to highlight their "collisions," sharpening the borders and boundaries between them and the inclusions and exclusions these define. Tafuri writes:

The construction of a physical space is certainly the site of a "battle" [...] That such a battle is not totalizing, that it leaves borders, remains, residues, is also an indisputable fact. And thus a vast field of investigation is opened up—an investigation of the limits of languages, of the boundaries of techniques, of the thresholds "that provide density." The threshold, boundary, the limit all "define": it is in the nature of such definition that the object so circumscribed becomes evanescent. The possibility of constructing the history of a formal language comes about only by destroying, step by step, the linearity of that history and its autonomy: there will remain only traces, fluctuating signs, unhealed rifts.²⁵

The historian's primary object, then, becomes the gaps and interstices between fragmentary and partial idioms of a pluralistic sort, from linguistic, discursive, and theoretical to typological, technical, material, and territorial:

Historical space does not establish improbable links between diverse languages, between techniques that are distant from each other. Rather, it explores what such distance expresses: it probes what appears to be a *void*, trying to make the absence that seems to dwell in that void speak.

It is, then, an operation that descends into the interstices of techniques and languages. While operating within these interstices, the historian certainly does not intend to suture them; rather he intends to make emerge what is encountered on the borders of language. Historical work thus calls into question the problem of the "limit": it confronts the division of labor in general; it tends to go outside of its own boundaries; *it projects the crisis of techniques already given.*²⁶

One of the specific manifestations that Tafuri uses as a diagnostic for approaching this interstitial space—relevant, perhaps, to a historical methodology for modernisms other than architectural as well—will be the divergences between

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

the historical series of modernist semantic, ideological, and theoretical *themes* and the succession of *forms* actualized in the work. This very divergence of ideological thematics and form takes on symptomatic value as an entry into a broader set of factors structuring the historical field and impinging upon the individual work. “It is,” Tafuri writes, “the very gap that exists between avant-garde ideology and the translation into *techniques* of that ideology. It is a gap that historiography is incapable of filling, but one that it must instead accentuate and turn into the material of concrete and widespread knowledge.”²⁷

In the end, Tafuri’s “historical project” defines itself as an iterative and intentionally pursued “project of crisis.”²⁸ The project of crisis, as an outcome of Tafuri’s mode and method of historical analysis, strikes deep at the bases of any monumental, autonomous historical evolution of modernist forms, which Tafuri sees as the characteristic ideological representation of modernism by its acolytes. It is, for instance, such a historical ideology that is enshrined by pseudo-historicizing notions such as “the Modern Movement” or “international style” in architecture. Despite his criticisms of the artistic avant-garde, Tafuri’s sympathies and even inspiration for the project of crisis lie with the radically disintegrative energies that flashed up briefly with the avant-garde of negation and crisis, such as Dadaism: “And to comprehend fully the dialectic—suspended between the extremes of the tragic and the banal—that shapes the tradition of the twentieth-century avant-garde, is it not more useful to go back to the hallucinatory buffooneries of the Cabaret Voltaire than to reexamine those works in which the tragic and the banal are reconciled with reality?”²⁹ Translated into historical method, Tafuri suggests, the project of crisis seeks to dissolve the ideological glue that held together disparate elements in an apparent synthesis:

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The interweaving of intellectual models, modes of production, and modes of consumption ought to lead to the “explosion” of the synthesis contained in the work. Wherever this synthesis is presented as a completed whole, it is necessary to introduce a disintegration, a fragmentation, a “dissemination” of its constitutive units. It will then be necessary to submit these disintegrated components to

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁸ “Project of crisis” is Tafuri’s own term for his project: see *op. cit.*, 13. For further elaboration of this notion in Tafuri’s work, see Marco Biraghi, *Project of Crisis: Manfredo Tafuri and Contemporary Architecture*, trans. Alta Price, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013.

²⁹ Tafuri, *op. cit.*, 13-14.

a separate analysis. What reactions, symbolic horizons, avant-garde hypotheses, linguistic structures, methods of reorganizing production, technological inventions will all be seen thus stripped of the ambiguity ingrained in the synthesis displayed by the work.³⁰

Having set free the fragments, and fragments of fragments, of these no-longer valid historical syntheses, the historian now has them at his disposal for critical "remontage."³¹

Tafuri explicitly refers to certain moments and figures of the avant-garde in articulating this point, which might be summarized thus: the historical project, as a project of crisis, shatters and estranges the apparently autonomous order of "languages" emerging out of twentieth-century capitalism's technologically permeated, state-steered, and metropolitan social order. Tafuri evokes the names of Zurich Dada, Viktor Shklovsky, Bertolt Brecht, and Max Bense, among others, as his inspirations and points of theoretical reference. It is thus as if, even for one of the most astringent critics of the ideological pretensions of twentieth-century modernist and avant-garde movements, fragments of the avant-garde remain an ambiguous resource of hope in the critique of modern culture and social life. However reluctantly and skeptically, Tafuri the stoical historian of crisis never ceased to seek in the avant-garde's practices and spaces the thrust of a contemporary critical "knight's move," disclosing the radically new.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.