

Ornament Bears Repeating

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“If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space” (Eliade, 22)

In 1908, just days before the largest meteor impact in recorded history devastated more than two hundred hectares of Siberian forest near the Tunguska River, and exactly six weeks before Adolph Loos’ famous injunction against superfluous ornament, the young Belgian metallurgist and geographer Danal Georeunt began his historic if largely misunderstood trip to Borneo’s north west coast to what is today known as the state of Sarawak. Located at 3°57'N, 114°47'E in the South China Sea and about a fortnight’s travel by steamship from the port of Oostende, the region was not unexplored or for that matter even particularly remote, having been successfully colonized in the preceding century by half a dozen different Dutch ventures and Christian missions of various persuasions. It was, however, despite the tumults in Europe and colonial greed, still an area of profound mystery and, most importantly to the young scientist, of geological wonder—for nowhere in any of the new world or old had any explorer found as many hints of geothermic exigency or tectonic potentiality as on this south Asian archipelago. Sarawak was for Georeunt a potential window into terrestrial origin and like a lost book in which the story of civilization lay hidden.

Though his stated mission was to look for a reliable source of taconite to fuel the Belgian colonies’ booming steel industries, the young man had alternative interests and an expansive set of curiosities that he intended to pursue on the far-flung island. In addition to his acknowledged expertise in geomorphology and pedology, his keen eye and mapping expertise allowed him to accurately survey the island’s diluvian basins for potential archaeological sites. But more important than buried treasure, it was Georeunt’s passion for scouting caves and other subterranea that drove him

to explore and informed his philosophy, held fast, that human civilization and social progress was inexorably linked with a region's landscape. This view was a kind of modified version of the catastrophism that was just beginning to gain favor in the universities. For Georeunt it meant that major geological activity and even extra-terrestrial events were responsible for any radical shifts in human evolution or ecology of the planet.

Georeunt believed that if civilizations had risen out of the primitive chaos of terra infirma, of mud and salt marsh, then it had occurred not as the result of a slow crawl toward shore, but of a massive evolutionary leap—a moment of such awesome power that an entirely new epoch was born in a matter of minutes, not millennia. This kind of an upheaval catalyzed by massive ecological cataclysm brought Georeunt into a somewhat queer middle ground in the prevailing research and at odds with his teachers and peers at the University, who were for the most part still believers in a rather distorted Bible-based uniformitarianism. His beliefs both hinted at the elasticity of tectonic geomorphism (and some would argue his contribution to this field have not been sufficiently acknowledged) and harkened back to an archaic system heavily indebted to the Pythagoreans and their advocacy of fieldwork as exemplified by the *pentemychos*.

Perhaps more than anything else, it was this rather uncertain orientation and unorthodox methodology that made Georeunt's mission both so radical and, in retrospect, so doomed to certain ignominy. But these reservations did not at the time curtail his enthusiasm, nor did they portend his surreal fate, and, backed by the confidence of new adventure and the certainty of oceanic steam travel, Georeunt set out. He was sure that buried in the island's vast volcanic sediments there would be some new proof of human origin and that a trip to Saranak would yield new discoveries and substantiate his deeply held philosophies.

Committed to the mission the young researcher agreed to the charter as laid out by his corporate sponsors, including their inevitable time table. It would be months before he was allowed a short leave, and the better half of two years passed before he managed to put together even the small expeditionary force necessary for travel into the island's dense interior. Perhaps it was these delays that were to blame for the decisions that led to his eventual disappearance. What happened is

uncertain, and the story has been distorted by the politics and scandal that followed. What is known is that he discovered what came to be called Deer Cave and that this terrestrial chasm has yet to be comprehensively mapped nearly a century after Georeunt entered its dark environs.

A psychological description of society must begin with that segment which is most accessible to understanding—apparently the most fundamental segment—whose significant trait is tential homogeneity. (Bataille, 137)

In Georges Bataille's essay *The Psychological Structure of Fascism* he points to the role heterogeneity plays in the disruption of homogeneous mechanisms of social society—where smooth-running supermarkets, motorways, and houses of worship all function to bind a community together and to ensure its stability. It is its distinction of being outside of normative structures and therefore of being censored, or taboo, that Bataille argues makes the heterogeneous synonymous with the unconscious. This distinction is applied especially to patterns of violence and oppression wherein the passive majority allows for a coalescence of power in the hands of a few. According to this definition, and given its gross injunction on the otherwise “relatively” balanced nature of society, Bataille maintains that fascism is an example of the heterogeneous and a disruptive force akin to a kind of mass hypnosis. Given his thesis—and with the retrospective insight we have vis-a-vis the sexual fetishism explicit in the fascist project, the question remains as to whether the manifestation of heterogeneity in the public milieu should be viewed as an explicit projection of repressed desire?

A society's recourse in times of imbalance has historically been ritual sacrifice. Performed according to strict regulations, including strictures on both time and place, sacrifice was designed to purify the polluted community by means of a surrogate victim. This act, which is taken up by the whole community, is a preventative one—through a specifically prescribed action, potential future crises are averted, and the individual victim absorbs the heterogeneity of the group (Girard, 101). What is

most important about the act of ritual sacrifice, and that would indeed be a central part of all public executions in Europe until their abolition in the early 20th century, was that they occur in view of the entire citizenry—that they are in effect a public illustration of collective unconscious, which exemplifies the aesthetization of the death drive (and arguably a shared sado-masochism).

The public nature of execution has, since the Pentateuch, been its most prominent function, where the arbiter of justice was the sovereign (or his proxy) whose interest lay fundamentally in establishing and maintaining the correct hierarchy. By telegraphing absolute power the king was ritually renewing the providence not only of his kingdom but of the universe, as his power was established via a cosmological authority. As such, the sovereign served as a kind of threshold, literally embodying the heterogeneous in an otherwise homogenous milieu and thereby establishing the psychosexual and (re)creative coordinates of the state.

The architecture that facilitated this projection is well known—from the tower and dungeon to the gallows and guillotine—the intention was to lay bare the criminal through a mechanism of public sacrifice and to erase the identity (often literally: to behead) of the condemned body. This erasure served as another kind of threshold over which the victim ceremoniously passed on his way to becoming a ritualized communal sacrifice. This design metaphor can be extended literally to the guillotine (that most elegant of the executioner's devices) where the public functions as the third and arguably most important factor in the architecture of sacrifice—serving as the legs that hold up the platform of the court, on top of which the adjudicating blade of the sovereign remains poised.

Given the vital importance of the collective in establishing cosmic harmony through sacrifice, the function of the heterogeneous taboo is to perpetuate a collision of social vectors—a historical catharsis. This is the point Bataille makes when he argues for the connection between the unconscious and fascism and that, in turn, informs the way André Breton defines the surrealist marvelous as being made up by a “veiled erotic” and a “fixed explosive.” Commenting on the latter, Hal Foster states that “The fixed explosive, the second category of convulsive beauty, is uncanny primarily in its im/mobility, for this suggests the authority of death, the dominant

conservatism of the drives” (25). But the explosive remains, like the aura that lingers around a corpse or the nostalgia that impregnates architectural decay, so that there is a confusion between the two states—and *this is the function of the sacrifice as a manifestation of the unconscious*—whereby there is a prolonged indeterminacy that acts as a heterogeneous eruption that can lead to the fascist trance.

In other words, architecture designed to mediate the threshold of death is by definition heterogeneous because it is both fixed and simultaneously subject to metamorphic mobility (in the execution of its design) and as such it serves to frame the explosive violence of the sacrificial act. In so doing, it functions as an example of what Breton called the marvelous and what we might call sublime terror. In either count, that architecture can manifest the fixed explosive is especially true when it is itself in a state of ruination or illuminated at night by bright lights, where it becomes doubled by shadow.

Adverse surfaces, the mirror of conquerors, the desertified expanses have attracted generations of prospectors, those who seek remnants, buried treasure...” (Virilio, 141)

Where does architecture start? With the armature that supports or the skin that protects? Or perhaps with the foundation, that ubiquitous corner stone? If the human body is indeed the original schematic, defined not only by its musculoskeletal engineering but also its having entrances and exits, then the animal kingdom was and is a sort of book of styles, and the peripatetic movement of men and women through nature is a great laying out of the cosmos.

The architectural historian Indra McEwen writes in *Socrates’ Ancestor* that “pattern can be thought of as a single, immutable template to be traced or copied, which appears to be how Plato understood it, or it can be thought of as a mutable rhythm governing a pattern of movement... a rhythm or order (*Kosmos*) that is rediscovered with each new tracing of the figure” (42). It is this attraction to rhythmic pattern that

defines the act of making and establishes the impulse for order in the cosmos that McEwen sees as informing not only the birth of architecture but also that of Western philosophy, the thesis of her marvelous book.

In order to get from the order of things to the order of the universe there is a translation, where the Greek *Kosmos* goes from simple adornment—and indeed the word *cosmetic* shares the same origin as *cosmos*—to a greater order as defined by the *polis* itself. This evolution from ornament to the structure of the universe is at the root not only of architecture but of the entire civilization, “the city was made, and continually remade, in a making that was itself a discovery of the *Kosmos*” (46).

If its function was as a kind of catalyst or in-between stage between the ritual body and the creation of reason, how does the ornamental function today, where architecture is still made and unmade, but where there is seemingly no need for a renewal of cosmic order?

One answer may be seen in the story of Daedalus and his design of the fabled Labyrinth to contain the Minotaur. The Labyrinth is of course a maze, a confused series of dead ends and false starts that, though seemingly chaotic, are in fact of the highest order. But more than just a puzzle the Labyrinth represents a hyper-realized *polis* wherein chaos is isolated and order an engineered ritual. But what then of the metamorphic monster at its center?

The goal of Daedalus’s Labyrinth was to contain the result of an unnatural intercourse between Queen Pasiphae and a bull—the Minotaur is a rent in the cosmos—defined by a gross metamorphose or hybrid. Ornament then, is important not only as a means of renewing the cosmos but also more simply as a reminder of the eternal germ that exists within all architecture—that of the chaotic. Indeed, even stripped of all ornament the building and cities that house them continue in their azimuthal bits of foundational material to reconstitute the Minotaur and in doing so renew the center of the Labyrinth and the true heart of the *polis*.

In this way the strategy of containing chaos through the tracing of pattern in the form of the Labyrinth is not dissimilar to the parlor game Exquisite Corpse, where the fragmented subject is sewn together by virtue of blind-bonded intersecting planes, similar to an architectural screen or accordion book. Implicit in this

seesawing body of folds is again the methodical tracing of Daedalus's Labyrinth. Where the players in the Exquisite Corpse are "lost" in the folds of their drawing, the infinite angles and byways that constitute our cities are also constantly (re)creating the symbolic Minotaur at the center of our collective *polis*.

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