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Disparate Vision: Preston S. Cohen's *Lightfall*

Abstract: This study investigates the relationships between the geometry of space, theory of perception and theory of narrative in the context of Preston Scott Cohen's *Lightfall* – the atrium space of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in Israel. The starting premise of the study is that it is possible to see the atrium space of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art as an inversion of the atrium space of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Guggenheim Museum* in New York. Hence, the main hypothesis is that Cohen's *Lightfall* transgresses the language of modernist architecture, moving from the constitution of exhibition space for *pure gaze* to the constitution of exhibition space for *disparate vision*. This means breaking with the homogeneous, universal space and time concepts of totalitarianism with the aim of building space-time concepts based on a disjunctive synthesis of narratives, ideologies and discourses of different societies, cultures and arts, or building space-time concepts in a continuous process of *becoming*. How does the architecture of Cohen's *Lightfall* reject the totalitarian modernist interior of the museum as an *institution designed solely for the observation of the work of art*? How is the theory and practice of contemporary art and culture reflected in the aesthetics of *Lightfall* and, *vice versa*, how do the aesthetics of *Lightfall* influence the practice of contemporary art, culture and society? In other words, in what way does Cohen's atrium space set the work of art not as autonomous, isolated, neutral and without context but as a unit of discourse? How does Cohen make the transition from the constitution of artistic space for *pure gaze* to the constitution of artistic space for *disparate vision*? This study draws on the theoretical investigations of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Gilbert Simondon and Pierre Bourdieu.

Keywords: pure gaze, disparate vision, Guggenheim, *Lightfall*

Distorted Symmetries, Disparate Vision

As you enter the atrium space of the museum, you suddenly feel that something is amiss. In place of the all-seeing atrium space, a space that gives a view of the whole interior, you are confronted with strange, twisted, curved, folded, distorted surfaces and horizontal, we could say post-Corbusian, elongated frames. You begin to explore this atrium more carefully, moving along promenades and stairways that at one moment frame and then cut through this space. The rhythm of your body

begins to change, shifting from slow to static (on escalators) to fast walking. You try to comprehend this space by looking through the horizontal, elongated and distorted frames. You try to find their “vanishing points”, but it is as if they exist in a space that has no connection to the space you are present in. Verticality and horizontality, centrality and peripherality, views from above and views from the pedestrian level, illumination and concealment in the shadows become superimposed and permeated, building unexpected relationships and moments.

The space just described is the so-called *Lightfall* atrium space by Preston Scott Cohen (1961) at Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2007–2011) in Israel. Based on the principles of the perspective method developed during the 18th century by Brook Taylor (1685–1731), central to *Lightfall* is the idea of distorted symmetry as a practical consequence of the projective function. Taylor’s perspective method refers to a three-dimensional projective process that rotates and inverts the projected object. This process produces two symmetrically opposite projections, one orthographic and the other perspectival, each a distortion of the other.¹ Cohen uses this play between the orthographic and perspectival projections of the Corbusian elongated horizontal window (fr. *la fenêtre en longueur*), or in this case the frame, but on distorted hyperbolic-paraboloid surfaces. The result of this play is an atrium space of distorted symmetries that brings into question the stable, static position of the all-seeing subject, the subject of ‘pure vision’, and undermines totalitarian modernist conceptions of interiors and the linear, continual progression of the narrative by providing space-time structures of ‘disparate visions’. In other words, Cohen’s *Lightfall* is a paradigm of a museum atrium space that undermines the homogeneous, transparent, universal space-time concepts of culture and society, transgresses the language of modernist architecture and creates disjunctive space-time concepts, i.e. space-time concepts in a continuous process of becoming. How are we to understand this process?

The Guggenheim Museum

Preston Scott Cohen’s *Lightfall* can be seen as an inversion of the atrium space by Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) at the *Guggenheim Museum* in New York.² The *Guggenheim Museum* is based on the organic form of the continuous spiral of a nautilus shell and an inverted ziggurat. The central atrium or gallery space consists of a continuous architectural promenade with pictures displayed along the walls and other gallery spaces arranged behind them as individual units or cabinets. The pedestrian

¹ Cf.: Preston S. Cohen, *Contested Symmetries and other Predicaments in Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press), 2001.

² Cf.: Preston S. Cohen, “Museum as Genealogy,” with Responses by Nicolai Ouroussoff, accessed March 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5Ij6la0MbQ>

movement along the promenade contrasts with the mechanical movement using lifts. The entire atrium space is covered by a glass dome which, together with the elongated horizontal windows on the spiraling walls, creates the very bright, diffusely illuminated space of the interior. The museum is based on a conventional approach to the organization of the contents in which visitors are led through a series of mutually-connected spaces and forced to follow the linear continuity of the central atrium.

The atrium of the *Guggenheim Museum* can be described, in Cohen's words: (1) as a high picture gallery which visitors observe from the other side, across the atrium evoking the original exhibition spaces of the 17th and the 18th centuries, (2) as a white cabinet, evoking the original exhibition spaces of cabinets of curiosity and the ideology of the white cube, and (3) as an evocation of a diorama.³

The vertical succession of the horizontal strips of the atrium space of the *Guggenheim Museum* evokes a gallery of 'accumulated' paintings of different sizes, like the exhibition space of the Uffizi gallery as depicted by Johan Zoffany (1733–1810) in his painting *Tribuna of the Uffizi* (1772–1778). This painting shows English aristocrats and capitalists on "the ritual tour of Italy"⁴. The painter depicts himself on the left side of the painting holding Rafael's *Madonna with Child* (1508). It can be immediately noticed that this painting depicts a collection of 'accumulated' masterpieces of different dimensions from the Renaissance period and authentic or inauthentic antiquities. All the walls, except for the floor and the ceiling, are covered with paintings, so that as little space as possible remains empty. The larger paintings occupy the higher parts of the wall (presumably so that they can be more easily seen from a distance), 'the best' paintings occupy a central position, while the smallest paintings are placed at the bottom of the wall. The visitors depicted examining and discussing the individual pieces interact with the paintings, growing bored, behaving like artists or explorers, and so on. Furthermore, every painting is seen as a self-contained entity, totally isolated from its neighbors, in a heavy frame and constrained by its own system of perspective. It is about the complex 'objective' and 'social' relationships between the work of art – the *piece* and the *observer*, "the piece and the piece, the observer and the observer, the piece and the observer, the piece and the piece in relation to the observer or the observer and the observer in relation to the pieces etc."⁵ Moreover, these relationships are supported by "a vague atmosphere of theory which takes the form of an explicit or implicit protocol, or public opinion that enables observation, dialogue and the creation of the exhibition space as an *institution intended solely for observing the work of art*."⁶ The typical collection of the 17th and the 18th century shown in Zoffany's painting is not yet an art gallery or a museum, but rather a collection of (cultural and social) values in the process of becoming a gallery or museum. Although it has not

³ Ibid.

⁴ Miško Šuvaković, *Diskurzivna analiza. Prestupi i/ili pristupi diskurzivne analize filozofiji, poetici, estetici, teoriji i studijama kulture i umetnosti* (Beograd: Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu, 2006), 148.

⁵ Ibid. (trans. Željka Pješivac)

⁶ Ibid. (trans. Željka Pješivac)

yet become a gallery or a museum in the institutional sense, it embodies the idea of exhibiting works of art for themselves, or *pure gaze*, in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu. We are dealing here with the creation of such spaces and institutions where works of art are so positioned, interlinked, named and classified that they are presented and seen as *only art*, i.e. spaces and institutions that enable visitors and observers to see the exhibited cultural artifacts on their own as pure and autonomous works of art.⁷

The atrium space of the *Guggenheim gallery*, which was originally intended for the exhibition of abstract art, is a good example of an exhibition space where the cultural artifacts are intended to be seen as autonomous works of art, that is, where the works of art are offered for *pure gaze*. Moreover, affirmation of the autonomous principle, production and evaluation of the work of art is inseparable from affirmation of the autonomy of the producers and the field of production. Like pure painting, which is intended to be seen in and for itself as painting (as a play of forms, qualities and colors) and not as a discourse, i.e. as independent from its references to transcendental meanings, the *pure gaze* is a result of the process of purification of a true analysis of the essence that is sought in history.⁸ The *pure gaze* is inseparable from producers of art motivated by purely artistic intentions, which is in turn inseparable from the autonomous artistic field, or to use the language of architecture, the pure white cube. Although the white atrium of the *Guggenheim Museum* has 'erased' the corners, ideologically this atrium can be seen (in the context of its primary purpose and function) as a white cube (contemporary artists are nowadays of course striving to create works that resist this ideology). The white cube is usually seen as an emblem of the alienation of art and the artist from society. "It is a ghetto space, a survival compound, a proto-museum with a direct line to a timeless, set of conditions, an attitude, a place deprived of location, the reflex of a bald curtain wall [...]"⁹ As Miško Šuvaković states, "the model of the white cube is not a transhistorical, transgeographical and apolitical construct of work in a disinterested and autonomous world of art. On the contrary, the aesthetic ideality of the white cube is a specific macropolitical and micropolitical construction of the autonomy of art, the work of art and exhibition of the work of art"¹⁰, and a gallery exhibition space, that is "peculiar to a society of high

⁷ "The term autonomous signifies the remarkable in itself, the non-utilitarian identification of the work of art in any instrumental, social sense. The autonomous work is remarkable and by itself placed as object, situation and event. The remarkable means perfectly made in a technical sense, authentic and unrepeatable, that is, different from other objects, situations and events. *By itself*, or the *only* object, the situation or event in this context means that the work of art is a function of internal real or fictional properties. Such a 'work' is isolated from cultural or social context and placed independently of any cultural or social context. The work looks as if it is a result of social practice, as it transcends any individual artistic practice." Ibid., 408 (trans. Željka Pješivac).

⁸ Pier Bourdieu, "The Historical Genesis of Pure Aesthetic," 264, accessed April 12, 2016, https://gop21.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/5-bourdieu_the_historical_genesis_of_a_pure_aesthetic_in_the_field_of_cultural_production2.pdf

⁹ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: the ideology of the gallery space* (California: University of California Press, 1986), 80.

¹⁰ Miško Šuvaković, *Diskurzivna analiza*, 391.

modernism”¹¹. The exhibition is presented here as neutral and *pure* (which it is not), and the space as an idealized aesthetic space for the presentation and communication of works of art (which is also not the case).

Conceived as an ideal white box (cube), in which roundness as the main motive of the interior in a sense creates a feeling of infinity, linearity, organic progress and integrity, the atrium space of the *Guggenheim Museum* is an example of the representation of pure form for the taxonomic, disinterested and non-utilitarian observation of art. All human beings appear together with the art to be comprehensible from any point in space, from any point along the ramp of the diffusely lit atrium. This is the embodiment of the modernist dream of an all-embracing and totalizing interior, the idea of the total man in a totalitarian society without any conflict or anarchy, like Le Corbusier’s description of the ideal society or the Ford factory,¹² in which “all is a collaboration, unity of views, unity of purpose, a perfect convergence of the totality of gestures and ideas.”¹³

Lightfall

A similar idea of the interior as a white box can be found in Cohen’s *Lightfall*, but something different happens here. *Lightfall* does not present a kind of neutrality toward the external context, nature and environment like the modernist architecture of the *Guggenheim Museum*. Cohen does not see architecture as an autonomous, self-referential discipline, but as dependent on context (culture, society, art), and also defining the context (culture, society, art). Instead of the white cube as a symbol of a homogeneous, universal, totalitarian society, Cohen offers the idea of the ‘white cube’ as a gap in which a dialogue opens between the incompatible events, narratives and ideologies of contemporary society and art, rejecting the white cube ideology as well as its form. Cohen thus defends real life in contrast to the sterilized room of the white cube, time and change in contrast to the myth of the eternal and constant, the myth of transcendence of pure form.

The atrium space of *Lightfall* is also a gallery space, but in a slightly different way. The adjacent galleries are not separate, isolated units or *cabinets of curiosity*. They are opened toward the atrium space in a way that removes them from the continuous procession of the architectural promenade. Namely, there is no wall between them and the atrium space, only a distorted horizontal frame. In this way the artistic wall of the gallery assumes the role of the frame and the act of framing the atrium space,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The model of the *Guggenheim Museum* was an inspiration to several museums for car exhibitions such as: the *Mercedes-Benz Museum* in Stuttgart (2006) and the *BMW Museum* in München (2008).

¹³ Laqueur, *Fascism, A Reader’s Guide*, in Kari Jormakka, *Eyes that do not See: Perspectives on Functionalist Architectural Theory* (Weimar: Verlag der Bauhaus, Universität Weimar, 2011), 121. Regarding the relationship of the idea of totalitarian society and the space of modernist architecture see: Željka Pješivac, “Spaces of Territorialization in Fritz Lang’s Film *Metropolis* (1927),” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 7 (2015): 85–95.

so that the gallery space is caught in the act of becoming the atrium space, and the exhibition space is caught in the act of becoming the external context.

It could be said that the frame of the gallery wall of *Lightfall* acts as a sort of *parergon* in which the outside comes into the inside in order to define itself as an inside.¹⁴ As Derrida states, a *parergon* is something outside the 'work' (*ergon*, in this case, the *distorted white cube* of the gallery space), which simultaneously belongs to it in some extrinsic way as a superfluous addition, or supplement.¹⁵ It can be seen as a kind of detachment that is hard to detach.¹⁶ Namely, the *parergon* simultaneously separates itself from the 'work' and the environment, first of all as a character at the base, but it does not separate itself as a 'work'. It is a frame that is detached on two bases, but in relationship to each of them; it is based on the other. According to the logic of the supplement, the *parergon* is divided into two – on the boundary between the 'work' (in our case the gallery space and its contents) and the absence of the 'work' (the gallery space and its contents). The frame exists only because something is lacking – there is a certain 'internal' vagueness – in what it frames. That lack, which could be defined, located, stopped inside or outside before framing, is the production and product of the frame (in this context the gallery space can be seen as a space for the production of life-as-art and not merely as a neutral cube for exhibiting art). The frame thus functions in the same way as a supplement: it is constituted in a way that itself requires constitution. Derrida describes this in a typically paradoxical fashion: "there is a frame, but the frame *does not exist*"¹⁷. The frame is constantly moving or 'infinitely multiplied'. It is constructed, which means it can be changed. Deterritorialization allows the frame to explode, to come apart at the corners, angles and joints, turning its inside into external borders¹⁸ (in this sense, the internal facade of the atrium space can be simultaneously seen as an external facade). The issue of the determination of the frame therefore is not related to the laws of agreement or harmony, but to certain dislocations, relocations, disappearances, foldings and refoldings. The contexts thus interweave with each other in a network of intertextual significations, putting them outside the reach of all individuals or authoritative roles. The work of art thus becomes a unit of discourse, *the distorted white cube* becomes the 'external' space and the wall of gallery becomes an aesthetic element – the frame of the art, the frame of images in motion – the moving bodies of the visitors, i.e. the frame of life as art (visitors at this museum are thus not only observers of the works of art, but also performers or part of the 'work' itself). The Tel Aviv Museum of Art does not try to bring the world 'inside' and represent it in some 'logical projection' but instead seeks to create an equivalence between what can be experienced in the museum and the

¹⁴ Cf.: Valdimir Biti, *Pojmovnik suvremene književne teorije* (Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska, 1997), 249.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

situation in the world outside the museum.¹⁹ *Lightfall* thus becomes a contained form of the museum, just as the museum is a contained form of the city.²⁰ The *Lightfall* atrium-gallery space is caught in the act of becoming the city. Cohen's museum does not follow a didactic impulse but is rather interested in exploring a wider range of *subjectivity*.²¹

While the horizontal Corbusian ribbon windows (or "spiral ribbon frames" in Wright's conception of the Guggenheim atrium space as an evocation of the idea and perception of diorama) unite the views toward one horizon, Cohen's distorted elongated horizontal frames permit the presence of multiple horizons which "do not exist in the space we inhabit"²². The horizontal Corbusian window cuts a strip of sky and a strip of the ground from the view, formalizing and making visible the horizon, and thus defining every space in terms of its relation toward the horizon. The implicit idea of the Corbusian window is that all these spaces are united in one horizon.²³ In the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, however, the distorted horizontal frames of *Lightfall* is not intended to connect all the spaces in one horizon and instead cuts hyperbolic surfaces, framing 'images' of spaces seen from each other, and suggesting multiple 'distorted horizons'. In place of one infinite horizon, favouring the horizontal organization of space, the mysterious, distorted surfaces of *Lightfall* become unifiers of horizontal and vertical space simultaneously (at times dislocating the regime of optical perception in the domain of proprioception or bodily affectivity).²⁴ In other words, instead of a universal, homogeneous, disinterested, autonomous exhibition space for the *pure gaze*, Cohen's distorted horizontal frames become the unifier of external and internal contexts, different narrative temporalities, visible and invisible, optic and haptic, expressible and inexpressible, sayable and unsayable spaces of disparate vision. This is a view that is determined by the difference of intensity and by intensity as difference,²⁵ a view that does not negate difference but affirms difference in the conditions of the extension and order of time.

It is not a juxtaposition of two different points of view, like, for example cartographic photography observed from above, giving the impression of God's eye, and the *flaneur* – the perspective of the Baudelairean walk or situationist *derive*.²⁶ The

¹⁹ Cf.: Preston S. Cohen, "Museum as Genealogy."

²⁰ Preston S. Cohen – Herta and Paul Amir Building, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, accessed March 11, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/75836815>

²¹ Preston S. Cohen, "Museum as Genealogy."

²² It is about digitally transformed spatial coordinates in a way that makes them fundamentally discontinuous with the space of common phenomenological perception. Cf. Željka Pješivac, "Afektivna topologija: Maks Rajnhard kuća (1992) Pitera Ajzenmana," ["The Affective Topology: Max Reinhardt House (1992) by Peter Eisenman"] *AM Časopis za studije umetnosti i medija* 3 (2013): 83–89.

²³ Preston S. Cohen – Herta and Paul Amir Building, Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

²⁴ Cf. Željka Pješivac, "Afektivna topologija."

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London, New York: Continuum, 2001), 223.

²⁶ In psychogeography, the concept *derive* refers to an unplanned journey through a landscape, usually urban, where the subtle aesthetic contours of the surrounding architecture and geography subconsciously direct

implicit idea of Cohen's work is in this case the Deleuzian idea of folding and refolding (narrative) points of view, simultaneously folding in and folding through. We are dealing here with the superimposition and simultaneous existence of both points of view, or catching dominant views in the act of becoming minor, the central in the act of becoming peripheral, the independent eye standing outside the frame in the act of becoming part of what is framed, the optic in the act of becoming haptic, the clear and distinct in the act of becoming a vague or indeterminate view.

This is not a representation of a heliocentric universe but a world of decentralized perspective. It is a new harmony between the enclosed interior and the modified exterior. Rather than a God-like all-seeing point of view, we have new points of view appearing from everywhere. We have here a dual departure, simultaneously from Cartesian logic and the Cartesian optic, from the regime of the 'clear and distinct' represented in the centrally-illuminated *Guggenheim Museum*, toward the 'vague and indeterminate' represented in Tel Aviv Museum of Art. *Lightfall* in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art engages a different regime of light in which what is 'clear' or 'clarified' is only a region within the darkness or obscurity. The deep intensity or virtual complexity of the space in the *Lightfall* atrium cannot be comprehended without changing one's own point of view. It is these divergences that permit 'subjective' points of view or perspectives and not 'subjective' views of an unchanging and uncomplicated space that permits perspectival variation, as in the *Guggenheim Museum*. "For illumination or enlightenment always comes from the midst or intervals of things, and the disparation of a space is always a kind of illumination or enlightenment."²⁷ It is as if the light is always seeping through the cracks and crevices of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art (the atrium space being seen as a special kind of crack and *lightfall* as an analogy of *waterfall*), illuminating the lines of its becoming other.

Conclusion

Cohen's hyperbolic-paraboloid surfaces and distorted symmetries, the post-Corbusian distorted ribbon frames and the discontinuous architectural promenade, impose a special kind of vision – a disparate vision, whose principle is not the disinterested or non-utilitarian identification of the work of art but the perception of art, the work of art, the architecture and the city as a unit of discourse that both depends on and determines the context. In place of universality, linearity, predictability and homogeneity, and the immovability and uniformity of the subject, Cohen favors heterogeneity, discontinuity and non-linearity, accidents and unpredictable events,

passengers with the ultimate aim of meeting a completely new and authentic experience. The Situationist theoretician Guy Debord defined *dérive* as "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances". He also states that "the term often signifies specific uninterrupted period of deriving". ("Dérive", accessed March 15, 2016, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%A9rive>)

²⁷ John Rajhman, *Constructions* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1998), 25–26.

changes, processes, movement and a multiplicity of subjectivities. In such a space of multiple, intangible views and polyphony, the visible is caught in the act of becoming invisible, the central is caught in the act of becoming peripheral, the major in the act of becoming minor, etc. In other words, by basing the atrium space on a transgression of the language of modernist architecture (an 'inversion' of the atrium space of the *Guggenheim Museum*), Cohen creates space-time concepts based on a disjunctive synthesis of different narratives, events, ideologies and contexts, or space-time concepts in a continuous process of becoming. This becoming should not be understood as an evolution of form (like the evolution of the organic nautilus spiral) but as an involution, or a new kind of creation.

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