Reflexive Dwelling: The body as representation of wall

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ABSTRACT

In a play-within-a-play, the Mechanicals’ production within William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the character Snout announces his transformation to play the character of Wall. Snout’s portrayal of Wall is both comical and menacing as he represents the forces that separate the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe. Wall becomes a subject in a manner no different from the lovers that he separates; his influence on their situation is brought to life. The unbecoming nature of walls to demarcate, separate, intimidate, influence and control is a relationship most can relate to in their experiences with architecture. It is in these moments that architecture leaps from the sphere of object into the realm of subject; where we might be involved in some intense struggle with the placement of a wall, the wall that might separate us from a lover, justice, freedom, power or privacy. This study investigates how this struggle is portrayed through the human body as representation of walls in performance.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture, as a creative discipline, is understood as being synergistic with existing power structures. It is a material manifestation of the state, nation, and institutions; of capitalism, power and authority. There are very rare circumstances where architecture might represent some minority cause, or make a stand against a political system. The authority of architectural materiality is often the catalyst for some intense association with the physical human body – the wall that defines gender or class, the double-bolted door that incarcerates. It enacts social and political systems through bodily occupation. This research elaborates on this unbecoming nature of architecture in the unbecoming of the human body. As French intellectual and writer Georges Bataille describes architecture represents. This research investigates an antagonistic relationship between the human body and architecture, through the physical body, avoiding the prevailing discussion on the body architecture represents. This research investigates an antagonistic relationship between the human body and architecture, through the physical body, avoiding the prevailing discussion on the body as representation of walls in performance.

While architecture works to constrain or control the body the body is also an instrument of choice when disrupting the overpowering act of architecture. Bodies on the rooftops of refugee detention centres draw international attention to their cause. Groups of protestors in the foyer of an office tower throw the building’s carefully planned programme into chaos, close streets and overwhelm its shadowy presence. The gathering of bodies in a public square in front of a city hall – a space designed for such a disturbance, which is nonetheless an assault on what the architecture represents. This research investigates an antagonistic relationship between the human body and architecture, through the physical body, avoiding the prevailing discussion on the body and architecture through psychoanalysis and the ‘ego’ acknowledging that architecture is a material act and that these intense associations between the body and architecture are brought about by an interaction between physical matter(s).

Through an analysis of performers’ bodies this paper draws on two case studies to explore the literal physical use of the body to represent walls in two plays – William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream (c.1590-1596) and The Escapist, Boy Girl Wall (2010). At the climactic point in both plays a character named Wall, played by an actor, makes a brief appearance. Congruently, both Wall characters separate two lovers but this separation in each play is also a metaphor for the part of the body that is represented. This is an act and that these intense associations between the body and architecture are brought about by an interaction between physical matter(s).

ARCHITECTURE AND THE BODY

Bernard Tschumi’s work in his essay, The Violence of Architecture, forms a substantial departure point for this study. Tschumi encapsulates this control architecture has over the physical body while also describing an analogy between architecture and drama through the script. He writes: ‘Who will mastermind these exquisite spatial delights, these disturbing architectural tortures, the tortuous paths of promenades through delightful landscapes, theatrical events where actor complements decor? Who …? The architect! By the seventeenth century Bernini had staged whole spectacles, followed by Mansart’s fetes for Louis XIV and Albert Speer’s sinister and beautiful rallies. After all, the original action, the original act of violence – this unspoken culminating of live body and dead stone is unique and unrehearsed, though perhaps infinitely repeatable, for you may enter the building again and again. The architect will always dream of purifying this uncontrolled violence, channeling obedient bodies from the very outset, in any case, the human and architectural orders make common cause, the latter being only the development of the former. Therefore an attack on architecture, whose monumental productions now truly dominate the whole earth, grouping the servile multitudes under their shadow, imposing admiration and wonder, order and constraint, is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man. Currently, an entire earthly activity and undoubtedly the most intellectually outstanding, tends, through the denunciation of human dominance, in this direction. Hence, however strange this may seem when a creature as elegant as the human being is involved, a path – traced by the painters – opens up toward bestial monstrosity as if there were no other way of escaping the architectural straightjacket.”

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along predictable paths and occasionally along ramps that provide striking vistas, ritualizing the transgression of bodies in space. Le Corbusier’s Carpenter Center, with its ramp that violates the building, is a genuine movement of bodies made into an architectural solid. Or the reverse: it is a solid that forcibly channels the movement of bodies. …

The architect, designs the set, writes the script, and directs the actors. Such were the ideal kitchen installations of the twenties’ Werkbund, each of a near-biocultural housewife carefully monitored by the design’s constant attention. Such were Meyerhold’s biomechanics, acting through Popova’s stage sets, where the characters’ logic played with and against the logic of their dynamic surroundings.

Tschumi goes on to describe that the violent proposition enacted by architecture is in fact a ‘deeply Dionysian’ gesture. This study supports Tschumi’s position by analysing the work of two comedies developed some six centuries apart in time, but both addressing the same themes of oppression through comedy, and more specifically, both using an actor’s body to represent the architecture, and subsequently represent authority. Another and more specifically, both using an actor’s body to represent the architecture, and subsequently represent authority. Another

before I digress, the intention of this study is not to criticise psychoanalysis, but to proffer a new reading of architecture, authority and the body and to suggest that the relationship between these entities is, instead, reflexive.

Žižek continues, in his work on materialist theology, to describe a reflexive short circuit that is exemplified by the two case studies in this paper. Žižek writes:

Materialism is not the direct assertion of my inclusion in objective reality (such an assertion presupposes that my position of enunciation is that of an external observer who can grasp the whole of reality); rather, it resides in the reflexive twist by means of which I myself am included in the picture constituted by me — it is this reflexive short

circuit, this necessary redoubling of myself as standing both outside and inside my picture, that bears witness to my ‘material existence.’

In the case of the performer’s body being used to represent the wall, the character that the actor plays becomes the architecture (is inside the picture) while also verbally acknowledging (in the dialogue) that they have become something ‘other’ (standing outside of the picture). It is a gesture that, as this study finds, casts light on some oppression embodied by the architecture and at once makes us aware of the (potentially overwhelming) materiality of the characters’ existence. It is also a reflexive relationship on a very basic level where, as Žižek asserts, the architecture references the body, and in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Boy Girl Wall, the body references architecture.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM

In this same interlude it doth befal
That I one Snout by name, present a wall;
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That had in it a crannied hole or chink,
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;
In this same interlude it doth befall
That I am that same wall; the truth is so:
That had in it a crannied hole or chink,
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;
In this same interlude it doth befal
That I one Snout by name, present a wall;
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That had in it a crannied hole or chink,
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;
In this same interlude it doth befal
That I one Snout by name, present a wall;
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That had in it a crannied hole or chink,
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;
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That I one Snout by name, present a wall;
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And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;
In this same interlude it doth befal
That I one Snout by name, present a wall;
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That had in it a crannied hole or chink,
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;
In this same interlude it doth befal
That I one Snout by name, present a wall;
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
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And such a wall, as I would have you think,
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and political issues of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

A number of Shakespearean historians and theorists point to the notion that the Mechanicals’ play was a political protest at Queen Elizabeth’s denial of a license to perform at court for amateur players.11 Unlike the metadrama in Hamlet – where Hamlet devises a performance that is intrinsic to the plot – the content of the Mechanicals’ play is tangential to the narrative, the focus is more on the performers. The players are amateur performers; all of them are artisans, or tradesmen. They are: Peter Quince, the carpenter; who plays the Prologue; Snug, the joiner; who plays Lion; Nick Bottom, the weaver; as Pyramus; Francis Flute, the bellows-mender; who plays Thisbe; Tom Snout, the tinker; as Wall; Robin Starveling, the tailor, who plays Moonshine. Theorist Louis Montrose writes that whilst it is unknown as to whether Shakespeare worked as an artisan prior to becoming a professional playwright, a number of his contemporaries in the professional theatre had previously worked as carpenters and masons. Therefore it is likely that the purpose of the Mechanicals’ play was to protest against the Elizabethan aristocracy's restrictions on amateur theatre. Montrose provides further evidence for this argument, including Puck’s cynical apology at the end of the play.12

Further to this, in this analysis I draw attention to Snout’s portrayal of Wall as being more than a mere representation of authority. In the very portrayal of Wall as being more than a mere representation of authority, but also a representation of authority, the focus is more on the performers. The players are amateur performers; all of them are artisans, or tradesmen. They are: Peter Quince, the carpenter; who plays the Prologue; Snug, the joiner; who plays Lion; Nick Bottom, the weaver; as Pyramus; Francis Flute, the bellows-mender; who plays Thisbe; Tom Snout, the tinker; as Wall; Robin Starveling, the tailor, who plays Moonshine. Montrose provides further evidence for this argument, including Puck’s cynical apology at the end of the play.12

No assure you; the wall is down that parted their fathers.14

Here Bottom alludes to another reflexive device where the wall is a metaphor for patriarchal society as well as the separation of events. Shakespeare’s use of Wall in the Mechanicals’ play works as a subtle metaphor for specific political situations of Elizabethan society. It is a reflexive device both within the play’s narrative itself and also reflects broader social issues.

BOY GIRL WALL

Boy Girl Wall is a contemporary one-act play devised by Australian theatre group The Escapists.15 This play follows on from A Midsummer Night’s Dream, as we are introduced to two lovers, Thom and Alethea who are separated by the wall that divides their living spaces in a block of inner city apartments. The play is set in 2010 and the two central characters, Thom, an IT worker who has a greater calling in astronomy, and Alethea, a writer who is plagued by the demands of soulless publishers, are not aware of each other’s existence until the transcendence of the wall through an electrical short circuit in their apartments. The simplicity of the set plays with the familiar painted black walls and floor of the thrust stage as they are transformed into surfaces for chalk drawings; simple white lines demarcate and symbolise the location of walls and doors, emulating the architectural plan. The audience is made aware that they are in a theatre, not tricked by the signifiers present in a mimetic theatre set. A single light bulb suspended over centre stage flicks on, the result of the perfectly closed loop of an electrical circuit, and so the play begins. While neither boy, girl or wall is physically represented at any point during the play, each is embodied through the performance of one single actor on stage. They are realised, along with other supplementary characters (the days of the week and even the windows and doors) through the actions of a single performer – although not simultaneously, obviously.

While mostly only present through chalk lines, the architecture of the block of flats in Boy Girl Wall frames and precedes its subjects. For the characters Alethea (Girl) and Thom (Boy), the wall divides them but also draws them together: It is only when the short-circuit between the characters escalates, manifested in the building’s electrical wiring causing a blackout in the block of flats, that the separation created by the wall is transcended. The architecture that separates the lovers is initially disturbed by its subjectification. To subvert the wall that separates the lovers, the one actor that plays both characters becomes the wall. The subject becomes the signifier (the wall) and the signifier becomes the subject.

At the centre – right down the middle – of the Boy Girl Wall story is the wall marked out in solid white chalk lines. It is a signifier of numerous dialectics that are present in the story, the dialectic that exists between art and capitalism, employment and satisfaction, male and female – a boy and a girl. The architecture represents an organisation and categorisation of capitalist society, which in this analysis is an underlying subtext to the play. Not only do Thom and Alethea discover each other when the wall is transcended, but also their individual struggles with work...
hierarchies and personal struggles with the capitalisation of art are overcome.

THE WALL BRINGS US TOGETHER AND FORCES US APART

Between the two plays it’s difficult to come to a definitive conclusion, in terms of each one’s use of the human body to represent architecture as a politically subversive device, because the reflexive content of the plays is dealing with very different political systems. While both have a political subtext, A Midsummer Night’s Dream is responding to aristocratic structures of power; class divisions and oppressive patriarchies, while Boy Girl Wall is concerned with contemporary capitalism and its oppression of aspirations in art and work. What the two plays do share is a struggle against oppression embodied by a wall. But why use a body to represent the wall? In both cases an actor playing the wall is comical, and this would suggest that using the body to signify architecture is a masking gesture to the authority it represents. The most interesting commonality between the two plays is the form that the actor takes to play a wall – there is an unspoken, uniformed bodily semiotic of ‘wall’.

A quick Google Images search of ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream Wall’ will produce a series of images of actors, professional and amateur, standing tall, arms stretched in a ‘T’ formation with legs slightly apart, a pose echoed by Lucas Stibbard when he plays Wall in Boy Girl Wall. Neither play describes this pose, but it is the script directs (‘Wall holds up his fingers’), while having arms outstretched. Where, then, does this pose for Wall originate? It is not suggested in Shakespeare’s script, nor is it described in a more detailed reading of its political and authoritative scope. Further to this there is a reciprocal engagement between the body and architecture. The way in which architecture references the body is broadly culturally referenced, specifically the pose articulated by the Vitruvian Man. The authority of architecture is derived from the body in the same way that bodies can be positioned in a way to overthrow it. Disrupting, as Tschumi describes, the idealised Vitruvian Man. Where the Vitruvian Man references the body, architecture references the Vitruvian Man and here the body in performance references the Vitruvian Man. There is also a broader reflexive relationship occurring between the characters and the wall. While the wall might be the thing that tears these lovers apart it is also the very thing that brings the lovers closer together. Without the wall there would be no occasion for the lovers to converse, it is as much the catalyst of their social demise as it is their creation. As Žižek writes in his essay, ‘The Architectural Parallax’:

This brings us to an unexpected result: it is not only that the fantasy embodied in the mute language of buildings can articulate the utopia of justice, freedom and equality betrayed by actual social relations, this fantasy can also articulate a LONGING FOR INEQUALITY, for clear hierarchy and class distinctions. Does the Stalinst neo-Gothic architecture not enact the return of the repressed of the official egalitarian emancipatory Socialist ideology, the weird desire for hierarchy and social distinctions? The utopia enacted in architecture can also be a conservative utopia of regned hierarchical order.

Here, Žižek elaborates on the reflexive authoritarian nature derived from architecture. While it represents existing power structures that may be the cause of detestation, it also expresses a longing for those power structures; for isn’t protest just a desire for an alternative power structure? Architecture might embody an unbecoming sentiment but at the same time it is a sentiment we long for; in the same way the wall in Boy Girl Wall and A Midsummer Night’s Dream brings the lovers together while simultaneously keeping them apart.

CONCLUSION

While the actor’s portrayal of Wall may impart the playwright’s contest to an existing authority, the actor’s body merely becomes a representation for some alternative power structure. As Georges Bataille writes, “… for that matter, whenever we find architectural construction elsewhere than in monuments, whether it be in physiognomy, dress, music, or painting, we can infer a prevailing taste for human or divine authority”22 if the pose taken by the actor reads as something else; limp, weak, an imperfect abject body instead of the sturdy, balanced stance of the Vitruvian Man, a very different image of architecture would be created.

Studying the relationship between the body and architecture through the body transpires to an understanding of a broader social interaction. Avoiding the limitations of psychoanalysis and the focus on the individual, the body divides a universal method for expressing architecture. This reading of architecture and the body through a broader, societal lens also enables a detailed reading of its political and authoritative scope. Further to this there is a reciprocal engagement between the body and architecture. The way in which architecture references the body is broadly culturally referenced, specifically the pose articulated by the Vitruvian Man. The authority of architecture is derived from the body in the same way that bodies can be positioned in a way to overthrow it. Disrupting, as Tschumi describes, the architect’s script.23 The body is the most significant way to refer to a person and it is through the body that we have access to architecture.

NOTES