

Why It's Important for an Architect to Look Like a Jesuit ***A Comparative Analysis of the Epistemology of Paul Klee and Gerard Manley Hopkins***

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Summary

Architects have long prided themselves on their ability to look, to look attentively, to regard, to see.¹ But examples of architects addressing what it really means to consider [contemplate] an object, let alone possessing the ability to substantially (let alone fully) articulate a system by which one might be able to see, and to discuss the implications of that particular faculty with any degree of specificity, are rare.

Here I examine the position held by Paul Klee (which establishes the concepts of *resonanzverhaltnis* and *andacht zum kleinen*) and compare Klee's position with that of Gerard Manley Hopkins (which engages the concepts of *inscape* and *instress*). The convergence and divergence of these positions is discussed. And they are subjected to critiques Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas.

I seek to give some specificity to the subject of *seeing* in art and architecture. It is hoped that by achieving some degree of precision in the discussion, we will better be able to understand the role of *seeing* for architecture: in both its practical and educational aspects.

theologia mystica unus modus videre est et architectura unus modus videre est.
temptationem neglegere aut deflectere lineas quae parallelae currere recusant pauci resistere possum.
*ne sutor supra crepidam!*¹

I.

Architects have long prided themselves on their ability to look, to look attentively; to regard, to see. To see drawings as a passable representation of a spatial construct. To see things, especially materials, for not only what they are but also for what they could be.² Indeed, the object of this purported *seeing* is seemingly boundless and is considered to extend throughout nature and the physical world, at a minimum.³

Ostensibly this insight stems from a desire to better understand the elements of architecture so as to be able to employ them in a meaningful, expressive and distinctive manner.

But examples of architects approaching the subject of seeing with any degree of specificity about what it really means to consider an object, let alone possessing the ability to even partially (let alone fully) articulate a system by which one might be able to see, and to discuss the implications of that particular faculty, are rare. This is as unfortunate as it is suspicious. Instead, architects

¹ *Seeing* should herein be construed as extending to all aspects of regarding and sensing. It springs from the fullest degree of sensation and experience to be offered by an object.

have tended to adopt, in an uncritical manner, and with condescending concurrence, stray statements and adages taken from figures in a variety of realms.

Indeed, the few who have written well on the subject tend to be philosophers and theologians. It is also a reality that in virtually all of these systems of thought we are "ever inclined to compare and contrast objects and to put before us what is universal in them. Our minds turn unconsciously as it were and instinctively to what this object has in common with others: it needs special concentration of our faculties to bring before the mind an object's distinctiveness."⁴ In other words, it requires special attention to see them *as they are*, in and of themselves, and consider their *quiddity* (essence) without succumbing to the tendency to consider what they are as but a particular instance of a more universal or transcendental aspect of being.

But there are two notable exceptions: the Swiss-born painter Paul Klee (1879-1940) and the British Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889).

Paul Klee committed his thoughtful and reflective understanding of the issue chiefly in two books: *The Thinking Eye* and *The Pedagogical Sketchbook*.⁵

Klee proceeds from the standard supposition that one can learn much from nature and the natural world. He states that because the artist is human, and thus nature, and therefore a part of nature in natural space, the artist's dialogue with nature provides a *conditio sine qua non*.⁶

Klee further states that "yesterday's artistic creed and the related study of nature consisted in a painfully precise investigation of appearance. I and you, the artist and his object, sought to establish optical-physical relations across the invisible barrier between the 'I' and the 'you'. In this way excellent pictures were obtained of the object's surface filtered by the air; the art of optical sight was developed, while the art of contemplating unoptical impressions and representations and of making them visible was neglected." But he also maintains that "the investigation of appearance should not be underestimated; it ought merely to be amplified. Today this way does not meet our entire need any more than it did the day before yesterday. The artist of today is more than an improved camera: he is more complex, richer and wider. He is a creature on the earth and a creature within the whole, that is to say, a creature on a star among stars."⁷

In Klee's estimation, the artist is attempting to understand the *gestaltung*: the world of nascent form. It is therefore, no longer admissible to draw a distinction between (or better within) an object which is real and an object which is imaginary.⁸ And so Klee asked whether a work of art reflected the essence of the object or only its outward optical manifestation, and we're left to conclude that he probably hoped they were indistinguishable.⁹

This position can be demonstrated in his understanding of artistic creation.¹⁰ Klee posits that the power of creativity cannot be named; it remains mysterious. It is left to reveal this power in its functions. He posits that it is probable that it is only a matter of form, but one that cannot be perceived by same senses as those that perceive the familiar kinds of matter. As a consequence, it must make itself known through the familiar kinds of matter and function in union with them. It must be merged with matter to enter a real and living form.¹¹

These positions ultimately coalesce into Klee's conception of *resonanzverhältnis*: the reverberation of the finite in the infinite which results from the ability to penetrate the relationship between an outer perception and an inner vista. This reconciles the dual reality between the seen and the felt.¹²

Importantly, Klee was determined that this degree of insight could be gleaned from the observation of even the smallest manifestation of form, and that careful attention to such

interrelationships could lead to conclusions about the magnitude of the natural order. And so he professed a need for *andacht zum kleinen* (a devotion to small things).¹³

A similar and sympathetic position is offered to us by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins was a poet. And it is in his poetry that we can first encounter his sympathies with Klee.

A quick survey of lines excerpted from two pieces of his poetry:

From *God's Grandeur*

The world is charged with the grandeur of God. [...]
[...] There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
[...] Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

From *To what serves Mortal Beauty?*

[*The answer...*] |See it does this: keeps warm
Men's wits to the things that are;| to what good means -

Hopkins seems to be, and in fact is, considering the relationship between the physical attributes and characteristics of things in the visible world and their cause.¹⁴ And, as is developed in his journals and essays, this investigation results in his formulation of the concepts of *inscape* and *instress*.

The term *inscape* is first mentioned in a journal entry dated 7 July 1868. While riding the train near Lucerne, Hopkins remarks "Swiss trees are, like English, well inscaped - in quains."¹⁵ Additionally, he wrote of Spanish chestnuts "their inscape [is] here bold, jutting, somewhat oak-like, attractive, the branching visible and the leaved peaks spotted so as to make crests of the eyes."¹⁶

The first recorded instance of the word *instress* dates to 15 April 1871. Hopkins: "Take a few primroses in a glass and the instress [...] so simple a flower gives is remarkable. It is, I think, due to the strong swell given by the deeper yellow middle."¹⁷

While it is true that Hopkins never precisely defined these terms, it is undeniable that they were borne of his attempt to develop a metaphysical explanation for the attraction and excitement induced by the forms and patterns to be found in nature.¹⁸

We can however adopt the following definitions of the terms:¹⁹

inscape - n. the essence of a thing, which orders both its individuality (including its external appearance) and allows it to achieve its end (*telos*); n. inscape is an effect of a thing's having been created and is thereafter held by that thing; v. to 'inscape' is to 'self' - to enact a distinct identity

instress - n. the power of a thing to sustain and express its inscape

Both Klee and Hopkins argue for the ability to not only understand the universal and transcendental *in* the particular, but also, and especially, to experience the delight and innate dignity *of* the particular. They each refuse to consider as independent and separable characteristics that are too often distinguished as belonging to either intellection or sensation. In this they enjoy the sympathetic applause of several authorities who have considered these matters carefully.

II.

Yet there exists a profound and important difference between Klee and Hopkins and this concerns the mode by which this understanding is achieved and accomplished.

Hopkins' concept of *inscape* is considered to have been profoundly influenced by Duns Scotus' concept of *haecceitas*; or *thisness*, which is the entitative perfection that causes an object to attain the potency of its individuality. This individuation allows the object to fulfill its essence and achieve its *telos*. It allows the object to achieve its proper place in reality, and further, it makes the object cognizable.²⁰

For Klee the object grows beyond its appearance through our knowledge of its inner being.²¹ This is permitted by the optic-physical phenomenon, which allows the individual (Klee's 'I') to draw inferences about the inner object from a combination of its optical exterior and certain *intuitive* inferences. Other (and importantly undefined and unexplained) ways of looking into the object then go farther. They humanize the object and create *resonance* which surpasses the optical foundation, combining outward sight and inward vision.²²

In this, Klee has replaced *deduction* (which he considered to be the epistemological mechanism of the period spanning between Aristotle and the Renaissance) with *induction*²³. And it is here that Klee faces an objection raised by no less a figure than Thomas Aquinas (c1225-1274).

As the Angelic Doctor, Aquinas carefully considered not only much about human epistemology, but also angelic epistemology. Aquinas states unequivocally that (apart from the very real but equally infrequent possibility of divine revelation: the direct infusion of knowledge) the understanding of man is reliant upon deduction.

Induction, as described by Klee is congruent with Aquinas' concept of apprehension. Apprehension does not rely on deduction to reach its conclusions. It pertains to the direct understanding of an object in its essence. Sadly, Aquinas claims that, amongst the beings of creation, angels, and only angels, are capable of apprehension. Therefore, Klee's induction remains beyond the reach of the human intellect.

Klee's aspiration, although it is based on the premise that 'the artist is human; himself nature; part of nature within natural space' is ultimately precluded by his process.²⁴

In contrast, *inscape* allows for individuation and establishes its importance without disrupting the potency of deduction. It permits the intellection of the universal and transcendental but also, and importantly, reminds of the dignity and value of the individual.

It is Hopkins' position alone that, because it is as fully possible as it is fully human, continues to brim with great and hopeful promise. It then may serve as a functional exemplar for the perspicacity we claim and desire.

III.

As regards its practicality, I believe the ultimate value of this investigation to be twofold. Initially, it is incumbent upon us to substantiate our alleged capacity for enhanced perception. We have the responsibility to articulate an operational apologia for our claimed ability to perceive objects for what they really are, how they are best expressed, and for what they could, or should, or want, to be. This prevents claims of a privileged insight from being dismissed as vapid and esoteric. No less importantly, this provides us with the opportunity not only to refine this perspicacity, but also to share it. If it is to some extent demonstrable, then it can be conveyed - it can be brought to bear on the formation of our students.

More generally, this approach might prevent the habit of dismissing the thing in itself; as either a pallid and imperfect semblance of a purely transcendental ideal, or as a passive presence wanting only for the self-enacting whims and will of the artist. We are presented with the possibility of rejecting both of these extremes and accepting the thing *as it is*: in *its* essence.²⁵ Which is hopefully what we were really trying to do in the first place.

Notes

¹ The second and third lines of this statement paraphrase remarks made early in Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*: "Few men are able to resist the temptation to ignore or deflect lines that refuse to run parallel," and "Let not the cobbler rise above the sole." The first line is mine: "Mystical theology is a way of seeing and architecture is a way to see."

² Here I will offer two well-known and celebrated examples. One is Louis Kahn as brick whisperer. The second is Frank Lloyd Wright who was so taken by Richard Bock's sculpted interpretation of Tennyson's "Flower in the crannied wall" that he commissioned a duplicate which was installed at Taliesin. Tennyson's poem is an excellent example in its own right.

³ Seeing should herein be construed as extending to all aspects of regarding and sensing. It engages not only sight, but all of the senses. It springs from the fullest degree of sensation and experience to be offered by an object.

⁴ These statements are taken from Peters, W.A.M. *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Essay towards the Understanding of his Poetry*. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970. p 1-2. Hereafter, *Peters*. This quote was simply too adroit not to be used in its totality.

⁵ The versions of Klee's books which will be referred to here are *The Thinking Eye*. Ed by Jurg Spiller. New York: George Wittenborn, 1964. and *Pedagogical Sketchbook*. Trans. by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. New York: Frederick Praeger, 1969. Hereafter, *Eye* and *Sketchbook* respectively.

⁶ The statements in this paragraph summarize and quote thoughts from *Eye*, p 63.

⁷ *Eye*, p 63.

⁸ *Eye*, p 16.

⁹ *Eye*, p 37.

¹⁰ *Eye*, p 17.

¹¹ From this follows Klee's description of the essence of the work of art, which has its genesis in formal movement and the harnessing of energy. And this is quite a literal genesis: it results from the interaction of the primordial feminine (the work as form-making in a material sense) with the primordial masculine (the work as form-deciding sperm). *Eye*, p 17-19.

¹² This is explained in more fully Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's Introduction to *Sketchbook*, p 7-12. When reading these passages it is difficult to resist the urge to recite Tennyson's *Flower in the crannied wall*...

¹³ *Sketchbook*, p 8.

¹⁴ Hopkins understood our souls to "alternate between a phenomenal and transcendental life." Cotter, James Finn. *Inscapes: the Christology and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972. p 263.

¹⁵ *Gerard Manley Hopkins, Selected Prose*. Ed by Gerald Roberts. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. p 40. Hereafter *Prose*. 'Quains' is an archaic form of the word 'quoins'.

¹⁶ *Prose*, p 43. Entry dated 20 July 1868.

¹⁷ *Prose*, p 50. The ellipsis indicates where Hopkins had tried to describe this particular *instress* as "brilliancy, [a] sort of starriness" before confessing "I have not the right word."

¹⁸ Storey, Graham. *A Preface to Hopkins*. New York: Preface Books, 1992. p 60ff. Hereafter *Preface*.

¹⁹ These composite definitions are taken from several sources, including Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Trans. by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983. Vol III, p XX-XX; "Gerard Manley Hopkins" *Encyclopedia of Catholic Literature*. Ed by Mary R. Reichardt. Westport: Greenwood Books, 2004. Volume I. p 340.; *Preface*, p 60ff.; and, of course, my own interpretation.

²⁰ Bettoni, Efrem. *Duns Scotus: the Basic Principles of His Philosophy*. Trans. by Bernardine Bonansea. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1961. p 60-62.

²¹ *Eye*, p 66.

²² *Eye*, p 67.

²³ Moholy-Nagy states this claim in *Sketchbook*, p 8.

²⁴ Moholy-Nagy places these statements at the head of her Introduction to *Sketchbook*, p 7. It is taken from Klee's *Ways of Nature Study (Wege des Naturstudiums)*, which was published in 'Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar 1919-1923' and appears in translation in *Eye*, p 63-68.

²⁵ An excellent example is to be found in Eco, Umberto. *Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*. Trans. by Hugh Bredin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988. On p 180, Eco writes "...in Aquinas' philosophical system, man-made form possesses an aesthetic value. It is endowed with proportion and integrity in that it conforms with the form in the mind of the maker, and also, as an accidental form, with the requirements of the substantial form of the subject. In fact, the external shape given to a material must not exceed the possibilities inherent in the material, on pain of irregularity and failure."