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MARK DORRIAN

**“WRITING ON THE IMAGE: ARCHITECTURE,
THE CITY AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION”.
LONDON; NY: I. B. TAURIS, 2015**

The inaugural lecture that Mark Dorrian gave on taking up his chair as Forbes Professor of Architecture at Edinburgh University was titled, “What’s Interesting?: On the Ascendancy of an Evaluative Term”.¹ In the lecture, Dorrian records that when he informed colleagues he was writing about the term “interesting”, the tendency was to write back along the lines of: “Yes, I know, I’m always using this word, but I wish I didn’t.” I am now ashamed that this was how I responded, for the lecture is the most potent expression I know of why, despite everything, teaching can be a wonderful occupation.

Dorrian’s approach is to take seriously the shame involved in responding to something as being “interesting”: the word has become a cliché, a fall-back term used when you don’t really know what to say. Dorrian goes through the shame to reflect on why generating interesting work nonetheless seems to have become the primary aim of his pedagogical praxis. In doing so, Dorrian notes a discomfort he feels when describing work as good. For this evaluative term performs an act of closure: it affirms that the work in question fulfils a pre-assigned set of standards. Work that is interesting, Dorrian argues, does something different. Such work responds to the terms in which the

¹ Mark Dorrian. What’s Interesting? On the Ascendancy of an Evaluative Term. *Architecture and Culture*. № 4:2. 2016. P. 173–184.

task was set (or in the language of architectural design studios, the brief was written), but does so in a way that is surprising, that critiques, challenges or picks up on something that was latent in the premises on which the task was constructed, and thus opens up a perspective that is new for both teacher and student. Interesting, or in its more exuberant version "really very interesting" work suggests an intensity in line with the etymology of the word interesting, "inter esse", to be between. Rather than an ending, really interesting work tangles with the beginning of a joint adventure of finding new ways to think.

I start with this odd deviation not just to assert that Mark Dorrian's book, *Writing on the Image: Architecture, the City and the Politics of Representation* is for me really interesting in the sense that Dorrian described in his essay, but also to argue that this interest is born out of a generative paradox. To review this collection of twelve essays, written more or less over the first decade of the new millennium, is to be drawn simultaneously in two perhaps contradictory directions. The first is the book as an exploration of the essay form. For in this volume we encounter writing that draws us into the heft and weave of a particular case in order to become the basis for a specular argument. In other words, the meticulous acuity and poetic sensitivity of the descriptions of the different cases that comprise the book are fundamental to it. These include: Walter Scott's urban choreography of the spectacle of the visit of George IV to Edinburgh, designed in order to generate symmetry and sympathy between the watching crowd and the king of the newly united England and Scotland; the shadow of the Palace of Culture and Science, Stalin's gift to Warsaw, displaced and miniaturised, but uncomfortably so, in the works of contemporary Polish artists; the semiotic minutiae that transform a visit to the London Eye into a mythical experience of flight, wherein the visitor becomes pure eye floating over the city; or a colleague in a French ministry starting his day by opening his computer and bouncing his Google Earth this way and that to relieve the tedium of affairs of state. In the essays grouped here, it is minutely observed material details — it is surely not accidental that the author's feet or shadow intrude into his photographs — that draw the reader into cultural, philosophical and literary associations that turn each chapter into a theoretical proposition. However, such writing also leads us away from theoretical summary towards the poetically orchestrated flow of the texts themselves, along which sensuous experience broadens out into exploration of cultural references that are more than just part of the argument.

Moving in an opposite current is the sense that, notwithstanding the coverage of a broad range of themes, encompassing city scenography, architecture criticism, the view from above, miniaturisation and expansion, digital image production, clouds and silence, this collection does constitute a powerful conceptual proposition. As each individual chapter drifts between issues, such as from the visual experience offered by the first Ferris Wheel at the 1893 World Exposition in Chicago to the city's mechanised meat industry; or from the anti-spectacle of a 2002 architectural cloud installation on Lake Neuchâtel in Switzerland to air conditioning and the privatisation of purity, it should be clear that the book's overall argument is not directly given, but is to be assembled by the reader from the rich array of component elements. For me, what seems interesting (sic!) and important is that Dorrian's critiques of technologies of vision and their socio-political ramifications offer tools for analysing our contemporary moment (of post-modernity?) as a multi-scalar phenomenon.

The evolutions of the aerial view, or what one chapter deems the "adventures on the vertical", provide a strong backbone to the essays gathered in this volume. Modernity, Dorrian argues, was characterised by a new vision oscillating between the microscope and the aeroplane. Both of these views from above were celebrated as new scales for dispassionate, scientific analysis, but the new worlds thus brought into view, with their displacing of the human subject, were also sources of anxiety. The microscope expanded microbic detail into worlds populated by alien life forms, while the aerial view shrank the landscape into a model available for new modes of measurement, but also generating exultation, dread and dreams of power. The transition that occurs post-war, as Dorrian notes in his analysis of Charles and Ray Eames' short 1977 film *Powers of Ten*, is that the scales of micro and macro are extended and intensified, and in so doing they become a subject of political competition.

The implication is that following the collapse of the Cold War political order, as Dorrian goes on to explore in the case of Google Earth, the intensification and extension of multi-scalar suturing is the watchword of our times. To put it perhaps too bluntly: big data enacts a further reconnecting of micro and macro, again opening new possibilities of scientific measurement, but also new exultation, dread and battles for power. The reproduction of a Google Earth visualisation of London on the floor of the entrance of the new London City Hall provokes in Dorrian a sense of vertigo (a dizziness all the more significant as this new building was opened in 2002 for a new London Assembly, following the disbanding of its predecessor at the height of neoliberal zealotry)

in the 1980s). How can the council represent London if it conducts its debates in a building that stands on a representation of the city digitally generated by a multi-national corporation, moreover a corporation that seems to have mutated into becoming our informational environment, both "everywhere and nowhere" (p. 133)?

Dorrian is acutely aware of and deeply interested in the political consequences of the spread of new modes of generating and experiencing images, of the threats and potentials involved in an unbinding and rebinding of relations between micro and macro, of the challenges and tricks involved in connecting image to argument. This politics of representation (a more pliable tool for investigating the societies of our era than the Spectacle Society?) is a theme which runs through many of the essays gathered in this volume and is developed in particularly grim form in a later text on the application of top-down imagery in the automated killing carried out by drone weapons.² However, Dorrian is far from technological or economic determinism. In each case, even that of drones, techniques of image production and circulation demand and, in his writing, lead to an effervescent weave of cultural, philosophical and artistic explications that bring the object in question into sharper view.

In *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott condemns modern statehood in terms comparable to a project of over-successful, but over-rigid cartography: the modern nation state project, he argues, was founded on making society legible from above.³ According to Scott such representations travesty the complexity of social life and across many fields, from forest management, through city planning to the Cultural Revolution, have led to projects to improve the human condition whose consequences have been disastrous. As a counter-proposal Scott champions *mêtis*, a practically oriented, vernacular knowledge, even a certain kind of cunning, like that demonstrated by Odysseus, required in and born out of finding ways to overcome the challenges of changing environments.

The atelier for art, architecture and urbanism, of which Dorrian is co-director, is also named *Metis*. In the work produced at the atelier or in the innovative architectural design studios he has pioneered with students at Edinburgh University, the processes of developing architectural propositions unfold through responding to the specificity of a given site by means of material and

² Mark Dorrian. Drone Semiosis: Weaponry and Witnessing. *Cabinet: A Quarterly of Art and Culture*. № 54. 2014. P. 48-55.

³ Scott, J. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

abstract experimentation, and in challenging and playing with divergences of scale of representation. While there is clearly common ground in Scott and Dorrian's championing of *mētis*, the question posed in *Writing on the Image: Architecture, the City and the Politics of Representation* is not that of debunking the failures of over-rigid state planning diagnosed by Scott. Rather, Dorrian takes as a given that the challenge of the contemporary moment is that of being beyond a primary level or mode of the organisation of vision. This situation demands a patient reconstruction, case by case, of how modes of seeing are constructed in a particular context. Working at radically contrasting scales, through different techniques and discourses of representation, and at its limits (whether these be the nebulousness of clouds or silence), and tracking these through an eye-opening array of cultural references, Dorrian opens up a blueprint for a critical cartography of our mind-spinning everyday.

Dorrian also applies a craftsman's sensitivity and patient endeavour to the text as a material form: his *Writing on the Image* is deeply researched and beautifully constructed.