

THE TENSE OF ARCHITECTURE

Introduction

What can a philosopher of language have to say about the works of two architects? More interestingly, what can he have to learn from a book called *Architectural Body*? At first sight, the only possible answer is: nothing. Except that the architects in question are also artists or poets, and one of their previous works, *The Mechanism of Meaning*, cannot be indifferent to a philosopher of language. So that the philosopher of language can exert his talents in two ways. He can discuss and make sense of (in a technical, not a patronising acceptance of the phrase) the architects' pronouncements, especially when they seem to defy common sense and beggar belief. And he can wonder whether the series of concepts produced in their architectural manifesto cannot be distinctly, and perhaps crucially, relevant to his concerns. I shall therefore proceed in two steps. I shall consider the very formulation of the entire project; and I shall learn something from *Architectural Body*.

We have decided not to die

How can we make sense of a proposition like this, which runs contrary to our most ingrained beliefs, beliefs so firmly established that they have acquired the status of knowledge? I do not *believe* I shall eventually die, I *know* it.

There are two trivial ways out of this quandary. I can treat the proposition as a piece of artistic provocation, designed to shake me, temporarily and I hope pleasurably, out of my ingrained knowledge—this is hardly better than a pose. Or I can treat the proposition as metaphorical. The traditional way not to die in that sense is to survive through one's offspring or one's works—the metaphor is as old as the hills.

The interest of Gins and Arakawa's position is that they do not encourage either of those trivial solutions, but take their proposition, there lies their radicalness, not only seriously but literally.

This is where the philosopher of language may have something to say, simply by asking, in his professional capacity, the question: how can I construe the meaning of such a proposition, which is semantically outrageous, but has the hallmark of respectable grammaticality?

I shall attempt to do this with the help of Gilles Deleuze's theory of sense, as expressed in his *Logique du sens*. His theory is based on the contrast between meaning and sense, or rather, since this is a French text, between two acceptations of *sens*. For Deleuze, a proposition has meaning if three elements are present: manifestation, designation and signification. Manifestation denotes the relationship between the proposition and

its speaker, who asserts it and thereby claims responsibility for its meaning (the canonical grammatical marker is the shifter “I”). Designation denotes the relationship between the proposition and the world: the asserted proposition has intentionality, it is “about” something, namely the world (and the canonical marker is the deictic, “this” or “that”). Subject and object, to speak in the terms of classical German philosophy, being dealt with, what else remains? The internal coherence of the proposition, that which makes it “make sense,” what Deleuze calls its signification, whose canonical grammatical markers are the marks of cohesion, syntactic or semantic, for instance the conjunction “therefore.” And the ultimate guarantee that all is well with the proposition, that subject is related to object in a meaningful way, through a meaningful, because coherent, proposition, uttered *by* someone *about* something, is God, the ultimate master of signification. Taken together, the three elements of meaning determine what Deleuze calls common sense (my manifestation is no different from the other fellow’s, I belong to the semantic fold; my designation has verisimilitude). They also determine what he calls good sense (my proposition is significant in that it goes in the right direction—Deleuze is playing on the two meanings of the word *sens*: direction as well as meaning—in that it does not go contrary to the eternal laws of signification as ordained by God). In other words, the combination of manifestation, designation and signification, that is of common sense (shared between the entire linguistic community) and good sense (abiding by God’s guidelines) has one general name, *doxa*, or received and established opinion, which is the real contents of what we mean by the “meaning” of a proposition.

The most striking characteristic, and the main interest, of the proposition “We have decided not to die,” is that it runs contrary to *doxa*, that it is not so much (unwittingly) a-doxic, as (blatantly) *anti*-doxic. As a result of this, it has ambiguous manifestation, doubtful designation, dubious signification, and consequently little meaning if any. For who is this “we” who have decided “not to die”? It appears to be ambiguous between the “we” of exclusion (Gins and Arakawa, as opposed to the rest of us, who have never thought of making such a decision, or have not been able to make it) and the “we” of inclusion, or conversion, which addresses one and all, you and I, and asks us to come and join the fun, or the reversible destiny project. So manifestation is ambiguous. But designation fares no better, as common and good sense tell me that, unless I am a vampire, I cannot “not die,” that there is no such object as an undead, or rather a human being that has forgotten to die or decided not to, unless it is relegated to the wildest fiction (the proposition does have some limited signification, but only in the language-game of fiction, peopled with creatures of dubious ontological status). Designation, therefore, is at best doubtful. But signification fares even worse. For the logical link between the two sub-propositions (“we have decided”/“we won’t die”) is highly dubious. “Not dying” is a constant, but temporary, state in which we all find ourselves, but not the object or goal of a decision. Unless I had decided to commit suicide today and have changed my mind, I cannot claim in a meaningful, that is in a doxic, way, to have decided “not to die.” You have to be Poe’s Mr. Valdemar, that is, again, a character of fiction, to utter the unutterable, “I am dead.” It would seem that I have made a considerable discovery: Gins and Arakawa, in so far as they are the speakers of the proposition “We have decided not to die,” cannot exist, they must be characters of fiction, on a par with Dracula and the Frankenstein monster, or rather, to be more precise, with Rider Haggard’s “She” and Lovecraft’s Charles Dexter Ward.

But this is true only if we insist on remaining in the realm of *doxa*. And for Deleuze doxic meaning is not all: there is a fourth element in the proposition, which he calls *sense*. Sense is what meaning blocks and freezes into *doxa*. It (chrono)logically precedes meaning, it marks the moment when meaning is not yet either “common” or “good.” So, unlike common sense, it is event-like, in that it has no truck with verisimilitude and established meaning; and unlike good sense it proliferates, it is multidirectional and paradoxical—a rhizome of semantic potentialities rather than the tree of Porphyry that determines and fixes meaning. And it has a much closer relationship to art than doxic meaning has: it is what literature, and especially poetry, is trying to capture; it does not deal in the distinction between truth and fiction, the literal and the metaphorical, but in style, in the proliferation of potentialities of meaning, in the taking of the expressive powers of language to their limits. I shall run the risk of quoting myself—here is an account of Deleuzean sense:

Being neither the terms of the proposition, nor the state of affairs, nor the experience of the subject that expresses it, sense, neither word nor body, sensibilia nor concepts, is neutral: it does not exist, but subsists and insists, indifferent to the usual dichotomies (neither personal nor impersonal, particular nor general, etc.). Its grammatical marker in the sentence is neither a shifter, nor a deictic, nor a syncategorematic word: it is the verb itself, as marker of process, which inscribes the pure event. Sense is indistinguishable from the surface nonsense Carroll captures in his tales and his paradoxes; it is the effect produced by the circulation of the paradoxical element as it zips the two series together [...]. Lastly, like the event, its temporality is not that of time's arrow (the temporality of the Markov chain and the construction of meaning), but the eternal and at the same time bi-directional temporality of Aion, not Chronos. (123)

Gins and Arakawa's proposition, which is rich in verbs (they are the only two semantically full words, the rest being grammatical words) may not have much doxic meaning, but it emphatically makes sense. It has all the exciting subversive quality of Deleuzean sense and jogs me out of my thought routine. And this sense is developed in the rhizome of concepts that make up *Architectural Body*.

The danger here would be to treat them simply as artists, to read the proposition as a *haiku*, and their manifesto as a volume of poetry (which in a sense it is also), thus reverting to the trivial position that I outlined in my opening paragraphs, and shutting them up in an aesthetic ghetto. I shall try another path, the path of making Deleuzean sense, that is of discussing *Architectural Body* as a work of philosophy, a site for the construction of concepts, thereby hoping to learn from it. For, if we treat their work as an example of sense, the answer to the question, “What can a philosopher of language learn from such a text?” is: a lot.

The language of architecture

At first sight, there is little relationship between language and architecture. The phrase, ‘the language of architecture’ can take, according to common sense, four different meanings: (a) The phrase can denote a specialised lexicon of terms of art, a jargon: if I want to know what a clerestory is, I may have to look it up in a dictionary. There is nothing special, or interesting, in this, for even hairdressing has its specialised language. (b) The phrase can mean that buildings are to be taken for signs: they signify, they convey messages,

they “make statements.” Walking in a town is like deciphering a text, the acting out of a process of reading and interpretation. We walk a town as we read a map. Although not uninteresting (Gins and Arakawa have used this in their Site of Reversible Destiny-Yoro), we are still at the level of metaphor (and here we must remember Deleuze’s strong hostility to metaphor: sense is beyond the literal/metaphorical divide, it is strongly linked to the body, and the slogan is: no metaphors, only metamorphosis). (c) The metaphor can be made more precise. Buildings are syntactically linked into an urban landscape, a street is a sentence, a neighbourhood an utterance (that we are dealing in discourse is made explicit, for instance by street names as characterising a neighbourhood). And the erection of a building is like a construction of a sentence: in both cases, structures are involved. We may remember here that the elementary language-game devised by Wittgenstein to illustrate his favourite concept is a game the elements of which are not words but building-bricks. (d) But because we are dealing with sense, beyond metaphor, before good sense, the metaphor can be inverted. So far, the implicit concept of language involved has been close to Wittgenstein’s concept of language in the *Tractatus*, namely the picture theory of language: the syntax of our language is homologous to the syntax of objects that make up our world, and our language is, consequently, a picture of the world. But because we are not dealing in metaphor, we may suggest that the reverse is equally relevant: it is the syntax of our language which is constitutive of the structure of our (lived) world, a structure that is materialised in the language of architecture. Buildings do not make statements, they *are* statements, embodied sentences or turns of phrase. We could even propose a Marxist version of this: ideas become material forces when they capture the masses; words acquire material force when they capture organisms into architectural bodies.

Gins and Arakawa have been there before us:

It is by relying on juxtaposed repeatable and re-combinable items that verbal discourse, with great sleight of mouth (or hand), encompasses and presents sequentially considered events. Modularly constructed areas and the architectural procedures they engender will be the juxtaposed repeatable and re-combinable items of a built discourse.

An architectural procedure resembles its predecessor, a word, in two respects for a start: first, it is a repeatable item that readily lends itself to discursive use; second, charged with conveying a specific experience or range of experiences, it can be evaluated as to how well it serves its purpose or how effectively it has been put to use. (Architectural Body 56-57)

It is clear, now that we have reached the Gins and Arakawa project, that we have escaped from the realm of *doxa* to dwell in sense. We must abandon the illusion of a literal meaning, or rather take the metaphor both literally and metaphorically at the same time. Buildings *are* and *are not* words and sentences, so that there will (not) be verb and noun buildings, or, to speak like Aristotle, categorematic and syncategorematic buildings.

At times, Gins and Arakawa seem very close to this, witness the phrase I have used as the title of this essay:

Because bioscleave itself occurs as a demonstrably tentative constructing towards a holding in place, architectural works constructed into it cannot be anything but tentative; furthermore—and it is for this reason that we have chosen tentativeness as an organizing principle in our practice—it is not enough to know that in

deep time all architectural works are fleeting things: it is necessary to construct architectural works that reflect the bioscleave's intrinsic tentativeness. An architectural work that will serve the body well will maximize its chances of drawing on and blending with bioscleave, positioning the body in such a way that it can best coordinate itself within its surroundings. Simply, pretending that architecture is not tentative is just that, only a pretense. Architecture will come into its own when it becomes thoroughly associated and aligned with the body, that active other tentative constructing toward a holding in place, the ever-on-the-move body. The tense of architecture should not be that of "This is this" or "Here is this" but instead that of "What's going on?" (Architectural Body 49)

Like their general proposition, the phrase "the tense of architecture" has no doxic meaning, *unless it is taken as a metaphor*. But if we move into Deleuzian sense, which will involve taking the metaphor literally (and vice versa), it will make a lot of sense. All we have to do in order to grasp this is consider the contrast between the two types of sentences that immediately follow. By contrasting an assertive, designational architecture that has noun determination but not tense, and a processual architecture, an architecture of the verb, which is therefore tensed, they opt for a dynamic, not a static/monumental type of architecture, and compel us to envisage architecture, which goes against our common or our good sense, as a process in time rather than a monument in space. A linguistic analysis of the three sentences on which the passage ends will bear this out. Tense is the main verbal category, and the verbal meaning in question is not expressed in the simple present of assertion, but rather through the tentativeness of a question (we remember here that, in some grammars of English, "tentative" is one of the values of the past tense, as in "Did you want more tea," uttered in the context of the present time of utterance). A question, therefore, is what this type of architecture expresses. But not all questions are right: the questions of designation, characterised by the use of deictics (what is this?) are clearly wrong, in that they fetishize processes into objects. To be truly "tentative," the utterance must be a question rather than an assertion, it must bear not on objects, not on subjects (who are we to build such buildings?) but on pre-individual, impersonal processes. "What's going on?" is the perfect formulation of such a question. And note that the tense of architecture is not the simple present (of blunt assertion), but the present continuous, where the aspect points towards the event, the moment of change, rather than the cause or the resulting state. This event, which the tense of architecture seeks to capture, is a Deleuzian event, produced by the circulation of sense, the bearer of which is not a subject, not even a speaking subject, but what Deleuze calls a haecceity (*heccéité*), a mode of individuation that is neither that of the subject nor that of the thing. Examples of haecceities in Deleuze are a season, a date, a shower of rain, a *haiku*. In Gins and Arakawa, a house, in that it is a tentative constructing toward a holding in place, within a bioscleave, the site for the deployment of an architectural body, is such a haecceity.

This is where Gins and Arakawa may have something crucial to teach a philosopher of language, this is where they may be able to dispel some of the aporias in which the discipline revels. For the concept of haecceity in Deleuze provides a way out of the aporia of the concept of speaker as subject (as individual center of consciousness). And the Gins and Arakawa version of it, which is a notable improvement, may provide a way out of the quandary of the relationship between a disincarnated *logos* and the body which gives voice to it. Since Aristotle, the dichotomy of *phone* and *logos* has been central to the philosophy of language, and their exact relationship a constant puzzle.

The four bodies

The puzzle has, of course, produced many solutions. There are four standard answers, and four linguistic concepts of the body. None fits the architectural body.

In “scientific,” positivist linguistics, the body of the speaker is a *biological* body. The clearest example is Chomsky’s concept of language. For him, language is a faculty, located in the “mind/brain.” Language has biological existence in neurone circuits and/or genes. The problem with this reductionist physicalism is that it fails to account for most of the phenomena to which we give the name “language”: it excludes them outside the pale of “science.” Most of all, it cuts language off from the world and human experience and practice. As a consequence, language is naturalised, maxims of linguistic behaviour become laws of nature. This has all the characteristics of what Althusser calls “a spontaneous philosophy for scientists,” and is of little help.

The second body is the erotic body, the body of psychoanalysis. This has a more congenial appearance: the articulation between body and psyche, body and experience, is no longer mechanistic. Primary, secondary and tertiary processes may be distinguished: in *Logique du sens*, Deleuze erects a theory of the origins of language on such a ternary structure. As a result, the scream is accounted for, in its relation with articulated language, the depth of the unconscious is distinguished from the surface where discourse dwells. We are now able to understand the concept of a maternal tongue and the practice of *fous littéraires*. But this concept of the body is still too individual/personal for us to be entirely satisfied with it.

The third body is the labouring body envisaged by Marxists of all description. This *labouring* body, which is, if we pay attention to the carefully chosen ambiguity of the term, both material and maternal, is above all a social body. It is no longer cut off from the world, but totally involved in and determined by social life. As a result, language is no longer reductively mechanistic, but what Deleuze and Guattari call “machinic” involved in all sorts of combinations with elements of the world. The speaker is no longer an individual subject but a collective “assemblage of enunciation,” an ontological mixture of discourses, institutions and objects, among which buildings play a prominent role. We are very close here to the architectural body, but not quite there.

For there is a fourth linguistic body, the phenomenological body. In linguistics and the philosophy of language, it is found in enunciation theories of linguistics (mostly in France, for instance the work of Benveniste or Culioli), and in the cognitive linguistics of Lakoff and Johnson, with their concept of embodied reason. Such a body is the site for the grammatical operations that constitute the speaker as speaker, but a speaker located within the world (here the world of perception) and oriented in and towards it—a world which she interprets and to which she adjusts in and through her discourse. This is the world of Lakoff and Johnson’s three types of metaphors (orientational, structural and ontological) and Culioli’s “operations of enunciation.” Such a body is the body of human experience, much more so than the labouring body of the Marxists, but it is again an individual and personal body (in spite of Culioli’s insistence on interlocution and “adjustment to the co-enunciator”).

The interest of Gins and Arakawa’s architectural body is that it avoids the aporias that none of those four bodies entirely avoid. It has obvious links with the phenomenological body, and it does not ignore the social nature of the life world from which language springs: architecture is not a solitary pleasure. Which means that it may

help us avoid the usual dichotomies, which are so many aporias: not merely the literal/metaphorical contrast, as we have already seen, but the collective/individual or the historical/natural contrasts.

In order to show this, I shall start from what is perhaps the linguistic position that is closest to Deleuze, and possibly to the architectural body: the enunciation linguistics of Antoine Culioli. The speaker here is the subject of enunciation, that is of a process of uttering, as opposed to the grammatical subject or subject of the utterance. She finds herself in a situation (a word with obvious existentialist origins, rich with hints of *Geworfenheit*), to which she adapts her discourse, on the background of which she “takes to the word” (*prend la parole*), as a bird takes to the wing. This situation is characterised by two variables, a subjective variable (“who speaks?”: the subject of enunciation, S_0) and a time variable, the moment of enunciation, T_0 . This accounts for the grammatical phenomena of deixis, aspect, tense and modality, more generally of quantification and qualification, the two main operations of enunciation. Yet, there is a curious omission in the setting up of a situation: there is no variable of localisation, L_0 , probably because such task of localisation (*repérage*) is the main concern of the process of enunciation itself. But this conceptual choice creates an imbalance in the original situation of enunciation (Sit_0), as a result of which this body is personally and temporally, but not locally situated (unlike the embodied mind of Lakoff and Johnson): the speaker is once again the angelic site of a purely intellectual process.

This is where the concept of an architectural body helps. For it is nothing if it is not located, situated in space, as a constitutive factor of its existence, when the mere organism becomes, in Gins and Arakawa’s phrase, an organism that persons. It is not difficult, of course, to find such markers of situated space in ordinary language (in deictics of space, “here” and “there,” in prepositions, the original meaning of which is always one of location and orientation). Thus the ontological “there,” in existential sentences (“there is a cat on the mat”) is a generalisation of the eponymous local deictic. Gins and Arakawa are fully aware of this, as evidenced in the first panel of, “Localization and Transference,”¹ the second subdivision of their research project *The Mechanism of Meaning*, where “this” and “that” are used as pointers in the operation of location of meaning through pinpointing (58), a concept central to Culioli’s analysis of operations of determination.

We must ask ourselves, therefore, how the concept of an architectural body enables the philosopher of language to understand the spatial location of a pre-individual, impersonal speaker endowed with a material and social body, and whether it enables us to go beyond Lakoff and Johnson’s embodied mind, for they, too, attempt to think the same process through their concept of orientational metaphor.

The architectural body

Let us start from Gins and Arakawa’s main thesis, as expressed in the introduction to the book:

¹ See Lecercle, fig. a (mech2_1.jpg)

An organism-person allied with, in close correspondence with, surroundings that guide skillful coordination of actions ought to be able to escape so-called human destiny, the as-if-ordained downhill course of things. Not only will houses and towns that architecturally guide and sustain an organism-person help her to compose, execute, and coordinate actions more skillfully than was ever before thought to be possible, they will also automatically enlist her in a thoroughgoing architectural questioning of the purpose of the species. An architecturally guided and sustained organism-person should then be able to reverse that destiny known to have been the lot of billions of other members of her species; when it becomes possible for an organism-person simply to go on indefinitely, a reversible destiny shall have been achieved. (Architectural Body xix-xx)

Since we are dealing in sense rather than meaning, let us take a conceptual jump, and decide that this is a recipe not just for personal survival, but for inhabiting the world, that is for undergoing and understanding the experience of being a speaking body. Once this displacement has been achieved (if displacement this may be called, rather than straightforward development), a rhizome of relevant concepts emerges. Thus the concept of “bios-cleave” will have all the advantages of Culioli’s concept of situation, but not its shortcomings: it is definitely a situation which is spatially defined, as the central concept of a “landing site” will show. In the same vein, the “organism that persons” is a more useful concept than the subject of enunciation, as it loses the intellectualisation, abstraction and premature individuality of such a concept. It is, however, with the concept of landing site that linguistic localisation comes into its own. That it has something to do with linguistic localisation appears in the very definition of the concept: “A person parses the world at any given instant into particular distributions of landing sites, or better, an organism-person-environment can be parsed into these distributions” (*Architectural Body* 6). My strategy, of course, is not to take the reference to “parsing,” a grammatical notion, as a metaphor, but as a direct description of the subject’s insertion into the world, of her construction of her life-world. Except, of course, that an “organism-person-environment” is no longer a “subject” in the usual sense. So that the central concept of “siting,” which is much more adequate than the concept of “situation” (in particular because it avoids the imbalance of a disincarnated speaker that is only a centre of consciousness situated in time), is no mere equivalent of Culioli’s “localisation” (*repérage*), but the very name of the speaker’s being-in-the-world:

A multiple, complex siting process or procedure would seem to be in effect as organism-person-environment; or posing it more neutrally, the world one finds in place lends itself to being mapped by means of a multiple, complex siting process or procedure. Human action depends on an attributing of sites and takes place in large part through sequences of sitings. (Architectural Body 7)

The three types of landing-sites (perceptual, imaging, dimensionalizing) give contents to this process of incarnated localisation, which is still pre-linguistic, but on the basis of which language as we know it can appear. We come to the essential philosophical breakthrough that *Architectural Body* operates: the landing-site as “muted symbol,” providing a “neutral zone of emphasis” that “by-passes subject-object distinctions”: “The tense of landing sites holds as that split second of muting whose instantaneous time span lasts only long enough for basic positionings to be registered [...]. Landing-site: a muted symbol, or one [...] event-marker in and of the event-fabric that is organism-person-environment” (*Architectural Body* 22).

It is now clear that I am not merely indulging in the facile conceptual translation of a series of concepts expounding a philosophical position in the field of architecture into a similar series in my own field of the philosophy of language. For a major difference has emerged between Gins and Arakawa’s concepts and those of pheno-

menological linguistics: the placing of the architectural body, a social entity, a form of social praxis, in the centre of the stage. The landing site, a muted symbol and event-marker, close to the Deleuzian concept of haecceity, overcomes the separation between subject and object that has plagued the philosophy of language so far. This is to my mind Gins and Arakawa's main contribution: they enable us to avoid both the fetishism of abstraction that is induced by concentration on the system or on linguistic competence, and the methodological individualism of a speaker conceived as centre of consciousness and/or operations of enunciation. The passage through architecture is essential here, as it is what allows such *Aufhebung*: with Gins and Arakawa, *architecture speaks*.

We can now understand their apparent counter-formulation: "A person who is held in the grip of language alone will have lost touch with many other scales of action vital to her existence" (*Architectural Body* 82). What they reject here is the "internal" form of philosophy of language or linguistics, conforming to the structuralist "principle of immanence," which claims that as an object of scientific inquiry, language must be considered independently of the rest of the world, as a self-enclosed set of phenomena. But language is not self-enclosed, the body of the speaker is an architectural body, steeped in human experience and human practice. What *Architectural Body* enables us to overcome is not only the separation between subject and object, but the opposition between determinism and freedom, interpellation of the speaker by language and the counter-interpellation of language (and the lived world) by the speaker, or rather the organism-person-environment.

Conclusion

The philosopher of language has learnt a considerable amount from Gins and Arakawa. He has been comforted in his Deleuzian awareness of the contrast between sense and meaning (an analysis of *The Mechanism of Meaning* in terms of Deleuzian sense would be rewarding). He has been comforted in his Culiolian awareness of the importance of localisation in the construction of linguistic meaning. But he has also been encouraged to go beyond the phenomenological body as the site of language into a form of body that owes as much to the labouring body of social practice as to the phenomenological body of perceptual and experiential siting. In so doing, he has been able to discard the false contrasts that have plagued his branch of philosophy for generations, subject v. object, constraint v. freedom, and to avoid the twin sins of fetishism and individualism. That is a great deal indeed.

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