Curzio, Bardot, and the Runaway Amnesiac
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Everyday I experience the death of the Sun.
And the ground that I stand upon, caves in.

Everything I see turns to stone.
And the beating of my heart just stops.

I close my eyes and fall down to the ground,
And await for all to shut down,
So the pain will fade.
I close my eyes and wait for the numbness to set in,
And I embrace the stillness of eternal sleep.¹

As man patiently waits to fade into the backdrop of his home, all that remains are the walls that surround him, and oppress him; the ceiling which hangs above his head, waiting to collapse, and the floor below him that gradually consumes him until he is nothing more than the space he inhabits, and the house has become nothing less than a permanent memory of himself.

There is something intrinsically nostalgic about the idiosyncratic house; whether it has to do with the fact that we, and by we I mean us the anachronistic spectators and voyeurs, will never truly experience the space as if it is our own, but rather a testing ground for a limitless number of our memory’s spatial projections. The idiosyncratic house, is the bespoke tailoring of a space catered to the needs of one sole individual: the inhabitant, the client, the architect; they are one and the same. Every passageway attributes to the interaction between adjacent rooms; each one, an act from a scene of a tragedy, every window is but an eyehole for the

¹ Bjärgo, Peter, Architecture of Melancholy, (Bandcamp, Peter Bjärgo, 2012)
voyeur from within, but also for the one lurking from without, and every wall is a curtain charged with the power to reveal our home’s most treasured secrets. It is the ones who’s experiences we cannot reproduce that fascinates us, where the narrative of its first life generates a vernacular of its own, one inextricably linked to its patron... and so Curzio Malaparte once said... “Casa come me” – house like me - ..., “ritratto di pietra” – self portrait in stone”.  

Casa Malaparte, an artifact, a ruin, an anthropomorph ized environment, the ideal stage set for the birth of a tragedy and ‘the constructed image of an isolated, romantic, rebellious intellectual.”  

An architectural self-portrait would be a mere understatement for this autobiographic al house, conceived as a stage for magical realism. A glance at it now and our perception quickly begins to drown amongst the subtly exacerbated references permanently embedded into this red brick pagan altar where “architecture [is] a virtual text, with all the narrative power of literature.” Casa Malaparte may hold a hidden mystical past whose layers we only gradually peel through in reading, re-reading, watching and re-watching its historical and fictional context. The space we witness is the embodiment of both our nostalgia, and that of Curzio Malaparte, his being the one that influenced every minute articulated detail of a scenario purely formed from the speculative projections of a story-teller’s imagination.

3 Ibid 24
4 McDonough, Michael, Malaparte A House Like Me, (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 1999) 21
Everything becomes catered to the needs of the house's plot within the overarching narrative of it being both the spectator and the participant.

You may find yourself in a position of power where you see everyone and everything, and everyone sees you, the uncanny. The house slowly assumes the dual role of being both the stage and the amphitheater, where one minute the staircase rooftop is the altar to which you ascend and take your seat as a voyeur of the mythological unfolding of the natural surroundings. Yet, as the camera angle shifts from your point of view to your voyeur's, you suddenly realize you are being filmed from afar as an actor trapped in some Modernist Arcadian stage set.

As you vagabond through the Pompeian atriums of the house, passing through the “twentieth century graphic reconstruction of” a Hellensitic house, your gaze is slowly drawn to the windows, perforating the secluded domus, facing towards the natural scenery, which you gradually realize is more than just trees, rocks, sea but a metaphysical painting of a mythical past and a re-memory roamed by deities and picturesque creatures. In a sense, Casa Malaparte from its inception is the love child of architecture and

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5 Talamona 57
6 Ibid. 59
poetry or as ‘André Breton described the quintessence of surrealism as “a powerful locomotive abandoned for years to the madness of the virgin forest.”’

The experience of an architectural space rooted in nostalgia and melancholy has the capability of invoking the notion of re-memory. The latter is a memory in constant evolution, constantly redefining itself according to one’s repeated and renewed experiences within an uncannily familiar but unknown space. The beauty of piecing the narrative in this way is that one need not always be present in the space to remember a forgotten quality; rather can equally engage through the experience of the its manifestation in other forms of media, such as cinema and literature. The power of words and film sometimes capture what the eye or ear cannot. In the following passage, John Hejduk inscribes Casa Malaparte in a fictional context, displacing it from space and time and embedding it into the all too familiar narrative:

“...a house of rituals and rites, it is a house of mysteries, it at once brings forth the chill of the Aegean on the horn head of past sacrifices, it is an ancient play placed in an Italian light. It has to do with the primitive gods and their unrelenting demands. It has to do with the suction of leaves and stone and the expulsions of sea and sky. It has to do with the choice of good and evil and the inevitable pathos when a wrong choice is made it has to do with the hollowness of caves and the inaccessibility of the sun. It has to do with the abandonment of abstraction and the seduction of the lyrical. It also has to do with the dilemma and problems of our time...It is a house of paradoxes. It is an object which consumes. It is filled with unrequited histories. It is a relic left upon the pinnacle after the seas have subsided. It is a sarcophagus of soft cries.”

Thus the quality of Casa Malaparte lies in the infinite opportunities it offers to whoever is willing to embrace its undeniable shipwrecked fate, for anyone and anything is able to project their desires onto a fabric which no longer has any distinct program by which to abide by. There is no problem to solve anymore, nor was there ever one to begin with, only the realization of a projected fantasy. It is a place of choices. Any of Hejduk’s metaphors has the

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7 McDonough 27
8 Ibid. 63
power to invoke and reiterate a different mask of Casa Malaparte, and the power of his literary tools only facilitates our visualization of forgotten memories.

An architectural space, a house, let us continue with Casa Malaparte for the time being, which gains acclamation through the activities of its proprietor suddenly becomes the center of all the media and culture’s attention. Curzio Malaparte, apart from being the prominent Italian author was also an adamant political activist, who throughout his life coupled the success of his literary career with his political writings on fascism and communism; both which he supported at some stage of his life. Enraging Mussolini caused his exile to the isle of Ischia, which perhaps may be where the prison-like environment of Casa Malaparte originates from, a house “melancholy, hard, severe,” like Malaparte himself. However it is the fact that he managed to interfere with the construction of the house, going as far as becoming considered, by many, the architect of the house, along with gaining reputation as a “newspaper correspondent, essayist, political writer, novelist and playwright, theater and film director; as well as his metamorphosis into contractor, architect, and ‘artistic’ director of the site at Carpi’s Punta Massulo” that inspired artists, photographers, other writers, architects, cinematographers and anyone who realized the potential of the house. It became a must-have addition to everybody’s body of research and work. It is through these secondary resources that we, the voyeurs of this spectacle, are able to gain insight into a house that we perhaps have never seen.

John Hejduk beautifully summarizes all the principal qualities of the house, and lets us embark on a journey through our wildest imagination, where he predetermines the visual articulation of references that we associate to this house. However, what may even be more powerful is when we are given an already existing but fictional narrative to experience in the form of cinema. This is the next intermediary stage where the architecture begins to take shape before our eyes in an alternate dimension that we can see but in which we cannot physically participate. It is at this stage that the author has the opportunity to show us an angle of vision that perhaps we would not be able to perceive in real life, and hence we skip the phase of actually going to visit the place and it becomes just “an enabler of life narration itself.”

This is exactly what occurs in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1964 film, Le Mépris. The film slowly builds up a momentum that touches “the depths of personal and collective memory...[and in doing so] architecture and cinema reveal their constructive force.” From the very beginning of Le Mépris, there is one reoccurring melody by Georges Delerue that invades us, the voyeurs, both in body and mind, like the chime of a pendulum counting down towards the unknown. What is this unknown factor? We are well aware that the plot is thickening, the music is dramatic, and we gradually become completely seduced by the words of Brigitte Bardot. And while the actors are there, the music is there, the way the film is shot is exactly how it should be; what is missing is the site. So what is the site? It’s not the film studio where the protagonist meets the producer, and it’s definitely not the apartment where Bardot and Piccoli are featured for during the greater part of the shooting.

The minute we are introduced to the possibility of the protagonists leaving to the villa in Capri, an element of uncertainty arises, along with a spatiality that we cannot touch but that is integral to the build-up of the climax. We inherently begin to relate everything non-architectural to the house where the tension must unfold. And when we finally witness Casa

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9 Talamona 23
10 Ibid.
11 Schöning, Pascal, Manifesto for a Cinematic Architecture, (London: AA School of Architecture, 2006) 22
12 Ibid 26
Malaparte for the first time, we feel this tingling sensation of everything falling into place. The music finally begins to make sense, and the characters all assume one mutual purpose – to be where they were meant to be the whole duration of the film, actors on the stage, the stage of Curzio Malaparte.

This stage takes a very particular form, as the roof of a mausoleum, which becomes a staircase fluidly connected with the environment. In one particular scene the camera follows Brigitte Bardot as she walks up the stairs onto the roof, with nothing but the thin line where ocean and sky meet behind her. As she moves in some form of ritualistic progression across the flat plane, the camera does not lose sight of her, but more importantly it does not lose sight of the backdrop behind her. The plane she is standing on slowly becomes a metonymical part of the whole, which is the cliff on which the villa stands. Suddenly one recalls the statues of the Greek gods featured a few scenes earlier in the first screening of the Mr Lang’s production that is shot at Casa Malaparte. Gradually the stone face of the deity begins to fade and is replaced by the silhouette of Piccoli standing on the cliff, looking out towards the sea. We realize that man has become God, and vice versa. The play has begun and the characters that we have thus far gotten to know have assumed new roles, characters of the Odyssey, professing universal truths. The house has now come to life and it is through the interaction of its characters that we start to understand the spatial qualities in a way that we were not able to before. It is when we apply an already existing narrative to a formed structure and then represent it through cinema that we can understand the true meaning of nostalgia. And in realizing that it is not our story but theirs, not our odyssey but the actors’, we succumb to melancholy.
Yet despite the pensiveness it brings us to watch a story unfold, who's architecture we will never be able to experience to its fullest, we gradually learn to “nourish the nostalgia for missed opportunities and the elation for future expectations”. However what we still have not understood is why are we drawn to the uncanny reality, apart from the notion that we project our own fantasies onto an architecture that offers itself willingly for us to abuse it? Why do we continue to repeat the same mistakes and dwell in the past and return to the spaces that cause us to remember and redefine our memories each time? Essentially what do we hope to find?

We hope to find what we long for, and more often than not we long to run away from the sensation of isolation and loneliness, and comfort ourselves with recollections of the familiar. Architecture has the powerful trait of withholding the history of social interactions tied to it. The walls still remember the quarrels of the couple that used to live between them, the doors could never forget who they welcomed and who they saw walk out that last autumn night. The household gods do not forget, and it is we, the voyeurs, who continually search and pray to them long after our visiting hours are over.

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“I mirrored their breaking lives, I saw their pale faces

Distraught coming and going, lined despair,

His shaken bulk, her calm pose in the doorway—

I saw them. I was there.

I have so long been silent, even now

Hardly at all remember how her slim

Long fingers once caressed me—was that how

At one time she touched him?

His lips on mine in the morning, or, in darkness,

After a happy embrace, warmed my clay.

Where is the firm mouth now, where the kiss?

Broken and swept away.

I see no more. Their life gave our lives meaning.

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13 Schöning, Pascal, Julian Löffler, and Rubens Azeedo, Cinematic Architecture, (Belgium: AA School of Architecture, 2009) 19
But broken homes will not set again.

Their parting was our dissolution, they

Will never know their household gods are slain.”

As Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli) strolls along the roof of Casa Malaparte, the sound of voices from below attract his attention to the side. He silently bends over and diagonally stares into the window from the second floor, just in time to see his wife, Camille (Brigitte Bardot), kissing the film producer Jeremy Prokosch. In one shot we see all three figures at different heights and depths of the house’s façade, and in that instant that façade becomes forever linked to that one scene, the interaction and sexual tension between the characters of Le Mépris. The house is not just a metonymic plane visually but acoustically as well; while its walls may be its clothes, the sounds from within have the power to entirely strip it naked. And while until now we were expecting to see the house in order to fulfill the plot, form this point onwards we will have great expectations of Casa Malaparte, in any media we witness it. The same way we will inextricably link it to Delerue’s melody, and expect it to be playing when we ourselves manage to step onto that delirious roof for the first time.

The house becomes inextricably linked to the body, and not just to its movement but also to its interior. “The body is house, the house of the soul, which like any house can only be maintained as such by constant surveillance of its openings.” As Casa Malaparte temporarily assumes the role of Camille, it soon expels her as well. The house represents all that she no longer finds in her love for her husband, while before it was the very reason that made her come there in the first place. As she takes her exit from the stage she also sets foot towards her death and the play ends in tragedy as she and Prokosch die. The show however must go on, the Odyssey continues to be shot and Casa Malaparte lives on, unchanged. Thus the roles reverse, and the house becomes an engine that is fed by the souls and flesh of the protagonist

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who has now become the secondary object. A house must fulfill the duties it was given from its inception, and history may only repeat itself for otherwise we distance ourselves from nostalgia and from melancholy, and away from the architecture that makes us feel.

We risk to become amnesiacs.

Casa Malaparte... a vessel charged with qualities only we, the voyeurs, can behold. Architecture of the melancholic. It is vital to remember that melancholy is not the same as depression, and still different from nostalgia. Melancholy is that necessary pause of creative thought that needs to happen as one seeks inspiration. We cannot lose it, we must not forget it, for to remember is to feel, and to feel is to live. And today “I live on an island, in a house that is sad, hard, severe, that I built for myself, solitary on a sheer rock over the sea: a house that is the spectre, the secrete image of a prison. The image of my nostalgia. Maybe I never desired, not even then to escape from jail. Man is not meant to live freely in freedom, but to be free inside a prison.”

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16 Malaparte, Curzio, Woman Like Me, (Leicester: Troubador Publishing Ltd, 2007) vii


Images Cited


