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.[1] 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 its domination of the human body. As French intellectual and writer Georges Bataille describes the way in which we endure a physical relationship with architecture that is reflexive with its authoritative identity – where the architecture 'attacks' but is also subject to attack:

> 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.[2]

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)[3] and The Escapists' *Boy Girl Wall* (2010).[4] 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 some protest against authority in the metanarrative of the play. Bringing the wall to life enables the storyteller to overcome a political struggle within the play and in the broader societal context in which the play is set. Using the body to mimic architecture becomes a vehicle for the playwright to subtly portray political subversion.

ARCHTECTURE 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 delirious 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 unspeakable copulating 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, channelling obedient bodies

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 step of a near-biochemical 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.[5]

Tschumi goes on to describe that the violent proposition enacted by architecture is in fact a 'deeply Dionysian' gesture.[6] 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 work of architectural theory that does much to inform this study is Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny*. Vidler carefully describes a history of the body and architecture, its absence in modern buildings and subsequent return in postmodern architecture. In the chapter on architecture and the body, Vidler writes:

> The idea of an architectural monument as an embodiment and abstract representation of the human body, its reliance on the anthropomorphic analogy for proportional and figurative authority, was, we are led to believe, abandoned with the collapse of the classical tradition and the birth of the technologically dependent architecture …, the long tradition of bodily reference from Vitruvius through Alberti, Filarete, Francesco di Giorgio and Leonardo seems to have been definitely abandoned with the rise of a modernist sensibility …. In this context it is interesting to note a recent return to the bodily analogy by architects … all concerned to propose a re-inscription of the body in their work as referent and figurative inspiration.[7]

Vidler goes on in this chapter to describe the affective relationship between the body and architecture as 'uncanny', drawing from Freud's theory that the uncanny is caused by a prior repression and expected return. While this is a valid reflection on the absence of the body in modern architecture, Vidler's analysis relies on psychoanalysis, falling back on an exploration of phenomena through the mind and not the body, and there is a correlation between studies of corporeality and psychoanalysis where Freud and especially Lacan relate the ego to embodiment. However, as Slavoj Žižek describes in his book, *The Parallax View*, there should be some trepidation in applying psychoanalysis, the study of an individual, to broader social-ideological processes, such as a broader understanding of how the body relates to architecture. Žižek writes that:

> The focus of psychoanalysis resides elsewhere: the social, the field of social practices and socially held beliefs, is not simply on a different level from individual experience, but something to which the individual himself has to relate, which the individual himself has to experience as an order which is minimally 'reified', externalised.[8]

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'.[9]

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 Vidler asserts, 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 befall
> 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,
> Through which the lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe,
> Did whisper often very secretly.
> This loam, this rough-cast and this stone doth show
> That I am that same wall; the truth is so:
> And this the cranny is, right and sinister,
> Through which the fearful lovers are to whisper.[10]

A Midsummer Night's Dream is undoubtedly Shakespeare's most famous comedy. The play involves three intertwining stories between the Athenians, the faeries and the Mechanicals that are set between the palace in Athens and the dream-like, utopian woods or forest. The Athenians are embroiled in a love triangle and family dispute, the Mechanicals are a group of amateur performers devising a performance for the Athenian royal court and both the Athenians and Mechanicals are manipulated by the faeries who are motivated by their own quarrels. In this analysis the focus is on the Mechanicals and their play within *A Midsummer Night's Dream: Pyramus and Thisb*e.

The Mechanicals' play-within-a-play is by its very nature reflexive. The metadrama draws attention to its own fictional being, it short circuits the aesthetic of the theatre; as Žižek would describe, the purpose of which is not to tell the audience something new, but rather to make them aware of something they knew all along.[11] *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is primarily an important case study because of the character Wall, played by Snout, who separates the two lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe. They communicate with each other through a hole or a 'chink' in the wall. In the third act of the play the Mechanicals rehearse in the woods and it is here that they decide that an actor in some sort of costume must play the wall; the actor being Snout. Bottom suggests:

> Some man or other must present Wall: and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify wall; and let him hold his fingers thus, and through that cranny shall Pyramus and Thisbe whisper.[12]

It is understood that critics of Elizabethan theatre were more concerned with the music than they were with scenography, compared to critics of later modern theatre, and that it is for this reason that plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* lend themselves so easily to adaptations of productions in dance.[13] The idea of an actor playing an integral but missing part of scenery may have been commonplace in amateur, and even perhaps professional, theatre. The wall itself, within the metadrama of the play, acts as a mirror within a mirror to the play, as theorist Hugh Grady writes:

> The play models in its own aesthetic space an implied theory about the relation of the aesthetic to the larger social world. That it is a mirror within a mirror is the key to its meta-aesthetic quality. And although the difference between these two realms is clear, the barrier between them, like wall in the inset play, has chinks in it, and within each separate domain there are traces of its excluded other.[14]

Therefore, the Mechanicals' play is reflexive of both the content within the play while also holding a mirror to broader social

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.[15] 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.[17]

Further to this, in this analysis I draw attention to Snout's portrayal of Wall as being more than a mere representation of architecture, but also a representation of authority. In the very last lines of the Mechanicals' play Bottom proclaims:

> No assure you; the wall is down that
> parted their fathers[18]

Here Bottom alludes to another reflexive device where the wall is some material manifestation of class separation. This reflects the lovers' situation at the beginning of the play where Egeus, a member of the Athenian court, forbids the union between Lysander and his daughter Hermia, as he has chosen Demetrius to wed his daughter. In the same way that Wall separates Pyramus and Thisbe, Egeus forbids Hermia from marrying a man he feels is unsuitable. The connections between feminism and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are also widely written about[19] and through Bottom's lines we are made aware that Wall is a metaphor for a patriarchal society as well as the separation of classes. 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.[20] This play follows on neatly 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

Above
Figure 1: Lucas Stibbard plays Wall in The Escapists' Boy Girl Wall, *2010.*
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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 mocking 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 appears to be the universal pose to represent a wall; a pose very much reminiscent of the Vitruvian Man. This pose is especially awkward in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when Wall has to do as 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 *Boy Girl Wall*. It appears to be a default 'Wall' position. This pose, I suggest, forms a reflexive loop between the body, architecture and the Vitruvian Man. It represents a constrained positioning of the body mimicking the way that architecture attempts to control the abject, unbecoming human body. The actor's freely mobile body becomes static and constrained, imitating 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 close 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 Stalinist 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 regained hierarchical order.[21]

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 divulges 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 architects' 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

1. Victoria Øye "Politics according to the MoMA," last modified September 24, 2012, http://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2012/09/24/politics-according-to-the-moma.html
2. Georges Bataille, "Architecture," Documents, Vol 1, No. 2, 1929, trans. in Encyclopaedia Acephalica, 35-36.
3. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (London: Gresham, 2010).
4. Lucas Stibbard and Matthew Ryan, *Boy Girl Wall* (Sydney: Currency Press 2012).
5. Bernard Tschumi, "Violence of Architecture," in Artform Vol. 20 September (1981): 45.
6. Bernard Tschumi, "Violence of Architecture," 47.
7. Anthony Vidler, The Architectural Uncanny (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 69.
8. Slavoj Žižek, Parallax View (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 6.
9. Ibid., 17.
10. Wall's first lines from A Midsummer Night's Dream, where Snout 'becomes' the wall. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 24.
11. Žižek, *Parallax View*, X
12. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 41.
13. Paul A .Olsen, "A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Meaning of Court Marriage," in Shakespeare's Comedies, ed. Laurence Lerner (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 118.
14. Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 52.
15. Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 197.
16. In William Shakespeare's Hamlet, the play within the play is used to illustrate Hamlet's suspicions on the murder of his father. The play is integral to the plot of the play and illustrates earlier events in the story to the audience. This is a device Shakespeare used deliberately in both plays.
17. Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing*, 201.
18. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 56.
19. Olsen, "A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Meaning of Court Marriage," 111.
20. The Escapists, "Devising an Original Performance," http://www.dramaqueensland.org.au/the-escapists.html (accessed 21st January, 2013)
21. Slavoj Žižek, "The Architectural Parallax," in Living in the End Times, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2010), 259-260.
22. Georges Bataille, "L'Informe," Documents, Vol 1, No. 1, 1929, trans. in Encyclopaedia Acephalica, 51-52.
23. Bernard Tschumi, "Violence of Architecture," 45.