



Peter Lamborn Wilson

EROS AND THANATOPIA

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The conflict in capitalism between modern productive forces and the relations of production [...] has entered its final stage. The rate of production of non-life has risen continually on its linear and cumulative course; a final threshold having just been passed in this progression, what is now produced, directly, is death.

Guy Debord¹

The Strife of Love in a Dream—or the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (Venice, 1499)—most exquisite of all incunabula, used to enjoy the reputation of being the most unread book of all “great” literature.² It was supposed to have been written in an impenetrable jargon, called “pedantesca,” of made-up Greco-Latin-Hebrew-Arabic-Chaldaean-Italian portmanteaux and puns, acrostics, codes, and esoteric (fake) hieroglyphs. Valued only for its typography and illustrations (sometimes attributed to Andrea Mantegna), scholars have maintained that no one actually ever read the text, some sort of vague allegory of love and architecture, and possibly the work of a madman (whose identity has never quite been established).

A partial translation in Elizabethan English exists, and years ago I tracked down a photocopy of its first and only edition in the Biblioteca Philosophica Hermetica in Amsterdam. Later I examined beautiful early Italian and French editions in the Rare Book Room of the New York Public Library. I’ve always felt attracted to books “no one” reads, and I was also interested in the Renaissance “reception” of Egyptian hieroglyphs, a key theme in the *Hypnerotomachia*. Unable to crack the real meaning of the hieroglyphs, Renaissance magi proceeded to invent their own based on Hermetic principles, eventually leading to the idea of the “Emblem” (see, for example, Michael Maier’s great alchemical Emblem Book, *Atalanta fugiens*). Again, scholars discussed all this only as futile fantasy, but I believed that this “Image Magic” (as practised by Giordano Bruno and Athanasius Kircher, for example) lay at the root of an entire hidden tradition of art magic, which, as Ioan Couliano points out in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, led not only (in the positive sense) to Symbolism and Surrealism, but also (negatively) to the “arts” of propaganda, brain-washing, spin-doctoring, public relations, advertising, and other modern forms of mind/image control.

The *Hypnerotomachia* indeed offers not only a marvellous reading experience but also an obsessive “reading” of architecture—of

“imaginal” architecture, based on classical ruins and hints about Egyptian buildings known to the erudite author through travelers’ tales and a few genuine looted obelisks and sphinxes in Rome. The hero, Poliphilo (whose name means something like “love of antiquities” or “ruins”), wanders and searches for his lost beloved, Polia, in a dreamscape of gargantuan buildings and ruins that excited him to the point of ecstasy. Indeed, he literally makes love to architecture.

I use the word “gargantuan” deliberately here because Rabelais, in the final Book of his epic, created an “Island of Wine” based closely and lovingly on the *Hypnerotomachia*, interpreted alchemically, complete with cyclopean temples and erotico-edenic gardens—and wine as the alchemic elixir.³ The illustrations in the *Hypnerotomachia* carried this erotic charge and proved immensely influential on Renaissance (and later) architects and artists, notably in the famous “Garden of Monsters” at Bomarzo, in Piranesi’s Egyptian fantasies, and the delightful chapels by Vignola found in the gardens of various wealthy Renaissance neo-pagans.

I once watched the late, lamented Lebbeus Woods show a series of slides, ostensibly “about architecture,” which all consisted of beautiful snapshots of his own children playing in a leafy sunlit backyard. I understood him to mean that he was fed up with modern buildings as “machinery,” and longed for some kind of dream (anti)architecture based on ludic and sensual values.

Such an approach to the built environment need not be limited to the “primitive hut” or garden; it could also embrace the mad monumentality of the *Hypnerotomachia* and yet still remain firmly located within a tradition of magical humanism. As Gérard de Nerval said in *Aurélia*, we must “seize back the hieroglyphs” from those who have sought to alienate us from love as a social principle.

Some such sentiment inspired the “urbanism” of the Situationists. The built space through which one can “drift” (as Poliphilo drifted through his dream) in a playful and erotic mode, cannot be achieved by any “planism” or authoritarian prometheanism of the architect as aesthetic dictator. It must arise naturally and spontaneously from a people whose desire is aimed toward their own utopian space. If this goal seems even more impossible now than it was in the 1950s and 1960s, it might nevertheless persist as one of those dreams in which begin “responsibility.”

The problem with implementing such ideas in the real world (i.e., in built space rather than theoretical journals) arises from the situation of desire itself in a totalitarian regime of the Image, in which all that was once real has retreated—not just into representation but into covert suppression. The ontological totality of information has even acquired a non-spatial subconscious, the “Dark Net” (a term worthy of sci-fi-cyberpunk hallucination), where all forbidden but disembodied desire has retracted beyond the pale of decorous discourse about “gender,” “rights,” and “freedom of expression” (that is to say, advertising). We

pretend to believe that the sexual revolution is over and “we won,” but subconsciously we know that eros is denied in the very fabric of capitalist eschatology.

The image of desire is ubiquitous. But the sensual space of desire is empty—or worse, virtually suppressed. “Left” and “Right” make no difference here. “Social media” have replaced human society and the body, both the commonality and the true individual. Fifty years ago, radicals believed that sexuality needed to be liberated, that it was in itself a form of liberation. Today, people still fuck, of course, but does anyone believe in “sexual liberation” any more?

An architecture of desire is no longer possible without an ideology of desire, because architecture is the sensual form of the idea (or “ideal”). The traditional vernacular of a normal society, from the grass hut to the organic medieval city, is always imbued with the erotic. From Poliphilo’s wandering through the pagan dream of the Renaissance to the Situationists’ Baudelairean *flâneurie* amidst the unknown streets of Paris, humans have made love to architecture. But as J.G. Ballard revealed, our typical modern space is the airport parking lot. Eros is displaced by thanatos, by the “crash”—or by the dead no-place-place of virtual (un) reality, as Guy Debord tried to tell us in *A Sick Planet*, his sibylline essay on “pollution” (1971), which had to wait until the twenty-first century to appear in print.

Under these conditions there will be no erotic architecture. The luxury of the 1% is merely obscene; the boring ugly crap of the 99% consists of spiritual and physical numbness. Place itself is disenchanted. Only “revolution” could restore hope for a liberated/liberating space—and post-modernism has given up hope of any insurrection. The prison, the hospital, the superhighway: this is the future (now) of architecture. Unless...

¹ Guy Debord, *A Sick Planet*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (London: Seagull Press, 2008), 84–85. This text was written in 1971 but not first published until 2004.

² A complete English translation of the *Hypnerotomachia* by the great occult scholar Joscelyn Godwin now exists (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005). See also my essay in the sadly defunct journal *Alexandria* (volume 5), “Oneiriconographia: Entering Poliphilo’s Utopian Dreamscape.”