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2005

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/21050>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Elsaesser, Thomas: The Modernist Postcard as Media Intertext: Controlled Angels, Arab Villages and Architectural Promeand. In: *Filmblatt*. Filmblatt 28, Jg. 10 (2005), Nr. 28, S. 87–92. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/21050>.

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Review Essay

The Modernist Postcard as Media Intertext: Controlled Angles, Arab Villages and Architectural Promenad

by Thomas Elsaesser

One of the most famous examples of International Modernism in architecture is the Weißenhofsiedlung near Stuttgart, a housing complex designed in 1927 by Mies van der Rohe, with purpose-built homes by Le Corbusier, Peter Behrens, Bruno Taut, J.P. Oud and a dozen other renowned architects from the 1920s. Weißenhof's fame rests, however, also on its notoriety: it became well-known partly thanks to a photomontage which denounced the white, flat-roofed cube-shaped building ensemble as an „Arab village“, depicting it complete with camels, a lion and burnus-clad Bedouins. Besides the fact that this anonymous, racist image used the typically left-wing technique of photomontage, what strikes one is that it circulated as a (hand-coloured and sepia) postcard well into the 1940s: playful, insidious and financially very successful. Yet for there to be this cartoonish ‚take‘ on the Weißenhofsiedlung, there must have been an ‚original‘, presumably also a postcard. And so it turns out to be: via its diffamatory ‚faking‘ of a famous urbanist landmark, a visual medium of modernity comes into view that has so far largely escaped scholarly attention: the architectural postcard.

Modern Greetings, the book under review, allows us to re-assess what this medium was capable of, with respect to modern architecture in the inter-war years. It is in many ways an eye-opener. Originating as the catalogue of a touring exhibition in 2004 organized by the Bauhaus Dessau, itself based on the private collection of Bernd Dicke, a German designer of note, the handsomely printed volume comprises 180 reproductions of mostly black-and-white or sepia postcards. They show some of the outstanding monuments of the Modernist Movement in Germany, focusing among others on buildings and housing projects by Peter Behrens, Otto Bartning, Erich Mendelsohn, Bruno Taut, Hans Fahrenkamp, Ernst May, Hans Poelzig, Fritz Hoeger, Otto Haesler and many others, but here grouped according to location and city, as one would expect with picture postcards: Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Cologne, Dortmund, Düsseldorf, Hanover, Bremen, Hamburg, Berlin and Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland).

As a film historian, I was captivated by what the volume told about several unanswered questions that had puzzled me over the years, while working on the cinematic representations of modernist architecture. For instance, why was it that so few of these landmark buildings and housing schemes of ‚Das Neue Bauen‘ (the new urbanism) were depicted on film? Why were there,

with the exception of Hans Richter's *DIE NEUE WOHNUNG* (1930), virtually no films, either documentary or avant-garde, that celebrated this key aspect of modernism? What had happened to the famous alliance between CIAM, the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne, and CICI, the Congrès International du Cinéma Indépendant, meetings in La Sarraz in June 1928 and 1929 respectively?

Somewhere, I felt, a link was missing, a factor had been overlooked, our premises were misconceived. In trying to account for the lack of the landmarks of modern architecture recorded on film, I eventually came across statements by architects themselves, notably Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius who, while in other respects enthusiasts of (avant-garde, as well as popular) cinema, nonetheless expressed reluctance to have their buildings filmed. In cases where they did allow a film camera, they tended to use only certain shots in order to illustrate their books, articles or pamphlets. The reason was in one sense simple enough: it was a matter of power and control. Architects felt that with film they could no longer control the angle or point of view from which their building was viewed. Hence their marked preference for still photography or single frame enlargements.

In another sense the issue was more complex and revolved around an unresolved tension between movement and stasis in modernism in general. Modernist architecture, with its reliance on straight lines, on geometric forms and the grid – in contrast to expressionist architecture – did not always come to terms with motion and mobility, those key signifiers of the city and modern urban life.

As counter-example confirming this point one could cite Pierre Chenal's film *L'ARCHITECTURE D'AUJOURD'HUI* (1931) about three of Le Corbusier's villas, and especially his masterpiece, the Villa Savoie in Poissy. There, one sees the architect himself arrive in his car and rapidly traverse the entrance, before taking Chenal's camera on a guided tour through the rooms and on to the balcony. The editing – at once Russian montage and continuity editing – creates a kind of cinematic equivalent of the architectural promenade, providing a carefully controlled way of experiencing the building with one's body, but here led and controlled by the architect himself. After seeing the film, Siegfried Gidion is supposed to have said: „Only film can make the new architecture intelligible“, a quote more often used to bridge the gap between architectural and filmic practice rather than to explain it.

Part of this gap is indeed addressed (and filled) by *Modern Greetings*. For it seems with the postcard, the architect could have it both ways. A popular medium, with a potentially wide circulation, it gave the architect a medium of motion and mobility while not obliging him to relinquish the control over how a building is seen. The brief historical excursus supplied in *Modern Greetings* by Rolf Sachsse explains the place of the architectural postcard within

the history of the postcard, focusing on questions of economics and printing technique as much as on aesthetics, taste and fashion.

The modern postcard goes back to 1870, when the single printed piece of card with specified dimensions was licensed by the (German) Post Office for private use. A by-product of the military (its trial run was as field post in the Franco-Prussian War), it was cheaper than a letter, and permitted messages to circulate more quickly and more efficiently.

But the postcard also opened up a new communication space between the private (breaking the much-prized confidentiality principle of the letter) and the public (the text was now as accessible as the address). The ambivalence of public and private can be extended to a similar ambivalence concerning sender and addressee. Postcards soon became kitschy, frivolous, 'naughty' and often enough pornographic: ways of teasing prying eyes, embarrassing the addressee and daring the censor. The visual riddle, the rebus picture and the photo-montage were favoured visual modes. Thus, precisely because of the public nature of an essentially private communication, the message on a postcard has always a particular rhetorical thrust, being as much a meta-message as a message: boast, boost and self-advertising are never far, especially when the holiday postcard is sent from fabulous destinations to those unlucky enough to have stayed at home.

A similar principle perhaps obtains in the architectural postcard. Rather than showing a beach, a cathedral, a local market or the hotel, on which the sender has figuratively inscribed his own presence, in order to gleefully or regretfully underline the addressee's absence, the architectural postcard obeys a symmetrical, but inverted semiotic rule: the general absence of people makes the building into the dramatis persona, while its sculptural prominence invites curiosity by invoking the invisible-visible presence of the building's creator. The architectural postcard thus functions as much as a visiting card identifying an architect as author, as it is a card recording a visit to an architectural site.

For what the images reproduced in *Modern Greetings* quite insistently raise are questions of scale and of human presence. Scale: the architectural postcard is recognizable as a distinct visual genre because of the quasi-uniformity of the perspective chosen, in particular, the relation of horizontals to the vertical axes and the function of the white margins as a picture frame, suggesting depth and recess, but also isolating the building and turning it into an abstract shape. Given the diversity of the photographers (some known, but many anonymous), it is remarkable how consistently the position of the camera takes either a bird's eye view or assumes the street-level as eye-level, tilting upwards. Equally typical is the emphasis on the diagonals, and the over-angle rather than head-on position generally chosen for the exterior of a building. Taken together, these stylistic choices lend to most of the sites a

forward-thrusting aspect, reminiscent of Lumière's train, roaring into the station or a ship's bow and thus perhaps not unconnected with the decade's craze for ocean-liners – an effect emphasized by the choice of blue skies, with just a hint of attractively picturesque cumulus clouds. Ernst May's Römerstadt building in Frankfurt or Fritz Höger's Chile House in Hamburg are icons of architectural history precisely because there seems to be only one angle under which they can be viewed – the one immortalized by the postcard.

Human Presence: virtually every building is set in streets that are all but deserted of traffic, people or pedestrians. This absence of human figures is characteristic for the ‚new way of seeing‘ which architectural photography took over from the ‚New Objectivity‘ and has in common with the minimalist trends in modern photography generally. As the book's cover puts it: „credit for the shrewdly calculated effect made by this visionary architecture is due to the photographers [...] whose ‚camera eye‘ staged factories and high-rises as radiant cubes and sculpture on a superhuman scale.“

The sculptural aspect – achieved at the price of voiding the site of the human user – is in some ways a provocation, but also that which most fascinates the eye. These postcards already appeal to the collector, rather than invite to be sent. A fetishism of possession creeps into one's gaze that Jean-Luc Godard so brilliantly satirized in *LES CARABINIERS* (1963): for his heroes postcards are the spoils of war, to have the image is to own what it represents. Architectural postcards, we learn, were mass-produced to be handed out at trade fairs, sold on site, or given away by the architect. Pioneers in this respect were Erich Mendelsohn and his clients, the Schocken Brothers. For their department store chain in Germany, Mendelsohn not only designed distinctive buildings, whose elegant curves, white bands of masonry, alternating with broad expanses of glass virtually defined modern shopping. By incorporating the lettering into the facade and making sure the building looked as spectacular at night, lit with neon lights, as it did in daytime, he underscored the tendency of architecture to become a visual medium in its own right, over and above it being built space, and functioning in a multi-media context. Indeed, Mendelsohn's Schocken buildings, made famous through the postcards, on sale and on display at the checkout, could be said to be among the first conceptual forays into an all-encompassing corporate design (after Behrens and his AEG factory), in which the thrusting yet modulated outlines as reproduced on the postcards are the key element: at once trademark and advertisement, with the logo the building and the building the logo. It required the pictorial isolation and monumentalisation as enacted in the architectural postcard, to generate such an image culture around these modernist cubes, with their soaring diagonals.

Thus, the mobility of thrust and recess, and the energy of elevation and scale ultimately rest on an almost Baroque *trompe l'oeil* effect. Such mise-en-

scène mimics elements of the cinema, while keeping the human figure at the edge or altogether off-frame. However, the point for us is surely to see the postcards in context: a popular medium serving another, elitist medium, while not forgetting their ironic and even anachronistic relation to each other, with an older medium 'borrowed' by a new age, as if to subtly allude to the traditional juxtaposition of 'the old' and 'the new', of 'before' and 'after' so stereotypically employed in advertising, in instructional films and when propagating social progress. Perhaps one of the first successful blends of avant-garde culture and popular culture, the architectural postcard did so well in the late 1920s, because by then, several of the technical media – photography, design, architecture, typography, printing and publishing – had begun to discover their mutual interdependence. Leading figures had become aware of synergies that could be realized when industry and the avant-garde, commerce and high concept design worked together, however warily they might have eyed each other. That the cinema in all this remained so marginal is still something of a mystery, and seems to indicate that it was probably not yet perceived as the medium of urban modernity we now tend to recognize it as, *METROPOLIS*, *MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA* and *BERLIN. SYMPHONY OF A BIG CITY* notwithstanding. Or perhaps, making films was simply too expensive, and the chances of distribution by then too uncertain for architects and their clients to invest in them: the postcards as established mass-medium at once substituted for the moving image, and sacralised the sites and buildings they so theatrically put on show. Even as they reduced them in scale, they made them circulate and kept them on the move. An ephemeral medium, but mass-distributed, the postcard raised the new architecture's recognition factor, which in turn was the ground on which its images grew into the clichés and the icons they became.

Which brings me back to the ambivalence I noted among modernist architects, with respect to movement, mobility of the gaze and the human point of view. Ambivalence, more than outright rejection. Le Corbusier, the very embodiment of the plan, the grid and the cube, and the man who famously said that the modern house was a machine to live in, was also acutely aware of the dilemma of how to 'take in' modern architecture. He once remarked: „Arab architecture teaches us a valuable lesson. It is best appreciated on foot. Walking – you have to walk through a building with a changing viewpoint to see the articulation of the building deployed. It is the opposite to that of Baroque architecture, which is conceived on paper around the fixed vertical axis. I prefer the teaching of Arab architecture“. Could it be that by calling, among others, Le Corbusier's contribution to the *Weißenhofsiedlung* an „Arab village“, the photo-montaged postcard was not so much proffering an insult, as paying a compliment – if utterly unintended? Did it speak truer than it knew about how modern housing should be perceived, experienced, lived in – on the far side of either the God's eye view or the frog's eye view,

but at the scale of the human body, and at the pace of the human foot? Or put the other way, was it the ‚naughty‘ postcard – as the medium of a more popular but also more populist-demagogic imagination – that took revenge on the Modernism which had appropriated it, by trying to ennoble it? Evidently, the battle over European modernism and modernity had only just begun, and the fact that the word ‚Arab‘ should be at the centre must strike us today as uncannily prophetic.

■ Kirsten Baumann, Rolf Sachsse (Ed.): *modern greetings. Photographed Architecture on picture postcards 1919-1939 / moderne grüße. Fotografierte Architektur auf Ansichtskarten 1919-1939*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Verlagsanstalt 2004, 216 Seiten, 180 Ill., In English and German
ISBN 3-89790-019-X, EUR 24,80

„Heimkehr ohne Ankunft“. Neue Studien zur filmischen Revision des Heimatbegriffs

von Michael Wedel

Auf Germanisten und Filmhistoriker, die im englischsprachigen Raum tätig sind, übt das Wort „Heimat“ eine fast schon magische Anziehungskraft aus, gilt es in seinem Konnotationsreichtum wie in seinem ideologischen Ballast doch – worauf hinzuweisen selten vergessen wird – als unübersetzbar und in der englischen Sprache ohne direktes Äquivalent. Umso viel versprechender erscheint es, den Begriff in seiner historischen Genese als über literarische und filmische Werke vermitteltes kulturelles Konzept bzw. diskursives Konstrukt auf seine Aussagekraft in der Frage nach der problematisch gewordenen nationalen Identität der Deutschen hin zu ergründen. Zumal sich an ihm, wie die Monografie von Rachel Palfreyman sowie die Aufsätze von Alexandra Ludewig und Johannes von Moltke belegen, durchaus unterschiedlich gelagerte Facetten medialer Selbstrepräsentation aufzeigen und kritisch diskutieren lassen.

Über den Heimatbegriff problematisch geworden ist das Selbstverhältnis den Deutschen dabei keineswegs erst seit der Wiedervereinigung. Alexandra Ludewig weist in ihrer Arbeit zu neuen Heimatfilmen der 1990er Jahre darauf hin, dass im Schatten des „klassischen“ Heimatfilms der 1930er bis 1950er Jahre der so genannte Großstadtfilm als historisch fortwirkende, der urbanen Heimat zugewandte *Alternativtradition des filmischen Umgangs mit der vertrauten Lebenswelt* in der Regel zu Unrecht vergessen wird. Es ist diese Tradition, die sie in Wim Wenders' *DER HIMMEL ÜBER BERLIN* (1987) und *IN WEITER FERNE, SO NAH* (1993) sich nachhaltig erneuern und in neueren Werken wie Andreas Dresens *NACHTGESTALTEN* (1999) die Topoi des Genres radikal unterminieren sieht. Als zweite Einflussgröße für die Neudefinition des Heimatfilmgen-