

The Singular Sublime: A Kierkegaardian Resolution to the Modern/Postmodern Conflict

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TODAY, it is difficult to label confidently one thing “modern” while another thing “postmodern.” The discourse surrounding postmodernism’s relationship to modernism is vast and riddled with disagreement. Whether postmodernism is modernism’s relativistic and playful brainchild, merely modernism appropriated by the language of deconstruction, or any host of distant or not-so-distant relatives to the modern, is hardly a debate that can be settled here. The discourse will continue, just as the child will ever struggle to establish its relationship to its parents, simultaneously pulling away and ever returning. Saying all this, the distinction between the modern and the postmodern becomes clearer when we address it within the scope of a particular creative or discursive field. Particularly in the history of twentieth century architecture, the modern and the postmodern have divided along certain fault lines of underlying philosophical and aesthetic approaches. Architectural modernism, on the whole—as represented by such figures as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Gerrit Rietveld—manifested, in Karsten Harries’ alliterative term, a certain “perennial Platonism.”¹ This “neo-neo-Platonism” embraces geometric forms and machine-cut planes to create buildings that speak of cold reason and the “machine aesthetic.” As a reaction to the disintegration of the basic touchstones of traditional Western culture—religion,

¹ Harries 228.

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moral conventions, the nation-state—modernist architects have asserted rationality’s totalizing capacity, its capacity to subsume everything under its mode of discourse. This approach has typically accompanied functionalism (e.g., the Bauhaus project) such that a minimalist aesthetic and the goal of efficient living have been synthesized into a single, rationally constructed unity. Architectural modernism filled the vacuum left by Nietzsche’s “death of God” with an affirmation of reason’s power to understand and unify.

In this way, architectural modernism fits well—perhaps better than modernism in the fine arts and literature—into Jean-Francois Lyotard’s characterization of the “modern” as allied with the “unified” or “monistic.” Lyotard opposes this project, as identified with the criticism of Jürgen Habermas, in favor of postmodernism’s intellectual and aesthetic pluralism:

Habermas demands of the arts and the experience they provide that they form a bridge over the gap separating the discourses of knowledge, ethics, and politics, thus opening the way for a unity of experience. My problem is to be positive about what sort of unity Habermas has in mind. . . . Is it the constitution of a sociocultural unity at the heart of which all elements of daily life and thought would have a place, as though within an organic whole? Or is the path to be cut between heterogeneous language games? . . . The first hypothesis, Hegelian in inspiration, does not call into question the notion of a dialectically totalizing experience. The second . . . must be submitted to the severe reexamination postmodernity addresses to the thought of the Enlightenment, to the idea of a uniform end of history and the idea of the subject.²

This attempt to rekindle the so-called “Enlightenment project” of “consilience”³—bringing together the different fields of human activity and knowledge under the reign of one unifying principle—is obviously illustrated in the buildings and writings of architectural modernists. For example, Gropius writes of the goal of the Bauhaus project:

² Lyotard 3–4.

³ Wilson 14–44.

The Bauhaus strives to bring together all creative effort into one whole, to reunify all the disciplines of practical art—sculpture, painting, handicrafts, and the crafts—as inseparable components of a new architecture. The ultimate, if distant, aim of the Bauhaus is the unified work of art—the great structure.⁴

And in even more tangible form, Wright's quest for modern "totality" meant that he went as far as designing the wardrobes and cutlery of his clients, ensuring that every piece of their lifestyle would be in tune with the structure in which they lived.

It is this type of modernism, Lyotard claims, which postmodernism rejects. No longer content to create an ersatz unity via a synthesis of rational aesthetic and functional simplicity, the postmodern accepts the loss of universal meaning and moves on. Explain Vargish and Mook: "Where Modernism wrestled with difficulties caused by the absence of universal, temporal, spatial and ethical coordinates . . . Postmodernism adopts without traumatic struggle the surreal, bizarre, and metanatural."⁵ Facing a Nietzschean abyss of meaninglessness and the breakdown of the universal, the postmodern embraces Lyotard's *novatio*, pure innovation for its own sake. Rather than using conventionalized form to soothe audiences' anxieties about the modern plight, the postmodern seeks to ask only one question: what is art? Says Lyotard of the postmodern project:

The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations . . . The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating.⁶

⁴ Gropius 50.

⁵ Vargish and Mook 164.

⁶ Lyotard 15.

In doing so, the postmodern has become a playful and yet deeply unremorseful approach—seeing the universal as a lost hope, it embraces the particular: the culturally specific, the morally relative, and the subjectively available.

While Lyotard energetically endorses the postmodern project, its failures seem to be as obvious as those of modernism's, particularly in regard to architecture. Whereas architectural modernism is prey to critiques of its universalizing, monistic tendencies—ignoring pluralism, subsuming the individual and the particular—Lyotard's postmodernism is equally susceptible to critique. Even beyond postmodernism's distaste for the "beautiful," the movement is troubling, and perhaps troubled. One cannot help feeling as if Lyotard's postmodernism has put itself in a box—having embraced the meta-question as its sole province, where is it to go? Having become entirely self-referential, how will the postmodern ever retain the interest of both the artist and the viewer? While modernism is troubled by its universalizing tendency—a tendency that it is either unfounded, or at least restricting, depending on where one's epistemology and view of history stands—postmodernism is equally troubled by its tendency towards self-exhaustion.

In this paper, I propose that this tension between the modernist and the postmodern paradigm, particularly as played out in architecture, has a precedent—not in the tensions between the Enlightenment and Romantic theorists, which is more obvious, but within the philosophy of the nineteenth century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. In his *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*, the philosopher sets out three distinct (and theoretically progressive) phases of living: what he dubs the "aesthetic," the "ethical," and the "religious" lives. While Kierkegaard speaks of these three "phases" as modes of individual human agency in relation to the universe, the first two are surprisingly parallel to the postmodernist and the modernist, respectively. Moreover, Kierkegaard, in discussing these phases of existence, uncovers their essential weaknesses, illuminating the parallel weaknesses in the postmodern and modern "phases" of art. After discussing Kierkegaard's characterizations of the "aesthetic" and the "ethical" and how they might

help us to better understand the tension between the modernist and the postmodernist paradigms, I turn towards Kierkegaard's third phase—the religious—to see if it might offer a solution to architecture's modern/postmodern quandary. In doing so, I take up Baudrillard's concept of the "singular" as a possible aesthetic analog to Kierkegaard's religious phase. By joining together Kierkegaard's characterizations of the religious phase in *Fear and Trembling* and Baudrillard's discussion of the singular, I hope to present a viable, if not complete, answer to the battle between modernism and postmodernism.

In his two-volume epistolary "novel," *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard first writes in the voice of an emotionally-charged aesthete and then in the voice of a highly-principled judge. Both writers suffer from their own brand of Kierkegaardian despair: the aesthete finds his egotism and his ongoing quest for the "interesting" ultimately exhausting, while the ethicist suffers from the sublimation of his individual conscience in the principles to which he is slave. Thus, what ails the voices of *Either/Or* are essentially the same problems that ail architectural modernism and postmodernism. Like the ethical judge, modernism, particularly in its architectural "perennial Platonist" incarnation, leaves little room for the individual or the particular in its appeal to the universal and the rational; what is irrational or particular is outside the domain of the architectural modernist.

Consider, for example, the work of Le Corbusier. In his *Towards a New Architecture*, Corbusier celebrates rationality's ability to address the question of dwelling in a mechanical, simplified, and unified manner. He delineates how even silverware, clothing, and art work should fit in a home in order to maximize efficiency:

[There should be] in your dining room fittings to take china, silver and glass, shutting tightly and with a sufficiency of drawers in order that "clearing away" can be done in an instant, and all these fittings "built in" so that round your chairs and table you have room enough to move and that feeling of space which will give you the calm necessary to good digestion.⁷

⁷ Le Corbusier 108–109.

In the name of rationality and efficiency, Corbusier banishes collectables, antiques, and family heirlooms from the house—i.e., traditional markers of particularity and individuality. In exchange for this “nostalgic” sense of individualism, Corbusier encourages modern man to embrace the “mechanical sense”:

This feeling in regard to machinery is one of respect, gratitude, and esteem. Machinery includes economy as an essential factor leading to minute selection. . . . The man who is intelligent, cold and calm has grown wings for himself. Men—intelligent, cold and calm—are needed to build the house and lay out the town.⁸

Corbusier’s appeal to reason, mechanics, and efficiency are essentially appeals to principles that are universally applicable and rules that will stamp out the eclecticism of individualism. In his “Guiding Principles,” Corbusier goes on to say this of the Engineer, the true architect: “The Engineer, inspired by the law of Economy and governed by mathematical calculation, puts us in accord with universal law. He achieves harmony.”⁹ In Corbusier’s *Unite d’Habitation* in Marseilles,¹⁰ we see the physical incarnation of such “universal law.” This large, blockish apartment building, punctuated by rows of symmetrical windows, lacks exterior decoration, cultural symbols, or differentiation. With each window the same as every other, it is almost a pronouncement of humanity’s ultimate equality and sameness: it is hard to imagine differentiated individuals inhabiting this space. Moreover, the building stands on the typical Corbusian stilts, a striking visual metaphor for its universal mobility—that, unattached to its *particular* place, the building might take off and relocate at any moment. With a timeless geometry, Corbusier’s modernist apartment building is distanced both from the individual lives that inhabit it and the unique ground on which it stands.

This “universalizing” tendency is understandable in light of Modernism’s “perennial Platonism,” for what is this Platonism other

⁸ Ibid. 117–19.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Harries 234 (plate 94).

than an appeal to the general over the particular?—the chair that stands for all individual chairs; the man who stands for all individual men. In Platonism, the general, monistic whole is the ideal: to simplify and elevate is the goal. This lofty goal, Kierkegaard suggests, is dangerous—in conforming to the ethical rules set before him, the principled judge loses his *self*, the definition of Kierkegaardian “despair.”

The “despair” felt as a result of modernism’s commitment to universalizing principles is well articulated by Friedensreich Hundertwasser. For the Austrian architect, modernist architecture threatens to alienate the individual from his own task of living. Hundertwasser thus calls, impractically, for the dweller and the architect to become one, even at the risk of having his roof fall on his head:

Everyone ought to be able and compelled to build, so that he bears real responsibility for the four walls within which he lives. We must face the risk that a crazy structure of this kind may later collapse, and we should not and must not shrink from the loss of life which this new way of building will, or at least may, exact . . . A man in an apartment house must have the possibility of leaning out of his window and scraping off the masonry for as far as his hands reach. And he must be allowed to paint everything around pink as far as he can reach with a long brush, so that people can see from far away, from the street: a man lives there who differs from his neighbours, the little people who accept what is given to them!¹¹

So strong is Hundertwasser’s rejection of the unifying, universal tendencies of the “perennial Platonism” of modernism that he is willing to subvert a basic ethical principle—respect for human life—in defiance. Surely, his words are rhetorical—and yet, they demonstrate the force of the Kierkegaardian “despair” caused by modernism.

And yet, it is not Kierkegaard’s ethicist who alone suffers from existential despair. The aesthete, too, finds himself, at the close of the *Either* volume of *Either/Or*, without hope. For the aesthete, this despair is a result, to put it mundanely, of boredom and exhaustion. Self-obsessed and driven compulsively to the “interesting,” the aesthete

¹¹ Hundertwasser 157.

is unable to find sustained, meaningful content for his existence. Again, Kierkegaard's aesthete reminds us of the postmodern artist or audience member—entirely self-referential and drawn, insatiably, to the “interesting,” or Lyotard's *novatio*. The result is twofold: exhaustibility (lack of sustained interest) and meaninglessness (lack of referential content).

For example, we take the Longaberger Company home office in Newark, Ohio—a giant, seven-storied, basket-shaped building made of a steel structure and stucco façade.¹² The building, when first seen, is immensely funny; the artist Claes Oldenberg long ago discovered the ready humor to be found in blowing up daily objects into monstrous sizes. What is more, this building packs a double bite—not only is it an oversized basket, it also houses the headquarters of a basket-making company. Certainly, it is much livelier than a traditional office building, or even Corbusier's *Unite d'Habitation*. Contrary to the universalization of modernist buildings, the postmodern Longaberger building celebrates and emphasizes the particular—declaring its specific identity in resounding and clear terms. And unlike the work of Corbusier or the Bauhaus architects, the Longaberger building is not motivated by a desire to manifest a universal set of rational principles, but rather by Lyotard's *novatio*—innovation for innovation's sake.

Thus, the Longaberger building is a perfect example of both the postmodern and its Kierkegaardian analog, the “aesthetic” phase. Motivated by concern for the interesting and the individual—rather than the universal or monistic—the Longaberger building takes as its content *itself*. This is accomplished in two ways. First, the form of the building, a basket, draws attention to the building's identity as the headquarters of a basket company. Secondly, the building plays around the distinction between a mere object and a building, conflating the two, thus asking the characteristically postmodern meta-question, *what is a building?*

Despite the building's obvious success as a playful, humorous structure, it underscores the problems that riddle both the postmodern and Kierkegaard's “aesthetic” category. The Longaberger building,

¹² See <http://www.longaberger.com> for images.

while doubtlessly funny on an initial encounter, reveals its exhaustibility quickly. It refers to nothing outside itself, nor does it mean to speak of anything greater than itself. This means that the building quickly loses its interest. It is difficult to imagine visitors wishing to return to the building year after year, as one might do with a baroque cathedral or a French rococo palace. Indeed, one might wonder at the employees of the Longaberger Company, who are made to enter and leave the building every day—does the building retain its initial force for them? Probably not—we might surmise, in fact, that they have grown quite weary of the “joke” of the structure. The postmodern and Kierkegaard’s aesthete suffer from the same plaguing disease—to escape boredom, they must constantly search for the new and interesting. Without an outside referent—moral principles for the aesthete, aesthetic principles for the postmodern architect—the content of the interesting is quickly exhaustible, making the search for *novatio* endless. Ultimately, as Kierkegaard suggests, it might conclude in despair.

In his *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard proposes a solution to this existential quandary between the ethical and the aesthetic phases of life. This solution might be applied to what I have argued are the analogues of these two phases, the modern and the postmodern. For Kierkegaard, the despair faced by both the aesthete and the ethical judge in *Either/Or* is resolved in the biblical figure of Abraham, who is the centerpiece of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. Abraham is worthy of our attention because he, unlike the aesthete or the ethicist, has leapt into the phase or category of the religious. A person who lives in the religious mode is one who moves beyond the universal ethical principles of traditional religion and enters into a singular relationship with the divine. In doing so, the religious individual—or “The Knight of Faith”—answers the call of the divine, even daring to outstretch the constraints of universal ethics to do so:

In the story of Abraham we find such a paradox. His relation to Isaac, ethically expressed, is this, that the father should love the son. This ethical relation is reduced to a relative position in contrast with the absolute relation to God . . . When we see a

man do something which does not comport with the universal, we say that he scarcely can be doing it for God's sake, and by that we imply that he does it for his own sake. The paradox of faith has lost the intermediate term, i.e. the universal. On the one side it has the expression for the extremist egoism . . . on the other side the expression for the most absolute self-sacrifice. Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for it would thereby be destroyed. Faith is this paradox, and the individual absolutely cannot make himself intelligible to anybody.¹³

This “teleological suspension of the ethical” allows the individual, in response to the divine call, to express his singular self, rather than being sublimated into the monism of the ethical phase. In doing so, the Knight of Faith lives in an absurd, paradoxical state of existence—breaking the universal rules of ethics for the sake of the divine. All of these aspects of the “religious” existence are illustrated in Abraham's obeying God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In Kierkegaard's view, Abraham was ready to commit this act in full knowledge of its unethical nature. Nonetheless, he purposefully moves outside of the universalized ethical phase and enters into a singular, individual relationship with the divine—asserting both his individual *self* and his faith in something external to him.

The religious stage, thus, resolves the problems of both the ethical and the aesthetic phases of existence. Both the ethical and the aesthetic phases result in despair—the ethical because it lacks room for meaningful and individual self-expression and the aesthetic because it is entirely inward-looking and easily exhaustible. The religious suffers from neither of these problems: unlike the ethical, the religious phase allows the individual to declare his unique existence—he is not sublimated into the greater principles of morality and his individual existence is given a singular, definite weight. Similarly, the religious is not prey to the meaninglessness and boredom of the aesthetic; while the aesthetic life is endlessly self-referential and driven by mere attention to “interest,” the religious life is given meaningful content by something *outside*

¹³ Kierkegaard 59.

itself. And yet, this meaningful content is *not* universal—it is subjective, but it is not entirely self-contained. It is, in short, the assertion that the human individual is capable of having a unique, i.e., non-universal, relationship with the universe.

What might Kierkegaard's "religious" phase tell us about architecture? If the modernist is the architectural analog to the ethical and the postmodern is the architectural analog to the aesthetic, then what is the architectural analog to the religious? Before we try to decide what such an architecture might look like, it might be prudent to first understand what this type of architecture would *do*. According to the Kierkegaardian analogy, such an architecture would have to fulfill the following two conditions: it must allow for individual self-expression without adherence to universal aesthetic norms; and it must be created in an answer to a call *outside* of itself, without being entirely self-referential. If architecture could fulfill these conditions, theoretically it might be more immune to the problems of both modernism and postmodernism—the totalitarianism of the rational on one hand and the boredom of the interesting on the other.

What kind of architecture might fulfill these conditions? In other words: how are we to know that we have identified a true Abraham and not merely a lunatic who thinks he hears God? In answer, I turn tentatively to Baudrillard and his notion of the "singular." Baudrillard's term seems to have much in common with Kierkegaard's religious phase:

[In the singular] you have an object that literally absorbs you, that is perfectly resolved in itself. That's my way of expressing singularity. . . . And it's essential that at a given point in time this singularity become an event; in other words, the object should be something that can't simply be interpreted, sociologically, politically, spatially, even aesthetically. The object may be quite beautiful and not be a singular object. . . . But we also have to take into account the way the individual's singular perception divides the world. There are no standards, there are no formulas, there's

no aesthetic or even functional matrix you can apply. The same object can satisfy all the functions we assign to it. That doesn't prevent it from possessing that extra quality.¹⁴

The singular seems to be a good candidate for an aesthetic equivalent of Kierkegaard's religious mode of existence, for two reasons. Firstly, the singular is defined in opposition to the clone or mere simulacra:

But to the extent that these artists are able to create without giving in to the farce of art, art history, or aesthetic codes. . . . [singularity] is possible, ultimately. It's as if the architect were able to build without first reviewing the field of architecture, its history, and everything that is constructed. The ability to create a vacuum is undoubtedly the prerequisite for any act of authentic creation. If you don't create a vacuum, you'll never achieve singularity. You may produce remarkable things, but the heritage you have to deal with is such that you'll have to pass through a whole genetics of accumulation.¹⁵

For Baudrillard, it is imperative that original artistic creation occur within a vacuum—that is, immune to the stultifying influences of aesthetic history. And yet, the creation must still be “authentic”; it is not sufficient for art to be merely “interesting.” Thus, the singular object is distinct from the universalism of the Kierkegaardian ethical or its aesthetic analog, the suspiciously modern. Secondly, the singular is not merely self-referential or self-concerned; rather, the singular object answers to a sort of call, giving it an “aura” of transcendence:

At some point, what's needed is a different kind of awareness. [Singularity] is something different, which is harder to articulate, because it can't be grasped intellectually . . . It even seems to me that there's something a bit demoniacal about it, in the German sense of the word.¹⁶

The singular, then, is neither a response to mere context nor rational concerns; it is, as Baudrillard suggests in his reference to its “demoniacal”

¹⁴ Baudrillard and Nouvel 67.

¹⁵ Ibid. 75.

¹⁶ Ibid. 67.

character, something of a *spiritual* response. To *what*, though, should the artist respond? Baudrillard leaves his answer deliberately, perhaps necessarily, ambiguous. In religious terminology, authentic artistic creation should be a response to the sacred, divine presence in the world. But in the wake of God's death, to what will the artist respond? The answer is unclear, but there are certainly possibilities: the Heideggerian "world" of meaning and being, the sacred nature of certain spaces, the noumenal realm of Kant, or moments of material transcendence.

Harries gives us one such probable interpretation of authentic artistic response in his discussion of the biblical Jacob and his ladder:

A particular place is experienced as filled with the presence of the divine: it is the house of God. But this place, this Bethel, not only is God's dwelling place but also opens up to a higher reality: it is the gate of Heaven. The ladder of the dream with its angels ascending and descending symbolizes that linkage. Jacob responds to this dream experience by rising . . . and by raising the stone that had served him for a pillow from a horizontal into a vertical position. This simple altar, a celebratory re-presentation of the supporting stone, as well as representation of the dream ladder, becomes the archetype of the church and perhaps of sacred architecture: building as a response to the genius loci, to the divinity dwelling in that place.¹⁷

While traditional builders—particularly builders of religious structures—thought of building as a response to a pre-given *sacredness*, this idea has, on the whole, been discarded by much of modernism and postmodernism alike. While Baudrillard's singular is seemingly secular, it retains a part of this religious impetus in that it is built in *response to* a pre-existent call. Like Abraham extending beyond the realm of the ethical on the command of God, the creator of singular objects builds in response to a secular sacredness that he discerns in existence—in the transcendence of material, an intimation of the noumenal, or simply participation in the Heideggerian world of being. But unlike the modernist paradigm, the relationship of the

¹⁷ Harries 186.

architect to his building is utterly individual—particular to the unique call that the artist hears from his universe. And unlike the postmodern, the singular architect refers to something outside of himself—moving beyond the meta-questioning of the aesthete.

Our tentative bridge between the Kierkegaardian “religious” phase and Baudrillard’s “singular” is bolstered by the notion of mystery, silence, and the unspeakable that pervades both. In *Fear and Trembling*, Abraham’s silence is a prime indicator of his religiosity. His absurd and singular relationship to the divine means that he is unable to speak to his fellow beings:

Abraham keeps silent—but he cannot speak. Therein lies the distress and anguish. For if I when I speak am unable to make myself intelligible, then I am not speaking—even though I were to talk uninterruptedly day and night. Such is the case with Abraham. He is able to utter everything, but one thing he cannot say, i.e. say it in such a way that another understands it, and so he is not speaking. The relief of speech is that it translates me into the universal . . . Abraham cannot speak, for he cannot utter the word which explains all (that is, not so that it is intelligible) . . . he who is so situated is an emigrant from the sphere of the universal.¹⁸

Abraham’s actions—like the actions of many avant-garde artists—are utterly incomprehensible to most of his peers. He bears their questions and queries in silence because the paradox that he, as a Knight of Faith, embodies is inarticulable. Similarly, Baudrillard is very concerned with illusion and mystery in relation to the singular:

the secret obviously becomes increasingly difficult in a world like our own, where everything is given to us totally promiscuously, so that there are no gaps, no voids, no nothingness; nothingness no longer exists, and nothingness is where secrecy happens, the place where things lose their meaning, their identity—not only would they assume all possible meanings here, but they would remain truly unintelligible.¹⁹

¹⁸ Kierkegaard 100–102.

¹⁹ Baudrillard and Nouvel 16.

Thus, both the singular and the Knight of Faith express things—one as an artistic creation, the other as an agent of action—that are somehow ineffable. And yet, therein lies their power. The religious man and the singular object both preserve a mystery and a space of “silence,” akin to the dissonance between the ability to conceive and present that characterizes the Kantian sublime. But unlike Kant’s category, the “religious” sublime—or Baudrillard’s singularity—would not return the human subject to his rational faculty. Rather, the singular type of sublime would, in its paradoxical assertion of the teleological suspension of the ethical (i.e., the unique call the individual artist hears from the universe), transcend both the rational norms of the ethical and the affective drive of the aesthetic.

If Baudrillard’s “singular object” is the correct aesthetic analog to Kierkegaard’s phase of the religious, then a possible resolution to the “despair” facing both modernism and postmodernism could be found in a building such as the *Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain* building in Paris, designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel.²⁰ This breathtaking building, running along the Boulevard Raspail in Paris, consists of six floors of office space and 1200 square meters of exhibition space contained within two giant sheets of transparent glass, standing at the front and back of the building. Depending on the lighting of the time of day, the glass either reveals the paintings, art objects, and visitors within the museum or it reflects the Parisian boulevard scene. At times, the real sky melds into the reflected sky; at other times, the giant potted tree that stands in front of the building seems to have a clone behind the transparent building. The overall effect is one of illegibility—a sustained sense of mystery, ambiguity, and playfulness. Explains Nouvel:

My buildings try to play with the effects of virtuality, appearance. Viewers wonder if the material is present or not. We create visual images, we create ambiguity. A building can play with transparency effects, but it does so through another element, which is

²⁰ For an image, see <http://www.fondation.cartier.fr/flash.html>.

[reflection]. At the Cartier Foundation Building, the viewer never knows if they're seeing the sky or its reflection. Generally, you see both, and that ambiguity creates an interplay of multiple appearances. At the same time, the building makes use of the most trivial function of transparency for the exhibition space.²¹

The Cartier building offers a single example of a singular object, but it illustrates well its characteristics: stretching beyond conventional principles, sustaining mystery and illegibility, and containing a certain sense of "response" or material transcendence. With these characteristics, a singular object manages—like Kierkegaard's religious—to avoid the pitfalls of both modernism and postmodernism.

But how far will this argument take us? Just as architectural modernism relies on the assumptions of intersubjectively available meaning and reason's capacities to depict reality, our Kierkegaardian-inspired singular sublime relies on the assumption that human individuals are open to a call that exists outside of them—that there remains, in short, the divine presence even in our modern world. While our empirically-driven generation might find it difficult to believe that the gods still call and speak to us, even the march of material and technological progress has not robbed us of our artists. Today, just as in Plato or Kierkegaard's day, there are those who hear the call of the transcendent—those, like the architect Jean Nouvel, who share Baudrillard's commitment to the singular sublime. In our postmodern world, perhaps it is unnecessary, beyond being simply unfounded, to ask whether this transcendent call has any empirical reality. Rather, it might suffice to remember that there are those who continue to perceive sacredness even in a world that is progressively more revealed and less mysterious.

It is often quipped today that art students spend more time learning poststructuralist theory than practicing painting, simply because the rhetoric artists use in reference to their own art has become as much a part of the capital processes of art buying and selling as the art object itself. Because of this, we have artists who are firmly

²¹ Baudrillard and Nouvel 62.

committed to much ideology—to the universality of modernism, to the *novatio* of postmodernism, or to the *-ism* of their own chosen brand of philosophic identity. While Marcel Duchamp was right to be wary of the implications of the saying *bête comme un peintre* (“dumb as a painter”), there is something to be said for artists who create, not in commitment to an ideology, but in response to an inward or outward calling. In our culturally and normatively pluralist society, there is hopefully room for both the artist of ideology and the artist of existential response. Thus, while the debate between the modern and the postmodern will continue in our academies, government councils, and in the public marketplace, a Kierkegaardian reading of the conflict offers a hope that chooses in favor of neither side. While the battle rages on, it will be the figure of the Abraham-Architect, the creator of the singularly sublime object, who offers a potent, though silent, resolution.

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