Babel and Rear Window:
Architectural Models from New Media

Contemporary architecture history, theory, and criticism since the 1960s have sought to put architecture and linguistics either at odds or in cahoots. Some portray architecture as the paragon of resistance to *any* critical theories involving language. Others ambitiously *align* architecture with linguistics, semiotics, hermeneutics, and other theories of meaning. This confrontation intensifies in the case of film theory. Not only does film portray much architecture and landscape, it seems to have developed its own sense spatiality and temporality, competing with architecture's "main business." This paper takes an "Ur-example" of architecture (the Tower of Babel) and compares it with what many have regarded as an "Ur-film," Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Because both exemplars combine matters of shape, space, and time with questions of knowledge and discovery, any comparison can but help getting to the bottom of architecture's radical semiology.

One of the oldest metaphors of building, the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel (Fig. 1), refuses to resolve the tension between meaning and mute form and presents a puzzle rather than a paradigm. Biblical scholarship has deepened the mystery. The Hebrew authors of Genesis, who were likely working from Babylonian or Sumerian precedents, may have intended to provide an account for the multiplicity of cultures and languages, with the moral kernel of advice against using or even seeking a meta-language packed in for good measure. The model for the Tower of Babel, the ziggurat, was a different kind of architectural device, however. As its Akkadian name suggests (*bab'el* or *bab-ilu* — "Gate of God"), its function was to facilitate communication with the divine, not disrupt it.[1]

Fig. 1. Pieter Breughel the Elder, "The Tower of Babel" (1583).

We can explore these contrasting uses of the same building through the relationship of the labyrinthine lower structure to the upper tip. Was the top unfinished or destroyed, as the Biblical myth would hold? Or, was it just invisible and inaccessible to the uninitiated, as the Babylonian ziggurat suggests? The theological interpretations may be radically opposed, but the architectural model and its iconic representations turn out to be closely conjoined in a number of aspects. In particular, the topology of the Tower of Babel and the earlier *bab-ilu* are, I argue, identical, and this is a key to subsequent relationships of architecture and communication.

In particular, the Biblical model favors a Gnostic theory of language that creates an esoteric interior to the exoteric Hebrew cover story. The Babylonian model depends on a radical discontinuity between upper and lower parts that duplicates the Gnostic contrast between esoteric and exoteric uses of language.

How do this ancient building and its attendant myths impact modern communications and architecture theory? First, this story of the origins of language asserts in a very sophisticated way what the French psychologist Jacques Lacan would confirm 3000 years later — the impossibility of a meta-language.[2] The existence of a "meta-language" is often presumed as a part of the idea of language translation. In one

form, it's the notion of a "structural grammar" underlying all languages. In more tangible examples, it's the notion that a concealed, often textual, meaning lies beneath and can interpret architectural form.

The second lesson of the Tower of Babel has to do with the question of topology. If complications in the fabular tradition of the Tower of Babel can be ironed out topologically, then an application of this method to other "primary" buildings might be equally informative.[3] An even more ambitious goal might be pursued: *to discover how communications itself is a matter of topology, whose "architecture" can be understood most clearly through examples of actual architecture.*

The Tower of Babel as Literature

The history of the Tower of Babel should be read with the idea of the architectural function of the "vent" in mind. A vent is a connection that facilitates the flow of air and hope rather than vision; it is a connection, typically, between opposites; and, it is an "opposite" with respect to each of the spaces it connects — the high part of a low space and low part of a high space, as in the case of a "cellar window" (*soupirail*).[4] The double set of opposites is significant. It sets up a structural context in which multiple and even contradictory meanings can coexist by virtue of a "twist" in the topological relationship. This is, in fact, the "function" of the Tower of Babel — the creation of an empty connector that can accommodate contradiction.

In Genesis X we are acquainted with Nimrod, descendent of Ham through Cush, called "the first potentate on earth."[5] "Nimrod" is the Akkadian "Ninus," an abbreviation of Tukulti-Ninurta I (thirteenth century, B.C.E.), the first Assyrian conqueror of Babylonia. The Biblical translator E. A. Speiser comments that "Aside from his conquests, this king was celebrated also for his building activities, and an epic extolling his exploits is one of the literary legacies of Assyria." However, it is Nimrod's fame as a great hunter, "by the will of Yahweh," that is salient for the authors of Genesis. Chapter XI describes the Tower of Babel. The authors emphasize the theme of human aggressiveness. Yahweh says, "If this is how they have started to act, while they are one people with a single language for all, then nothing that they may presume to do will be out of their reach" (Gen. XI, vi.). There is no mention of the destruction of the tower, only the confusion of tongues and subsequent dispersal that left construction incomplete.

If we were to list the poetic epithets for Babel, they would be: language, ambition, "built by Nimrod the hunter," and "building with its top in the sky." Each of these attributes are immediately present in the description of Babel and its association with Tukulti-Ninurta I. Language is cast as the agent for the ambition of humans to connect heaven and earth, and this project is portrayed as aggressive rather than worshipful, hence God's alarm at its presumption. This ambition focuses on the top of the tower, which intends to connect directly with heaven. Of this group of modifiers, one might say that the "ambition" motif set in motion by the authors of Genesis goes a bit too far in explaining things. It ties up the question of the origins of language in a single act of revenge and leaves the tower as an architectural illustration of the linguistic theme. Speiser and others note that the idea of a brick building in contact with the blue ether was incongruous for the more horizontally disposed Hebrews. The flat terrace that was subsequently the hallmark of ziggurats was taken to be the nothing more than the limit of construction at the time of Yahweh's decisive action. That is, the actual finished top of the Babylonian ziggurat was transformed into an unfinished margin by an attempt to assimilate architecture into the language-complex.

"Nimrod the Hunter" is also somewhat outside this explanatory sequence of ambition and punishment. He is hunter "by the will of Jahweh." The Hebrew word translated into that phrase is *lipne*, which literally means "to the face of," with the spatial connotation of "in front of" or the temporal idea of "before." *Lipne Yahweh* came to mean something like *deo volente*, implying approval or at least assent, sometimes in relation to a tolerance painful to the Hebrew authors: "If He so wills! (Then we must suffer)." Hunting was, as Mary Douglas has noted in her skillful analysis of the origins of Jewish food laws, not approved as a means of livelihood.[6] Only the poor herdsman or imprudent farmer was forced to resort to game, and much of the food restricted as non-Kosher was defined in contrast to the cloven-hoofed, cud-chewing animals that Hebrew herdsmen raised. But, Nimrod, the first great ruler of men, can scarce be accused of failure in farming or husbandry. Yahweh did not necessarily condone Nimrod's hunting. The preposition *lipne* leaves it open that Nimrod may have been hunting before Yahweh defined the acceptable modes of acquiring food. Another possibility is that Nimrod's hunting was, like the hunting nobles all the way up to the end of the European Middle Ages, the sacred occupation of the king, exercised in special enclosures figured after Eden. The hero of the *Enuma-Elish*, Marduk, is the prototypical hunter, whose slaying of the primordial indefinite entity, Taimat, initiates being proper. Through numerous St. George figures to follow, nations are founded and cities built upon the

combat of the hero with a snake-like or dragon-like monster representing primordial chaos, played out in more secular contexts as the pursuit of game by the hunter for the sake of ritual sacrifice rather than survival. "Hunter," then, may be an abbreviated reference to the combat that all city-founders enjoin, which is in turn an abbreviation of the *katabasis*, the journey to Hades. After all, *hero* originally meant nothing more than "a dead person." The hero-founder had to demonstrate legitimate connections to the underworld, which was the source of all knowledge and authority.

It first seems that the image of a Tower of Babel must have been drawn from a Babylonian ziggurat, specifically from the *E-temen-an-ki*, or "house of the foundation of heaven and earth," dedicated to Marduk, the hero-figure of Babylon. Interestingly, the historical ziggurats, including the famous *E-temen-an-ki* of Babylon, did not exist at the time of Genesis's writing. However, the authors had at their disposal a *literary* precedent from which they most likely drew. The *Enuma-Elish* describes the construction of a sacred precinct, *Esagila*: "The first year they molded its bricks. And when the second year arrived / they raised the head of Esagila toward Apsû."[7] *Apsû* is, among other things, the blue ether of the sky, the cosmic source of sweet water. "Esagila" means, literally, "the structure with the up-raised head." The idea of a building with its head completely in contact with the ether was essential to the sacred function of connecting heaven and earth, a function more literally specified in the name of the later real ziggurat, *E-temen-an-ki*, "foundation of heaven and earth."

But, since the idea of a brick building with its head in the sky was barely conceivable to the Hebrews, they had to translate the Assyrian's religious motive as over-reaching ambition, interpreting the tower's top as unfinished or destroyed. In reality, the tops of ziggurats were flat in order to house a group of temple structures. Their tops would be represented as concealed by clouds, distinguishing the mortal world in shadow below and a realm communicating directly with the *ether* above. The building was depicted as "headless" because the top was invisible from below. This pictoral tradition persisted. The Renaissance emblem of Justizia was sometimes shown as "headless," because Justice, to be true, must communicate directly with the source of truth. Other commonplace images of the same period, such as "Cebes' table" (Fig. 2), developed the idea to be copied later by Masons in high places: a pyramid whose top is made invisible by clouds or visible through some symbol of divinity — a jewel or all-seeing eye, as on the apex of the pyramid shown on the U. S. dollar bill.

Fig. 2. John Davies, "Cebes' Table" (1670).

The authors of Genesis can hardly be given credit for a poetic grasp of the ambiguity of the Assyrian tower, since it seems that they limited the motive for building Babel into an "ambition motif." Further, it seems that the motive for this misreading was gratuitous: the invention of an explanation for the diversification of human languages, an ornament to the "Table of Nations" presented in the previous chapter. The authors are even more to blame for using, as a motive for the language theme, a pun that is easily traced to a distortion of an Akkadian word. The more general name for the ziggurat, *bab-ilu*, "gate of the god," was temptingly close to the Hebrew *balal*, meaning "to confound" or "to mix." It seems likely that this proximity led the authors of Genesis to use a building with its head in the ether to account for the diversification of human languages.

The authors may not have intended to convey any meaning beyond the "moral," the warning against ambition against Yahweh or the explanation of the multiplicity of human tongues. They nonetheless engaged the logic of the vent. The authority of rule had to be grounded in a connection with Hades and its antipode, the Heavens (the vent's main architectural forte). The spirits of the dead and the signs of the sky were the

two mainstays of primitive religion. The importance of physical means of connecting to the *plenum* of the underworld is emphasized in the common use of sweet-water springs as places of prophecy. It was no accident that *Apsû* stood both for the depths of underground waters and the *ether* as the meteorological source of sweet water.

To emphasize the connection of the low with the high, the Babylonian king abased himself in the ritual building of the ziggurat by mixing the bitumen and forming and laying the first bricks himself. The ambiguity of this act is clear: the king was building his own tomb, and his union with the goddess in the temple-complex on the terrace top was both an apotheosis and death.

Priestly power was based on the ability to translate divine signs into ritual formulas, or "whispered spells" that preserved the secrecy of their profession. This tradition of whispered, secret speech finds its counterpart in the outsider's description of whispers as babble, nonsense. Within our system of complexes, the puzzle-complex and the spell-complex dominate this story. The authors of Genesis, in their inadvertent or intentional misreading of the significance of Nimrod's tower, through the accidental proximity of a pun, actually restored one of the key components of the meaning of Babel as a vent. The connections that bound the priest-king's authority to the extremities of the universe, whispered formulas, and ritualized sacrifice were ironically preserved: the whisper survived as nonsense and the "invisible" head of the building was preserved as a symbol of Yahweh's punishment.

The Tower of Babel's two incongruous parts prevent it from "lying flat" in any ordinary space of projection. Its twisted topology points to a system of polar oppositions. Certainly, one of the intended functions of such "gates of heaven" was to use polarity in literal and theological ways. Once in place, such structures replicated their logic through their tendency to generate misreadings that, no matter what the motive or mistaken associations of the misreaders, manage to preserve the original significative system, or topographical structure. Thus, although the misreading involving linguistic themes would seem to have nothing to do with the real meaning of Babel, it in fact reveals an important feature of the tower's function as a vent. And, although we are led to believe that the top of Babel was unfinished or destroyed, the mistake preserves the truth that the head of the building communicated with the *ether* and invisible Hades. What better truth can there be than one that can be preserved by inadvertent or deliberate distortion?

The Tower of Babel as Topology

The literary critic Michael Riffaterre advises that, in the case of a poem, "ungrammaticalities" are consciously constructed so that the surface meanings can break apart in a more or less planned sequence that yields the discovery of a concealed descriptive system (hypogram).[8] In the case of what Riffaterre calls "permanently poetic terms" such as the vent, this descriptive system involves polar oppositions that replicate inner logic in outward form through a system of negations. Poems use prior texts as a source of such hypograms. Architecture has a wealth of its own "hypograms." But, like poems, such buildings, like the Tower of Babel or the Thesean labyrinth, in turn typically refer to texts.

The interplay between texts and architecture are sometimes surprising. For example, the authors of Genesis, in their attempt to shape the Babel story into a cautionary tale against human hubris through a misreading of *bab-ilu* as *balel*, actually pointed back to the original Assyrian religious use of the ziggurat. The references to babble as well as the act of misreading itself involves the notion of the Hermetic spell, the whispered speech, a key element in the lore of the vent. Latent in the ritual use of ziggurats, the theme of babbled speech as encoded verbal formulae comes around to haunt the Genesis version.[9]

Similarly, the apparently spurious reference to Nimrod as a hunter, through Yahweh's will, makes it impossible to say whether Nimrod's hunting preceded Yahweh's concern and authority or occurred with His permission. Just as Leviticus tended to restrict the eating of game through a logic that compared game animals to the products of husbandry, the hunter was outside the Hebrew social system. *Lipne* could be "to the face of Yahweh" in the more modern sense of "in the face of Yahweh." There is also the suggestion of temporal priority. The assault theme would be consistent with the subsequent Hebrew view of the tower as arrogant rather than worshipful, and would stack the decks in favor of seeing the top as destroyed rather than successfully invisible or simply flat. But, the ambiguity of *lipne*, an otherwise gratuitous addition (a great hunter *before* Yahweh) would suggest exactly the opposite.

So, it seems that architecture may have the ability to engage topological (hypogrammatical) systems with or without conscious intent. Like the god Hermes, who began as a pile of stones, systems of signification begin once two parties, who believe in the same fiction, come into a symmetrical relationship, however idiotic. What lies behind buildings is not an abstract system or code but, rather, another building which, in turn, repeats the logic of misreading, or ungrammaticality. The authentic original and

the misinterpretation thus have a kind of equivalency. Each is capable of revealing the other.

Hitchcock's "Rear Window" as a Paradigmatic Babel

Is the Tower of Babel a paradigm limited to theological and philosophical arguments? The conflicts of historical interpretation have turned out to be not "problems to be resolved" but basic clues into the *nature* of this story-building. This nature is revealed by a topology that defines and describes, as the popular application of the fable suggests, the nature of communication.

In modern times as in every age, we have new and popularly recognized versions of Babel. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), a film set within a single urban residential courtyard in the New York City of the 1950s, could easily be regarded as a metaphor "about" communications.[10] A heat wave has forced residents of the buildings adjoining the common open space to open their windows and shades, to pass through wherever possible to the limited spaces of the yards, balconies, and fire-escapes. The use of outdoor space for living follows the principle of spatial inversion. This is a Tower of Babel where the core has been turned into a periphery, where the outside is now the inside shared by residents who, for the most part, do not watch each other out of polite recognition that a change in weather should not destroy privacy in the process of destroying comfort.

There is an exception to prove this rule, a photographer temporarily immobilized by an accident that has left him with a broken leg. Jeff Jefferies, with time on his hands, enjoys the heat wave as a mechanism that has given him more than usual to enjoy while gazing out of his casement window. The temperature inversion that has given rise to the heat-wave has inverted the space of relations that has turned the paradigmatic spiral of the Tower of Babel into a line of sight connecting Jefferies with his neighbors.

This spatial flip-flip reveals a lot about Babelology. To put the matter diagrammatically, the neighbors 'x' and 'y', formerly adjacent but outwardly directed, are now opposite each other. The line that connects them is ethically limited by what is held proper for one to look at, even when it is visually available.
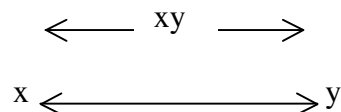
$$\longleftarrow \quad xy \quad \longrightarrow$$

$$x \longleftarrow\longrightarrow y$$

Fig. 3. *Rear Window*'s inversion of the space of Babel.

The inversion theme has several clear consequences. Jefferies, a bachelor, notices that most of his neighbors are either "bachelors" or otherwise "maritally disadvantaged." The one exception is a married couple moving into a new apartment in the building to the left of Jefferies' apartment. In keeping with the topology of the bachelor space, they pull down the shade of their window.

In general, bachelors are "immobilized" within the locational structure of this modern Babel, an immobility symbolically exaggerated by Jefferies' broken leg. Bachelorhood necessitates, as Duchamp has taught, the antipodal category of the Bride, a *mobile* form of subject who is able to transgress perspectival space and possess directly the objects of desire that elude the bachelors. The Bride in this case is the alluring Lisa Freemont, played by Grace Kelly, the girlfriend of the reticent Jefferies.

The courtyard of *Rear Window* has turned the vent of Babel into a real vent, a device for using wind for relief from the heat rather than the discovery of theological truths. What returns us to the theme of signification is the story's main clue, the wedding ring of the possible victim of a murder, the wife of the salesman, Lars Thorwald, who lives directly across from Jefferies. This small object, like the temple at the top of the *mons delectus* of Cebes, is the key to, if not wisdom, then at least the solution of the mystery. The clue/key proves its role by restoring the flipped space of the urban courtyard to its primary Babel-configuration. Thorwald realizes that Lisa has found the ring and, as she tries to signal Jefferies through the window of Thorwald's apartment, also realizes the identity and location of his real pursuer. By exiting his building and going around the block, he can directly confront Jefferies.

There are many more themes and issues that cement the role of this film as a modern Babel. Michel Chion and Slavoj Zizek have emphasized the role of "acousmatics," the unlocatable voice that, in this film which uses ambient noise instead of a composed sound-track, works to annotate the thoughts of the audience.[11] This tantalizingly recalls the theme of whispered speech. As Hitchcock himself admitted, the film is "about marriage," and this bride-bachelor thematic extends the Duchampian qualities of the Babel topology. As with the Large Glass, *Rear Window* refines the idea of Babel as a "structure of desire," more apt in many ways than the paradoxes of Zeno in showing how desire defines objects it will never be able to reach.

Our goal has been reached, however. It remains to point out that *Rear Window* is but one of many modern versions of Babel. Each paradigm tends to attach to contemporary issues and contemporary terms; but, it falls to the critic and historian to make the connections that show how ancient, perdurable, and universal is the structure of meaning that lies beneath. The tool for this job is topology, and it is this topology that we must address in order to find a more common basis for assessing the full range of meanings to be found in words and stone.

Endnotes

[1] This is by no means a new or original thesis. Perhaps its most popular protagonist was André Parrot, *The Tower of Babel*, Studies in Biblical Archaeology, 2 (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1955).

[2] For a discussion of this problem in relation to the arts, see Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-30.

[3] I have in mind such "paradigmatic" structures as the Cretan Labyrinth, the Greek theater, the Egyptian pyramids, and the *tholos* tomb. Both simple and complex, these buildings may be found replicated in whole or part throughout subsequent architecture history.

[4] Michael Riffaterre, *Semiology of Poetry* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 42-46.

[5] E. A. Speiser, trans., *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 64.

[6] Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[7] Speiser, *op. cit.,* p. 75.

[8] Riffaterre, *op. cit.*, p. 12-13 and *passim*.

[9] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[10] This film has endured more commentary than is easily cited in a single paper. One of the more important sources of insight has been Juhani Pallasmaa's "Geometry of Terror: Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window," *Chora: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture* 4 (forthcoming).

[11] Slavoj Zizek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (but Were Afraid toAsk Hitchcock)* (New York: Verso, 1992).