



A Tale of Two Citadels

by Patrick Wright

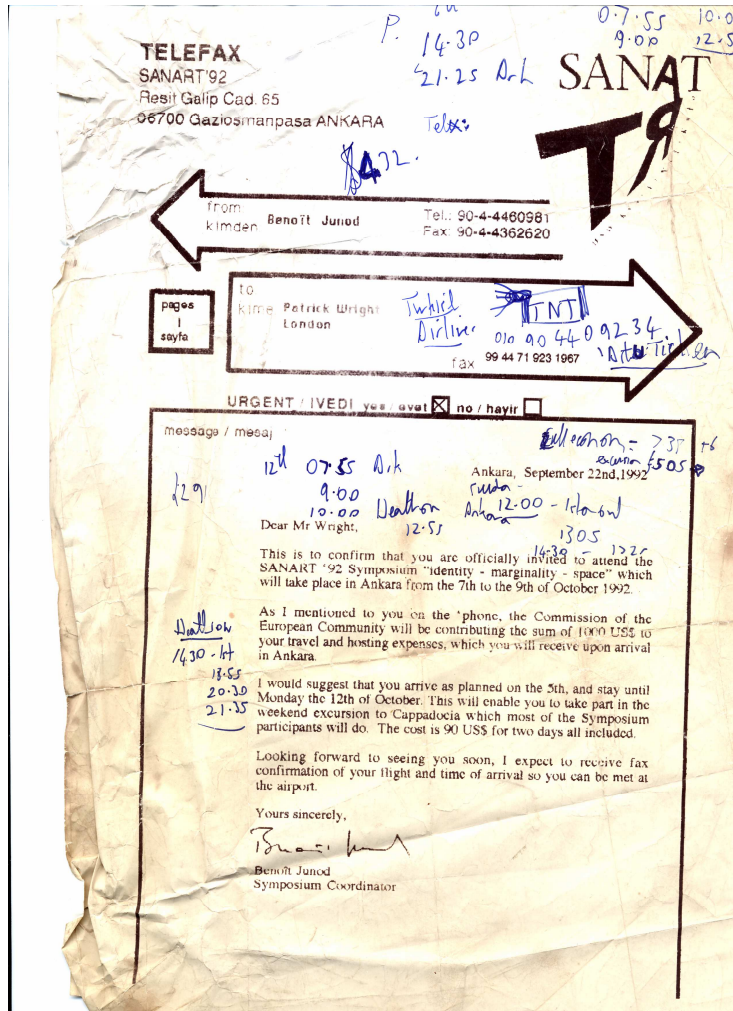
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A three day symposium entitled 'Identity - Marginality – Space' is perhaps not among the world's most enticing prospects. The programme offered little relief, promising only to drag all comers through the additional thickets of 'fragmentation' and 'transversality'. This, surely, would be another of those events where philosophers get up to warn one another that 'Intersubjectivity is under pressure', while architects discourse on the virtues of being somewhere 'between nomadism and solipsism' - clicking their way through slides of the bizarre buildings they hope to suspend on these rising clouds of rhetoric.

Wherever such gatherings may actually occur in the west, their caricature gathers them into the last resort of post-modernism. The hotel is comfortable if not luxurious, and the designer surfboards are lined up on the beach outside. The Simulator comes adorned with neat epithets like 'The Gulf War never took place' and 'The year 2,000 will never come'. The Deconstructor is still favoured by some young architects, but no longer quite so fashionable among the silver-haired professors of literary theory. The Jencksian Accomodator is a sedate, even gondola-like model, full of cushions and fitted with a Jacuzzi in which, as the slogan promises, 'One hundred Taste Cultures bloom'.

But what would happen if we took this western show and flew it over the Balkans, landing not in the exotic and all too obvious destination of Istanbul, but further east in the land-locked and famously ugly city of Ankara? Our imaginary post-modernist - let us call him Henri Tifo - would step off the plane, hail a taxi for the Hilton, and sit back to survey a city that has boomed dramatically since 1923, when Ataturk declared it the capital of the new and secular Turkish state he was forging from the divided remnants of the Ottoman Empire. Glimpsing the mosques, the squatter houses crammed all over the outlying hills, and the traditionally dressed figures at the roadside, Tifo would note with some satisfaction that not all of Anatolia's traditional ways of life have disappeared into the industrial and apparently westernised city that Ankara has become. In the city centre, he might be impressed by the imposing buildings of state office, some of them designed by European

modernists in the thirties; and as the author of several noted papers on kitsch, he would probably smirk a little at the prominent bronze statue which has Ataturk, surrounded by four blazing braziers and towering over the congested traffic.



The widely discussed death of History has only increased Dr. Tifo's sensitivity to ruins so, after checking in at the hotel, he calls another taxi and heads for the oldest part of town. He is moved by the magnificent prehistory displayed under the Ottoman domes of the Museum of Anatolian Civilisations, but the sequence of ancient worlds - Hittite, Phrygian, Galatian et cetera - seems too transparently ordered, as if the millennia themselves had only been lining up to prostrate themselves in archaic tribute to Ataturk's modernising state.

The walls of the old citadel turn out to be altogether more agreeable. The guide-book declares them to be Byzantine at the higher levels, and ninth or even seventh century below, but their main attraction lies in the myriad fragments of Roman marble which have been incorporated into their lower courses as so much convenient building material. In places they are



positively jostling with recycled fragments of statuary and undeciphered inscription, the latter often mounted upside-down. So much, then, for the illusion of progress. Cultures rise and fall. History dies, not once but repeatedly. The sacred is profaned. Power becomes unintelligible and is unknowingly stood on its head.

Later that evening, Max Tifo might be found in the Hilton foyer, musing on the partial similarity between Turkey's situation and that of the west. He has learned over dinner with his hospitable hosts that Ataturk forged the Turkish state on principles borrowed from the European enlightenment: a Swiss civil code, votes for women, separation of the state from religion. But what, apart from successive military coups, comes after that?

Picking up a copy of the *Turkish Daily News*, he gathers that the cultural differences Ataturk hoped to suppress with his new, and forcefully imposed, conception of the Turk, are still breaking in to spoil the picture. Islamic fundamentalism may be contained to a considerable extent by the existence of a broad Turkish middle class, but no such thing can be said for 'the Kurdish problem', which, as he reads, is currently the object of a military 'sandwich operation' designed to wipe out the outlawed Kurdish Workers Party.

Dr. Tifo is a recognised authority on fragmentation and deterritorialisation, but this operation, which has since spilled over into Iraq, is altogether more violent than anything he had in mind. So he lets the newspaper drop, orders up another drink and goes back to rehearsing some of the more adroit theoretical manoeuvres he hopes to carry off in his lecture the following day.

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We need not persist with this fiction because it is quite overtaken by the real achievements of SANART '92, a voluntary association set up early in 1991 with the purpose of promoting the visual arts in Ankara. The three day international symposium on 'Identity - Marginality - Space', which took place last month, was the main event on SANART '92's agenda. It was accompanied by various international exhibitions and preceded by a series of preparatory lectures and discussions, which built up an impressively large audience for the big event. As many as 600 people have turned up to hear philosophers lecture on 'the Crisis of Culture', or 'Postmodernism's Critique of the Enlightenment'. 'Post avant-garde' video artists, who admitted to sometimes phoning around their friends to raise a last minute audience at galleries in the west, found themselves at the centre of much appreciative attention.

The symposium's first speaker was Professor Thomas Sebeok, the elder statesman of Semiotics from Indiana, who considered the 'Prefigurements of Art' in the animal world. Dismissing flea circuses and Spanish riding schools as 'illusions created by human choreographers', he went on to talk about animals that collected things, Australian birds that painted and decorated their nests, and the rare 'ornitho-musicologists' who believe that music came from people imitating birds.

Sebeok showed some paintings by chimpanzees, describing how the American art market had opened to accommodate these unexpected works. This provoked a sharp response from Bedri Baykam, a flamboyant Turkish artist and fiercely secularist politician associated with Ataturk's party who, in the sixties, was celebrated as a child genius and Wunderkind. Baykam, who would shortly publish a polemic entitled *The Monkey's Right to Paint*, retorted that it was entirely typical of the Western art world to admit the work of monkeys before it could accept that artists might come from a non-western country: 'only five nations participate, but then they pretend its the whole world'.

Pursuing a similar line of attack, Brahim Ben Hossein Alaoui, the Moroccan-borne curator of the Contemporary Art Museum at the Arab World Centre, spoke cogently about the fate of the southern artist who is barred from asking the founding question of western art, namely 'Who am I', and only granted folkloric status.

Mohammed Arkoun, Professor of history of Islamic Thought at the Sorbonne, used a telling sequence of slides to indicate what had happened to the sacred iconography of Islam since the dislocations of colonialism. He showed the mosque with its dome and minaret, dwarfed by huge office developments and reconfigured by architects who, with some duly honoured exceptions, seemed to lack all but the most rudimentary understanding of its form. The dome lost its symbolic depth, becoming an empty signal, and then degenerated further to become a mere shape piled up with other saleable junk in the market place. Without explicitly opposing contemporary fundamentalism he reminded the symposium that classical Islamic thought had been pluralistic, with many different schools and interpretations of the Koran. The secularising Ataturk had pushed religion off the Turkish state's agenda, but in Arkoun's view it was now an urgent necessity to teach Islamic thought in its dynamic range: 'only then will it gain a historical and intellectual dimension'.

What happens when the idea of postmodernism is hammered into this troubled intersection of east and west? Mr. Fikri Saglar, the Minister of Culture who opened the conference, linked its programme to the political

climate in which Turkey found itself after the collapse of Communism. Rigid ideologies are in decline, he explained, and the expansion of communications has eroded the concept of nationality and stripped the idea of censorship of much of its significance. The Modern period, as he saw it, had 'certain drawbacks', having been defined by Europe, yet a bright post-modernist future surely beckoned. There had been at least forty civilisations in Anatolia - the place was inherently pluralist, thanks to a long history of internal and external migration - and Turkey could surely look forward to a strong future in the region, its sphere of influence reaching into Asia, the Balkans, and the Middle East.

Some pursued the Minister's optimistic idea. As SANART '92's President Jale Erzen remarked, fragmentation could lead to 'a very beautiful future': it implied 'the reassertion of humanism in the world' and also the 'critique of occidental power'. Other speakers explored the parallel between Turkey and the similarly 'hybrid' countries of Latin America. The distinguished Argentinian curator and critic, Jorge Glusberg, rephrased Ricoeur's call for 'a dialogue of cultures' that would put an end to the idea of a single western civilisation and make the transition from an 'international world to an intercultural one'. The Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, whose recently translated novel *The White Castle* had already placed him in the first rank of contemporary writers, outlined the 'horizontal voyage' that the storyteller could now make in the direction of previously marginalised cultures.

It wasn't long, however, before the dark side of postmodernism was pulled into view by a succession of Turkish speakers. The Istanbul architect and historian, Dogan Kuban, was excoriating about the fake marginality that had been cooked up in 'the alienated cities of the west'. Rightly protective of Turkish art and architecture as 'an original field of creation', he dismissed the 'postmodernist discourse' as 'a new marketing device for the rapid production of western intellectuals'. In the west, he said, 'ambiguity has become synonymous with thinking' and people engage in 'self-promotion' through bombastic style. Attila Yucel pressed on with the same attack: postmodernist 'verbiage' is presented in terms of democratic plurality, but its actual effect had been 'to vaporise the ethical and technical responsibilities of architecture'.

Postmodernism may be bad for architecture, but its consequences in other spheres are far worse as the Turkish sociologist Caglar Keyder pointed out, in the course of explaining the failure of the nation-state that the west had tried to impose on the decolonising world after the Second World War: 'fragmentation' is a fashionable term in western art talk, but in the real world - say Somalia, Yugoslavia, parts of the Arab world, or even, as nobody was



sufficiently tactless to point out, in Turkey itself, it means ‘people killing one another in the attempt to solve differences’.¹ The proceedings were further rerouted by the Istanbul philosopher Ionna Kuçuradi. She condemned post-modernism for equating freedom with the rejection of rules and standards, and for ‘throwing out not just the scientific conception of the world, but ‘the whole project of the enlightenment,’ right down to its concern with human rights. Post-modernism should be rejected as ‘a theory that does not explain, but justifies and promotes what goes on.’ Left to itself, she added, ‘its form of freedom could lead to a new slavery.’

So there came a point in the proceedings when eyes turned towards the horizon, glancing over the Ankara citadel with its ancient polyglot walls, and across the flaming Balkans to settle on the vast steel walls of the Eurocitadel to the west. By this time the symposium had heard from the architects and semiologists, but would the philosophers of that distant western fortress have anything to contribute to this pressing enquiry? Could they help to elucidate what might be the framework of co-existence, or to define norms that might possibly constellate a world that was flying apart in this way?

Emissaries had been dispatched to find out, but the news they brought back was hardly reassuring. One reported that the Eurocitadel’s thinkers, once so confident in the universal application of their principles, were no longer certain even of the existence of the outside world, and that all responsibility for ‘intercultural’ matters had been ceded to the guards at the gates. The second swore that an epidemic of self-loathing had broken out among the intellectuals in what had once been Christendom. Indeed, they were queuing up to denounce their own tradition as Eurocentric and brutalising, and to condemning the supposedly great books in their library as so many milestones on the road to Auschwitz. The art galleries were full of contrivances dedicated to the transgression of ‘bourgeois norms’ that had actually long since fallen apart on their own. There was indeed much talk of ‘identity’ and ‘the body’ in the Eurocitadel, but it was feared that this was only the label under which western intellectuals disowned the global perspective so readily assumed by their more confident forebears, and made their own personal bid for minority status.

People were about to give up, when a messenger reappeared with some witnesses who would gainsay this depressing picture. Marcia Tucker from the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, insisted that working towards the margins in New York City did not entail a disavowal of responsibilities - quite the contrary. But the feminist cast of her argument, was more than some members of the audience were prepared to take seriously, and her claim was not pursued. Fussed over by a proud Greek

ambassador, the second witness was Cornelius Castoriadis, the Paris-based Greek philosopher and former economist, a psychoanalyst who specializes in psychotic patients, and a militant who broke away from Trotskyism in the fifties to become a radical democrat and scourge of Stalinism and bureaucratic capitalism alike.

Castoriadis started by conceding that democracy has been prostituted by all sorts of regimes; indeed, nearly all countries claiming to be democracies are 'regimes of liberal liberties, in which minorities exert power informally, and economic power is converted into political power, through the media and state bureaucracy'. For him, democracy meant what it had meant in ancient Greece, namely the practice of the *demos*, or the power of the people.

Yet as he had gone round arguing the case for the democratic principle he considered to be implicit in western tradition, he had faced a constant stream of accusation claiming him to be phallogocentric, logocentric and, of course, Eurocentric: 'the minute you try to think globally nowadays, you are accused of preparing the Gulag'. Castoriadis knew about the horrors of many universalistic western political philosophies, but he still stood firmly against the post-modernist tide, insisting that the events of recent years have given ample evidence of the horrors that follow from the abandonment of all universalistic principle.

He went on to expound a view of art and its potentiality that far exceeds the paltry academicism of much contemporary art-practice. For him art was connected to 'the power of formation', the compulsion people have always felt to give the world meaning. In 'autonomous' societies this power of formation breaks free from the religious or dynastic worldviews that have previously constrained it. In them, 'We create meaning, and we create it on the ground of the abyss in which we all end . . . We might expect this to drive people crazy, and societies to suicide. But the opposite is true. The great flowering of Classical Greece came from the realization that we have nothing to expect from the Gods.' So too did the west's modern period of autonomy, which began in the eighteenth century and was, so Castoriadis insisted, a time of quite remarkable creativity and daring, not just on the part of artists, but also of the public that followed them.

All that came to an end in the 1950s, however, and we had since been living through 'the most conformist period of history'. We are constantly told that individuals are free, but 'they are only free to push the same pattern and watch the same nonsense on TV'. Art has lost its innovative edge and collapsed into 'eclecticism and pastiche'. It is here that the 'miserable



theoreticians of post-modernism' have come in, proclaiming 'the death of meaning, the death of everything'.

Postmodernism was 'conformism travelling under the guise of subversive discourse'; it was 'cheap Heidegger', merely 'a new way of not doing philosophy'. It was a 'Cabaret show', mounted by figures like Jean Baudrillard - the man who had 'seen some billboards through a car window and mistaken them for America'.

Is a renewal possible? Insisting that he was not a prophet, Castoriadis refused to imagine change unless a truly democratic movement comes into being. Without the development of such a 'new cultural orientation', artists could only carry on cavorting in the void: nothing would change unless the people get fed up 'see the emptiness of the whole business'. In the meantime, 'All we can do is try to be as honest and as uncompromising as possible, and remain truthful to the idea that a life without conceit is worth living - a life of spiritual and effective freedom.' This was, he suggested, 'a fighting position' and not a form of Stoical acquiescence.

The conference continued after he had spoken. The Colombian film-maker and writer, Rene Rebetez, who lived 'voluntarily shipwrecked' on the tiny Colombian island of Providence ('the last resort', as he called it with a smile), stepped up to remark that it made 'no sense to talk of democracy in relation to the countries on Latin America', advocating instead that we turn inwards to the renewing world of ritual, and prophesying that before long 'the west will fall apart'. A deconstructed Turkish/New York architect, showed slides of 'critically dismantled' versions of 'normative towers', or of windowless rooms that would, as she remarked, 'promote an inward turning of the gaze'.

But these contributions failed to exorcise the words of Cornelius Castoriadis, which lingered in the hall, haunting the proceedings to the end. Then the Turkish participants went home, leaving a party of western visitors to embark not on Orhan Pamuk's 'horizontal voyage', but on a coach tour of Cappadocia. As the killing continued far away in Bosnia, we would inspect and even buy carpets, peer into a troglodytic underground city built by the early Christians, and marvel at the painted walls of cave churches. Here was the 'power of formation' indeed, just as it had been described by Castoriadis, the last of the Ancient Greeks.

¹ My notes on Keyder's presentation are as follows:

Fragmentation? It leads people to killing in the attempt to resolve differences.

This is due to an insufficient degree of modernity.

The problem in the third world? An incomplete version of modernity.

The kind of fragmentation now being observed is the fragmentation of the nation state, and its inability to carry out the modernisation it started with. It is a problem in which the nation state is unable to mediate.

The nation state was formed by people concerned to ease their country's incorporation into the capitalist dynamic. They also wanted to exploit national virtues found in the past. They set nationalism against religion and traditional assumptions. They embraced a new secular ideal associated with modernisation.

The excesses of this approach to nationalisation?

It involved the creation of mythical histories. If this aspect of the nation state strategy had worked, jealousy at the cultural level might have been transcended. Culture, both at dominant and subordinate levels, would have become folkloric and not dominant.

The success of the nation state might have eased nationalist pressure projected from the centre.

The problem came from the state part of the equation.

Development became the arbiter of success. This was a predominantly economic consideration, concerned only with efficiency. Developmentalism put concern for efficiency at the centre of things, and left everything else out.

It neglected all other aspects of citizenship that have made the modern world.

The legal and political dimensions of citizenship were never emphasised.

The nation state strategy went for economic development without enfranchising citizens legally or politically.

Hence its disintegration. It established no agreement on the rules of integration.

It established no defence against economic crisis – leaving citizens without resources to defend modernisation when it starts failing. Nationalist ideologies were not dominant.

The nation state can fulfill none of its promises – because it has failed, in the earlier period, to establish a broad conception of citizenship

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