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ALESSANDRO ROCCA, *TOTEM AND TABOO IN ARCHITECTURAL IMAGINATION*, LETTERAVENTIDUE, SIRACUSA, 2022.

“Deep down, architects are afraid of [...]”<sup>1</sup>

In 1913, the book *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* by Sigmund Freud came out. In it, Freud applied his newly founded psychoanalytic method to the wider scope of society and culture. He argued that obsessiveness, projection, neuroticism, and narcissism that characterize modern subjects revolve around the dynamic between totems – as sacred objects representing our human communities (our main symbols and power structures) and taboos – whose role is to protect the social system (based on morality and religion) as one of the main products of human imagination.

Alessandro Rocca’s book *Totem and Taboo in Architectural Imagination* investigates the Western contemporary cultural imaginary cantered on social responsibility, ecological concerns, political ramifications, and technology development determinants, in which architecture becomes completely entangled as a field. Although perhaps more complex than Freud envisioned, this cultural imaginary seemingly continues to operate within the framework of totems and taboos. Within this context, obsessiveness, projection, neuroticism, and narcissism have emerged as the fundamental building blocks of culture, disrupting architectural practice as much as all other spheres.

Rocca’s quote from the beginning of the text states: “Deep down, architects are afraid of images.” This statement introduces the first of

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<sup>1</sup> A. Rocca, *Totem and Taboo in Architectural Imagination*, p. 15.

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four main chapters in the book “Images, an architectural taboo,”<sup>2</sup> which explores the historically conflicting and almost iconoclastic relationship between architecture and “the image.” While Rocca’s book is a compilation of diverse papers in the broader scope of architectural theory, images surface as just one of the taboos – or key, unresolved, yet governing issues characterizing contemporary architecture.<sup>3</sup> The author examines internal cultural conflicts as a common theme throughout the book, offering a more complex analysis of “architecture as a system of communication,” a field that seems to function today primarily at a latent level of cultural consciousness.

Like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, who finds herself in the world of reverse logic and meaning behind the looking glass, these specific fears or taboos (of images, of montage, of discourse, of origin) seem to function backward yet in a very (self)reflective manner. What was once the modernist rejection of the image through ornamentation, is now a rejection of architecture as an *imaginary* of modern consciousness. A call to arms coming from the critical architecture of a “radical protest against today’s world through a rejection of its images.”<sup>4</sup> Image was, however, through most of the history of architecture, a part of the less significant sphere of post-production; and now post-production, Rocca claims, rules the process. In a world where design can no longer be viewed as anything but a discursive practice, architecture follows the fragmented path set by post-modernism, wondering the strange backward world devoid of clear rules, yet in which it is forever governed by its taboos.

As a Holocaust, art, and media scholar I found it interesting how significant architectural and artistic works representing the Holocaust were for Rocca’s thinking (Peter Eisenman’s Berlin Memorial, Daniel Libeskind’s Garden of Exile and Emigration, John Hejduk’s Masques and Victims). Because where else should one look if not to practice which explored the very possibility of representation of a world outside the familiar, outside of what kept the (Western) world in place, the system in check? Rocca appears to be looking for instances of the same artistic

<sup>2</sup> The other three chapters are titled: “Composition and post-production montage,” “Another post-production: The end of the classic,” and “Parodies, analogies, and other imitations.”

<sup>3</sup> Key thinkers Rocca invokes through his theoretical explorations are Valerio Olgiati, Joseph Rykwert, Mario Carpo, Giorgio Agamben, Manfredo Tafuri, Georges Didi-Huberman, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Peter Eisenman. He analyzes projects and practice of Rem Koolhaas, Forensic Architecture, Studio Albori, Lacaton & Vassal, and others.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

inventiveness that brought us anti-monuments, non-places, and presence through absence and vice versa.

The ultimate goal seems to be “making sense” of conflicting and fragmented processes that guide contemporary architecture. Rocca doesn’t seem to find this too daunting a task, professing enthusiasm for a time of no linear history – a “long wave where everything is held and everything has a reason.”<sup>5</sup> He posits the image and montage as the core tools of theoretical and critical analysis of architecture and a strong energetic impulse that could guide it. He demonstrates in his writing the same approach that he uses to analyze contemporary architecture – conversing with the classics, as with his contemporary counterparts, with art, literature, film.

Good theoretical books should be able *to move* the debate in the field. Rocca’s text, although fragmented in its main theme, confronts us as theorists, philosophers, architects, artists, and citizens with, for some uncomfortable and others exhilarating, facts about the state of Western and globalized culture and society – forcing us to (re)think the ways of building the world and communicating with it.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.