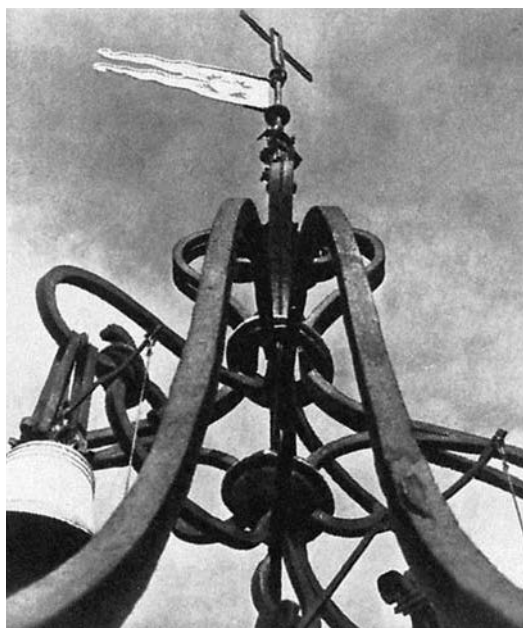


Frans Sturkenboom

COME UNA OLA DE FUERZA Y LUZ*

The title is taken from a musical composition by Luigi Nono, *Como una ola de fuerza y luz*, based on the homonymous poem by Julio Huasi.

On Borromini's Naturalism



Bell tower of the monastery of the Filippini



San Ivo della Sapienza



San Carlo, entablature, arches and arched roof (All pictures by Paolo Portoghesi. He has captured Borromini's architecture beautifully . . .)

‘Like a wave of power and light . . .’ That is how we experience Borromini’s architecture, and how we are inclined to describe it. In its animation is a sense of vitalism, like an ode to nature and its elements. Luminous, powerful, undulating, florid. But there is yet more significance in this line of music, namely the notion of a simile. In the manner of, *like* a wave. An analogous motion, perhaps a metaphor, a turn of phrase, maybe even sleight of hand. That, then, is the question: what are we to make of this liveliness? This naturalism? This blossoming decoration: colossal sunflowers, bees the size of a fist, lavish garlands and a shower of pomegranates? Vital, all too vital! An almost showy imitation of nature, a summer of surrealist proportions. And amid all that foliage, we even find the head of a winged cherub giving us an ironic smile . . . What knowledge, then, is concealed in this ironic gesticulation, in this mimoseous mime? What leads Borromini to overload architecture with flowers? What will it be that inspires these *fleurs du mal* to open their petals? This, already, is nearly a *hypothesis*.

The *task*, then, is to blaze a trail through this obtrusively naturalistic idiom, to establish a genealogy, with the aim of tracking down that will and capturing it in the tapestry of time. The tapestry of time? Yes, where Renaissance and baroque, classicism and Gothic, pre-, pleni-, and post-modernism, warp and weft, still industriously weave away at that image of the word, that countenance, called architecture . . .

THE LIGHT

One of the loveliest passages in Vitruvius’ ten books tells of the birth of architecture from light, the light of the sun. This passage describes how to determine the cardinal directions, in order to plan a city in accordance with them. For this purpose, Vitruvius recommends a bronze gnomon or ‘shadow tracker’. He instructs the reader to mark the end of the shadow cast by the gnomon at the fifth hour of the morning. Then draw a circle using a compass, with the supporting leg at the centre of the sundial and the drawing leg passing through the marked point. In the afternoon, when the shadow once again touches the circle, make a second mark, and draw two semicircles of equal diameter with the two points at their centres. The points of intersection of these semicircles, and the straight lines passing through those points and the centre, give us the septentrional and meridional quarters.

We are not concerned here with how Vitruvius attempts to capture the health of the corresponding winds, the north and south winds, or those of the east and west, Favonius and Solanus, in order to connect them to human well-being. What interests us most is the sunlight that either touches earth directly or, in failing to do so, draws a shadow, a dark line. This dialectic of full and empty, black and white, for once and for all gives shape to Classicistic light-writing: architecture is the place where heaven kisses earth. The light is as white as the

sun, the shadow as black as ink, and it is with this graphic sensibility that Vitruvius, Palladio, Jones and, yes, even Rossi write their treatises. The second aspect of interest to us is that the city and its architecture are founded from light as well as from the order of the day; from the cycle of the sun – in short, from precisely measured time. The fifth hour in the morning and hour x in the afternoon give us a compass. Here, in its forms, architecture sets itself up as a strict geometer and a precise chronometer. The success of the kiss, the cosmic happiness of architecture, is now contained in the perfection of this contract between earthly space and the time of the sun's path.

It is not entirely clear whether Borromini's library included the handbooks of the Roman author Vitruvius or the Vicentine Palladio, though it very probably did include Palladio's. Borromini's early years betray a Palladian inspiration, manifest in the courtyard of the monastery of S. Carlo. The columns there are surmounted by the same alternating arches and rectangular sections that characterise a Palladian window. But what is more important is the graphics of light and dark, which establish the surface as a play of fullness and emptiness. Still, it must be said that precisely that classical light makes this an exceptional work in Borromini's oeuvre. The first and last of its kind, you might say, because Borromini's architecture is not this type of object, measurable by the sun. His architecture might be cosmic, but in the sense of a falling star. For Borromini, architecture shines a light of its own, a light that detaches it from the earth, a light that isolates it from its surroundings. Borromini's architecture is an architecture that illuminates. The time this architecture inhabits is not the space from morning to afternoon; no, it is the immeasurable moment when architecture gets up, arises, as light that differentiates itself, as colourism. To achieve this effect, Borromini has to construct a light machine with which to lead and mislead the sunlight, the natural light, forcing it to bend its rays and no longer fall directly on the earth. The light will sweep and skim, and even send its shafts skywards!

At S. Giovanni in Laterano, Borromini divides the now diffuse light into two components: regular light in the central nave and light that alternates bay by bay in the first aisle. He then differentiates the surfaces of the pillars in between, into straight and concave ones. The 'interference' between these two forms of light – each with its own rhythm – and the alternating contact with receding and flat surfaces gives rise to a very complex sequence of light-dark gradations. Rhythmically, the architecture begins to sing, to resound, in and with its own light, a purely architectural material.

This light evolves even further at S. Ivo della Sapienza. An exceedingly slow snowfall of light descends from the chapel, its tones so high that the last remnants of classical composition (columns reduced to thin pilasters, the tambour diminished to the laughable proportions of an attic) dissolves and the tonal play now brings out only the slow rhythm of the

moulding, and the organism vanishes in a luminous cadence. Hear Argan sing the praises of this supremely subtle play of light, and its effects in the façade of the Oratory of S. Filippo Neri: 'For the front of the monastery of S. Filippo Neri, the artist had envisaged a frontal view, but precisely there, where the space was more open and accommodating [than at the Collegio di Propaganda Fide, F.S.], the relief flattens out and empty areas appear on the surface; the light effects are kept within a more moderate range; the rhythm is more restless and fluid. The entire façade moves in a soft curve, almost seeming to draw back from the space that faces it. The strongest dark accent is found at the bottom, in the niches of the first order, which are positioned further back than the windows above them, while both are embedded in a coffered pattern created by the threefold iteration of the order. This thrusts the empty surfaces of the windows forward and upward, beyond the capitals and against the central cornice. All the dynamic accents merge, here, like waves breaking against the shore, and in an act of unbelievable liberty, the window-frames are placed above the capitals, where they break the static coherence of the façade irrevocably. Higher above, in the second order, the rhythm resumes, in a more relaxed passage that is more open to the light, ending above the final cornice in the 'capriccio' of the crowning section. The difference in the rhythmic development of the two orders is mediated by the central axis; below, a narrow, convex area serves as a hinge for the two wings of the façade, and above, the flattened concha of the niche opens the lighter areas and makes them stand out.'¹

A complex interplay, thus, that finally departs from the dark-light balance of classicism. But what are the forces at work in this light? We have seen that in classicism, architecture appears as a place where heavenly light and earthly matter kiss, in a contract of perfection. It was thus inevitable that this architecture would be possessed by ideal forces, that the compass would become a compass for humanity, that the site of the kiss would also become a site for their reconciliation of divine sky and human place, that at this site, architecture would be tied to the fate of the world. That the time of the sun's course would be the time of the course of human lives, and that architecture would function as the ideal mirror between them, as an ideal sign and the sign of an ideal. The triangle of the pediment thus became the human forehead, and the mirror-game of heliography no longer wrote any stories but human ones. Classicistic architecture intended itself to be a peace offering, sacrificing itself for the happiness of the world. The forces of the earth triumphed over the light of architecture.

In Borromini's case, the opposite happened. He could appear only after (alongside) classicism, and began with the remnants of that happiness, began overloading architecture with symbols that refer to the fate of the world, in the religious, political and moral realms. What is more, he misled the light of

¹ Giulio Carlo Argan, in his article 'Borromini'. The quoted passage clearly shows the affinity and accuracy with which Argan approached Borromini's architecture. He is the greatest of Borromini's many biographers and historiographers. Everything he wrote about Borromini is now available in the collection *Opere di Giulio Carlo Argan*, vol. 2, *Immagine e persuasione: saggi sul Barocco* (Milan, 1986). Other studies that had a significant influence on this essay are: Hans Sedlmayr, *Die Architektur Borrominis* (Munich, 1939); Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Architettura barocca* (Milan, 1979). Let me also mention Tafuri's articles in various publications, which are quite simply some of the best ever written about the baroque Borromini. In contrast to almost the entire body of literature on Borromini, Tafuri does not see Borromini's architectures as homogeneous objects or rounded organisms but as a universe of fractures. See e.g. *Studi sul Borromini* (Rome, 1967).

nature, turning it into a demiurgic machine, an architectural artefact. He thereby melted down symbolism – the language of the ideal and the idealistic language – and transformed it into a luminous relief. And through this alchemy, he gave architecture a sun of its own. Like a true Phosphorus (morning star), he wanted to ignite architecture into a *will to shine*.

Now come, O fire!

STRENGTH

Like the morning star, he wanted to liberate architecture from the ground. But that requires consummate technique! After all, doesn't it entail contradicting the force of gravity? What refinement this must demand, you will undoubtedly say. True, but even so, Borromini's proposed solution is simpler than we would think.

If we take matter as the starting point, then we must say that architecture is an art of challenging and defeating gravity. The classically minded turned to nature as a model. Sturdy buildings that aspire to carry the heavens should stand like trees. An acanthus, for instance, whose leaves remain recognisable in the Corinthian capital. Its power also lay in having the right proportions: to carry *x* times as much foliage and sunlight, it grew a trunk *x* times as thick. We will never know whether the classical column in fact derived its power from material with suitable dimensions, or from its harmonious proportions. We can, however, see in Vitruvius' treatise how the problem of natural strength is submerged and dissolved in exquisite mythical images of the origin of the orders, in an anthropomorphic image: Doric is strong and masculine, Corinthian slender and feminine. Ionic comes from Ion, a young warrior. And the Caryatids bear their punishment nobly, heads held high. All these bodies are oriented towards the sun, like heliotropic flowers, their feet firmly planted on the ground, neatly topically divided into form and substance, light and matter, image and strength. Yes, strength may be real and material, but more than that, strength is an evocative image, a question of figurative language, of metaphor!

The seventeenth century aimed to see through this metaphor, to treat it as a figure of speech. As a natural scientist, one can of course take a hard line, rejecting this image of proportional strength as a fallacy.

That was what Galileo did (in the famous passage about the two bones).² But one can also devise a much more refined natural science that reveals nature's mirror-game to be an unreal play of forces, and can use technology as a real means to this revelation. This affirms the distinction between image and reality, and tackles both problems head on. In the case of the image, that problem lies in its metaphorical nature. For if architecture is more truly an image of beautiful natural force than an image of real scientific force, then it would be better to search for the genesis of beauty, for the beauti-

ful thing, than for the accurate depiction of proportioned power. Of course, one should not forget how to lay bricks and construct an arch – on the contrary – but doesn't the refinement of beauty lie in the subtlety of the stucco? It is thus *crucial* to acknowledge that action is reaction, of course! But the two do not form a couple in the architectural sense. It is even more crucial to acknowledge that imagination is active, and therefore not reactive. This may be less natural, but it is nonetheless a reason not to approach the image of a naturally painted power with resentment. The masterly thing, at this point, is to say, let us wear this natural mask and truly exaggerate, raise the power, force the issue – yes, a *tour de force*, a show of power, because only then is there a chance that the balance of strength will shift, that we will disempower the natural idiom and that something will bud there, that the budding power of beauty, of architecture will come to us and triumph. It is masterly to say this because it is *disinterested*, for that arrival cannot be measured in terms of interest.

To see this, let us travel to S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, the small church in the heart of Rome where Borromini began his career as an independent architect. In the interior, the image of nature is visible not only in the decoration but, most importantly, in the verticality of the columns, like an imagined triumph over gravity. They stand firmly, these tree-columns. Alongside this classical motif, Borromini introduces a horizontal, placing the columns in overlapping groups so that they generate a decelerating and accelerating rhythm. He then crowns them with one continuous entablature, thus disrupting the logic of the arches, which should rest directly on the columns (for continuity in the conveyance of force). In particular places, selected for planimetric and perspectival reasons, he has the entablature recede and balloon the walls. This builds on the idea of dilating and contracting forces. The image of a supporting framework is eroded by the elliptical experiments, and with arches that twist where they bear the heaviest load, the ideal image of gravity appears to have been conquered. The power of matter makes way for the power of space: centripetal and centrifugal space, evasion and invasion. Diastole, systole . . . aha! The image of *nature* has not yet been conquered. In fact, what emerges is a vital, multidimensionally pulsating organism. A beating heart. But more important than this organic space is the type of observation it demands. The idea of an organism creates the impression – reinforced by the compactness of the dome's oval – that the space can be surveyed in a single glance. Nothing could be further from the truth! This impression goes back to the idea of the oval as a perspectival space in which everything flees our gaze to converge at the vanishing point. S. Carlo does not work like that at all. Along with the longitudinal axis of the oval, which can be detected in the ground area as well, the lateral and vertical axes are emphasised. The lateral axis is reinforced by the two concave altar niches, in which the arrangement of the elements and the disappearance of the

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Galileo Galilei, *Discorsi e dimostrazioni matematiche intorno a due nuove scienze* (1638).

The passage in question can also be found in Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, *Theorieën van het architectonies ontwerpen* (Nijmegen, 1984).

receding coffers of the concha behind the pediment create a perspectival illusion. The longitudinal and lateral directions now begin to modify each other. In both cases, the perspective is more radial than central. The eye itself is subjected to centripetal and centrifugal forces, forced to keep moving, and it grows disoriented among the frames, supports and arches that light up like lines of force. The potential for the gaze to draw a conclusion – a potential that could be taken for granted only because of central perspective and the consequent closure of the organism – ceases to exist, as does the possibility of taking in the overall distribution of the space. Even the balanced play of masses is sacrificed to the edgy suggestiveness of the structure. In following the lines, the eye takes pleasure in antics and tumbles, half-curves and arabesques that constantly turn back on themselves and thereby circle something else, a simple motif, a single organ, as it were, the organic quality of which has however been lost in our astonishment at the motif as a beautiful thing in itself, *una bella cosa*!³

Before the wandering eye, the astonished eye, the play of veins and muscles thus loses its depth, the organism becomes ornament, a collection of lines and objects of which only the beautiful forms matter. How powerful, this will to seize architecture away from nature's profundity and transform it into surface, this will to make the architectural eye, after all that turbulence, end in the stasis of the gaze, to swallow it up in the absurdity of seeing. But it is sublime too, the start of this degeneration in the ambiguity of the lines of force as a natural motif, a motif that is stripped of its nature by strong, rapid oscillation. And all this so that it will come, that beautiful thing, architecture.

Three ideas then play with the strength: (1) It is real, it is real gravity, and can be taken on by real, technical methods. (2) It is an image of natural forces. These can be taken on with a special technique: the further imagination of the entire organic arsenal. (3) Only in this hypertrophy of the organism does the eye degenerate into the absurdity of seeing. This is where the third force comes to light, a vital, rising force: making architecture lighter by stripping it of the weight of its natural content. The consummate technique that this seemed to require is therefore as simple as it is ingenious: intensifying the image of the force until it is lost in the multiplicity and velocity of lines. The will to deprive the viewer of his over-view, a folly of the eye, a *will to see*.

WAVE

What mark does this desire leave on the façade, the outside? And what is the relationship between that outside and the inside, the interior? Two questions, and Borromini addressed both of them through the idea of the wave. A wave can die away romantically or froth up expressionistically. In both cases, it is subject to the idea of an origin, whether dying or,

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A body without organs, one might say, echoing Deleuze and Guattari. In their joint studies, these authors made the organic the theme of their research. For them, the organism is a question of the organisation of the earth. To take on this question, they propose the art of 'unearthing' (deterritorialisation) and thereby attaining a 'body without organs'. This art does not target the organs as much as it does the organic. The art is to trace a convergence line out of it, a line of 'inorganisation'. The problem is not that of order and chaos, but that of the 'plane of consistency' that one must draw with these convergence lines, a cosmically composed chaos or Joycean chaosmos. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Capitalisme & Schizophrénie I & II, l'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris, 1972), and *Mille Plateaux* (Paris, 1980).

on the contrary, making one last appearance in all its intensity. There are 'neutral' waves too, however, in which other forces are at play, not those of the interior as origin but those of the surface as neuter, an undulation, *Schwung* or swing. But in this case, again, the natural resemblance remains, and we write in nature's idiom – of a rippling stream, for instance.

How are we to characterise Borromini's waves? Many authors have sought a prefiguration of modern architecture in his façades, and above all in their relationship to his interiors, seeing the undulation on the outside as an expression of the movements within. This might put one in mind of Mendelsohn's expressionistic buildings, in which expressiveness does create continuity between the inside and outside, as if in the façade, we see the intimate nature of the interior, the intimacy of the human, sloshing outside for one last moment, to remain standing in the artificial domain of the city. This movement does not greatly differ from that other modernism in which the interior and exterior become entirely homogeneous and the façade effaces itself, becoming a transparent medium.⁴ The same continuity could lie at the basis of Borromini's undulating façades: convex and concave movements could refer to the vitality of the organism within, in a homogeneous spatial concept. Brandi and Norberg-Schulz even speak of causality: a centrifugal spatial force on the inside gives us a bulge on the outside. The baroque space then becomes a *res extensa*, homogeneous, without a crack or cranny.

For ordinary visitors, however, the moment of cause and effect is never observable. To be sure, the image of a similarity imposes itself upon us, but if we trace the planimetric movement of the internal and external contours, we see that there is no continuity whatever, no linear relationship. The movement of the façade is never necessitated by spatial or constructive requirements of the 'organism'. This causality is a kind of mime, an art of the simulacrum.

What is more interesting than the bare fact of this rupture, however, is the architectural problem to which it points us, namely the independence of two undulating components as a reference to their own *space*. The interior points us to the question of typology: is there a formal concept belonging to a type of building? The exterior points us to the city, less a morphological problem than a question of the silhouette and rhythm of the wall. At S. Agnese, he plays a clever game with the component of the wall and profile.⁵ He incorporates the church into the fabric of the city with two linking sections, thereby reinforcing the wall, but then makes the façade recede so that the cupola protrudes outward and enters into a rhythmic play of verticals with its own campaniles and the belvederes of the adjacent Palazzo Pamphili, pointing towards the sky and at the same time adding strength to the wall.

The urban and typological factors thus reinforce the independence of the interior and exterior. As we see below, the undulations dissolve into the typological fixation of the

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It is therefore not so strange that Mendelsohn managed, almost soundlessly, to take the step from a sloshing continuity to a more regular one.

5

At least in the drawings that Borromini made for this purpose. This urban game has been reconstructed by Tafuri (see note 2).

baroque era; in the genesis of the formal concept of a plan, they develop a swinging typology. On the outside, the wave gives the city more *Schwung*. This says very little, however, about the natural appearance that both undulations retain. That raises the issue of the genesis of form. This problem is more complex than that of the city or the typology; it is precisely here that the resemblance between the interior and the exterior comes into being. As noted, this resemblance can be striking (as it is at S. Carlo and S. Maria dei Sette Dolori), and perhaps even a fortuitous accident, but never a necessity. It arises from the fact that the façade and the interior have the same type of planimetric origin. The problem that arises here, however, is quite different from that of a possible formal resemblance between the interior and exterior; specifically, it is that of the convergence of nature and science. For Borromini sets himself the task of extracting a natural and naturalistic image from mathematics. He achieves this by superimposing the geometric figures – diamonds, circles, ovals – that serve as the basis for the floor plan, or embedding them in one another, until they form a natural motif, whether it is a frenetic line or the regularity of a flower. Then geometry is no longer an ideal figure of nature, and nature no longer the content or idea of an ideal geometry. Nature emerges as the product of mathematics. The relation between science and nature is then as follows. Science is besotted with nature, but its cruel fate is that it is forced to pervert and metamorphose its own ideal laws if it wishes to obtain nature's beautiful features: a wave requires endless circling from a variety of points, a flower the endless rotation of squares. Nature lures geometry into this game, encouraging it by producing ideal figures in the course of its own metamorphoses: crystals, shells. And hence triangles and stars, waves and circles form mutual convergence lines. This art is perfectly reserved, however. Nowhere do we find the excesses of rococo. Architecture searches for the untraceable moment when geometry and nature come closest to convergence, searches for the *slightest* difference, the moment at which one cuts off flower-nature as a motif that is no longer real but linguistic, a product, an artefact. The slightest difference, but *ineradicable* – a question of restrained gardening.

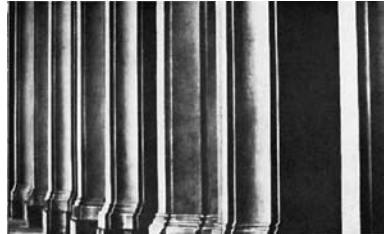
Let us return to S. Carlo to look at all of this in combination. This little church cannot be approached from the front; it stands on a corner at the intersection of two narrow streets. From the two streets, two different urban design motifs were developed. Approaching from one of the two, we see the corner tower, confirming the status of the little church as a monumental moment, a pivot of the city. In the other street, from a distance, the façade looks like a luminous motif and a slight rippling of the wall. When we come closer, this manipulation of the urban accent metamorphoses into swinging architecture. As we approach, the dynamism of the wave increases. On a sunny day, the chiaroscuro enhances the effect; light and shade are not artfully balanced but used to expand the ampli-



Detail of one of the lateral chapels at San Giovanni in Laterano



San Giovanni, pillars of the central nave, detail. Brightening the architecture



San Giovanni, pillars of the central nave. Rhythm of light

tude. And when we finally arrive in front of the façade, our gaze shoots upward along the rising columns, encounters this stone undulation along the way, and ends where the silhouette, with a stray cloud alongside it, looks like a veil blown by the wind. There it dissolves in a tactile wave of light.

When we enter the elongated space of the interior, a striking resemblance washes over us. But above all, the interior raises the typological question of the baroque era: is an elongated plan best suited to the new requirements imposed on church architecture by the liturgy? (Masses had to unite ritual with spectacle.) In other words, does the formal concept have to fall halfway between the temple and the basilica? No, Borromini says, and he places the oval that the baroque selected as the ideal answer to this typological problem atop the dome of this small church, instead of using it as the floor plan. The question of the elongated plan is irrelevant; it is much more interesting to put typology to the test in the genetic game of nature and geometry, thus attaining flexibility and the atypical. Within this approach, the planimetric figure of the wave is a welcome one.

We now know that the correspondence between the wave on the outside and the wave on the inside is a simulacrum. The exterior is no longer a product of the interior, or vice versa (as is confirmed by their planimetric genesis: the interior is a product of right angles and ellipses, the exterior of pure circles). Both waves are informed by the idea of severing the image from its origins, preferably as close as possible to the source, the continuing recession into the intersection of geometry and nature. The will to see is thus a *will to sever*. The interior is severed and separated from the exterior; the image is severed and separated from its nature. And it is precisely in this cutting technique, in this sharp art, in their confirmation, that one says to architecture,

'You must come . . .'

GARLAND AND STAR

Like a wave of strength and light, then. Light and strength belong to the surface, as a language of architecture. The wave gives us an idea of the genesis of this language in a desire to sever. Power was not only the image of the power of gravity or contraction, but also the generative power of the image, a will to see. Light was not only sunlight or side-light, but also the illumination of architecture, like a desire to shine, a craving to seem.⁶ In each case, we can see naturalism, as a linguistic moment, a moment of luminous seeming, in which the natural habitat of architecture is lost. But this loss contains a potential point of arrival for architecture, an architecture that seems to sing of its own accord . . . *como una ola de fuerza y luz*. The future of architectural life is at play here. But in this idea of the future, the idea of history is also at play, the idea of architectural life's faculty of memory.

6

Translator's note: In this passage, the author plays on the ambiguity of the Dutch verb 'schijnen', which means both 'shine' and 'seem, appear'. Author's note: The concept of the earth as a battleground of earthly and 'unearthing' or degenerative forces comes from Nietzsche-Deleuze. See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris, 1962). The will always germinates in a relationship between two forces. Bachelard has developed a typology of the will for representing this battleground of forces: *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Paris, 1947). An exceptional will germinates when earth no longer resists imagination and a rising psychic force emerges, a will to fly. Bachelard sees this force in all the 'Manichaean flowers', as he calls them: Shelley, Poe, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Novalis, Rimbaud (*L'air et les songes*, Paris, 1943). Borromini should be counted among this family.

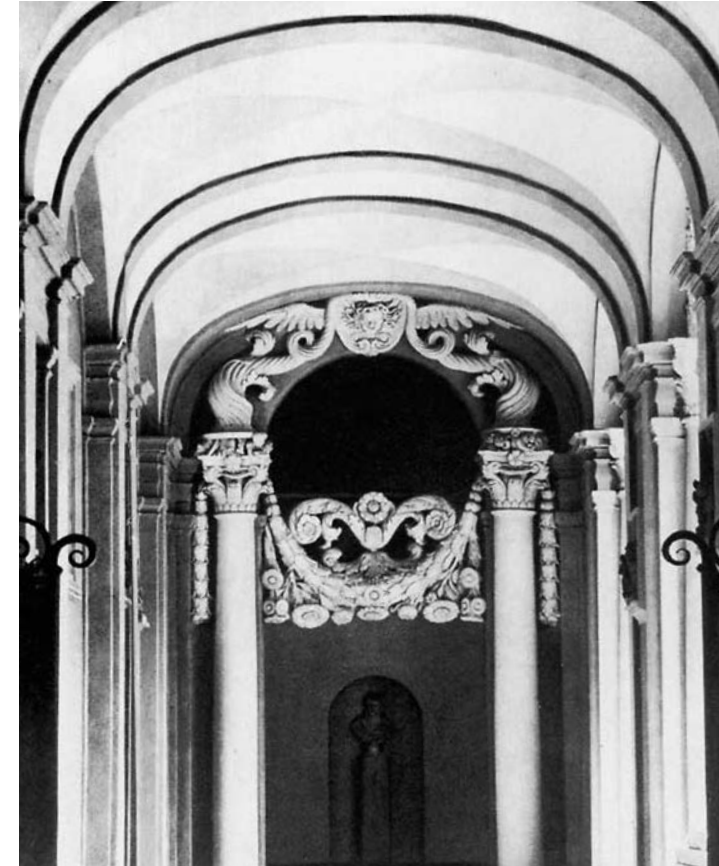
What is their relationship? We can find the answer in the art of decoration as Borromini practices it. Borromini reveres and adores history. He does so with humour, in which the powers of error play a part. Let us look at the structure of the order in the interior of S. Carlo, for example. A concave architrave – unimaginable, impossible. The pediment is crooked in places, truly laughable. And decorating the sunken quarter-vault of the concha with square coffering, that's asking for misshapen lines. But to frame this entire grimace with a twisted arch like a sarcastic aureole is to summon the devil and curse in his face. Pure heresy, as Bernini remarked, betraying a poor sense of humour. For it is truly hilarious to see how Borromini deprives this structure, this old code, of its reality. Likewise, in the courtyard of the Oratory of S. Filippo Neri, for instance, the syntax of the elements is intensely ironic; the classical entablature of architrave, frieze and cornice, which should not be separated from the capital by anything more than an abacus, is lifted up, the distance between the two monstrously increased, so that the remainder, a light cornice with a heavy Attic, simply hovers. *Vergogna!*

Yet not only the classical code, but also the mannerism and Gothic, that drift in this ether of gently mocking or mocked signs. The gesticulation of laughter: what was once structure is now grimacing memory; what was once syntax is now a decoration, a smile; what was once a forbidden past, is now a Gothic quip. O, that hallucinating memory.

The same is true of all those other languages: the symbolic, the allegorical, and that of the icon. S. Ivo is freighted with them, inside and out. Take the star in the plan, for example. Is it really a star? A flower, perhaps. In any case, a double triangle, a double trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, twice! But it is also a papal emblem and, allegorically, a star of salvation. And it pays homage to geometry as a clever science (S. Ivo della Sapienza is the Roman university church of the baroque period, dedicated to the patron saint of science). Allegorical, emblematic and symbolic voices jockey for possession of a single motif. And so it goes, every time: mountains of loaves, oak leaves or palms, it is unclear whether the reference is to nature or religion, or both. What multiplicity of meaning, what polysemy! But – and this is the ultimate of ironies – isn't S. Ivo dedicated to unity, to science's victory over the confusion of tongues? Isn't that the Tower of Babel crowning its roof? Indeed it is, but even the Babel allegory can be interpreted in at least two ways. So we have lost them, those beautiful signs, round or flat, the Gothic triangle – Father referent, Son signifier and the Holy Spirit as the messenger meaning – or the Renaissance realm of analogies. But what is even more beautiful is anticipating the lost future of all full signs, of signs that by inner necessity refer to their reality. This stirring of the future, for instance, in the flora and the fauna, the flowers and the foliage, the fruit and festoons. The galleria of the Accademia di San Luca: it is as if the cornucopia has spilled its contents



San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, façade
The monastery of the Filippini, façade



Accademia di San Luca, the galleria

for the last time, to compensate for the lost nature of the sign. What hangs down like a wreath of joy, a festive gesture, rises to a winged but flesh-eating medusa head. And note the columns with their ultra-vital capitals, the volutes veiling the overflowing abacus-fruit dish, the apples, bunches of grapes and pinecones, and so much more. It is all much too much, much too real, much too lively. It is as if this excess of stucco wished to proclaim its opposite: death, nature's cadaver, an image once and for all.⁷ *Vivat, crescat, floreat*, but only as a *natura morte*! Furthermore, it is not even decorum, wreathes no value and confers no dignity. Or yes, its own emptiness. Garlands coil and curl around themselves like their own funeral wreaths. Take another look in back, against the wall there: upwards coiling, downwards hanging, both light, with a semicircular black surface between them. Almost Piranesi's famous altar. In any case, death . . . and darkness, void . . . and light; something is dawning there, perhaps architecture. *Architecture*? You have to cut the flower before you can enjoy it, and hold it up to the light to see its beauty. You have to cut even more flowers to get used to the idea of cutting, to learn architecture *as* a technique and embrace it *as* an artefact. But the basket of flowers strewn for the purpose of concealment must be infinitely rich, to mislead the eye like a *will to deceive*. There is nothing at all negative about that: infinite quantities of foliage are needed to cover up architecture when it no longer speaks in the immediate proximity of nature, under nature's protection, and at the same time to honour and commemorate the grave of this lost reality of architecture. So much foliage to conceal the naked, blinding secret of architecture, because now there is a chance that it will come, architecture, burning like that original fire, burning up space and consuming itself and wiping out all difference, an answer that will drain space dry once and for all. The art is to respect that secret then, to cover the blinding riddle, a rain of pomegranates to douse the proximity.

It can be even more direct, making the flames recede, by representing them, see high above on the campaniles and Borrominiesque magic caps, and by reiterating the flames representationally, and departing in that reiteration from the original flame, the archi-flame, differing in *techné*, in tectonics, and hence in archi-*techné*, architectonics. So that it will not come, will not come . . .

'And it does not come, it does not drain us dry . . .'

CRYSTAL

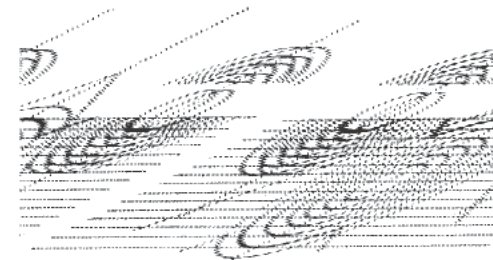
And so it was questioning the impossible, to return architecture to its origin and originality, the inherent meaning of tectonics; it was an impossible question and an unsatisfiable demand. For what is architecture? If we knew that, we would not build, would never build again . . . That is why we must cover up that riddle, so that it does not solve itself; we must surround it with stone, with architecture. Dal Co aptly remarks

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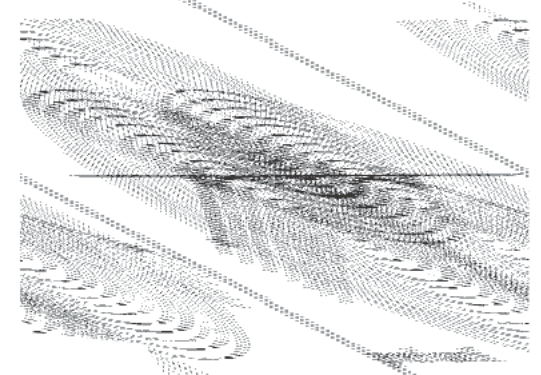
See Jean Baudrillard,
L'échange symbolique et la mort
(Paris, 1976), 79-82.



San Carlo, the façade viewed from below, a deluge of light



Planimetric plan of the exterior of Santa Maria dei Sette Dolori



Planimetric plan of the façade of San Carlino

that architecture is a construction for concealing itself. And so it remains a question and a sign, a mark, a question mark in the tapestry of time, an ephemeral moment in the endless conversation of and with architecture, in the tapestry of time where it becomes tangled up with other lines of thought and questions, Borrominian architecture, a constellation.

What other lines of thought, for example?

With *classicism*. Classicism is an architecture devoted to the earth. That is where it traces a true history, an origin and continuation. In this framework, the origin of architecture is an ideal object: a Platonic idea or an earthly *noema*. This idealisation relates to time as history (Greek architecture as an archetype), space as nature (ideal proportions as harmonic physics) or technology as primitive (Laugier's hut of branches as natural technology). This ideal idea is supposed to be reinscribed, and approached as closely as possible, in every architectural object. That object must be a mirror or imprint of it, preferably a faithful copy. Any classicism measures history by the success of this venture. For Vasari, thus, Michelangelo was a hero; he rivalled and *outdid* even the ancients. For the neo-classicist Winckelmann, he was an object of degeneration and decline for that very reason. And so, in the eyes of classicism, Borromini – who revered Michelangelo as the grandfather of his architecture – must have looked like an aberration and an error, a bizarre and capricious degeneration, turning the world and his roots on their head.

Even so, the baroque Borromini never did anything but draw the utmost consequences from what was already taking place in the Renaissance and Mannerist periods – what was, in fact, already occurring in the heart of classicism. He saw that if the archetypal, earthly *noema* of architecture contained so many notable phenomena, so far removed from one another and so diverse, so many interpretations and so many imitations, that equally many origins just might reveal themselves in those images, equally many fragments of the origin.

Ora questo è perduto . . . But even then, it already was!

These fragments were Borromini's building blocks. And that is a second line of thought, not anti-classicist but *beyond classicism*; the fragment that links Borromini to Piranesi, cartographer and cataloguer of a lost but imagined Rome and Egypt, and with Soane, that archaeologist of the frivolous for whom it is not enough to gather up the fragments, for whom even the four cardinal directions, once involved in the birth certificate of a great deal of classical beauty, grace the walls like empty labels. The baroque Borromini was not a classicist, but nor was he an anti-classicist. When he mocked classicism, it was not out of resentment, but because it was an object of affection, just as he mocked nature with his frenzied reverence, to confront both with their senseless beauty. The baroque Borromini; but was he truly *baroque*? This question is difficult to answer; it requires a baroque yardstick. Architecture does not have such a thing. All we can say is that compared with Bernini, Cortona and Rainaldi, he was the most

baroque of all, that is to say the least classicistic. Not only stylistically; for Bernini, the truth of history was still at stake. Borromini strayed farthest from the path. Even so, this was not pure excess. For unlike rococo, which is often seen as the legitimate heir to the baroque, rococo, for which excess was merely excess, unlike this wilderness, Borromini saw excess rise out of emptiness. And so he did not practice an art, like rococo, of maximal departure from an already distant truth of nature, but an art of minimal difference with the still-intimate illusion of nature. He sensed that cutting the flower would bring not only the joy and perversity of the game, but also the separation and the farewell, the scar and the wound.

And he bears them without nostalgia.⁸ His lack of nostalgia may have been the most baroque thing about him. So much so that – possibly against his better judgment and, in any case, very hesitantly – he returned to the practice of synthesis, architecture as a synthetic product. This, then, is what links him to Guarini and Vittone, those other chemists of future material (Giedion and Argan, those advocates of the modern, they recognised them!).

It was Borromini, Guarini and Vittone who started to become aware of the intermediary, of the technique of architecture, of architecture *as* a technique. Even before neo-classicism, Borromini saw that even an architecture that mimicked nature would need a technique, the technique of pantomime. All three of them then said: if the technique, the instrument, the machine is necessary, surely it is finer and more beautiful for it no longer to invoke nature, but to evoke architecture, utter deracination, transcendental technique. Acrobatic domes, a trapeze of vaulting, an athletics of architecture was what they placed there in the machina-mecano-metamorpho-sphere. Borromini, Guarini, Vittone, they lived the baroque architectural life, in them a cosmonautic space flight began and a fallen star ended. With their domes, those magic caps, they fittingly covered up the riddle, honoured the star.

A star, a crystal, then, a diadem, because there the imaginary values of heaven and earth are interchanged, because the crystal, perfectly inorganic, still invisibly preserves the memory of organic time. But also because it opens the time of polishing, a technical time, yes, but as a mathesis of midnight figures. In nature's crystal farewell, a constellating dream is also at play, one which must stake earthly thoughts in order to heave, to dare, to devise an ethereal future.⁹ What knowledge we have asked for, what knowing conceals itself in this naturalism. It is the knowledge of the evening and the knowing of the wound, not without a smile or quip. A feigned reality, a mined crystal, a *desire to sparkle*. Loss and gain, nature lost, fire regained, even if it does not come, does not come, for it dies like all nature. Then it is a fine thing to say with furore, like Borromini:

'To die a diadem . . .'

Translated by David McKay

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The baroque is often seen as the era of melancholy. Walter Benjamin sees it as the era of the *Trauerspiel*. The melancholy is then allegorical (see Henk Hoeks, 'Trouw aan de dingen'). When melancholy rids itself of allegory, lost time triumphs, and the concept of a 'Malinconia felix' takes shape, as Pieter Jan Gijsberts describes in his work on the paintings of Adriaen Coorte (see 'Het in zijn nu verblijvend hier'). Both of these articles can be found in the superb issue of *Museumjournaal* (no. 5/6) devoted entirely to 'nostalgia for seeing'. It is well known that Borromini was a very melancholy person; his architecture, however, is devoid of nostalgia; after all, the idea of a house or home lost in history is incompatible with his hallucinatory art of memory. In fact, nostalgia is probably a phenomenon characteristic of the twentieth century.

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Borromini lived in the age of doubt. Not only because the heliocentrism of Copernicus and Galileo threatened to do away with the earth as a fixed point of reference, and this in its turn was outdone by Giordano Bruno's infinite space with infinitely many suns, but more generally because the possibility had been called into question of the existence of any fixed point at all, for being and seeing, morality and thought. Pascal, Descartes and Leibniz came up with dubious responses to this (see Michel Serres, *L'interference*, Paris, 1972, 137 ff.). Borromini's version of this doubt could be expressed as follows: Is an architecture that transcends earth, nature and humanity possible? Is there any point at all to which architecture can be fixed? After writing down this question, he shot it into the heavens, where it still sparkles, architecture's foolish question mark. Then he weighed his options, wondered . . . and went to work to give life to that architecture.