

DIGITAL IMAGING AND PHOTOGRAPHY

WEDNESDAY, 8 JUNE 2011

Utopias, the Cathedral of the New Worlds and the Microchip



Lyonel Feininger *Cathedral Frontispiece* from the first *Bauhaus Manifesto* 1919. Woodcut.

A minor scriptwriter for the Republican Party in the United States, called George Gilder once said “the digital microchip is the Gothic Cathedral of our time... It will transform business, education and art. It can renew and entire culture” (Winston, B, 2005 p. 375).

Before I explore the above statement within the context of Brian Winston’s book, it is worth pointing out that the image of the cathedral connects us to the history of immersion in art. The great cathedrals of Europe are models of the total artwork, the very basis of multimedia practices (Packer and Jordan, 2001, xxiii). The image of the cathedral connects us too with utopian concepts.

William Golding in his novel *The Spire*, describes the cathedral as a “diagram of prayer” (1964, p. 120), because it points beyond itself, in this case to heaven and to God or to the divine imagination. Modernism, especially the progressive and radical strain of modernism, points beyond itself too. It imagines human perfectibility and imagines a better world. Is it all about transcendence?

Who was it who said that the railway stations were the cathedrals of the 19th Century? Was it Marx, Engels, Benjamin, Hughes or someone else?

The great example of this is the Bauhaus, founded by Walter Gropius in 1919. The word Bauhaus literally means “House for Building”. This name “carried the intentional overtones of the *Bauhütten* or the lodges where, in the Middle Ages, masons and designers at work on medieval cathedrals were housed (Hughes, 1991 p.192). This connects modernity with the medieval and to William Morris and the 19th Century Arts and Crafts Movement. The image of the Cathedral in modernist terms is then a “symbol of Utopian collectivism” which was “part of the Bauhaus myth” (Hughes, 1991 p.192).

What the Bauhaus promised was an end of the snobbery between art, design and craft. This was claimed in his manifesto:

Architects, sculptors, painters, we all must return to the crafts! For art is not a “profession.” There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman. In rare moments of inspiration, transcending the consciousness of his will, the grace of heaven may cause his work to blossom into art. But proficiency in a craft is essential to every artist. Therein lies the prime source of creative imagination.

Let us then create a new guild of craftsmen without the class distinctions that raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist! Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith. (Naylor, G., 1968 p. 50)

The first manifesto had as its frontispiece a woodcut of a starlit cathedral by Lyonel Feininger (1919).

I doubt if George Gilder was considering the Bauhaus when he spoke of the cathedral.

Behind Gilder’s words, according to Brian Winston, “lies a hostility to the existing world of liberal free expression... Who was ‘tired of TV’? Who felt that an entire culture needed renewing? Who else but Gilder and those of like mind? His intervention made him momentarily a player in American *Kulturkampf* of the millennium’s last decades, a sustained conservative war on liberal expression which was part of a wider political divisiveness ” (Winston, 2005, p. 375).

The idea of an “information revolution is mere hype” that “was dependent on a fundamental misunderstanding of the digital grounded in a basic loss of its history and an imperfect sense of physics” (Winston, B., 2005, p.376). Professor Winston draws our attention to the origins of digital technology: “the first actual device to sample a sound wave digitally was constructed and patented by a sound engineer A.H. Reeve in 1938” (Winston, 2005, p. 376). By 1940, the first digital calculator had been built by the American physicist and inventor John Atanasoff.

Brian Winston unravels some of the threads of the key stages of technological development: “the first demonstrations of semi-conductor materials in the 1870s; through the theoretical physics behind the transistor in 1920s; to the transistors themselves in 1948” (Winston, 2005, p. 376). The digital microchip described by Gilder was itself 25 years older, having been perfected by Marcian (Ted) Hoff at Intel in 1969.

Reconnecting us back to the metaphor of the Middle Ages, the cathedral and the medieval/Bauhaus model of the guild of craftsmen “these technologists - Kirby, Hoff and many others- who had a hand in its development, remain as anonymous as any ecclesiastical architect is crucial to the oxymoronic idea that a fundamentally transformative ‘digital revolution is underway” (Winston, 2005, p. 376).

Sources:

Golding, W., (1964) *The Spire* London: Faber

Hughes, R., (1991) *The Shock of the New* London: Thames and Hudson

Naylor, G., (1968) *The Bauhaus* London: Studio Vista

Packer and Jordan, (2001) *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* New York, London: W.W. Norton

Winston, B., (2005) *Messages* London: Routledge

POSTED BY JOHN HUDSON AT 11:22 

LABELS: [CYBERCULTURE](#), [CYBERTOPIA](#)