

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Henri Lefebvre, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (edited by Łukasz Stanek; translated by Robert Bononno), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8166-7720-7 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-8166-7719-1 (cloth)

In 2008, Łukasz Stanek experienced that rarest moment of scholarly *jouissance*: the discovery of a lost manuscript. Stanek—a leading authority on the work of Henri Lefebvre (see Stanek 2011)—had travelled to Saragossa to visit the urban sociologist Mario Gaviria, who had been one of Lefebvre’s closest friends and colleagues. Gaviria told Stanek of a manuscript he had commissioned from Lefebvre in 1973 as part of a study of tourist new towns in Spain. Gaviria had considered the resulting text too abstract for inclusion in the study, and had shelved it in a library in Cortes, where it had remained untouched ever since. The next day the two of them travelled to the library, where, after several hours of searching, they found the manuscript. Now Stanek has organized its publication, lucidly translated into English by Robert Bononno (who also translated *The Urban Revolution* [Lefebvre 2003]) and including an excellent introduction by Stanek himself. For Lefebvre aficionados, the emergence of an entirely “new” work is obviously an exciting moment, and there is plenty here to slake our thirsts. But more general readers hoping to learn about the relationship between architecture and enjoyment should note that this is not really a book about architecture—at least in the common understanding of the term. Instead, it is a sustained critique of the multiple dimensions in which the sensuality of lived experience has been eviscerated from the everyday spaces of modern capitalism, and an equally relentless search for the utopian possibilities that lie buried within this quotidian wreckage.

Lefebvre begins by defining architecture in very broad terms, as “the production of space at a specific level, ranging from furniture to gardens and parks and even landscapes” (p.3). Only urbanism and spatial planning are excluded, as the levels at which “certain agents and powers intervene that are quite capable of crushing

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architects completely” (p.3). This methodological “isolation” from the structures of state and capital aims to reveal the utopian potentialities of architecture, understood as a practice closely allied to Heidegger’s notion of dwelling, and sharing more in common with poetry and music than with the reductive techniques of commercial construction. Confronted by the abstract space of modern capitalism, in which the symbolic textures of pre-capitalist places have been ravaged by a geometrical plague, Lefebvre poses the question that provides the focus of the book: “Where then is the architecture of enjoyment?” (p.21). In the course of responding to this question, he offers several fragmentary definitions of enjoyment. It should be “understood in the broadest sense, the way we are said to ‘enjoy life’” (p.16), including “happiness, joy, pleasure” (p.103). It encompasses spiritual ecstasy: “a deeper sensuality” beyond physical pleasure (p.15), as well as orgasmic release: “a flash, a form of energy that is expended, wasted, destroying itself in the process” (p.115). This release is not only sexual, but can take the form of “energy expended in festivals and revolutions” (p.70). As with many of Lefebvre’s concepts, however, enjoyment should be understood less in terms of this diversity of positive experiences than as a tool of negative critique—defined by what it is not, and by what remains when the obstacles to its becoming are removed. For Lefebvre, enjoyment is *not* the alienated “satisfaction, comfort, well-being, and saturation” (p.51) promised by bureaucratic consumer capitalism. In contrast to this “abstract utopia”, Lefebvre defines the architecture of enjoyment as a “concrete utopia, which...takes as its strategic hypothesis the negation of the everyday, of work, of the exchange economy...It begins with enjoyment and seeks to create a new space, which can only be based on an architectural project” (p.148).

Rather than setting out an architectural project, however, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* provides a more general defence of the concrete against the abstract, the lived against the conceived, the spontaneous against the planned. The text shares many of its concerns and much of its terminology with *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre 1991), which Lefebvre was working on at the time that he wrote this.

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Stylistically, however, it has more in common with his more obscure and experimental thought-pieces such as *Toward the Cyberanthrope* (Lefebvre 1972) or *Presence and Absence: Contribution to the Theory of Representations* (Lefebvre 2006) (neither of which has yet been translated into English). As in these books, in *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* Lefebvre takes a specific motif, and uses it to riff on his favourite themes with gleeful disregard for the boundaries of respectable academic discourse. Having introduced the problem of enjoyment, Lefebvre embarks on an imaginative “quest”, arguing that “[t]o discover the place of enjoyment, we must enter the dream, because the real has betrayed joy” (p.32). At this point the pragmatism of Gaviria’s decision not to include the book in his state-commissioned final report becomes abundantly clear. Imagine the horror of the uptight government functionary who, turning the page in impatient expectation of sensible policy recommendations, would suddenly have been whisked away on a “magic carpet ride” across time and space in search of spaces of enjoyment (p.42). Under Lefebvre’s (distinctly gendered and orientalisng) gaze, however, each of the seemingly voluptuous locations encountered on this adventure is found to be lacking. Isfahan’s beauty is that of asceticism, not enjoyment. The seduction of Angkor Wat lies in its glorification of power. And Nicolas Schöffer’s proposed “Centre for Sexual Relaxation” transforms “a fragment of the female body into a pleasure machine”, resulting in “the fragmentation of desire” and “a form of extreme, but exhausted, visualization” (p.48).

Having alighted from his magic carpet, Lefebvre spends the rest of the book pursuing his quarry across the terrain of the social sciences, which he finds to be equally bereft of enjoyment. He begins with philosophy, arguing that philosophers from the pre-Socratics to the present have sought to define enjoyment in ways that reduce the sensuality of lived experience to brittle knowledge and frigid spirituality. Even Heidegger’s concept of poetic dwelling—of such inspiration to Lefebvre throughout his later work—is accused of a metaphysical obtuseness that “completely

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ignores enjoyment” (p.79). The only philosophers to emerge with any credit are Nietzsche—for his embrace of “a vital, explosive energy, the energy of enjoyment” (p.70)—and Marx—for his endorsement of revolution as the necessary means of propelling “society as a whole into an age of enjoyment” (p.71). From here, Lefebvre moves to anthropology. Like the majority of Western philosophy, structuralist anthropology is condemned for replacing lived experience with intellectual abstractions that erase enjoyment. In ethnographic studies of the Mongolian yurt, however, Lefebvre finds evidence of a richly symbolic space, which might be considered a space of happiness, if not enjoyment. He contrasts the yurt, as “a social space...made for the development of the human being” (p.86), to the spaces of the sex industry, which offer a “functionalised sensuality, with a price tag attached”, concluding that “[t]he space of enjoyment cannot provide a ready-made, consumable form of enjoyment” (p.86).

The next chapter focuses on history. Lefebvre argues that, in its dual obsession with the technical and the anecdotal, the discipline of history has failed to adequately theorise the relationship between the development of capitalism and the production of space. He then presents his own account of this relationship, in an argument reminiscent of the historical chapter of *The Production of Space*. The history of space is a dialectic of domination and appropriation, through which abstract space consolidates itself, evolving towards the horizon that Lefebvre has elsewhere identified as “planetary urbanisation” (see Brenner 2013). Within this evermore dominated space, fragments of past spaces continue to echo with the possibilities of enjoyment. Lefebvre offers the example of the cloister—a space not subordinated to exchange value and not saturated with signs, which allows for “the flight of the imaginary towards a transcendent reality...a contemplative joy quite distinct from sensory-sensual pleasure” (p.94). As for the spaces of enjoyment produced by capital itself, Lefebvre notes the proliferation of leisure spaces such as the beach resorts that Gaviria’s research project addressed. Such spaces contain a utopian dimension, in

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their promise of an escape from everyday life, in which “use value comes to life in the face of exchange value” (p.100). But their subordination to capital ensures that this promise is betrayed. “The result is a parody of the festival, a caricature of enjoyment: the utopia of free days devoted to celebration and enjoyment within a pressurized time-space subject to the demands of profit and a return on investment” (p.101).

Lefebvre then turns his attention to psychology and psychoanalysis, acknowledging that these disciplines have advanced beyond philosophy in their emphasis on the embodied dimension of enjoyment. However, their claims to scientific status, and their continued commitment to the established conventions of academic knowledge, have ultimately led them “to grasp the flower of living flesh with steel forceps, with surgical tools [that] attempt to trap pleasure and joy” (p.103). Lefebvre accuses these practices of operating as mechanisms for the adaptation of alienated human beings to the “tiresome satisfactions” (p.104) of the quotidian—and to the absence of enjoyment. His most damning critique, however, is saved for the chapter on semantics, which he attacks for its reduction of meaning to signification and of symbols to signs. He equates this process with the emergence of “abstract space and the disappearance of architecture as an effect of meaning”, to be replaced by “the actively reductive nature of the building, of the function of the signified, of the space that contains sign-things” (p.124).

This is followed by a chapter on economics, in which Lefebvre argues that an economy of enjoyment would necessarily subordinate exchange value to use value, noting that the development of capitalism has led to the spatialisation of this contradiction in the form of the ecological crisis. Referring to the Club of Rome’s 1972 report on the “limits to growth”, Lefebvre argues that “the assumption of infinite growth, turned into a supreme political truth, has taken on the sinister appearance of a political utopia, the most abstract, the deadliest of all” (p.133). The economy of enjoyment would be anti-productivist, but would also resist the ascetic primitivism of the ecology movement that was emerging at the time, by embracing the possibility

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opened by capitalism of a fully automated post-capitalist society of abundance and non-work, replacing “a space that destroys nature” with “the space that addresses all of nature, not merely its resources, but space as a whole” (p.133).

The final chapter is on architecture. This, it would be reasonable to assume, is the point at which the entire book will at last be brought together. The long trek through the wastelands of abstraction has led to an oasis in which the architecture of enjoyment will be revealed. As Lefebvre himself observes at the start of the chapter, “if this analysis uncovers a principle (or principles) of classification for architectural works that is related to enjoyment...the time spent on such a pursuit will not have been in vain” (p.136). But instead of providing us with such a classification, he immediately ambles off on another flight of fancy, musing on the relative sensual merits of the Baths of Diocletian in Rome and the erotic temples of Khajuraho and Ajanta in India. He then aimlessly reflects on the work of the utopian planners Charles Fourier and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, before petering out with two apologetic attempts at the classification he had promised: inside/outside and symbolic/analogical, which are so weak and undeveloped that even he seems to be unconvinced. This is Lefebvre at his most frustrating. Compared to the relative coherence of the rest of the book, it reinforces the impression that architecture is not really Lefebvre’s concern here, but is added almost as an afterthought to yet another instalment in his lifelong ruminations on the dialectic of abstraction and lived experience in the modern world.

To the extent that Lefebvre endorses a particular architectural practice, it is a non-practice: “If painting and music offer a return to indifference and ambiguity”, he asks, “why can’t architecture achieve similar results with space?” (p.110). He repeatedly refers to Constant Nieuwenhuys, a member of the Situationist International, whose New Babylon Project conceived of a worldwide city in which architecture would provide no more than the minimum coordinates required for collective artistic freedom (see Wigley 1998). He also returns to the example of the cloister discussed above; in contrast to the tendency of modern architecture to obey

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“the law of power, which cannot allow disturbance or disorder”, Lefebvre celebrates the minimalism of the cloister, which provides “the space of contemplation, the space of dream” and is “able to control ambiguity, to orient it towards a certain enjoyment” (p.110). He concludes that it is “erroneous to hold that enjoyment is the result of architectural effect”, arguing that architecture and the production of space should “not have enjoyment as their goal”, but should “allow it, lead to it, prepare it” (p.151).

For Lefebvre, the role of architecture is therefore essentially negative, in the sense of being restricted to opening the space in which enjoyment can spontaneously emerge. What, then, is the critical value of Lefebvre’s theory of enjoyment? While it may be gratifying for Lefebvreans to witness Henri mocking the desiccated analysts and pedantic systematisers of the various academic disciplines, we should acknowledge that his critiques are rarely developed in the depth required to convince the non-converted. Indeed, he could often be accused of providing erroneous caricatures of his intended targets, when a more nuanced approach would both strengthen his critique and open the possibility of more productive engagements. This is the case, for example, in the chapter on psychology and psychoanalysis. From the outset, Lefebvre’s conflation of these two disciplines is misleading. Psychoanalysis, at least in its Lacanian variant, is overtly opposed to the normalizing agenda of institutional psychology. Far from reducing “uncertainty to certainty...silence to speech...pleasure to thought” (p.103), as Lefebvre suggests, Lacanian practice aims to create a space of radical uncertainty, in which silence is deployed against speech to break through delusional structures of thought, confronting the analysand with their true relationship to *jouissance*, in order to enable a fuller experience of enjoyment (see Fink 1995). Lefebvre misreads Freud’s theory of the death drive as a glorification of death over enjoyment, when it in fact concerns the unquenchable drive of *jouissance* beyond the limits of the body. He affirms the role of the mirror as “the encounter of the self with the self, a mirror of truth” (p.110), while dismissing Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, according to which the mirror image gives rise to

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the encounter with the *false* self—the ego of narcissistic attachment. And he rejects the existence of the unconscious, without attempting to substantiate his position beyond asserting that “below consciousness, as above it, there is the body” (p.108).

The weakness of Lefebvre’s polemic against psychoanalysis is particularly relevant to the present discussion, given the centrality of Lacanian theory in contemporary critical work on the relationship between capitalism and *jouissance*. *Jouissance*, of course, is the Lacanian term for enjoyment, and was also the term used by Lefebvre in the original title of his manuscript. In a note at the start of the book, Bononno explains that he chose to translate it as “enjoyment” precisely to distinguish Lefebvre’s usage of the term from the now-hegemonic Lacanian definition. Yet the problem is not so easily avoided. For Lacan, *jouissance* is a profoundly ambiguous phenomenon that is closer to “getting off on something” than the humanistic ode to sensual pleasure and artistic happiness that Lefebvre sings in celebration of enjoyment. It is located in all the dimensions of the subject that Lefebvre denies—in the insatiability of the death drive, the narcissistic delusions of the ego, and the repressed desires of the unconscious. Since Lefebvre’s time, “advanced” capitalist societies have floundered ever deeper into a hyperreal morass of quantitatively-eased consumerism. In this context, his optimistic appeal to the ludic potential of the leisure society can only appear as misguided and naïve. Indeed, the 1968 generation’s assertion of radical enjoyment against bureaucratic capitalism ended up fuelling the neoliberal rejuvenation of capitalism itself (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Lacan’s dark vision of *jouissance* would seem to provide a critical weapon better suited to our times. As Slavoj Žižek (2006) has pointed out, “Enjoy!” is now the overriding imperative of capitalist society, and as such is an injunction to be resisted, not endorsed. Perhaps, as Alain Badiou has suggested, it is not enjoyment but love that constitutes the truly subversive utopian potentiality to be sought within the decadence and nihilism of the present. Love, for Badiou, “is like Noah’s cloak cast over these unpleasant considerations” (2012: 21).

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Were Lefebvre alive today, he may well have agreed with this conclusion. After all, love was a constant theme of his life and work (see Shields 1998)—although it is surprisingly absent from this book. Certainly, Lefebvre could only have been appalled by the trajectory of consumer society since his death in 1991. As we have seen, Lefebvre was explicitly opposed to the alienation and simulation of capitalist consumption, and it would be a mistake to equate his “space of enjoyment” with the cheap thrills of the postmodern *jouissance* machine. For him, it was not the beach resort that promised a utopia of enjoyment, but the modern transformation of the beach itself into a shared space of sensory delight. In *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, Lefebvre ends his magic carpet ride high above a beach. It is here that he finds the object of his quest, not in any architectural form, but in the confluence of the elements, and their collective appropriation: “Fire burns and consumes by its own force, water engulfs, and the air sweeps away and dries. Where they end, the beach begins. Transition, passages, encounters... a space of enjoyment that could be used by everyone, all class distinctions being dissolved in a strip of land near the sea” (p.49).

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