

Presentiments of death  
Edgar Lissels photographs of the NS-Architecture

by Dieter Bartetzko

Architecture is incorruptible. Like all arts it stores up, so to speak, behind the backs of its creators intentions and messages of which the latter are unaware. Art-historical examination of the so-called "Neue Deutsche Baukunst" reveals that all the modernity and even all the traditionalism of National Socialist architecture was just a porous mask from behind which the obsession with eternity and, not least, the longing for death showed through. Thus, just as the cultural critic Karl Heinz Bohrer once described the essential core of National Socialism as a "practical and mental ritual of killing," so the state buildings of the Third Reich betray themselves as being gigantic sacrificial altars, as catafalques and mausoleums, in and before which the masses were to attune themselves to the idea of their own death: a willing death, reality for thousands upon thousands into an agonizing, senseless death. The altars and monuments of antiquity were – often anonymously – the models for state buildings, enriched by the mythical aura that Fritz Lang and other German film directors gave their set architecture; fake buildings such as the crystal-shimmering and yet martial Worms Castle in Lang's *Nibelungen*, but also the cathedrals of Speyer and Worms – effectively shot in close-up – in Rudolf Bamberger's documentary films, aroused the rapturous admiration of Hitler and his architects.

Light, the effects of which had been learned from cinema, was a major tool in transforming the subliminal necrophilia of Nazi architecture into messages of salvation. Both the oppressed and their oppressors were intoxicated by the magical radiance that was spread at night primarily by the illuminated buildings that provided the settings for mass celebrations and mass solemnities. All this culminated in a construction that was entirely imaginary and yet became the most famous architectural work of the Third Reich: Albert Speer's cathedral of light, which anti-aircraft searchlights created in the night sky, first in Nuremberg and later in Berlin. The French ambassador of the time wrote in his memoirs that he felt "solemn, as in a cathedral made from ice."

A solemn, icy coldness also emanates from the photographs of Edgar Lissel. Since he, too, works with light, he shatters the mystique of the edifices of that era – only to give them a new mystique. The camera obscura technique with which he exposes photo canvases for hours at a time gives the buildings depicted a strange radiance and surrounds them with a glowing nimbus. They exude a pale, cold shine similar to that attributed by Hieronymus Bosch to Hell more than four hundred years earlier, when he painted his *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

The reverse procedure, whereby the buildings as color negatives of themselves become at once alien and yet identifiable, evokes an association with Franz Murnau's film

Nosferatu. The first viewers, so it is said, cried out with horror when Murnau allowed the furious coach ride to continue in the form of negative film from the instant when the frontier to the kingdom of evil was crossed. The shock of this world, which is distorted in order to reveal the ghastliness it conceals, can also be sensed in Lissel's photographs, the effect lessened by the delicacy of the angle of vision, the technique, and the colors, but still vivid in the long run.

All this, and the oppressive freeze, which at times seems more alarming than the milling masses in Murnau's ghost sequences, brings out the Third Reich. The time, the "fleeting appearances" of which Hitler spoke and which – as moving people or moved objects – are in fact the manifestation of life, become ghostly patterns in Lissel's photographs, or else they vanish completely in the glimmering eternal pathos of the edifices, as the dictators strove to freeze time for a thousand-year empire with unswerving rules. With the imperious rigidity, the lack of people and of life, and the magical shine of the edifices, Lissel's pictures come quite close to the suggestion of the real Nazi buildings and are at the same time worlds away from them. For in these photos one is aware of the rigor mortis of this regime and the phosphorescent glow of decay that lay hidden behind the claim to dignity, permanence, world domination, and universal power. Edgar Lissel's renderings give an effect as though Breughel's war fury "De dulle Griet" has just raced by and left behind the eternity of death. This is what Hitler subconsciously revealed when he spoke of his buildings which, "like the cathedrals of our past," were intended to project forward into the millennia of the future.

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