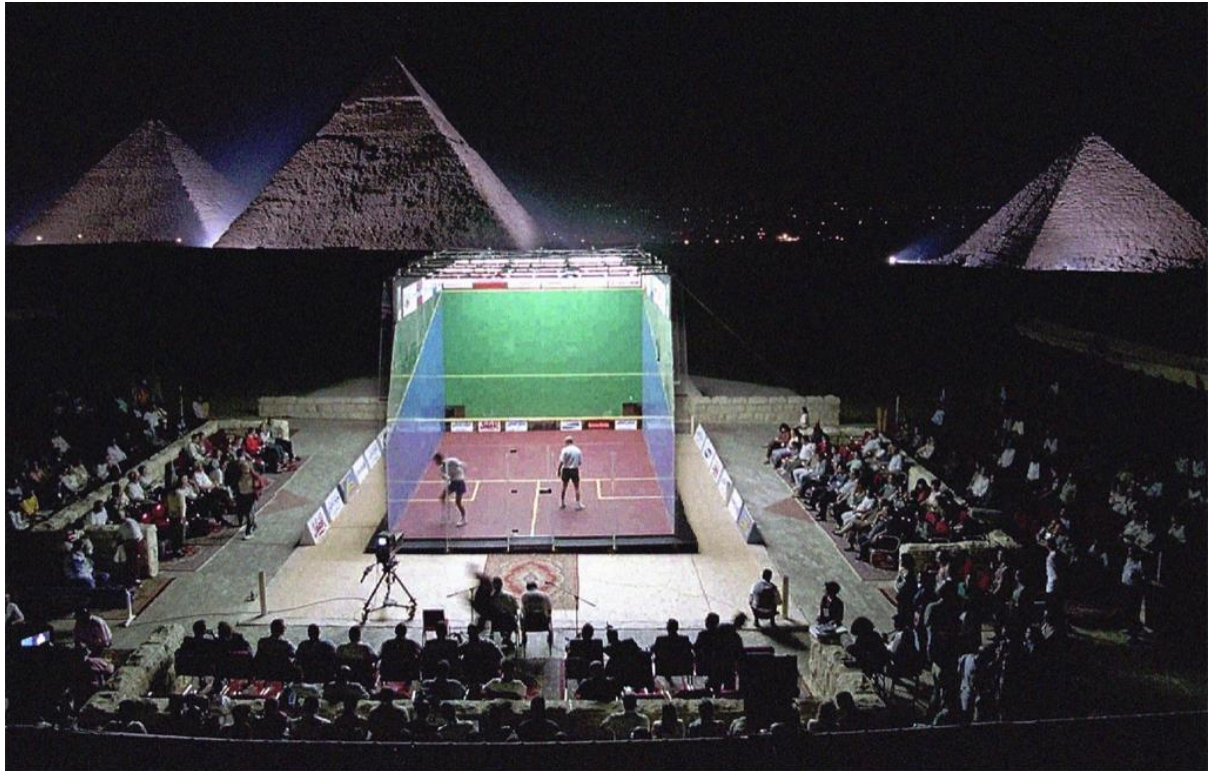


The New Normal. A Goodbye to Language

Roemer van Toorn

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I believe we are just at the beginning of a new *renaissance*, a new modernity, of which we are far from sure what it brings or could enlighten. As Jüri Soolep outlined – “the way we personally communicate, use and, to some extent, even alter the digital reality is mostly in the form of the visual image”. In fact, architecture has always played an essential role in this throughout history: as material practice representing, embodying and making alive social, political, cultural and economic values, through its different projections, and forms of organization. As institution architecture has always directed our sensuous experiences and conceptual understandings of the worlds we live by and look out for. As Michael Hays has remarked the power to create images is a good partial definition of architecture’s competence. When thinking about the possibilities of contemporary architecture today, the work of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai helps us to understand that the idea of imagination can also be a staging ground for emancipatory action, and not only for an escape into commodification. According to me the architectural imagination – and that very much includes the image, and its visual culture it brings with it – is a staging ground for action, with the power to engage individuals and cultural movements to open up journeys of enlightenment. Enlightenment not as universal truth, but as temporality, provisional possibilities and potentials, lines of flight, temporalities.

Two points help me to imagine anew: First we have to understand that we are living a rather bizarre moment in time. What I myself and others have called the new normal. This

new normality of circumstances and outcomes we have to map and understand anew. And the language of hybrids, we are used to, to help us, to make sense of it all, will not help us either to grasp this new normality says Benjamin Bratton. Secondly, we need to address what kind of normative claims can be enforced in this arising new normality through the advancement of digital technology and its digitized cultures of images. Not only should we question our sovereignty, tools and methods, but look for how this new normality can challenge and inspire us what possible futures of civil imagination could be conceived. What other images/ instead of visuals can be produced, and what could its normative agenda be concerned with is the question.

Instead of the many city spectacles, and smart cities becoming places of “spectacle-ization”, increasingly made dependent on what city marketers make of our imaginations. Instead of disqualifying the spectacle all together – as the *classical* left used to practice in the safe haven of academia – we should investigate how ethical spectacles could be created that surpass the traveling circus of “cultural capitals” full of cultural and historical theme parks. To do so is not simple. Spectacular culture is most often designed to manipulate people and take their money, not to set the stage for democracy. But at the same time, we have to recognize that consumer culture – its crafted fantasies and stimulated desires – speaks to something deep and real within. The challenge is what these ethical spectacles could consist of. This urgent question is by no means an easy one, but without a framework of understanding and alternative theory (such as one on the image), any means of instrumentality will be futile.

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Short bio

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