

TENDENZA: THE SOUND OF CONFUSION¹

Given the nature and the setting of this exchange, it seemed appropriate to consider the role of words in architectural theory. In Einsiedeln we are surrounded by them, enclosed in the bindings and covers of thousands of books and rare editions. They wait, so to speak, for readers to unleash their energy once again. Interpretation must then steer that energy onto a certain destination. The primary meaning of these words is thus intertwined with additional ones, prompted by the context of the reading. This critical process of transformation, one that discards neutrality, was described and advocated by Roland Barthes in the essay “Qu'est-ce que la critique?” originally published in 1963. He wrote: “critical ‘proof,’ if it does exist, relies not on the capacity to *discover* the work under scrutiny, but rather to *cover* it as completely as possible with its own language.”² According to this proposition, hermeneutics invest a source under study with a new layer of significations. What remains to establish is whether such activity might also fall to the musings of the “sound of confusion.”

On this particular occasion, I wish to speak to you about a particular word: Tendenza. Or rather, misquoting the American writer Raymond Carver, to answer a question about it: what do we talk when we talk about Tendenza?³ In order to do so, this address proposes a short philological survey of sources associated to the word. It has no pretence to retrieve an original content, if there ever was one. Instead, it presents several definitions of Tendenza and calls attention to their discrepancies. By means of these citations, it ultimately seeks to confront the intrinsic ambiguity of the concept with the countless prose written about it. And wonder if architectural theory and criticism did fall prey to the “sound of confusion” in this case. Was there ever any other way?

Tendenza is commonly perceived as a movement born forty years ago in Italy and spearheaded by Aldo Rossi. Around his charismatic figure orbited several colleagues such as Ezio Bonfanti, Rosaldo Bonicalzi, Daniele Vitale, and Massimo Scolari. They would congregate to a major public display, held at the International Section of Architecture of the fifteenth edition of the Milan Triennale in 1973. This *aggiornamento*

1. Diogo Seixas Lopes, presented at the Architectural Colloquium “Geschichte und Theorie im Architekturunterricht,” Bibliothek Werner Oechslin, Einsiedeln, November 2009.

2. Roland Barthes, “Qu'est-ce que la critique?” in *Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p 256. My translation. “(...) la ‘preuve’ critique, si elle existe, dépend d’une aptitude, non à *découvrir* l’œuvre interrogée, mais au contraire à la *couvrir* le plus complètement possible par son propre langage.”

3. Raymond Carver, *What We Talk When We Talk About Love* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

was organised by Rossi himself and consisted of an exhibition (*Architettura-città*), a film (*Ornamento e delitto*), and a book (*Architettura razionale*). The premises of Tendenza were articulated in the publication, namely in the article “Avanguardia e nuova architettura” by Scolari. This text has frequently been considered as the first attempt of theoretical formulation of the movement,⁴ summarized by the following passage:

For the Tendenza, architecture is a cognitive process that in and of itself, in the acknowledgment of its own autonomy, is today necessitating a refounding of the discipline; that refuses interdisciplinary solutions to its own crisis; that does not pursue and immerse itself in political, economic, social, and technological events only to mask its own creative and formal sterility, but rather desires to understand them so as to be able to intervene in them with lucidity—not to determine them, but not to be subordinate to them either.⁵

With the proverbial stance of a manifesto, Massimo Scolari firstly defines Tendenza as a negation of something else. It opposes the bureaucracy of functionalism and, more significantly, the “escapisms” of the new avant-gardes clustered in Florence around names like Archizoom, and Superstudio. This disapproval is then extended onto a previous index sorted by Constantino Dardi that does not spare even a doyen of Italian architecture – Giovanni Michelucci – and goes on to condemn the pop architecture of Archigram, the geometrisms of Robert Venturi, the associations of Moshe Safdie, the huts of Hans Scharoun, and so forth.⁶ To this, Scolari counterposes the exemplary standing of Aldo Rossi – “if not the only one, at least the most precise, and the one most pregnant with possible developments”⁷ – rooted in a lineage that goes back to Ernesto Nathan Rogers and his direction of *Casabella-continuità*. Finally he outlines, in abbreviated manner, fundamental tropes claimed by Tendenza such as monument, type, and city in order to produce an architectural theory based on “logically interconnected principles.”⁸

This structure of contents proceeds from historical context to theoretical enunciation and the compliance of this protocol grants the text its seminal status, a kind of Magna Carta of Tendenza. Nevertheless, according to Manfredo Tafuri, Scolari would

4. See, for instance, K. Michael Hays, ed., *Architecture Theory since 1968*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1998), pp. 124-25.

5. Massimo Scolari, “Avanguardia e nuova architettura,” in Scolari et al., *Architettura razionale* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1973) / “The New Architecture and the Avant-Garde,” in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli, p. 131-32.

6. See Constantino Dardi, *Il gioco sapiente, tendenze della nuova architettura* (Padua: Marsilio, 1971), p. 21.

7. Scolari, “The New Architecture and the Avant-Garde,” p. 133.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

later disavow it as a “Dadaist gesture.”⁹ These tactics of rebuttal also indicate how the word itself became an intellectual charade to trigger a much wider debate over what architecture should really mean. Tendenza thus confirms the dictum of yet another American writer, William Burroughs, that “language is a virus.”¹⁰ This dissemination must be traced back to Aldo Rossi as part of a lexicon he was able to introduce in the architectural jargon of that period. Rossi seemed to experience periodical infatuations with the semantic potential of labels like realism or rationalism that were liberated from their historicist sense. The autonomy he promoted applied to forms, but also to words, manipulated as part of a repertoire. His references to communism further exemplify this poetic licence regarding the usage of words charged with ideological undertones.¹¹

As Rossi safeguards a personal choice by means of this licence, architecture is necessarily committed to an autobiographical condition. It is fitting that the earliest mention to Tendenza can be found in the intimacy of his notebooks, the *quaderni azzurri*.¹² These diaries span from 1968 until 1992 and document, firsthand, impressions and ideas that would eventually surface in his projects, essays or classes. At the very debut of this series – that is, five years before the essay of Massimo Scolari – he lists a series of keywords as part of an architectural program. One of the underlined terms is Tendenza, described as “a unique development of certain forms and results.”¹³ To this Rossi adds the names of his elective affinities drawn from history: Étienne-Louis Boullée, Adolf Loos or Giorgio De Chirico.

History was, of course, a prime asset of Tendenza. Its instrumental value had been championed previously in the groundbreaking work that is *L'architettura della città*.¹⁴ Published in 1966 – the same year that *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* by Robert Venturi came out – it is a fact that these two books have had an historical impact on architectural theory and education. But if one goes “across the texts,” as Carlo Olmo did in his thorough examination of the writings of Aldo Rossi, it is hard to consider *L'architettura della città* a clear-cut reading. In fact it is rather labyrinthine, somewhere

9. Manfredo Tafuri, *Storia dell'architettura italiana 1944-1985* (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), p. 174 n. 3.

10. See William Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (Paris: Olympia, 1962).

11. For a recent appraisal of the early ideological background of Aldo Rossi see Pier Vittorio Aureli, “The Difficult Whole,” *Log 9* (Winter/Spring 2007): pp. 39-61

12. Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri*, ed. Francesco Dal Co (Milan: Electa, 1999).

13. Ibid., QA1 (June 19 1968).

14. Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, (Padua: Marsilio, 1966).

between poetics and historiography with constant shifts of meaning that Olmo dissected.¹⁵ The post-modernity this book heralded can first be found in its fragmented structure and the replication of past literary genres such as the treatise. For the rest, its notoriety seems to be condensed by a title that gives back the city to architecture, under the specific terms of architecture. In the introduction to the second Italian edition, written in 1969, Rossi rephrases this proclamation as a question of tendency and thus of personal choice:

Architecture and architectural theories, like everything else, can only be described according to concepts which are neither absolute nor neutral, and these, depending on their importance, have the potential to modify man's way of seeing profoundly. In architecture problems of knowledge have always been connected to matters of a tendency and of a choice. An architecture that lacks a tendency has neither a field nor a manner in which to reveal itself.¹⁶

With the growing notoriety of Rossi, *Tendenza* will be disclosed to an even wider audience. It migrates "across the texts" as if its author was writing but a single essay. Such is the case of "L'architettura della ragione come architettura di tendenza," also from 1969. This introductory note to the catalogue of the exhibition "Illuminismo e architettura del '700 Veneto" widens the horizons of *Tendenza*. It travels through time to become the *zeitgeist* of another period of conceptual clarity and artistic identity.

The biggest interest we hold for these works regards their principles of composition and logic construction. With references well grounded on a rational process for the construction of art, they present to us an architectural theory where the chronological sequence of facts loses relevance. Instead, tendency acquires a significant meaning. The more contemporary tendency shows the singular coincidences between the constructions of Girolamo Frigimelica, the inventions of Piranesi, Prato della Valle in Padua, the temple of Possagno and other works and artists. The tendency is made clear and built upon these references, with a mix of description and deformation, of invention and knowledge, linked to the best experience of modern art and settled here with a shared will for style.¹⁷

15. Carlo Olmo, "Across the Texts: The Writings of Aldo Rossi," *Assemblage* 5 (February 1988): pp. 91-121.

16. Rossi, *L'architettura della città*, 2nd ed. (Padua: Marsilio, 1970) / "Preface to the Second Italian Edition," in *The Architecture of the City*, Oppositions Books, trans. Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p. 165.

17. Rossi, "L'architettura della ragione come architettura di tendenza," in *Illuminismo e architettura del '700 veneto*, ed. Manlio Brusatin (Veneto: Castelfranco, 1969), p. 7. My translation. "L'interesse che noi proviamo per queste opere è relativo ai principi compositivi e alla costruzione logica da cui sono nate; essendo i loro riferimenti ben fondati su un processo razionale, di costruzione dell'arte, essi ci mostrano una teoria dell'architettura dove la successione cronologica dei fatti perde di importanza. Significato rilevante acquista invece la tendenza; e la tendenza più della contemporaneità mostra le coincidenze singolari tra le costruzioni Girolamo Frigimelica, le invenzioni di Piranesi, Prato della Valle a Padova, il tempio di Possagno e altre opere e altri artisti. La tendenza si costruisce e si esplicita in questi riferimenti; dove compare quel misto di descrizione e di deformazione, di invenzione e di conoscenza a cui è legata l'esperienza migliore dell'arte moderna e che qui è risolta in una comune volontà di stile."

This ubiquity of *Tendenza* further endorses a licence to freely associate disparate references, locations, and chronologies. Rossi illustrates this possibility with the “Capriccio” painted by Canaletto between 1755 and 1759. It assembles in the same Venetian vista three projects by Andrea Palladio: Ponte di Rialto, Palazzo Chiericati and the Basilica of Vicenza. None of these projects actually existed at La Serenissima – the first being a proposal, the other two being at Vicenza – and yet they epitomise Venice. This virtual space prefigures what came to be known as “*città analoga*.”¹⁸ By means of analogy, Rossi bridges the gap between analysis and design but he also contaminates these activities with psychological detours. To paraphrase Carl Gustav Jung, this temporary suspension of judgement that makes room for serendipity is strictly subjective.¹⁹ *Città analoga* thus poses the problem of the commitment of this intellectual montage to reality. In the article “Ceci n’est pas une ville,” Tafuri exposes this problem and literally relegates it to the Freudian couch.²⁰

Much like *Tendenza*, these associations could not aspire to achieve a normative status. On the contrary, they could be rather idiosyncratic and hence prone to polemics. Thus, in a section on the heritage of *Tendenza* at the Milan Triennale of 1973, Hannes Meyer and Giuseppe Terragni could be juxtaposed in spite of their ideological connotations. Yet Rossi insisted on the word “scientific” in his second book, published in 1981. *A Scientific Autobiography* is precisely the opposite, a maelstrom of memories and allusions that opens with a confession: “I felt that the disorder of things, if limited and somehow honest, might best correspond to our state of mind.” What endows a “scientific” title to this very enigmatic but very beautiful text is a citation, acknowledged from the start:

Certainly a very important point of reference is Max Planck's *Scientific Autobiography*. In this book, Planck returns to the discoveries of modern physics, recapturing the impression made on him by the enunciation of the principle of the conservation of energy; he always recalled this principle in connection with his schoolmaster Mueller's story about a mason who with great effort heaved a block of stone up on the roof of a house. The mason was struck by the fact that expended energy does not get lost; it remains stored for many years, never diminished, latent in the block of stone, until one day it happens that the block slides off the roof and falls on the head of a passerby, killing him.²¹

18. Rossi, “La città analoga: tavola.” *Lotus*, no. 13 (December 1976): pp. 5-8.

19. Cf. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Interpretation of Nature and the Psyche. Synchronicity: an Acausal Connecting Principle* (New York, NY: Pantheon 1955).

20. Tafuri, “Ceci n’est pas une ville,” *Lotus*, no. 13 (December 1976): pp. 10-13.

21. Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, Oppositions Books, postscript Vincent Scully, trans. Lawrence Venuti (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 1.

For the purpose of this discussion, and in order to come to a conclusion, it is useful to compare this account to the way the story was originally told in the *Scientific Autobiography* of Max Planck.

My mind absorbed avidly, like a revelation, the first law I knew to possess absolute, universal validity, independently from all human agency: The principle of conservation of energy. I shall never forget the graphic story Müller told us, at his *raconteur's* best, of the bricklayer lifting with great effort a heavy block of stone to the roof of a house. The work he thus performs does not get lost; it remains stored up, perhaps for many years, undiminished and latent in the block of stone, until one day the block is perhaps loosened and drops on the head of some passerby.²²

Planck, the scientist, uses twice the word “perhaps” since his epistemic provenance dwells on the realm of probabilities. Rossi, the architect, has no doubts: the block of stone kills the passerby. For him, the principle of conservation of energy is but a tragedy.²³

As the subject of an investigation, Aldo Rossi poses the problem of misquotes and misinterpretations. This “smokescreen” was, first and foremost, set up by Rossi himself as a means to dumbfound critics and disciples. In the end, the “realist education”²⁴ he had advocated was meant for a single person: “Formal replicas are always negative. The investigation and development of theoretical principles are more important. In reality, I do not believe in a ‘Rossian school’ based upon the formal copy of my work.”²⁵ As for theoretical premises, it is not entirely clear how to establish them when his first books is literally dismantled by his second one. At the time, he wrote, there was only the desire to “forget architecture.”

It is also within the flaws of this architectural program, rather than the permutations of its forms, that architectural history and theory face the challenge of current complexities and contradictions. After all, Aldo Rossi seemed to single-handedly anticipate the shape of things that came to be: stardom, overexposure, and commodification. His “rise and fall,” as Kenneth Frampton called it,²⁶ still stirs up confusion. But there was also the cathartic, and thus enlightening, potential of tragedy. In 2001, a building designed by Rossi for the

22. Max Planck, *Wissenschaftliche Selbstbiographie* (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1948) / *Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 14.

23. This mismatch was first discussed by Jacques Gubler. See Gubler, “Le jeu de l’autobiographie,” in Gubler et al., *Aldo Rossi. Autobiographies partagées* (Lausanne: PPUR, 1998), pp. 7-9.

24. Aldo Rossi, “Une education realiste,” *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui*, no. 191 (1977): p. 39.

25. Aldo Rossi, “Entretien avec Aldo Rossi,” *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui*, no. 191 (1977): p. 42.

26. Kenneth Frampton, “Minimal Moralia: Reflections on Recent Swiss German Production,” in *Labour, Work and Architecture* (London: Phaidon, 2002), p. 328.

publishing company Scholastic opened in New York. Concluded almost four years after his death in a car accident, this posthumous work served to recall him. In the words of the architectural critic Herbert Muschamp, regardless of the ups and downs of the Italian architect, “he put himself out there.”²⁷ This is perhaps a good legacy for architectural history, theory, and education as it ponders again over this work. The need to put ourselves “out there.”

27. Herbert Muschamp, “A Message from a Poet of Public and Private Memory,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2001.