

BOOK REVIEW / BOEKRESENSIE

Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring. Art, Architecture, Religion*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, xiv + 346 pp., 137 ill. with 36 in colour, ISBN (cloth) 0-226-79132-7, price \$45.00

Mark Taylor is Professor of Religion at Williams College and he demonstrates that even postmodern theologians have not lost the instinct to preach. 'The moment has arrived when it is not only possible but, in a certain sense, necessary to reconsider the complex interplay of art, architecture, and religion', he announces sonorously at the commencement of his lengthy book, and he proceeds to subject the reader to a rigorous catechism in the meaning and application of 'disfiguring' and 'theoesthetics', terms which are to play a central role in his argument. Particularly annoying is Taylor's repeated insistence that he is dealing with issues largely neglected by others: 'Most interpreters overlook the important role religion played in the genesis of modern and postmodern artistic movements', he tells us (p. 21). Historians of art and literature will prick up their ears at this statement because they will know it is misleading. And what is more, Taylor himself must know it is misleading, since he makes ample use of earlier studies. In defining theoesthetics he draws for example on M.H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) and *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) and deals with much the same kind of Romantic art and thought as did the art historian Robert Rosenblum in *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition. From Friedrich to Rothko* (1975). Taylor even begins his chapter on theoesthetics by discussing a painting well-known to readers of Rosenblum – Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* of 1808-1810 – and by quoting extensively from Rosenblum, while subsequent chapters on earlier twentieth-century art follow the trajectory of Rosenblum's book quite closely, from the early abstractionists Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich to Americans such as Newman, Rothko and Reinhardt.

But there are differences between Taylor and Rosenblum. For one thing, Taylor's priorities are not art-historical, and en route through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries he passes many artists by but stops at virtually every philosophical/theological lamp post to sniff the traces. Also, Taylor discusses developments in art which postdate the Abstract Expressionist ones with which Rosenblum ended his book. For Taylor, the story goes on to include artists such as Rauschenberg, Johns, Warhol, and Pistoletto, and ends with an intensive discussion of Anselm Kiefer. And, unlike Rosenblum, Taylor covers architecture. Besides

major architects of modernism such as Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, the post-modern theories, buildings, and plans of Robert Venturi, Michael Graves, Bernard Tschumi, and Peter Eisenman engage Taylor's attention. The relationship between Eisenman and the philosopher Jacques Derrida is spun out at great length, and if one wonders why then a not-so-subtle hint on page 267 provides a likely answer: there, a quotation from a letter from Eisenman to Derrida credit Mark Taylor with having influenced the architect to take up the implications of Hebraic thought for architecture. It's a small world.

Taylor is, in fact, highly selective in his choice of artists, architects, and theorists. Too many names are missing – those of artists such as Georges Rouault or Mark Tobey, but also those of influential theorists such as Mircea Eliade or C.G. Jung – to make this a useful survey of the complex relations between modern art and religion. Rather, the book offers a long and involved argument about theoesthetics, a word Taylor has coined from a critical remark by Walter Benjamin: 'The idea of the unlimited immanence of the moral world in the world of beauty is derived from the theosophical aesthetics of the romantics' (p. 17). Though illuminating about art and architecture, Taylor's argument turns out in the final analysis to be about postmodernism and theology.

Taylor postulates that Kant's aesthetics, and particularly his conceptions of the autonomy of art and the experience of the sublime, preluded and stimulated a series of developments in German Romantic thought that gave a common purpose to philosophy, theology and art. Schleiermacher's theology sought to satisfy Enlightenment minds by avoiding Christian orthodoxy and defining religion aesthetically in terms of 'the sensibility and taste for the infinite' and an 'immediate consciousness' of the oneness of all things, while Schelling, Schiller and Hegel developed philosophies with similar aims: 'By defining the role of the artist-philosopher as the aesthetic educator who leads humanity to the ideal state, Schiller defines the notion of the avant-garde that informs twentieth-century artistic and architectural practices' (p. 31). The joint aim of theology/philosophy and art became, as Taylor puts it, to found the Kingdom of God on earth, and as this project extended into the modernism of the twentieth century the means used were those of negation. In their

search for transcendence and redemptive purity, theologians like Karl Barth negated the world and culture, artists from Mondrian to Reinhardt negated figuration in painting, and architects like Le Corbusier negated ornament. This process of negation is what Taylor calls 'disfiguring', but the significance of the term does not end with the art of abstraction and the architecture of modernism. 'At the time Alitzer was developing his death-of-God theology, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol were charting a new course for art. These seemingly disparate theological and artistic innovations are not unrelated' (p. 158). Taylor suggests that a painting such as Johns' *No* (1961) 'disfigures the dis-figured surface of abstraction' (p. 176) and that Warhol's emergence as a 'business artist' further radicalised the attack on the values of abstract art. But this attack did not mean the end of the theoesthetic enterprise: 'Warhol's electric spectacle is, in effect, a perverse realization of the utopian dreams of modernity in which art and life become one. Pop art discovers redemption by redeeming appearances' (p. 181).

In other words, the process of negation shifted gears but effectively continued, and this new stage marked the birth of (modernist) postmodernism: 'While abstract painting and modern architecture dis-figure by removing figures, modernist postmodernism disfigures modern dis-figuring by defacing abstract forms and pure structures with superficial figures' (p. 230). Postmodernism is the world of stimulation, image and money, and Taylor devotes a whole chapter to 'Currency', in which – with help from Debord's *Society of Spectacle* and Venturi's *Learning from Las Vegas* – money and consumption are dealt with in terms of sign and image. Postmodernism is also the world of Derrida and Eisenman, and of Kiefer, though this is a postmodernism that doesn't seek redemption through appearances: 'Something is forever missing from Derrida's texts and Eisenman's architecture. They are always writing and building something else – something that cannot be written or built but can only be traced by a certain disfiguring' (p. 265). And the painting reproduced on the front cover of his book, Taylor writes: '*Zim Zum* is, in my judgement, Kiefer's most magnificent and most troubling work. In this painting he pushes art to the point where something that is not and yet is not nothing "appears" by disappearing. [...] Kiefer's disfigured canvas bring art to the limit where it trembles with the approach of an Other it cannot figure' (p. 304-5).

Here Taylor's argument reaches its climax. He has already made it clear that the disasters brought about by the theoesthetic quest

of modernism were not confined to individual tragedies such as Rothko's suicide: 'What began in the salons of Jena ended on the stage of Bayreuth and on the parade grounds of Nuremburg. [...] When the desire for presence creates a will-to-immediacy that becomes a will-to-purity, the sacrificial fires of purgation spread to become a holocaust' (p. 95). And now, in the work of Kiefer, Taylor sees a postmodern art emerging that does not heed the theoesthetic call. Kiefer, unlike his onetime teacher Joseph Beuys, does not believe in the healing, redeeming power of art: 'Directly facing the devastation in whose wake we still live, Kiefer refuses every utopia – be it the imminent utopia of modernism or the immanent utopia of modernist postmodernism. His unflinching realism does not lead to despair but to a relentless interrogation of the forces that release disaster and of the role that art can play in a world that is undeniably postmodern' (p. 293). Taylor confirms this postmodernism by recalling a nineteenth-century thinker to give evidence: Kierkegaard, who did not accept the identification of art and religion. What Taylor derives from Kierkegaard is the courage to challenge the premise of theoesthetics, to point out that negations of negations are still caught in the same old pattern of thinking, and to move into 'the space *between* the alternatives that define the Western ontotheological tradition' (p. 316). The space between is that of a/theology and a/theoesthetics, which as the true non-modernist, non-utopian postmodern standpoint is neither theistic or atheistic: 'A/theology pursues or, more precisely, is pursued by an alterity that neither exists nor does not exist but is beyond both Being and non-being. This unthought and unthinkable beyond is suspended between the poles that constitute twentieth-century theology' (p. 316).

I must confess to having mixed reactions to all this. The argument built around theoesthetics strikes me as both too simplistic and too complicated. Simplistic, because one historical line is pursued relentlessly and to exclusion of others that could diversify our picture of the relations between modern art and religion. And complicated, because in pursuing this line into 'modernist postmodernism' and then beyond into a/theoesthetics Taylor often has to resort to convoluted arguments that teeter on the edge of comprehensibility and credibility. In fact, in my attempts to follow his train of thought I sometimes found the quotations from other writers, with which he begins each chapter, more helpful than Taylor's own formulations. Just what or who the 'Other' is, that appears by disappearing in Kiefer's work and that is both there and

not there in Taylor's a/theology, I am surely not meant to know. I can only presume that we are being presented here with a theological variation on the well-known postmodernist theme of the palimpsest: as the traces of effacement and earlier usage remain visible in a re-used manuscript so the erased of the once believed-in Deity returns to haunt the scepticism of Taylor's a/theology. Thinking along these lines, I found Taylor's shadowy and torn writings on Kiefer's shadowy and torn paintings in the end strangely compelling. Indeed, I suspect that Taylor's account of Kiefer is a genuinely empathetic one, and this is one of the reasons why his book has preoccupied me more than I initially expected.

However, with the notion of the palimpsest in mind I also found myself preoccupied with detecting the traces of old themes in Taylor's new argument. We have already noted that if the term theoesthetics is a neologism its content has a very familiar ring to it. Taylor's other favourite term, disfiguring, is obviously close kin to the best-known of all postmodernist concepts, deconstruction, while the Greenbergian theme of the self-critique of modernist painting, and the many dialectical approaches to art developed down the years, prepare the way for Taylor's negations and negations of negations. As a writer on art, Taylor draws on some well-established concepts to offer analyses which are not, quite, what one has read before but which certainly do not justify the publisher's claim, on the cover of the book, that this is 'the best writing on art and architecture since Walter Benjamin'.

As a theologian, Taylor is particularly concerned with the poles established by the transcendentalism of Karl Barth earlier in the century and the radical immanentism of the death-of-God school of theology in the Fifties and Sixties. In reading Gabriel Vahanian's *The Death of God. The Culture of our Post-Christian Era* (1957), for example, one comes across a number of Taylor's central theological concepts. Theologians such as Vahanian and Altizer established a link between the death-of-God theology and existentialism, while the philosopher William Barrett showed in his influential book *Irrational Man* (1958) how modern art, the 'death of God' and existentialist philosophy were intertwined. Like the theologians of his day, Barrett gave Kierkegaard a strategic place in these developments. Now, Taylor returns to Kierkegaard, and in his discussion of artists such as Kiefer

he takes up what looks very much like existentialist themes.

What is most obviously at stake in this book – it is published in a series of Religion and Postmodernism, of which Taylor is the general editor – is the author's stance on postmodernism. One of the interesting things about the postmodernist debate in recent years has been the continual shifting of boundaries, the continuing redefinition of postmodernity itself. This has largely been a result of the criticism, initially from outside the movement but increasingly from within it, that postmodernism is simply modernism in its newest guise and that the acclaimed radical break with the modernist tradition has never really occurred. Developments that were once qualified as postmodernist have been reassessed and renamed, for example as 'late modernist'. Taylor's frequent use of the term 'modernist postmodernism' reveals his interest both in exposing the modernist hold on postmodernism and in breaking that hold. His avowed concern is to point the way to a postmodernism that is no longer a modernism in disguise and that gives up the dreams of utopia and salvation: 'The door is closed, closed tightly; there is no upper room' (p. 317). But such things were said years ago, by existentialists and about existentialism: 'When mankind no longer lives spontaneously toward God or the supersensible world – when, to echo the words of Yeats, the ladder is gone by which we would climb to a higher reality – the artist too must stand here face to face with a flat and inexplicable world' (Barrett, *Irrational man*, p. 43). Taylor confirms my suspicions that one of the major streams in present-day post-modernistic thinking revivifies an older existentialism. And if that is so, we are not finished with modernism yet.

Perhaps the most surprising conclusion one can draw after reading Taylor's argument is that postmodernism, true postmodernism, is something we are still looking for. If we had found it, Taylor would have had nothing to preach about in his last chapter. What worries me is that at the close of the twentieth century this looked-for postmodernism, this a/theoesthetic, seems just as unthinkable, just as inexpressible, just as much a dream, as was the first theoesthetic in German Romantic circles at the close of the eighteenth.

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INLIGTING AAN OUTEURS

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