

Architecture Animé or Medium Specificity in a Post-Medium World

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On New Year's Day 1963, Tetsuwan Atom—Astro Boy to English-speaking audiences—was aired for the first time on Japanese television. Having initially appeared in a 1951 comic book by Osamu Tezuka, the televised Astro Boy is the first animated example of anime or Japanese animated cartooning. But Astro Boy was already characterized by the series of incommensurable superimpositions that continue to dominate the genre. On the one hand, manga's still images developed a highly graphic idiom dependent on strong contours and stylization, detailed attention to backgrounds but no atmospheric perspective or depth. Astro Boy's graphic sensibility when animated on the other hand, confronted a plastic fullness, a burgeoning three-dimensionality that not merely anticipated merchandising objects to come, but that suggests a material resistance to the planar logic of the page and the strict ocularity of print culture.

Through this still, flat, full movement, Astro Boy demonstrates that anime was not a simple addition to the culture of cartoons or the moving image, but was organized around what has been called the fact of television. In the historical instant between the day Astro Boy came to animated audio-visual life in Tokyo and a few months later when he first appeared on American TV, becoming therefore not only the first animated anime but the first anime shown outside Japan, Astro Boy performed two of Marshall McLuhan's 1963 media predictions: first that TV would produce a global village and second that TV would collapse the spaces and times of the world into a new visual and acoustical condition that McLuhan famously called allatonceness.¹ Through McLuhan, we can see in Astro Boy's formal and material misceginations the beginning of the end of medium specificity.

In 1964, Takashi Murakami was born in Tokyo. Growing up alongside characters like Astro Boy, Murakami took them out of the robot lab and into the art factory to produce new characters like Mr. DOB and a never-ending proliferation of mushrooms. In the world according to Murakami, early anime's simple forms of allatonceness expand to

produce further impossible simultaneities where 2 and 3 d coexist, American post-war pop is mapped onto Japanese pre-war traditions of visual representation, military aggression and sexual anxiety are confused, and McLuhan's distinction between the linearity of pictorial space and the multi-modal action of acoustic space is compressed. Whether in print form, plastic figurines, moving images or t-shirts, Astro Boy as avatar of contemporary anime has moved not only beyond the logic of animation cels, traditional ideas of genre, and the post-medium fact of TV but he and his friends have generated a new condition that Murakami calls the super flat, also a misceginating allatonceness, but one in which the end of medium specificity ends and new forms of supermediums begins.

In 1965, preparations began for an exhibition to be held in Pistoia under the name Superarchitettura. The show's manifesto begins: "Superarchitecture is the architecture of superproduction, of superconsumption, of the superinduction into consumerism, of the supermarket, of superman, and of the gasoline called Super."² Superstudio and its collages, graphic novellas and storyboards, its effort to make moving images the ideal medium for architectural representation, and its siting of architecture in an interplanetary village, became the best known product of superarchitettura. But what has not been noted is that superarchitecture, like Astro Boy, belongs to the logic of TV: one of the only requirements imposed by Emilio Ambasz when he updated the Superarchitecture show as *Italy: the New Domestic Landscape* at MoMA in 1972 was that every installation use a TV Set in place of wall texts. Each virtual house was placed not in a white gallery but in a black box theater and the principal source of illumination and auditory continuity in this landscape less of domesticity than of soundstages was the flickering luminosity of the cathode ray and the overlapping noises of simultaneous TV loops.³

In 1966 Andy Warhol collected the Velvet Underground, the films he started making in 1963, various and sundry performers and hangers on and took them to the Dom on Saint Mark's Place and set them into motion as the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. This multi-media light and sound performance used sensory overload, high degrees of stimulation but low levels of visual and auditory resolution to fill the space with a new form of environment that used the exaggerated animations of its ambience to undo the legibility of the architectural frame. While cunningly isomorphic with traditional architectural space, the EPI's episodic environment exploded the stabilities of building and plastic form, unleashing instead a superabundance of agents that coalesced and dispersed in a pulsing flow of time. When McLuhan discovered the EPI, he considered it even more like TV than TV because it was participatory and immersive in the extreme, breaking spec-

tators out of a visual mode of reception and engulfing them in a state of synthaesthesia.⁴ But while McLuhan thought this would lead to a new form of presentness, accounts of the EPI's allatonceness suggest instead a barrage of simultaneous instants, the era of the 30-second TV commercial and the super-ephemeral. As one reviewer described the EPI, "the lights have become a dim blue flicker that goes fast and slower and pauses now and then, [but] just as your eyes get used to each kind of flicker... before your mind can grab it, it's become random and confusing again."⁵ Allatonceness in the EPI was not where time ended in the continuities of an immersive image but the convulsive demonstration of a new kind of time that was interrupting old kinds of space.

In 1967, Fabrizio Fiumi, a student of architecture at the University of Florence, came to the US for the second time.⁶ During his first trip he had been eager to see the works of Frank Lloyd Wright on Fiumi's second trip, he was on the lookout for love-ins and Pink Floyd, which led him to the Electric Circus, the nightclub into which Warhol's Dom and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable had been transformed. Literally electrified by the experience, Fiumi headed back to Italy via Canal Street where he bought as many projectors as he could carry to Leonardo Savioli, one of his professors. Savioli then set the Electric Circus as the thesis topic for the year.⁷ The entire generation of what Germano Celant later deemed Radical Architects was either a student or TA in this course in which Warhol and the Velvet Underground were turned into architects and allatonceness became an architectural brief. As one group of students interpreted Savioli's assignment, "Let us make an architecture of tactile audio and visual stimuli that implicate the operator in an active and creative participation ... the spectator will become an actor in a space undergoing continual transformation in which luminous effects create a total disorientation in the universe of Cartesian geometry."⁸

The work in Savioli's course is symptomatic of architecture's desire to find its way into allatonceness. The most direct efforts entailed adding moving bits and pieces of artificial light and sound to the medium. But beyond this mechanical use of televisual equipment, many of the projects also used rough assembly to define architectural form as a superabundant concatenation of disparate elements and contrasted these informal gizmos with precisely measured drawings. Like in *Astro Boy*, the flat drawn surfaces and plastic model forms of traditional architectural representation began to misalign. Fiumi went further, superimposing plans drawn on transparent paper and placing them over a neon light, a technique that produces the spatializing effect of an axonometric, a drawing type associated with the '60s. But the light box technique, which

gets turned on and off and makes the deep image visible only when lit, transforms the drawing into an apparatus from which the representation emanates. The image is on and of TV, is both a drawing and a model, is both actually flat and virtually spatial and as such anticipates, predetermined even, the way computer graphics and digital media now describe architecture.

Superarchitecture found its place of speculation in these exploding inevitables as every project in Savioli's studio pursued allatonceness to disrupt normal systems of architectural coherence and to become more like an episode of *Astro Boy* than a building. But if architectural conventions were abandoned to accommodate systems of allatonceness, the lightening speed with which McLuhan's ideas were taken up suggests not a loss but rather how new representational strategies added to what could count as architecture. Indeed, allatonceness immediately invited exploration by architecture because the idea was already architectural.

McLuhan, after all, used architecture and spatial descriptors to explain an idea purportedly about TV and how it was going to put an end to things like architecture—a key image in McLuhan's analysis is children sitting at home too close to the TV set. And the more McLuhan's metaphorically architectural notion of allatonceness came into contact with emerging spatial mediums such as the EPI, and as allatonceness was reoriginated in architecture, the idea was put under pressure. The universal present McLuhan fantasized TV would generate was broken into discontinuous bits as it expanded beyond the range of the tele-visual apparatus to an environmental scale and discovered not only the dimensions of architectural space but the striations that the architectural medium imposes on volume. To merely draw the allatonce was to pull it apart. So it should come as no surprise that even though domesticity was essential to allatonceness—domestic proximity is the precondition for McLuhan's notion that TV is immersive —when returned to the domestic scene allatonceness found not a home but a doppelganger and became instead "a whole lot of difference all at the same instant."

In a sublime example of historical allatonceness, in 1967, the year of McLuhan's *Medium is the Message* and the year of the superarchitecture *Pipers*, a series of articles appeared in architectural journals that described the reappropriation of projective devices from stage and display windows for private uses, that cited both the Electric Circus and McLuhan's theory of allatonceness.⁹ The results were called instant interiors and turned-on décors characterized by spatial totality, in which floors, ceilings and walls were charged with "high fantasy" images and by instantaneousness as events, by décors not understood as ornament but in terms the capacity suddenly to be turned on. Constantly

shifting projections spilled promiscuously throughout these interiors, on top of human figures and through transparent furniture until, instead of containing a TV set and in a topological inversion where inside becomes outside, the entire interior became TV itself. Generating luminous and flickering ambience, the superarchitecture of the superephemeral reorganized architecture away from the logic of inside and out, public and private and even away from the coordinates that distinguish walls from floors, up from down, and plans from sections. Turning architecture on was exploding this plastic medium, making it a supermedium that overlaid, superimposed on architecture's propensity to stabilize images and form the radically disruptive capacity of the instant.¹⁰

By 1968, turned on décor was again on the move and had become the instant exterior. While Washington D.C. was beautified, Fiumi and fellow students staged a happening in which they projected op-art images, LA freeways and astronauts onto the Ponte-Vecchio, recapitulating Reyner Banham's book of the same year, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, which argued that mechanical systems were leading to an architecture of electric light that could expand to an urban scale and retract to the scale of an individual living pod. In 1969, the peregrinations of the animated and projected image from commercial television to radical art practices, from media gurus to home decorating manuals to academic pedagogical models coincided, for Fiumi, in a nightclub that still exists in Florence: Space Electronic. In its 1969 guise, 15 x 25 meters of shiny aluminum placed on the floor reflected the movements of a large parachute, also carried from the US, suspended like a droopy piece of film, or a superhero's cape, from the ceiling. The architects described their spatial goals in this architecture of overhead projectors, films, slide projectors, stage lights and sound, live performances, recorded music, theater and happenings, as evanescent, mobile and fluttering and they asked "Why do we think that space is not made by sounds and perfumes or by the dark."¹¹ The atmospheric elasticity and durational instability of these materials permitted superarchitecture to make illusive yet identifiable environments. As Domus argued about the Other World club, another "electrically extended architecture", turned-on architecture was best considered a field of "now and then," neither an open nor closed space but an environmental mode held together by a vast array of moving particulate matter flickering between on or off.¹²

These events, instant interiors and exteriors belong to the widespread use of projection technologies in the 1960s across many disciplines, but they also expose the specific parameters that emerged as the instantaneous and the turned-on image became an architectural and urban system. By the

mid-60s architecture was abandoning the surround or multi-screen system of expanded cinema, exemplified by the often-cited work of Kiesler and the Eames, and resisting the understanding of walls as extra large screens that are the mere bearer of images without intrinsic matter or consequence. Instead, architecture increasingly exploited the effects of direct contact between image and the architectural surface, using projections as an added layer of matter and as extensions of the architectural medium. Architecture was now not the accommodator of TV sets or film screens or subject to the dematerializing force of projected images but a discipline that found in surfaces thickened with moving images, spaces filled up with undulating waves of sound and light, and representational techniques poised between the flatness of drawing and the animated three dimensionality of digital media the means to become an exploded supermedium or architecture anime.

Between 1963 and 1969 architecture learned how much there was to learn from Astro Boy, which entailed not only learning about animation but learning how to do the impossible. For anime, the impossible was adding flatness to the already flat such that even something solid could become superflat. For architecture, the impossible meant using the superflat surface to add time to the timeless. On the one hand, from at least the 18th century when Lessing classified mediums as either spatial or temporal, architecture has understood itself to be by definition inanimate. Indeed, resistance to the limitations imposed by this self-image generated an immense catalogue of efforts to manage the supposedly frozen condition of architecture, from the mediations on natural and historical time of the Enlightenment to the mimicry of the camera pan and phenomenal movements of modern formalism. But by the 1960s, using architecture as a prop for the representation of durations that actually unfold elsewhere and for the will to dematerialize architecture—lest the inert and unmoving carcass of building betray the fantasy of animation—had ceased to be an adequate response to the instants of contemporary time.

Banham argued that architecture's inability to tell time had caused it to lose its status as design's universal design to industrial design—Italian design most of all—because, as he wrote, industrial design "works on a variety of time-scales ... creating objects in which the opposing forces of stabilized investment and technical improvement are in a different equilibrium" to the resistantly and persistently 50 year life spans that govern the design of building.¹³ Banham encouraged architects to compensate by borrowing the cycles of consumption as registered in industrial design products to make architecture more temporally agile. Well, architects seemed to have listened, at least the Italian ones,

because Fiumi's collective decided to call itself Gruppo 9999 which they based on the face of a flip-clock, an Italian industrial design invention of the late 1950s that became a universal standard in 1965 with Gino Valle's Cifra 3. Of course, 9999 does not exist in real time, but suggests the theoretical moment before a final flip brings a new millennium or a blast-off, the instant of the flip itself when no time is legible but the animations of time are performed and heard. Going further than Banham ever imagined, Gruppo 9999's electronically extended architecture did not just make room for a flip clock because a clock could be more up to date than a building, but became itself a flip clock, an analog machine showing digital animations, a new instrument for registering new kinds of time.

It was perhaps overdetermined that Italy would become one of the most productive centers of anime popular culture. Banham had already linked Italy to Japan when he cited the plagiarizing by Italian manufacturers of Japanese mid-century products. Today, Toki Doki, and its moofia of Mozzarella figurines, runs a close second to the marketing of Murakami and the superflat. But all these twists and turns suggest not the trade battles of international capital nor the loss and recovery of competitive disciplinarity, even though these are the terms used by figures such as Banham who lamented that architects would not be the ones to design TV sets, but could still serve the public by designing well where to put a plug for the TV. To the contrary, architecture's entry into the logic of the animated image expanded its field of operations, quite literally thickening its surfaces, adding not just time but

the most difficult because the most fleeting of durations to its self-definition as a medium, integrating animation into its structure, resulting in a supermedium that stretched itself almost beyond recognition to absorb what should not have been absorbable, like the sound of television, and to resolve itself into something that is all at once the same and not.

Today, as car designers, pop artists, medical imagineers, and architects share virtually identical forms of material technological, social and economic infrastructure, and as the architectural surface is increasingly cannibalized by capital, medium specificity is again a question. But while in the 60s these convergences seemed to predict a unifying blend of allatonicness, where all mediums dissolve into one giant ubermedium, medium specificity turned out to be a concatenation of preoccupations and modes of intellection that made it possible for many different fields to watch the same episode of Astro Boy yet see something completely different. The superflat surface, the surface thick with ambient producing technologies and animated by instantly changing decors and time scales previously anathema to architectural duration, is no threat to architecture but rather is where the architectural action is today. And while this very action has attracted the attention of many fields—the superflat surface is today crowded with special effects designers, graphic design, experience design and artists—the super-surface is architecture's answer to medium specificity in a post-medium world; it was built by architecture and is knowable today because architecture has been looking into its depth for some 40 years.

Notes:

- 1 McLuhan, Marshall, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects with Quentin Fiore*; New York, 1967.
- 2 "La superarchitettura e l'architettura della superproduzione, del superconsumo, della superinduzione al consumo, del supermarket, del superman e della benzina super. La superarchitettura accetta la logica della produzione e del consumo e vi esercita un'azione demistificante." *Manifesto of the 2nd Mostra di Superarchitettura*, Modena, 1967. My translation.
- 3 Ambasz, Emilio (ed.), *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievement and Problems of Italian Design*; Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972.
- 4 For McLuhan, this was possible because television produced a new kind of image that was, first, spatial rather than pictorial—it enveloped viewers in an ambience of sound and light and, second, that was discontinuous—fast cuts and excessive content required viewers to fill in the blanks.
- 5 Cited in Branden W. Joseph, "'My Mind Split Open': Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable"; *Grey Room 08*, Summer 2002, p. 97.
- 6 This account is based on an interview I conducted with Fiumi in Venice, CA in 2005.
- 7 The only available source on this course is in Leonardo Savioli, *Ipotesi di Spazio*, Florence, 1972.
- 8 Savioli, *Ipotesi di Spazio*, Florence, 1972, p. 48.
- 9 See "Instant Interiors," *Progressive Architecture*, vol. 48, no. 6, p. 176–181, 1967.
- 10 The Piper Club phenomenon was a supercompression machine where live and recorded music, popular culture and traditions of high art, theater and happenings, business and entrepreneurship and utopian forms of resistance all occupied the same place at different times. In Turin, for example, the Piper Club was programmed like a TV schedule with dancing on Fridays for the fiat factory workers, the Living Theater on Wednesdays for students and art shows during the day like a traditional museum.
- 11 The project description is from a privately produced book, unpublished and untitled, that is described as by "9999" copyrighted, G. Birelli, C. Caldini, F. Fiumi and P. Galli in Florence. Galli provided me with a copy.
- 12 From Tommaso Trini's review of two Piper Clubs designed by Pietro Derossi with Giorgio Ceretti, one in Turin, the other, *L'Altro Mondo* in Rimini, *Domus* 458, 1968.
- 13 Reyner Banham, "Design by Choice," in *Design by Choice*, ed. Penny Sparke; London: Academy Editions, 1981, p. 97–107.