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A Necklace of Bites

// Clemens Finkelstein

1959. In the swelling heat of summer, the philosopher and anthropologist Ernesto De Martino visits Salento, a region of the Southern Italian peninsula, the *Mezzogiorno*, where magic is still very much alive. Hundreds of people have claimed here in the past, to have fallen victim to the bite of a mythical tarantula, endemic to the region for over five hundred years. They call the illness caused by the bite of the creature *tarantismo* (tarantism). Only the *tarantella*, a dance inducing a trance-like state, in conjunction with the performance of specific music and colors, can cure the sick; a ritual exorcism meant to expulse the demonic possession through the *taranta*.¹

Deeply ingrained in Italian culture, Leonardo da Vinci describes the sickness as manifesting “a man in his intention, that is, whatever he was thinking when he was bitten.”² Associated with states of hysteria, melancholy, somnolence, and madness, the nympholeptic hold of the magical beast carries with it an irresistible craving to express the inner tempest through bodily movement. Succumbing to the poisonous bite, the violent dance that ensues can last a many nights and days. De Martino describes the ritual procession accompanying the exorcism in his resulting study *La Terra del Rimorso* (1961) as communal experience; soliciting “the participation in diverse capacities of musicians, family members and an assorted audience of ‘believers’ who throng at the doors of the hovels where the home cures take place, or who form a circle around the dancing *tarantato* [the *bitten*]” in open squares.³

Fast and repetitive rhythms emanate from the musical instruments that thrust their net of hypnotic vibrations through the air, drawing out first minor tremors, twitches, and spasms from the *bitten*. As the melodic chant intensifies, correspondingly, the *bitten*, clothed in a purifying pearly white, convulses more and more, pulsing on the cold stony floor ecstatically, eyes closed, arms and legs flapping, head shaking violently from side to side...



The creation of a “healing” or ritualistic space, both for the passively participating “believers” and the actively immersed *tarantato*, is reliant on what can be broken down into a tripartite rite of music, dance, and colors.

In architecture, the correlate manifests as *performance* (movement), *notation* (semiotics), and *complexion* (color/texture). The translocation of this three-fold program from the ethnopsychiatric and ethnomusicological folklore to a semiotics of space, provides a promising entry point into an architectural investigation of the complex operations of the *bite*. Thus, what is a *bite* if not the registration of forces; forces that may leave an impression, a fading bruise or a scar of penetration. Yet, a *bite* is not a *bite*. When dealing with this operative transgression of violence, we need to distinguish between different intentions and modes of *biting*: a *bite* of sensual desire, animalistic lust or sadomasochistic submission; a *bite* of survivalist aggression, poisonous injection or possessive intrusion. Additionally, we have to distinguish between the active *bite* and the passive *bite*; between *biting* and being *bitten*. Furthermore, distinct from its modes and intentions, the final instance of the *bite*, must be differentiated threefold (if not fourfold⁴), reflected in what will be termed the “degrees” of the *bite*: an ephemeral impression (first degree), a temporary bruise or mark left in the flesh (second degree), or a permanent penetration (third degree), leaving a residual scar as evidence of its own encroachment on the other.

I. Impression—ephemeral mark. Let us begin by focusing on the scene of the *bite*—the pressure applied to the flesh, the teeth sinking in, the mouth enveloping the scene of transgression—where the boundaries of the *bitten* and the *biter* blur in a mist of pain and pleasure, pressure and release. The indenture that presents itself as residual mark of the *bite*, then, depending on the amount of force applied, and the physiological predilection of the *bitten*, either gradually fades into non-existence, or transforms itself into a bruise, the rupture of underlying blood vessels, discoloring the skin around the *bite* into gradually changing polychrome shades of red, blue, purple, black, green and yellow.

The first degree *bite*—that of a slightly delayed, yet immediate dissipation—may initially seem inconsequential to the registration of forces that could influence the *bitten* following its occurrence. However, as minimalist sculptor Carl Andre rightly stresses, “nothing ever truly disappears.”⁵ Specifically due to the lack of an evidentiary residual mark—visually

indexical—the first degree *bite*, in its subtlety, manifests as *phantom* haunting the *bitten*. Traces of memory take shape as psychological after-image, which in Derridean deconstruction forms as an “‘I’ that is both part of the spectacle and part of the audience; an ‘I’ that, a bit like ‘you,’ attends (undergoes) its own incessant, violent reinscription within the arithmetical machinery; an ‘I’ that, functioning as a pure passageway for operations of substitution, is not some singular and irreplaceable existence, some subject of ‘life,’ but only, [...] a mere function or phantom. A term and a germ, a term that disseminates itself, a germ that carries its own term within it.”⁶

As such, the first degree *bite* operates only within the *bitten*, invisible to outside observers, and even—or especially—to the *biter*. This distancing is due to a difference between the fading forces of the *bite* and the former’s intention. Now externalized and detached from the *biter*, relationships and forces are transformed. Any retention of pain or pleasure within the *bitten* has become a mere function, operating at a remove from the original event. Once absorbed and internalized, the *bite* becomes increasingly affective while the initial sensorial registration of pain dissipates, overwritten by the overall excitement of an intimate violence.

In the second degree *bite*, transgression results in an ephemeral polychromatic mark, a bruise slowly fading. Contrary to its obvious visual presence, the second degree is less potent in transferring the force of the *bite* into the *bitten* than the first degree outlined above. Despite its clear existence—evident to the *bitten*, the *biter*, and outside observers—the second degree *bite*, in its prolonged ephemerality, effectively cancels out the affect of the preceding intimate exchange. Not only does the outward appearance of this prismatic symbol carry with it negative connotations, a bruise remains filled with residual pain, displeasure, and soreness in consequence of the petechial hemorrhage marking the dermal layer, thus overshadowing the more powerful dichotomy of an immediate transversal from pain (*action*) to pleasure (*reaction*) in the *bitten*—as it occurs in the first and third degree *bite*.

II. Penetration—symbolic scar. When the *bite* exceeds the ephemeral by penetrating the skin and the flesh of the *bitten*, it presents itself as mark of permanence. More than a mere nibbling, the third degree *bite* ruptures the dermal layer and becomes eternalized as symbolic scar. Here, the initial act of transgression is (literally) more bloody than in the ephemeral

degrees of the *bite*; bringing with it another unique occurrence—a true interrelation and exchange of bodily matter between the *bitten* and the *biter*.

As the most powerful, the third degree *bite* is multidimensional: it embodies the subliminal characteristics of the first degree while its physical zenith presents itself as a visual and palpable scar that possesses a symbolic quality, uniquely layered for the *bitten*, the *biter*, and the spectators of the breach.

For the *bitten*, her wound, the mark of transgression through an other, has become part of her-*self*. The regenerated flesh, the cicatricial tissue, contrary to being solely a record of submission or violation, thus *owns* the other's infraction. By embodying the event of the *bite*, the *bitten* assumes ownership of the identifying signature of the other. In a reversal of submission and domination, gaining on the breach, the *bite* becomes a Platonic *pharmakon*, both poison and cure; the wound, as Héléne Cixous poetically remarks, reveals itself “in breaking, [...] a strange thing: [...] a kind of work takes place [here], mysterious [...] trace, even if it hurts us. It is here that I sense things happen [...], the story.”⁷

An abysm healed, remains, in its intention, as *writing*, as surficial root to a deeper dissimulation; of a registration of forces within the intimate exchange of the *bite*. This intimacy is bi-directional. The *biter*, in turn, has lost control over her former indiscretion. The mark of dominion, as it morphs into the scar tissue of the *bitten*, has turned on her-*self*. As the *biter* is now unable to alter or re-assume her mark—trying to renounce the scar as abstraction of an event now misrepresented—agency is inversed. Similarly, for outside observers, the symbolic scar acts as evidential witness of the original event; of something that has long since happened, yet that remains actual, collapsing past and present emblematically.

In transcending the mere mark as surficial symbol, we must, therefore, recalibrate and collimate our tools here in accordance with Merleau-Ponty, whom points out, regarding the oscillating depth of the visible, that, “since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow take place in them; their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility.”⁸ Echoing the biblical reference of the Eucharist ritual, the dual subcategory of the third degree—wrapping up our theory of the *bite*—culminates as an exchange of bodily matter, of substances being withdrawn from or injected into the *bitten*: “He that eateth my flesh, and

drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.”⁹

As demonstrated above in De Martino’s study on the mythical *taranta* of the *Mezzogiorno*, we know that a *bite* can also carry with it a poisonous gift, be it supernatural or physiological, demonic possession¹⁰ or feverish infection, cured by an exorcism or antidote. Conversely, the exchange can also culminate in the saturnine consumption of bodily matter of the *bitten* by the *biter*; consumption of matter as either flesh or blood. Rarely accidental, its intention is the most ferocious and ranges from “normal” nutritional diets to such highly charged instances of anthropophagy (cannibalism) and exsanguination (vampirism).

Charged mythologemes fester around these instances of the *bite*: the biblical *Ur-sin* of Eva’s transgressive act, piercing the skin of a juicy apple that will bring impending doom and expulsion from paradise; Saturn, fearing to be overthrown by his own offspring, devours them upon their birth; and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) or E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Die Serapions-Brüder* (1819-1821) and *Vampirismus* (1821), the latter transcending Stoker’s comparatively tame eroticism by constructing a German literary history of the vampire as figure that de-romanticizes the *bite* as raw fetishistic dimension of necrophilia. Oddly enough, in the seam of these magical and more rational images, architecture emerges. Eclipsing the mere mythos of such fantastical tales, Philip Johnson could be recalled, whose own “origin story” as an architect owes much to his 1927 visit to the Greek island of Naxos, where, being “caught up in a local vampire panic spurred by a cholera outbreak,” his life would change forever.¹¹

III. Archi-bite. Synchronously constructing, designing, exposing, and transforming forces in a relational action between *biting* and being *bitten*, architecture operates diagrammatically at an instance of contact-based tension/pressure. Characterized by and acting out aspects of the *bite* outlined above, architecture condenses “a space of tension between thought and material constraints, logical implications and real implications, habits of thinking and dehabituating tendencies of matter.”¹²

However, not all architectural projects that deal with tropes of the void or wound, in effect, truly embody the full potentiality of the *bite*. The *bite*—in these cases—only superficially exists and perpetuates the appearance of a forceful operation through its “opened” visuality and pictoriality; be

it in the appearance of the façade, pure allegorical form, or theoretical contextualization. While there exist many seemingly apparent cases of the *bite*—misrepresentations of the intricate system we have outlined above—we shall turn to one architectural instance that devotedly performs operations of the *bite*: transgressing, infiltrating, devouring, possessing, on the surface or deeply structural, visible or invisible.

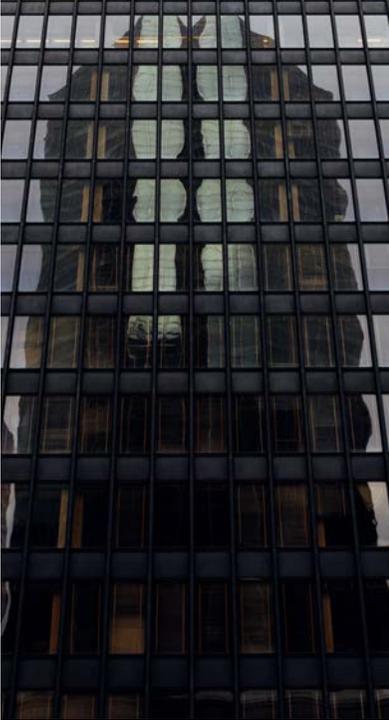
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's *Seagram Building*, furnished by Philip Johnson and prominently located in the heart of New York on 375 Park Avenue, lends itself to our emergent speculation. Demonstrating Mies' first attempt in 1954-58 at a 515 feet tall high-rise office building following the principles of modernism, which he had honed beginning in the 1920s in his Berlin skyscraper experiments, the architect's project encompasses all three programmatic correlates of the *bite*: *performance* (movement), *notation* (semiotics), and *complexion* (color/texture).

Though static in its monolithic sublimity at first glance, the Seagram firmly oscillates as intricate performance between interior and exterior, moving about and anchoring itself into the urban fabric of Manhattan in an active expression of spatial forces. The ritualistic dance that ensues takes its cues from its surround, the proximity to other architectural structures, which it plays off of intricately in the creation of an unfolding space of dynamism. "The very body of the building," describes K. Michael Hays, "contorts to assume the form demanded by the contingent configuration of the site and to register the circumstantial images of the context."¹³ Nonetheless, movement is not solely achieved through relational operations, yet, similarly to De Martino's *bitten*, emerges from within the structure itself; from its gridded body and architectural *skin*.

In his essay *The Principle of Cladding* (1898), Viennese architect Adolf Loos, as Anne Anlin Cheng remarks, "attributes the origin of architecture not to structure or solid material, as might be expected, but to mobile surfaces: fabric, even skin."¹⁴ Loos' *Bekleidung* (cladding) connotes both, as Cheng points out, the covering of bodies as much as buildings.¹⁵ Mies' glass curtain wall, accordingly, presents itself "alternately transparent, reflective, or refractive depending on light conditions and viewing positions," writes Hays, through which the building's *skin* "absorbs, mirrors or distorts the immediate, constantly changing images of city life" it is surrounded by.¹⁶ *Biting* into the urban fabric—always already—as the dominant steel and glass structure that it is, the Seagram is thus also marked by the *bite* of its circumambient—the infrastructure, other

architectural structures, and the exhibitionism of New York hustle and bustle that accumulate on its reflective surface.

Bi-directionality, as characteristic of the intimate exchange between *bitten* and *biter*, here excavates traits of the first degree and third degree *bite*. On the one hand, a passing ephemerality of the dissipating mark, as it



is registered on the surface of the Seagram by the city's actors such as the human and vehicular bodies roaming its enclosing space, steers us towards the first degree. On the other hand, the symbolic scar of the building itself—a residual mark of the Seagram's *bite* into the urban flesh of New York City—remains as attest to the third degree. The latter is further underlined by the rectangular streets that, like cicatricial tissue, encircle the scene of the violent inscription.

Evocative and affective in being both, proof of the *bite*'s permanent mark in the city and stage for the procession of those other actors and witnesses to *bite* back, the darkened asphalt veins lead us to our second determinant of the *bite*. The Seagram delicately interlaces *performance* with what forms through the crystallization of images and signs as *notation*. Akin to musical harmony, which has been a leitmotif of architectural theory prominently in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the sequential score of the *bite* materializes as a time-sensitive image that transcends a straightforward identification, yet can be found in the “coexistence of all images, without center, direction or orientation.”¹⁷ “What is at stake,” writes Maurizio Lazzarato here fittingly in following Henri Bergson, “is the image in itself, an image that no eye perceives.”¹⁸

As symbolic vessel, the Seagram “transmits movements, in which action and reaction are merged,” it assumes the role of emitter, receiver, catalyst, and inceptor that, following a certain notation, puts the myriad of images that erupt and fold in on themselves into a potent equation. Implying a ritualistic cyclicity of performing these assorted tasks, day after day, the building operates as an image that has transcended its ability to be fathomable on a purely visual scale, rather piercing through matter and experience as “tremor, pure vibration, shiver”—as *bite*.¹⁹

The Seagram manifests as the architect's very own engagement with *image* in this way, as a proleptically astute creation of space through contrasted flow. By delaying an immediate repartee with the neighboring urban fabric, achieved by mining “air to breath” through the preceding plaza that sets the building aback, Mies delicately pits negative and positive space against each other—organically oscillating between horizontality and verticality.

In allowing for a prolonged approach to the Seagram from the edge of the street, he not only underlines the processual *mise-en-scène* of monolithic proportions unfolding in front of the visitor advancing towards the building,

yet virtually anticipates a directionally opposed enactment of movement through urban dwellers enthralled by two large fountains inserted into the plaza. While the building itself formerly executes vertically directed forces through its symbolic shell—though horizontal movement obviously always simultaneously takes place internally on each of the building's floors—the plaza functions exclusively on the accumbant plane. Further enhancing the performance of the *bite*, which in the preceding is enacted by a clearly defined compass, the Seagram on a level of dissolution blurs spatial limits as one enters its lobby; where the pearly white ceiling carries through from the exterior to the interior.

As Hays accentuates, and through which he leads us to our third determinant, that of *complexion*, Mies' attention in the Seagram project seems to have revolved—"from the start, judging from the documents"—around the "pink granite plaza" in front of the building, situated in contrast to the "cavernous [polychromous flowing] streets of New York," and the vertically stretched, onyx tinged block of glass that is the upwards striving skyscraper.²⁰

The obsidian hued and bronze tinted glass curtain wall of the Seagram, by day, acts markedly as a *Claude glass*, abstracting through abatement of the tonal range and the sharpening of silhouettes and edges the surrounding urban landscape in a painterly and picturesque operation. By night, when the interior of the building is illuminated by an oddly warm, xanthous glow emanating from the ceiling panels, the Seagram's black grid-like structure, now enhanced, even further emphasizes the importance of complexion and contrast to our perception of the architectural forces at play. A perception that, as Bergson stresses, "seizes the infinitely repeated vibrations that are constituted by light or heat, [...] and contracts them into relatively invariable sensations: these are the trillions of exterior oscillations that the vision of color condenses in our eyes, in a fraction of a second."²¹

The chromatic spectrum, whether day or night, thus acts as revelatory tool regarding the affectation of the *bite* ascribed to Mies' Seagram. Experience is related via a movement through color and space, textures and sensations that reveal their inner essence by blinking, taking in the oscillations Bergson alludes to, not by staring.

The complex operations that have been revealed thus far, begin to elucidate the potential of the *bite* in providing a theoretical groundwork for engaging with architecture; making apparent the gestural, auratic,

desiring, dialectic, violent/pleasurable performative potential inherent to certain architectural projects. As such, in a first symptomatic reading, Mies' Seagram emerges, not as a superficial nibbling, but as a full-fledged *bite*.

Epilogue. As a last taste of this excursion into the territory of the *bite*, Derrida provides us with an example of a truly special case, that of *biting one-self*. Having expounded on the transgression of one towards the other, this operation truly collapses the relationship between the *bitten* and the *biter*—the dialectic active/passive or submission/subjection. Derrida writes:

To see, without going to see, without touching yet, and without *biting*, although that threat remains on its lips or on the tip of the tongue. Something happens there that shouldn't take place—like everything that happens in the end, a lapsus, a fall, a failure, a fault, a symptom (and *symptom*, as you know, also means 'fall': case, unfortunate event, coincidence, what falls due [*échéance*], mishap). It is as if, at that instant, I had said or were going to say the forbidden, something that shouldn't be said. As if I were to admit what cannot be admitted in a symptom and, as one says, wanted to *bite* my tongue.²²

Biting one's own tongue, again, depending on the force applied, may very well lead to an inability—passing or permanent—to speak, to a symptomatic silence. Utterly self-inflicted, this silence, as Jean-Luc Marion points out, is itself an ambivalent thing: "precisely because it does not explain itself, [it] exposes itself to an infinite equivocation of meaning."²³ Architecture, in such muted instances, thus may find itself in a highly charged atmosphere of potentialities, anticipating further engagement in a silence that is demanding to be broken. It is in the silence—pain or pleasure—that may echo this essay, that we excavate the further potential for an investigation into the *bite* and architecture, suspended until re-*bite*.

Endnotes.

- 1 "Demorsi Appuli curantur sono . saltu . cantu . coloribus." (Apulian bite victims are treated with music . dance . song . colors.) – Gaudenzio Merula, *Memorabilia*, Lyons 1556, ch. LXIX.
- 2 Leonardo da Vinci, cod. Il. 18 v.
- 3 Ernesto De Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism* (London: Free Association Books, 2005), 22; originally published as *La Terra del Rimorso* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1961).
- 4 A fourth possible dimension of the *bite*, that of "following through" on the third degree, culminates in the consumption of bodily matter.
- 5 Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with Carl Andre," *Artforum* 8:10 (June 1970), 55-61 (56).
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 325.
- 7 Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (London: Routledge, 1997), 16.
- 8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 164.
- 9 John 6:56.
- 10 Possession, which itself can be supernatural or natural. Mother Nature is no stranger to curious occurrences, and this the following example shall prove; an homage to Ed Eigen, whose scholarly obsession with mollusks did enlighten a many lectures on architectural history witnessed by this author at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design: A snail, upon having consumed the parasitic worm *Leucochloridium*, is turned into a so-called *zombie-snail*, result of an aggressive mimicry in which the worm paralyses the snail and invades its eyestalks, pulsating hypnotically to imitate the juicy patterns of caterpillars attractive to birds that will in turn consume the snail and return the worm with its feces to become eaten by other snails—completing the cruel cycle of life.
- 11 Benjamin H. Bratton, "El Proceso (The Process)," in *e-flux journal* #69 (January 2016), n.p. (1).
- 12 Reza Negarestani, *Torture Concrete: Jean-Luc Moulène and the Protocol of Abstraction* (New York: Sequence Press, 2014), 10-11.
- 13 K. Michael Hays, "Abstraction's Appearance (Seagram Building)," in *Autonomy and Ideology: Positioning an Avant-Garde in America*, ed. Robert E. Somol (New York: The Monacellii Press, 1997), 276-291 (278).
- 14 Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23.
- 15 See *ibid.*, 24.
- 16 Hays (1997), 278.
- 17 Maurizio Lazzarato, "Machines to Crystallize Time: Bergson," in *Theory, Culture & Society* 2007 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore), Vol. 24(6): 93-122 (97).
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Hays (1997), 282; addendum my own.
- 21 Henri Bergson, *Œuvres* (Paris: PUF, 1991), 1334-5; as cited in Lazzarato (2007), 97.
- 22 Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," in *Critical Inquiry*, Vo. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 2002), 369-418 (373); emphasis my own.
- 23 Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 54.