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The Sphere: Reading a Gender Metaphor in the Architecture of Modern Cults of Identity

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In 1936 Albert Speer made his first designs for a domed hall, which was intended to complete and tower over the north-south axis envisioned by Hitler for Berlin. According to Hitler's wishes, the dome was to surpass those of the Capitol in Washington and St Peter's in Rome. In the dome, with its semi-spherical basic form, its ribs and lantern, Speer cited ecclesiastical architecture since the Renaissance, but took it several steps further; he magnified the basic form, and multiplied the number of ribs covering it. The rising lines of the ribs, which culminated in the lantern, signified hierarchy and notions of salvation and resurrection. With its gigantic dimensions, the domed building was to encompass the 'nation as a body' (*Volkskörper*) – standing room for 150,000 was planned – and to elevate it to the object of its own cult.

In 1939, when the final version of the design for the domed hall was completed,¹ a whole, unadorned sphere next to a steep triangular obelisk became the symbolic monument of the 1939 World Fair in New York.² Inside the sphere visitors could admire the model of a futuristic machine-age city surrounded by a park, 'Democracy', designed for the 'world of tomorrow'. The Fair opened in the summer of 1939, shortly before Hitler invaded Poland.

Two versions of the sphere as metaphor: each of them was to represent, visually, a political system. The designers clearly assumed that the metaphor of the sphere

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¹ See Lars Olof Larsson, *Die Neugestaltung der Reichshauptstadt. Albert Speers Generalbebauungsplan für Berlin*, Stockholm, 1978, pp. 44-6.

² See, among others, *Le livre des expositions universelles, 1851-1989*, Paris, 1983.

had a high capacity to create appropriate meanings; that is, they could refer to an effective tradition in the collective visual memory. It is surprising that this metaphor was employed on both sides of a confrontation between political systems that had assumed existentially threatening proportions at the time. The 'war' of metaphors that was being fought out between fascism and democracy immediately before the outbreak of World War II juxtaposed two fields of meaning and association surrounding the same basic form, and in so doing referred to two lines of tradition in architectural history: the ribbed semi-spherical dome of the ancient and modern architecture of domination, whether ecclesiastical or imperial, was contrasted with the whole, unadorned sphere of the radically stereometric architectural visions of the so-called revolutionary architecture conceived by Boullée.

I am getting ahead of myself, though. This 'narrative' actually begins elsewhere, with an architectural design by Boullée himself. The reception of his design among architectural historians since its rediscovery in 1968 led me to ask questions about the sphere as an architectural *metaphor*, or, to be more precise, as a *gendered* metaphor. This led to further questions about the meaning of this gender metaphor in the field of political identities, and that will be the subject of what follows.

The Sphere (I)

It was probably in 1793, during the Jacobin Terror, that Étienne-Louis Boullée designed a temple to which, so far as is known, he never gave a name. In current scholarship it is known by two names: the Temple to Reason and the Temple to

³ The following authors use the name 'Temple to Nature': Helen Rosenau, *Boullée and Visionary Architecture including Boullée's 'Architecture, Essay on Art'*, London and New York, 1976; Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, *Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728–1799). De l'architecture classique à l'architecture révolutionnaire*, Paris, 1969; Philippe Madecq, *Boullée*, Paris, 1986; the only German author thus far has been Johannes Langner, 'Fels und Sphäre. Bilder der Natur in der Architektur um 1789' (English trans. 'The Rocks and the Sphere: Architectural Images of Nature around 1789'), both in *Daidalos*, vol. 12, 1984, pp. 92–103. Curiously enough, it is mainly scholars from the German-speaking countries who argue for the name 'Temple to Reason': Lankheit (see note 4 below); Adolf Max Vogt, *Boullée's Newton-Denkmal, Sakralbau und Kugelidee*, Basel, 1969; Bruno Reudenbach, 'Natur und Geschichte bei Ledoux und Boullée', *IDEA. Werke. Theorien. Dokumente. Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle*, vol. 8, 1989, pp. 31–56; Monika Steinhäuser, 'Étienne-Louis Boullée's Architecture. Essai sur l'art. Zur theoretischen Begründung einer autonomen Architektur', *IDEA*, vol. 2, 1983, pp. 7–47. Richard Sennett offers a 'just' but unfortunately neither very subtle nor well-founded nor well-documented solution in a few short sentences on the 'Temple to Nature and Reason' in his *Flesh and Stone*, New York, 1994, pp. 294–6. He simply dedicates the temple to both cults, but additionally simplifies the duality through reductions: the top half was that of 'Reason'; the bottom half was supposed to be scooped out of the earth and was thus the half of 'Nature'. Sennett apparently believes that the rocky landscape of the surrounding crater was supposed to be the mere result of these excavations. He fails to note that this was a carefully planned architectural *natura naturata* and not 'nature' in some authentic, material (scooped out!) splendour.

Nature.³ It has been assigned to two fields of signification which generally represent extremes on the scale of the symbolic gender order: reason = male, nature = female. The possibility of such divergent interpretations lies in the nature of the design itself. It radically formulates the gender ambivalence associated with the metaphor of the sphere and allows it to stand unresolved.

In 1968 Klaus Lankheit attributed to Boullée the two large architectural drawings in the Uffizi, which show the exterior (54 × 90 cm) and cross-section (48 × 91 cm) of a rotunda, dated them c.1793, and interpreted the building as a Temple to Reason.⁴ The exterior structure of this 'temple' is a rotunda of extreme regularity, with a plain dome sunk into two cylindrical rings. Boullée's principles of absence of ornament and closed wall surfaces, which allows the stereometric volumes to be effective as a basis for construction, are fully developed. The chief characteristics of the interior space are the two half-spheres of different diameters for the dome and for a rocky crater with grotto. They are linked by a double non-structural colonnade. The half-sphere of the dome is visible only in the interior space. The lower half-sphere consists of an artificial rocky crater, at the base of which a grotto mound rises up with a dark cave entrance with a strong vertical emphasis. The grotto mound is crowned by a Diana of Ephesus. Originally a nature and fertility goddess from Asia Minor, she must, as Lankheit notes, have been familiar to the architect as a symbol of nurturing nature present in iconographic tradition since Raphael's loggias in the Vatican.⁵ As an emblem of revolutionary nature religion, she had also gained new prominence in the festival iconography of 1793–4. To summarize, the design consists of a dome which is visible in the interior space as a half-sphere, but from the outside only as a sunken sphere segment, the surrounding cylindrical rings, a double interior colonnade, a rocky crater with a grotto mound, the grotto entrance and the statue of Diana Ephesia.

This clearly delimited number of components led architectural historians to identify the cult to which the temple was dedicated as, variously, reason and nature. The decisive factor here was the contrast between the rational stereometric form of the dome and the *mise en scène* of chaos and fertility in the rocky crater, the grotto and the statue of the goddess. What all attempts at interpretation have in common is their desire to harmonize an extremely polarized image, usually in favour of the dome, which represents 'Reason'.

As a sign, the sphere has a long history. The imperial apple, as an old symbol of sovereignty, points to the formal analogy between the sphere and the earth. We find it as an emblem in heraldry and as an attribute of allegorical personifications of the most diverse meanings. In the architecture of the late Renaissance and the Baroque it belongs to architectural ornament, particularly in the ephemeral festive decorations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in garden architecture,

⁴ Klaus Lankheit, *Unveröffentlichte Zeichnungen von Étienne-Louis Boullée aus den Uffizien*, Basel, 1968, 1973.

⁵ Ibid.

funerary monuments and architectural *capricci*.⁶ There, it is usually only one element among others, however. With the architectural visions of Boullée, Ledoux and Lequeu, though, this form becomes an architectural body in its own right, and thus moves from a peripheral position to that of central signifier.

During the French Revolution the metaphor of the sphere embarked on a new political career as a signifier for a collective vision. It found expression in the plans for public buildings for the Nation and its new sovereign, the so-called 'People'. The sphere and its derivatives became central metaphors in the architectural representations of political cults. They were part of the symbolic apparatus used to visualize the discourses on such political terms as 'People' and 'Nation', which were to become central for modernity.

The political cults of the French Revolution represent the first high point in the emergence of modern cults of the political. They formed around the constructions of identity that accompanied the abolition of the monarchy and the simultaneous introduction of a collective Self in the French Revolution: the People, also referred to as the Nation. The sovereign People was to replace the sovereign king. A result of this radical shift was the search for images to supplant the image of the beheaded king, and thus fill a dangerous vacuum of political symbolism. It proved extremely difficult, however, to provide the abstraction of popular sovereignty with a symbolic 'body'. Architecture was to participate in addressing this problem in public space alongside painting and sculpture.

The gendered sphere

At first glance, the sphere is a body in a purely stereometric sense. It appears, in its formal abstraction, to transcend its (grammatically) female gender⁷ and to reach a stage of meaning far beyond anything so particular as sex, which is what made it appear so appropriate a metaphor for the all-encompassing and the indivisible.

The metaphor is not, however, without gender. This representation of totality is constructed *within* fields of signification which are shaped by the symbolic order of the sexes. That is the reason for the ambivalent creation of political meaning in Boullée's design described at the outset. As latent signifiers, both sexes support the metaphorical field of activity of the sphere and its derivatives, among which I would like to include the ribbed dome and also the grotto mound.

What, however, is the relationship between this gender ambivalence and the need for symbolic unambiguousness in the discourse of political identities? What is the relationship of the symbolic gender order to the concepts of Nation that lie at the heart of the political systems of modernity? And how does it relate to the concepts of equality and totality used to legitimate collective units and political

⁶ Werner Oechslin documents the ornamental and iconographic scope of its use in painting and architecture in 'Pyramide et sphère. Notes sur l'architecture révolutionnaire du XVIIIe siècle et ses sources italiennes', *Gazette des beaux-arts*, vol. 77, 1971, pp. 218ff.

⁷ Translator's note: the German for sphere, '*die Kugel*', is feminine.

ideological hegemonies? Put another way, why is it that the gender ambivalence of this sign does not impede the visual representation of unity, but instead actually fosters it? And what does this say about the fantasies with which notions of collective unity are rendered visual and elevated to public imagery? We must ask, not least, why the visual discourse of political collectivity 'has' a gender at all, whether it is manifested or remains latent.

These questions about gender relations in the visual language of metaphors of power necessarily call into question the conceptions and patterns of discourse of terms such as the People, community and the Nation precisely at those points where they emphasize that that which is represented as universally valid in fact refers to and helps to enforce the particular. One may trace this process not only in body images, such as national allegories,⁸ but also in the forms of architectural 'bodies'.

Architecture as field of meaning

Boullée's visions of public buildings are 'speaking' architecture (*architecture parlante*), i.e., they are intended to produce meaning. One could apply to them what Roland Barthes has said of advertising images; one may assume that 'the image's signification is assuredly intentional . . . : the advertising image is *frank* [emphasis in the original] or at least emphatic.'⁹ Boullée's designs were doubtless frank and emphatic. I would like to use the reference to Barthes's attempt to develop a rhetoric of the image to relativize that assessment of Boullée's aesthetic, which regards his designs and his theory as early indicators of 'autonomous' art.¹⁰ If we apply the aesthetic of the autonomous art work to Boullée's architectural designs, we will be unable to pose certain questions which place these visions in a functional or, more precisely, meaning-producing and thus socially norm-producing context.

Boullée's work and the cult architecture that followed had something in common with modern advertising: dedication to a political cult generally meant, and means, a quite *precise production of meaning*, which in turn generates a (in this case architectural) *rhetoric*. The metaphorical repertoire of this cult architecture, with all its implications for modernity, became fully developed for the first time during the French Revolution.

⁸ See, in particular, Silke Wenk, *Versteinerte Weiblichkeit*, 1996, and Susanne von Falkenhausen, *Italienische Monumentalmalerei im Risorgimento, 1830–1890. Strategien nationaler Bildersprache*, Berlin, 1993.

⁹ Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', in R. Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991, pp. 21–40, here p. 22.

¹⁰ The need to evaluate Boullée's work in this light, and thus to incorporate it into a narrative on the genesis of modern art, was already the impetus for its rediscovery by Emil Kauffmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, Vienna, 1933. This tendency continues within the framework both of modernist and postmodernist-oriented reception.

Were we to follow the widespread assumption that art is art (only) when it is 'autonomous', i.e., free of any responsibility, and that it can only then fully exhaust the category of the aesthetic, we would be virtually robbing the architecture of a Boullée of its aesthetic value if we asked about its participation in the public, normative production of meaning. I do not believe, however, that aesthetics need necessarily conflict with the public production of meaning and thus with participation in the cultural presuppositions of an era. Where architecture is supposed to convey something, it becomes an intelligible *image*. It transports meaning through perception. In this perception, in turn, the artistic quality, the aesthetic, gains in significance over other characteristics of architecture such as function, economy, *convenance* or decorum. For architecture, the production of meaning does not necessarily result in a diminution of its artistic character because it is being put in the 'service' of something else. On the contrary, the result is its intensified entry into the pictorial.

The Metaphor

'The most energetic language is that whose sign has said everything before one speaks,' writes Rousseau in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*.¹¹ He dreams of a world in which the sign and the signified are supposedly one, a time of images and the unquestioned substance of that which can be seen. The French Revolution, of all things, attempted to force this unalienated Arcadia, the backward-looking Utopia of the unity of sign and nature, into the present. Its political imagery thus referred not only to the values intended in a given situation, but beyond this to the myth of an identity between the sign and the signified as an identity between human beings, society and nature, between what is seen and the truth.

The form of representation which appeared predestined for such an operation was the metaphor – a term from rhetoric which described a sort of borderline operation between language and image, for its effect was directed at pictorial feeling and thought. Stylistic ascetics frequently rejected, and continue to reject, the metaphor as too baroque, too sensual, illogical, confusing or even immoral, in short, as too seductive – a sort of linguistic *femme fatale*. Political moralists could take up this train of thought for the field in question here: the metaphors of the political cults of the modern age. The metaphor's seductive power would then form the basis for an abuse of the – in themselves – guileless arts for the manipulation of the masses. I cannot, alas, share the hope underlying such an attitude, that a world purged of the seductive power of metaphor would automatically be a good one. The problem, then, can be solved neither by questioning

¹¹ 'Mais le langage le plus énergique est celui où le Signe a tout dit avant qu'on parle'. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l'imitation musicale*, ed. Charles Porset, Bordeaux, 1968, p. 31.

the morality of metaphor nor by the desire to abolish it. And this naturally holds true for gender metaphors as well.

Gender metaphors, whether in language or in art, are generally signs that are omnipresent yet 'invisible'. They fill the collective imagination with material whose meaning remains partially unconscious, only to be fed into the cycle of images. It is precisely through this state of unconsciousness that a production of meaning, which apparently rests on hopelessly long-term factors, can function. This 'invisibility', and the often anachronistic persistence of these images in the collective visual memory, in defiance of all historical change, guarantee the stability and consistency on all cultural levels of a power relationship: that between the sexes. With this we come to the connection between images and very real power relations. Analogous observations can also, by the way, be made in relation to 'un'-conscious racism. The language of political correctness, the fruit of American linguistic ascetics, will do little to change this, however, though it does bring it to our attention. My secret, old-fashioned hope is that the power formations clandestinely at work in these images may be robbed of their power at the moment when, to describe it with two Enlightenment metaphors, they are raised from the *darkness* of the unconscious to the *light* of the conscious.

People and Nation

The terms 'People' and 'Nation' lay at the heart of the political construction of identity which French Revolutionary cult architecture was intended to assist and embody. The histories of these terms are closely intertwined.

In 1788 Sieyès equated the nation with the Third Estate and thus conceptualized the latter as all-encompassing.¹² The fact that this self-definition rested on the exclusion of the majority of the male population and of all women does not appear to have been considered problematic, even in the purely logical sense. That, on the other hand, is characteristic of the unquestioned defining power of a discourse that the French Revolution transferred to political practice, and which makes visible the hegemony of the bourgeoisie for the coming epochs as well.

'People' and 'Nation' were a community of equals not only in terms of education, property and politics, but also in terms of sex and skin colour: only

¹² Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État?*, Paris, 1789. For a summary of the history of the terms and the scholarly discussion of them, see Gabor Kiss, 'Nation als Formel für gesellschaftliche Selbstrepräsentation der Demokratie', in J.-D. Gauger and J. Stadl (eds), *Staatsrepräsentation* (Schriften zur Kulturosoziologie, vol. 12), Berlin, 1992. The literature on the subject is extensive and treats the historical variants of 'descriptions of the Other and of the Self' ('*Fremd- und Selbstbeschreibung*'), Kiss in such communities, i.e., also the inclusion and exclusion of particular population groups, but not that of women from definitions of 'People' and 'Nation'. Gender difference is 'invisible' in this scholarly discourse.

white men belonged to those groups who negotiated with each other the legitimate exercise of political sovereignty.¹³ This community nonetheless represented itself as universal, with an intensity in word and image that shows that, for them, legitimation to rule stood and fell with this operation. I understand these representations from the perspective of social psychology as evidence of the male collective Self of the 'People' struggling for self-representation.

The Jacobin-inspired temple designs for revolutionary cults by Boullée, Lequeu and others show the intensity with which the need for political imagery converged with architects' need to elevate construction to a creative art, and themselves to the status of artists.

The Metaphorical Repertoire: The Sphere (II)

As becomes evident in Boullée's treatise, cult architecture was for him as free as the fine arts. It sought to create images that affected the beholder and aroused the quasi-religious feeling of the sublime, a central concept in eighteenth-century aesthetics. Accordingly, Boullée developed an architectural imagery that was metaphorically oriented. Using our design as an example, I would like to illuminate this imagery more closely. Let us begin with the dome. It is smooth and unarticulated, unlike the ribbed domes of the existing tradition in sacred architecture; this underlines its geometric purity and perfection as an architectural volume. For Boullée, this produces order and symmetry, and thus beauty – in contrast to which the rocky crater and grotto in the lower sphere, closer to the earth, consist of irregular volumes, which Boullée tellingly calls '*corps obscurs*',¹⁴ that is, dark, opaque volumes whose form 'lies beyond our grasp'.¹⁵ The regular volumes, particularly the sphere, have the aesthetic advantage for Boullée of being comprehensible at a glance.

Lankheit, Vogt and others read the dome of our design as being in the typological tradition of Boullée's 1784 Newton Cenotaph Boullée had here tried to create, at least in a design, the pure, i.e., unribbed and complete, sphere as

¹³ The exclusion of women ran parallel to that of men of other skin colours in other areas as well, in some cases down to the strategies of justification. For the history of this discourse, see Sigrid Weigel, 'Zum Verhältnis von "Wilden" und "Frauen" im Diskurs der Aufklärung', in S. Weigel, *Topographie der Geschlechter. Kulturgeschichtliche Studien zur Literatur*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1990, pp. 115–48.

¹⁴ Rosenau, *Boullée and Visionary Architecture*, p. 121. Rosenau translates '*corps obscurs*' as 'irregular volumes', which corresponds to the later use of the term '*corps irreguliers*' in Boullée's tract. His choice of the word '*obscur*' nevertheless demonstrates the strongly metaphor-laden character of his thought. In the following passages I follow Rosenau's translation.

¹⁵ '... la figure des corps irreguliers ... échappe à notre entendement'. Rosenau, *ibid.*, p. 121, in the chapter 'De l'Essence des corps. De leurs propriétés. De leurs analogies avec notre organisation', English on p. 86.

the most perfect and never yet realized architectural volume. The cenotaph was intended at once as a monument to Newton and as a site for the era's popular Newton cult. Here, the sphere symbolized a universe that Newton's theory of the system of the rotating gravitation of bodies had rendered rationally comprehensible, yet which remained infinite and beyond human experience. It was our design's derivation from the Newton Cenotaph that Lankheit invoked as decisive in his selection of the name Temple to Reason. The powerful presence of the 'irregular volumes' (the grotto mound, and the goddess of fertility and death) so little esteemed by Boullée but employed all the more consciously, tends to undermine this interpretation, however. They make the total picture, which this space dramatizes, into a typical example of the sublime in its interaction between the beautiful and the terrible, which is supposed to overwhelm the viewer.

Boullée's attempt in the Newton Cenotaph to translate the perfect stereometric form of the sphere into architecture is probably the aspect of his work that has most fascinated both his contemporaries and modern scholars. The sphere is, after all, a deeply atectonic form – without a base, removed by its perfect all-round 'regularité'¹⁶ from the forces of gravity, virtually a metaphor for weightlessness, for detachment from the earth. Thus, in Boullée's Newton Cenotaph it can embody the cosmos: the scientifically recognized universe in *abstract analogy* to Newtonian theory, not as a mimetic image of the earth.

The reason for the adoption of this particular typological derivation for our design may lie in the fact that a comparison between the *interior* of the temple and the *exterior* of the cenotaph makes this interpretation of the sphere comprehensible, even if, in the temple, it is already restricted by the smaller radius of the crater. The apparent comparability disappears, in contrast, when we see the two exteriors side by side: in the Newton Cenotaph more than half of the sphere protrudes from the supporting cylindrical rings, but in the case of the temple we see only a shallow calotte. In addition, on the Newton Cenotaph the rings have been cut out in order to visualize the view of a whole sphere as the underlying principle. In addition, the base of the sphere in the Newton Cenotaph does not touch ground level, while the inner crater, with the vertex, is submerged in the temple well below ground level, rendering that much clearer the earthbound, dark character of the rising grotto mound.

The Newton Cenotaph seems a much more likely candidate than our design for the 'paternity' of those domed centralized buildings designed for French Revolutionary cults as temples to Equality, Reason and the like.

Thus, for example, Sobre's design for a Temple to Immortality, made between 1793 and 1797, more closely follows the dream of a radically spherical structure and its accompanying cosmic, rational associations as we know them from the Newton Cenotaph than does the so-called Temple to Reason. Sobre shows this dream

¹⁶ '... la figure des corps irreguliers ... échappe à notre entendement'. Rosenau, *ibid.*, p. 121, in the chapter 'De l'Essence des corps. De leurs propriétés. De leurs analogies avec notre organisation', English on p. 121.

character particularly clearly: a half-sphere is surrounded at its base by water, producing a reflection which, when viewed from a suitable distance, gives the beholder the illusion of a perfect sphere. Architecture here is indeed image – down to the fixing of the distance from which the beholder should look at the picture. Should the beholder come closer or even enter the structure, the illusion is destroyed.

Boullée constructs the myth of the sphere on the basis of perception, of the gaze. Furthermore, in the sphere, as an eternal polyhedron – and this is important – the most infinite variety also derives from the most perfect symmetry.¹⁷ It is from the mathematics of volumes that, quite independently of any similarity of shape with the globe, the sphere thus derives the metaphor for totality, a totality that is rooted in nothing, without above or below, without hierarchy or focus. It is a disembodied, immaterial body, the image of an abstraction and, as such, the image of a transcendence that needs neither gender nor heavenly authority; but it is nevertheless not without gender. This image of the world/cosmos/universe is constructed androcentrically, for it is the male fantasy of being at one without an Other. In this image the feminine is not dissociated from the masculine, but it is put out of commission, and with it that Other which otherwise delimits the masculine Self. This, in turn, functions only if the masculine, too, is rendered invisible. The sphere is, after all, not denoted as masculine. In an absolute thus conceived, with which it seeks a place beyond gendered duality, the masculine tacitly asserts itself as absolute. In other words, the universal, the ‘human’ beyond gender, is determined and imagined from the standpoint of the masculine and, accordingly, elevated to a covertly androcentric norm. This achieves two things for the masculine (conceived of here as a category in a symbolic cultural order): it is the centre of discourses without being named, and it is imagined as perfect. The painful experience of only belonging to one of the two culturally intelligible sexes, and thus being ‘imperfect’, thus appears banished.

The Political Sphere

The metaphor of the pure sphere had scarcely become established in architecture (Boullée’s design for a Newton Cenotaph¹⁸ preceded the Revolution only by some five years) when it appeared in the architectural visions of the Revolution, above all in the Academy competitions of Year II¹⁹ for the temple to the revolutionary cult of unity, and the spaces in which the ‘Souveraineté du Peuple’ was to be cultivated, whether by the National Assembly or local bodies. In this way, the

¹⁷ ‘C’est que de la symétrie la plus parfaite dérive la variété la plus infinie’, *ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁸ See also other designs for spherical structures, some of them also for monuments to Newton, in Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos, *Concours de l’Académie royale de l’architecture au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris, 1984, p. 233, a design by Despine and, even more clearly, a design by Sobre. One could also mention Vaudoyer’s 1785 House of a Cosmopolite.

¹⁹ See Werner Szambien, *Les projets de l’an II*, Paris, 1986.

sphere became a metaphor for popular sovereignty itself, conceived of as a totality without hierarchy and without any need for such external authorizations of power as the Absolutist divine right of kings had required. In this, it was the visual representation of an androcentric paradigm of a universal subject. In addition, the sphere appeared to constitute the perfect experiential space for something that had not yet found visual representation in a symbolic uniform body: the multiplicity of male subjects making up the political collective of the 'People', for it represented, mathematically speaking, the perfect unity of an infinite plurality.

Here, the *citoyen* of the Third Estate found a political metaphor for the self-referential authority and identity of *his* notion of 'the People', which was thus represented as something all-encompassing.

The Metaphorical Repertoire: The Tumulus and the Grotto as Derivatives of the Sphere

As was stated above, however, Boullée's Temple to Nature does not conform to this type of spherical structure. It is worth asking which architectural metaphors from Boullée's work could be applied to this design instead, as the metaphorical language of Boullée's architecture found many emulators. It is his funerary architecture which provides the key. It displays similar features both in the exteriors and cross-sections, and could tell us much about the fields of association which Boullée sought to open metaphorically, via 'similarity', for this building. Thus, for example, his necropolis with a central domed building features comparable proportions in the external structure: the broad, depressed proportions of the cylindrical rings and relatively low calotte, which appears submerged, correspond in type to the exterior view of our design. We know from Boullée's treatise what 'character' he hoped to achieve with such proportions. The poetry of the funerary monument was intended to correspond to the image of '*architecture ensevelié*', buried architecture.²⁰ The depressed proportions were intended to convey to the beholder the impression that the earth was withholding part of the building.²¹

This '*caractère*' of gloom, of something half-reconquered by the earth, is intensified in our temple by the circumstance that the interior space is also lowered in relation to the outer level of the earth – unlike the Newton Cenotaph, but similar to other Boullée tomb interiors, like that of a pyramid tomb for Turenne, which he used in his treatise to illustrate buried architecture.

The domed forms of our design thus correspond more to Boullée's funerary architecture than to the type of the spherical building as a visual analogy for the scientifically conceived universe. This opens up a new associative field of reference for the temple, one difficult to reconcile with the revolutionary cult of Reason as the bright child of ideal and regular Nature. The incursion of architectural

²⁰ See Werner Szambien, *Les projets de l'an II*, Paris, 1986. p. 135.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135, 136.

disorder, the '*corps bruts*' of the boulders and the dark cave opening as a figure of the uncontrollable (because unobservable), does not correspond to the Jacobins' image of a well-ordered, Reason-producing Nature as the model for their political and social system. The revolutionary cult of Nature was a cult of light, whereby the light metaphor was taken over from the Enlightenment discourse on Reason. In revolutionary festivals it was celebrated in the open air.

There exists an anonymous design for a temple with a semi-spherical dome and a Diana Ephesia as a cult statue bearing the inscription 'She is the source of all blessings.'²² Unlike Boullée, the unknown author associated with the Diana Ephesia an exclusively optimistic programme – under the architrave run inscriptions proclaiming the values of the new earthly paradise ('*énergie*', '*abondance*'). It is only logical that the dark grotto does not appear in this context.

The Grotto as Site of the 'Other'

For revolutionary propagandists, the grotto was usually the place where the vanquished foes of the Revolution, in the form of repulsive serpents, writhed with crown and mitre, as in Bonnet's *Sacred Mountain* of 1794.²³ Here the grotto is additionally surmounted by a Hercules figure symbolizing the victorious People. Which fields of association refer to the grotto motif? The possibilities are numerous and can only be summarized roughly here. The primary meaning is the body metaphor referring to the womb of 'Mother Earth'. The grotto relates to both birth and death, and can be found in the most diverse contexts of function and analogy – from cult architecture to the refreshing garden grotto. With the grotto or cave motif as a body metaphor for the earth as a womb, an animistic understanding of the world lived on in the scientific thinking of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁴ From the sixteenth century until the early nineteenth, notions of the earth giving birth – and death – also accompanied garden grottoes, including the landscape garden.²⁵ An example is the Proserpina grotto of 1786 in the hermitage at Arlesheim.²⁶

²² 'Elle est la source de tous les biens', *ibid.*, pp. 84–5. Szambien believes it may have been inspired by Boullée's designs. The fact that the dome is ribbed seems to speak against this.

²³ A sacred mountain with a Temple to Equality, Hercules and a grotto in which, according to the accompanying description, crime and tyranny have been chained up. The temple is surmounted by a Victory. See *ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁴ Horst Bredekamp, 'Die Erde als Lebewesen', *Kritische Berichte*, 1981, Heft 4/5, pp. 5–37.

²⁵ On the typology of artificial grottos, see Barbara Rietzsch, *Künstliche Grotten des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts: Formen der Gestaltung im Aussenbau und Innenraum an Beispielen in Italien, Frankreich und Deutschland*, Munich, 1987; and Reinhard Zimmermann, *Künstliche Ruinen. Studien zu ihrer Bedeutung und Form*, Wiesbaden, 1989.

²⁶ Proserpina is, significantly, the goddess of both the Underworld and Nature. See Adrian von Buttlar, *Der Landschaftsgarten: Gartenkunst des Klassizismus und der Romantik*, Cologne, 1989, pp. 241–2.

The front of our grotto appears in a tectonic form which is cited in the portal forms then fashionable particularly for funerary monuments and prisons, as in Favart's 1793 design for a prison.²⁷ Since the mid-eighteenth century the grotto motif had become a permanent feature of the expressive repertoire of *architecture parlante*, but especially of revolutionary architecture: 'The gate was soon to become the bearer of secrets *par excellence* ... a cross between niche, shaft and crypt'²⁸ – a description that attests to its uncanny quality. In the visual discourse of revolutionary reason the grotto thus generally appears to symbolize that which deviates from the norm of reason; in a prison building, stepping through the grotto portal signals to the prisoner that he has been cast out of the earthly paradise of Reason into a subterranean Hell of moral damnation, and this transition to Hell is marked, just as in Christian iconography, by the vulva metaphor of the grotto. As an image of Nature as uncontrollable chaos, it seems obvious that the grotto cannot be used to signify the revolutionary cult of Reason as light. Instead, it becomes the image of revolution's evil 'Other'.

Boullée's temple which, had it been constructed, would have had enormous dimensions – one must assume a dome radius of some 130–390 m²⁹ – contains no space for cultic *practices*. Any visitors could have clambered over the base of the colonnades or stopped at the end of a tunnel on the same level as the Diana, but could not have descended into the crater. The cult object remains unapproachable; the cult stops at contemplation. The architectural language of metaphor thus attains the highest significance. Radically liberated from the rules of '*convenance*' and ecclesiastical ties, the cult of the Nation could plunder this architectural language and utilize its component parts.

Images of the Earth

Boullée's temple offers three successful architectural metaphors: the sphere, the grotto mound and the tumulus-like submerged dome. The grotto mound and submerged dome, with their connections to the earth, have traditionally 'feminine' connotations. They, too, derive from the spherical form, but they emerge not from a mathematically abstract cosmic image of perfection, but rather from notions of 'earth' as 'mother'. In a brief, highly schematic account I would like to illuminate here the historical shift of forms and meanings in the visualization of the symbolic field of 'earth'.

In 1618 Matthias Merian the Elder published a *Nutrix Terra*.³⁰ The earth, in a sort of animistic animation, is a nursing mother's body – the ideas of the globe

²⁷ See Szambien, op. cit. (note 19), pp. 125–9.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Lankheit, op. cit. (note 4), p. 22.

³⁰ Copperplate engraving, illustration to M. Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*, Oppenheim, 1618, p. 17. See also Bredekamp, 'Die Erde als Lebewesen', op. cit. (note 24).

and of female nurturing have not yet become separated. This is precisely what resulted from the mathematical verification of the image of a scientifically calculable cosmos after Newton's discoveries. It was the mathematical image of the sphere as the perfect body that became an image of the triumph over the earthly, over gravity and material. The image of the world now became split into the immaterial transcendence of the totally calculable cosmos on the one hand – the 'sexless' but androcentric sphere – and the image of the earth as a tomb, a mound, a grotto on the other. To put it another way: the idea of Nature itself was split – into the mathematical model of cognition and a feminine Nature that defied rational understanding. This Nature, imagined as feminine, had, in turn, two possible 'faces': that of demonized femaleness as an image of anti-Reason, and that of a positively connoted womb, which promised a return to the mother. The grotto opens up a female field of association with different implications from that of Merian's *nurturing* Mother Earth: namely, that of the vulva. We shall find this vulva as tomb over and over again in the secular cult architecture of the nineteenth century, above all in memorial architecture.

Such a definition of Nature follows a basic pattern of cultural discourses on the feminine since Rousseau.³¹ According to Georg Simmel, the definition of femaleness is a 'supplementary definition'³² to that of maleness, which is set up as an absolute – a realization already formulated in 1911, which illuminates the gender order as a power relationship. It is precisely this relationship which seems perfectly expressed in the metaphoric dyad sphere-universe and maternal body-earth – the one supposedly gender-neutral, abstract and total, the other female, material and particular.

The psychoanalyst Christa Rohde-Dachser describes this supplementary definition of the feminine as a kind of vessel for that which has been dissociated from masculine self-representation. This scheme for the construction of femininity is apparently indispensable to the stability of the asymmetrically organized gender system, as it conserves the feminine, fixing it in the 'indestructibility of the imagination'.³³

In its unresolved duality, Boullée's Temple of Reason/Nature may be regarded as a perfect visual analogy to the dilemma that arose in the representation of political universality; it cannot 'forget' the symbolic impact of gender. The sphere, in its cosmic version, marks the universality of a 'sovereign' which excludes women. At the same time, the 'earth' versions of the sphere (grotto, tumulus) seem to fill the symbolic void in this universality with female representations of the political myth at the centre of its cult, i.e., with Nature.

³¹ On this see, among others, Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *Das moralische Geschlecht. Theorien und literarische Entwürfe über die Natur der Frau in der französischen Aufklärung*, Weinheim and Basel, 1987; English, *The Moral Sex: Woman's Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn, Oxford and New York, 1995.

³² Georg Simmel, 'Das Relative und das Absolute im Geschlechter-Problem' (1911), in G. Simmel, *Schriften zur Philosophie und Soziologie der Geschlechter*, Frankfurt am Main, 1985.

³³ Christa Rohde-Dachser, *Expedition in den dunklen Kontinent*, Heidelberg, 1991, pp. 95–6.

After the Revolution

Around 1800 the metaphor of the grotto-crypt begins to become ubiquitous in the architecture of monuments, and the cult of commemoration becomes a central cult of national identity. At the same period, with the rise of Napoleon as autocrat, the metaphor of the sphere disappears from architecture. Viewed historically, this supports my interpretation of the sphere as a 'radical', non-hierarchical, but total and androcentric metaphor for popular sovereignty. That apparently rendered it suspect for the representation of the nineteenth-century's authoritarian state systems.

With the Restoration, the forms of representation of political national identity also became modified. The conflictual coexistence of bourgeois emancipation and restored monarchy by divine right no longer permitted 'total' metaphorizations and, above all, no levelling ones. Authority and identity were once again conceived of in tandem. Various weighted montages emerged to permit the harmonization in a single image of ideologically contradictory or even competing models of state, nation and cultural identity.³⁴

An extremely compressed chronological typology of monuments might look like this: the basic structure is usually divided into a substructure with a vault and a building above it. This latter can be a temple, a tower or a monument to a person or persons, while the crypt/grotto remains a lasting feature.

In the French Revolution the grotto-vault was combined with the sphere, the obelisk and Graecizing temple types, as in Favart's 'Tomb of the Martyrs of Freedom', with an open columned hall on a Greek cruciform ground plan with a vault between the stair-ramps. During the Restoration, we initially still find the crypt combined with the Graecizing temple, as in Klenze's 1814 'Monument to the Pacification of Europe'. The Greek temple should be read here as a symbol of transcendence signifying the nation understood in ethical terms. Both citizens and monarchs could identify with this model.

In the last third of the nineteenth century a phenomenon arose which I would like to call the polarization between vault and tower. It is particularly apparent in the most important German national monuments, such as the Kyffhäuser monument and the monument to the 1813 Battle of the Nations near Leipzig. The verticality of the tower completely displaces the horizontality of the temple. A striking materialization of the gender sign for virility replaces the temple metaphors. The sphere for popular sovereignty and the Greek temple for the spirit of national ethics had located the abstracting transcendence of the community androcentrically, to be sure, but very clearly beyond the materiality of sex; now,

³⁴ Thomas Nipperdey gives a summary of the various tendencies in nineteenth-century monumental architecture in 'Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert', *Historische Zeitschrift*, no. 206, 1968, pp. 329–85.

in the tower, German manliness erected for itself the very symbol of the 'vigorous' colonizing late nineteenth-century nation. Such an interpretation is by no means a mere feminist exaggeration; contemporaries drew the same conclusion.³⁵ The 'masculine' thus emerges from latency and the incognito of the unnamed but intended. As explicit masculinity it elevates itself to a ruling norm and is simultaneously, in its *re-hierarchization* of the architectural sign, the extreme opposite of the sphere metaphor. The tower gained currency not only for the great national monuments, but also for the mass sites of commemoration for the nameless and countless fallen of World War I. Now, in the identity-producing generalization of military mass death, it actually came to mark a collective masculine.³⁶

In 1797 Friedrich Gilly, who had made a close study of French Revolutionary architecture, designed a monument to Frederick II of Prussia for a competition.³⁷ In 1942 Albert Speer had a model reconstructed and published. As an image of the hero's return to mother earth, the monument's crypt was intended to convey, with a sort of 'holy shudder', the heroic dimensions of his death. The temple erected over it signalled the triumph over death through the act of public commemoration.

Fascist Grottos and Graves, the Spherical Perfection of Mass Democracy, and Stalin's Tower

The National Socialists regarded Gilly's design as a forerunner.³⁸ In his designs for war memorials (*Ehrenmäler*, or monuments to honour) Wilhelm Kreis, who bore the title of Chief Government Architect in Charge of War Graves,³⁹ allowed the grotto motif to 'speak', as in his design for the crypt of the Soldiers' Hall in Berlin. The captured territories were to be generously strewn with memorials. The commemoration of the heroism of one's own (German) dead, in contrast to the vanquished, was to be employed as a symbol of the latter's 'eternal' subjugation. In a remote imitation of Boullée's geometrical radicality, Kreis's 1941 design for a war memorial on the Dniepr emphasizes the character of the tumulus. With this he

³⁵ Wolfgang Pehnt, 'Turm und Höhle', in *Moderne Architektur in Deutschland, 1900 bis 1950. Expressionismus und Neue Sachlichkeit*, exh. cat., Frankfurt, Stuttgart, 1994.

³⁶ See Reinhard Koselleck, 'Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftungen der Überlebenden', in O. Marquard and K. Stierle (eds), *Identität*, Munich, 1979, pp. 255ff.

³⁷ Alste Oncken, *Friedrich Gilly, 1772-1800*, Berlin, 1981, p. 49.

³⁸ On Speer's orders a model was built according to the design and extensively published in *Die Baukunst: Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich* in August and September 1942.

³⁹ On Kreis, see Albert Speer, 'Der Architekt Wilhelm Kreis', *Die Baukunst*, July 1941, pp. 130ff; and Meinhold Lurz, 'Die Kriegerdenkmalsentwürfe von Wilhelm Kreis', in B. Hinz, H. Mittag et al. (eds), *Die Dekoration der Gewalt*, Giessen, 1979, pp. 185-97.

evokes archaic forms of the cult of the dead, stretching back before the Greek temple and its implications of spiritual transcendence. Here, without a tower, solely through a radical monumentalization of the tumulus-crypt motif, in the dead soldiers' mass return to the womb of earth, Kreis authorizes the German national body to extend infinitely the 'German' womb of the earth. Kreis remarked: 'Sacred ground covers them. It is the earth, the mother of all being. Great as the earth, simple and noble is the form of these stones . . .'.⁴⁰ Viewed in the context of the function of male constructions of femininity, this means that in the image of Mother Earth which emerges in the crypt, femininity is fixed in the imaginary. It holds out the promise that, at the moment of his sacrificial death, the soldier will return to his mother/bride, thus stabilizing the soldier's masculine heroic identity in a moment of severe stress – the National Socialist campaign in the Soviet Union. It is thus precisely the dissociation of the feminine from the masculine Self that encourages the idea that it can be overcome by fusion with the mother – but only after death, as the hero's reward for his sacrifice. The same structure can be found in figurative representations of this theme, namely painting and public sculpture.⁴¹

The 1930s, which Franco Borsi has called the epoch of monumental order,⁴² witnessed the coexistence of diverse sphere metaphors: the monument tumuli of National Socialist memorials, the ribbed half-sphere of Speer's assembly hall for the National Socialist national body, and the pure sphere of the 1939 World Fair in New York.

'Democracy' versus the racist national body: the polarization between systems is visible in the polarized spherical metaphors of modern cult architecture. The supposedly non-hierarchical totality of a mass democracy in the pure sphere in New York is de-materialized and de-sexed, but androcentric. It stands in contrast to the leader principle drawn from the national body⁴³ which is represented by ancient metaphors of authority also linked to the sphere and its derivatives: the gigantic dome of Christian cathedrals in the case of Speer, and the tumulus, a

⁴⁰ Wilhelm Kreis, 'Kriegerdenkmale des Ruhms und der Ehre im Altertum und in unserer Zeit', *Bauwelt*, vol. 11/12, 1943, p. 6, quoted in Meinhold Lurz, 'Die Kriegerdenkmalsentwürfe von Wilhelm Kreis', op. cit. (note 39), p. 190.

⁴¹ See Kathrin Hoffmann-Curtius, 'Opfermodelle am Altar des Vaterlandes seit der Französischen Revolution', in G. Kohn-Wächter (ed.), *Schrift der Flammen. Opfermythen und Weiblichkeitsentwürfe im 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 1991, pp. 57–94; and Silke Wenk, 'Versteinerte und verlebendigte Weiblichkeit – Weibliche Allegorie und ihre mediale Repräsentation in der Französischen Revolution', in *Geschichte – Geschlecht – Wirklichkeit*, Protokoll der 1. Kunstwissenschaftlerinnen-Tagung der Sektion Kunstwissenschaft des VBK – DDR, Lehnin, 1989, pp. 154–65.

⁴² Franco Borsi, *The Monumental Era: European Architecture and Design, 1929–1939*, New York, 1987.

⁴³ For more thoughts on the structural relationship between forms of visual representation and the derivation of popular sovereignty in totalitarian systems, see my 'Mussolini Architettonico. Notiz zur ästhetischen Inszenierung des Führers im italienischen Faschismus', in *Inszenierung der Macht. Ästhetische Faszination im Faschismus*, Berlin, 1987, pp. 243–52; and 'Vom "Ballhauschwur" zum "Duce". Visuelle Repräsentation von Volkssouveränität zwischen Demokratie und Autokratie', *Die Neue Gesellschaft. Frankfurter Hefte*, no. 11, November 1993, pp. 1017–25.

form of prehistoric ruler's grave,⁴⁴ as an image of the conquest of the body of Mother Earth in the case of Kreis.

A contemporary commentator attests to this polarization in architectural discourse during those years: in his 1939 text *Die Kugel als Gebäude, oder: Das Bodenlose* (*The Sphere as a Building, or the Bottomless*) Hans Sedlmayr polemicizes against the spherical building as a 'symptom'. For him, it was symptomatic that 'a gigantic sphere' was to represent the 'centre of the Neuyork' [sic] World Fair of 1939: 'Such a coincidence cannot be an accident. One may suppose that there is an inner connection between the idea of the spherical building and the "bottomless" spirit of those revolutions, which has only existed since the French Revolution.'⁴⁵ He uses the word bottomless quite literally. For him, the denial, in spherical abstraction, of architecture's connection to the earth, is a sickness. Curiously enough, he appends to the name of El Lissitzky, whose explication of Leonidov's design for a spherical building for the Lenin Institute he quotes as a principal witness to the sick revolutionary will to overcome connection to the earth, the parenthetical question '(a Jew?)', as if this could explain the ailment.⁴⁶ For him, Leonidov's 1927 design was an 'involuntary and thus all the more horrible symbol of that spirit which rejects the earth'.⁴⁷ Werner March's Reichssportfeld, which was half-submerged in the earth, he found, in contrast, a laudable example of architectural health. The abstract had to be conquered 'by saying yes, once again, to the earth, the tectonic, overcoming the inhuman quality of abstract construction by invoking "orders" that recognize the earth as a base and man as the measure of things ... The leader of the counter-movement in 1800 was Germany, and it remains so today.'⁴⁸ The enemies were the machine-oriented cultures of the USA and the USSR. Sedlmayr did not acknowledge that the authoritarian principle had ultimately triumphed in the Soviet Union as well, as the winning design by Iofan for the Soviet Palace of 1933, with a tower crowned by a gigantic statue of Lenin, shows.

Modern Myths

As we have seen, the identity cult of masculine political collectives has assumed different forms since the first modern formulation of collective political sovereignty. Metaphors for the feminine and the masculine serve to structure

⁴⁴ Of interest here is Hans Gerhard Evers, *Tod, Macht und Raum als Bereiche der Architektur*, Munich, 1939, p. 2: '... ancient architecture integrated the king's death into the life of the community, from an absorption into the densest forces of nature, absorption into stone, into mass, into nourishing earth ...'.

⁴⁵ Reprinted in Klaus Jan Philipp (ed.), *Revolutionsarchitektur. Klassische Beiträge zu einer unklasischen Architektur*, Braunschweig and Wiesbaden, 1990, here p. 126.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

fundamentally the visual representations of these constructions of identity but in different formations, which can offer clues to the corresponding discourses with the political systems in question. They tell us about some of the ways in which the masculine collective imagination, as well as collective masculine self-representation, with its dissociation from the feminine, functions. They also give occasion for reflection about whether the degree of metaphorical gender polarization might not have something to do with the fundamentalist tendencies of such collective identities.

Let us return to the sphere and the grotto as architectural metaphors for the world. Let us read them, as has already been indicated, as corresponding exactly to asymmetrically organized gender relations: the sphere as a metaphor for the cosmos is a product of the mathematical, abstracting imagination. It is an image of conquest and control over the material, of totality and order, and it is, apparently, gender-neutral. That would correspond to Simmel's idea of the masculine posited as absolute which, because it is absolute, need not present itself as gendered. The grotto, in contrast, is a metaphor for the world as earth and womb. It expresses the unruliness of this material in a mixture of attraction and fear. It would correspond to the masculine 'supplementary definition' of the feminine in Simmel's work. That which is excluded from masculine self-representation then becomes material for the patriarchal construction of the feminine.

Since the separation of Reason from Nature, the sphere, as the body which could not, for lack of a base, be anchored in the earth, and the womb-earth metaphor have ultimately proved incompatible. The 1618 *Nutrix Terra* by M. Merian the Elder, with its symbolic identity between body and globe, shows that this was not always the case. Two examples illustrate the extent of this split, but also its untenability. In a design in 1970 for the city of Echternach, Leon Krier sends the sphere where it logically belongs: into the sky, free of the earth. In contrast, in her monumental sculpture *Hon* Niki de St Phalle takes the masculine myth of the womb literally; she makes the longed-for return to the womb *feasible* – the myth falls by the wayside. But does this also defeat the metaphor itself?