ARCHITECTURE OF THE DIAPHANOUS
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The following notes are an attempt to investigate and open up the 'device of transparency' as something which must be understood as being forged in and that is strictly tied to the Modern Era, and to which the Modern is tied in return. The label of *modernity*, mostly pertaining to historiographical concerns, easily escapes any sort of 'exact' attribution. Of its many beginnings, often traced back to early Renaissance, 1851 can perhaps be considered one. This is the inauguration year of the Great Exhibition of London, which finds housing under the iron and glass-made vaults of one of the largest greenhouses ever built: The Crystal Palace. Here, a never-before-seen richness of goods is gathered in exhibition stands that are not enshrined but rather displayed through an architecture of transparent arcades that echoes the smaller *passages* of cities like Paris and London. Perhaps for the first time, the whole world is 'collected' and 'stocked' under the same roof. The modernity staged here is the one described by Walter Benjamin, the one of an accumulation of goods and of total loss of any 'auratic distance' of artefacts, in favour of an *immediate* (as non-mediated) fruition of the commodities and of their exhibition value. The goods displayed in the crystalline galleries of the Great Exhibition are transfigured in the eyes of the visitor, who is taken by what Benjamin himself defines as a '*phantasmagoria*'.[1] Moreover, the total limpidity of Paxton's halls almost dissolves any difference between interior and exterior, placing one as a display of the other and vice versa, setting the conditions for the 'disparition' of its architecture and offering itself as a foundation for the 'myth' of the 'immaterial'.

The architecture of the Crystal Palace and the event of the Great Exhibition are one amongst many expressions of the Modern Era. If, on the one hand, it seems a quite difficult task to define what modernity *is*, a rather easier task is to say what it *is not*. In this sense, the Middle Ages can be hardly associated with modernity and have instead been used since the Enlightenment as a sort of 'backdrop' onto which it was possible to delineate (and *emancipate*) the singularity of the latter, by developing it into a line of *progress* that weaves together Renaissance, Enlightenment, and eventually the industrial revolutions. Yet, it is perhaps in this truly pre-modern time *in-between* times that a pre-specific explanation to the 'question' of modernity can be found. From the

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[1]   "We define the aura […] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be." (Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 211–44); "World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value becomes secondary. They are a school in which the masses, forcibly excluded from consumption, are imbued with the exchange value of commodities to the point of identifying with it: 'Do not touch the items on display.' World exhibitions thus provide access to a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted." Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999), 7.

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completely diaphanous facets of the Crystal Palace we move then back to the coloured glassworks of the Basilica of St. Denis: the substantial *transparence* of both these architectures being perhaps an indication of an 'invisible' connection. The same light that glares upon the goods, unstopped by the panes of Paxton's gigantic greenhouse, shines through the decorated windows of the early gothic cathedral, and—even before lighting the space of the church—it illuminates the *image* impressed on the window itself, making it visible to the eyes and *intelligible* to the mind.[2] This subtle difference, that seems now to be confined to a mere issue of architecture history, if not physics of light, can be accounted for instead as a symptom of a much wider question, the core of which is perhaps the confutation and the refusal by some key Christian theologians—and, to a certain extent, of the West itself—of the notion of a 'separate intellect'.

Introduced by Muslim physician and theologian Ibn Rushd (better known as Averroes) in a 'long commentary' to Aristotle's writings on the soul, the formulation of a 'separate mind' tries to answer the question of the 'unity of the intellect', that is to say how one man can think the same way and the same ideas of others, yet have different, particular thoughts and therefore be an *individual*. To solve such *magna quaestio*, Averroes postulates a unique, separate intellect to which all individual minds are connected through their own 'images'. This unique and transcendental mind, split in a purely potential 'material intellect' and into an only-operative 'agent intellect' is described by the philosopher through an interesting analogy:

> Just as light is the actuality of a transparent medium, so the agent intellect is the actuality of the material intellect. Just as the transparent medium is not moved by colour and does not receive it except when there it is lit upon, so too that intellect does not receive the thoughts which are here except insofar as it is actualized through the agent intellect and illuminated by it. As light turns colour in potency to actual colour, so that it can act upon the transparent medium, so the agent intellect turns the thoughts in potency to actual thoughts in such a way that the material intellect can receive them.[3]

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2   The Basilica of St. Denis is considered to be one of the earliest (if not the first) example of a Gothic church. Its Romanesque fabric was entirely 'reformed' in 1127 by the powerful Abbot Suger, whose readings of Pseudo-Dionysus supported the analogy between heavenly hierarchies and the transmission of light; see: *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, ed. by Erwin Panofsky, 2. ed (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1979).

3   Averroes (Ibn Rushd) of Cordoba, *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, Book III (Yale University Press, 2009), 328. The translation has been here edited by the author, in accordance with the Latin text (Averroes, *Commentarium Magnum in Aristotelis De Anima*, edited by F.S. Crawford. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

It is not light, but *transparency* to be posited as *something*; without transparency no light is possible, one could paraphrase. By affirming transparency as pure, formless potentiality, yet as a *substance*—the one of a 'material' intellect—against an intuitive notion by which light hits objects without the need of any mediation, Averroes highlighted the position of an 'excluded third'. His material intellect, configured as a 'transparent medium', is a substantial element without which no communication nor knowledge can be possible.

As Emanuele Coccia remarked, the 'absolute medium' of the material intellect cannot simply be a collection of the totality of all actual thoughts and ideas;[4] it cannot be associated with an overload of 'sensible data,' so to speak. It is rather when all men stop thinking—in the total *absence* of any actual thought—that the possibility of a material intellect can be contemplated. In its other qualification of 'possible' intellect, such a 'mind' resembles an untouched clay tablet, waiting to be written upon. Its 'materiality' must not be misunderstood as 'matter' that can be 'transformed' in any idea, nor as the presupposition of forms by the combination and transformation of which new thoughts can be 'produced'. The material intellect is a substance subject not to transformation nor to production, but only to *information*: Its only 'power' is to be affected by forms—to literally be 'informed'.[5] The distinguishing mark of the separate intellect resides then not in the fact that it contains and stores *all* present, past, or future information, but in its absolute 'disposition' to welcome it *in potentia*. Potency is then the 'measure' of such disposition, or the capacity of being affected by forms (to be informed). Yet, the challenge of Averroes is to think of this separate intellect not just in the 'virtuality' of an absolute potency, but as a *potency* that is nevertheless *substance*, leading thus to "the paradox of a substance that *is* the less it is form."[6] The material intellect is the 'subject' (the Aristotelian *hypokeimenon*) of its own receptivity, the *locus* in which such receptivity becomes substance.[7]

It is in fact the figure of a 'locality', as Coccia notes, the one that seems to suit best the notion of the intellect as a transparent medium—not an *extensio* but an 'emplacement', a place besides the existence of things, "what exists besides and beyond the bodies without

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4   The present essay is in this matter largely indebted with his outstanding work, and all the discussion over Averroes' *material intellect* is fully derived from it. Emanuele Coccia, *La trasparenza delle immagini: Averroè e l'averroismo*, (Milan: B. Mondadori, 2005). Not being unfortunately translated in English at the time of publication, all translations of the excerpts are mine.

5   Coccia, *La trasparenza delle immagini*, 84. Concerning the 'materiality' of the intellect, Coccia refers to it as "the thinnest of all matters" (p. 115), evoking a sort of *infra-materiality* which is perhaps close to the one which Michel Serres'*'logiciel*' works upon.

6   Ibid.

7   Ibid., 106.

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participating to their extension."[8] Such a transcendental *locus* can be conceived once again through an 'optical' analogy: the one of *reflection*. Any object reflected in a mirror loses its materiality of being a thing to be present only in its pure form—in its pure *intelligibility*. In the mirror, an object can be perceived in its pure 'species', and its form can exist *outside* its own (real) place; it can be grasped in a (sovereign) *ausnahmezustand*.[9] Just as we can perceive the form of an object in a mirror through our vision, in the same way we can 'look' in the space of the separate mind through our 'speculative' intellect. This latter, which does not belong to the material intellect but—exactly like hearing, taste, touch and vision—rather to the 'sensitivity' of each individual, is what allows us to look into the images of the separate intellect, to 'speculate' (from Latin *specio*, 'to look') its invisible 'spectrality'. The connection between separate intellect and individual mind happens then by the means of *images*—'*intentiones*' as Averroes calls them, or 'phantasms'—that do not belong to each individual but are 'actualized' by the agent intellect itself. Such 'spectrality' of images becomes then the bridge by which every man and the unique mind are connected.

It is important here to remark that Averroes's 'intentions' are not *universals*, nor can the separate intellect be assimilated to Plato's *hyperuranion*. Despite being compared as a space which our mind looks at as our senses do with sensible reality, the certainty of 'truth' is here insured not by a trustworthy external reality, but rather by the images themselves, as a sort of *co-incidence* between individual minds and separate intellect. This does not mean that truth is fictitious or 'artificial', but that such a position also takes distance from any 'existentialist' standpoint, to express it with an anachronism. Averroes's material intellect is neither the *locus* in which truth can be 'found' (the Greek *heurisko*) nor 'created' *ex-nihilo*, but where it is *in-formed* or, in a way, *invented*. It is in this sense perhaps that its images are not so much 'copies' of an original (as the term *imago* would suggest) but *in-tentions*, something 'tending' to a matching point whose 'emplacement' stands *outside* any sensible or empirical reference. From this perspective,

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8   Coccia, *La trasparenza delle immagini.*, 117–118. Such 'emplacement' could perhaps be thought in analogy to the 'locational' understanding of the *parasite* by Serres.

9   "Sovereign is the one who decides over the exception [*Ausnahmezustand*]". Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015 [1922]). And further on, concerning the *exoticness* of such an 'absolute' emplacement: "The *bios theoretikos* places the living being outside the city; it is not a coincidence that Aristoteles compared the speculative life with the one of the stranger, to that *bios xenicos* that the law is not able to grasp nor to articulate, as absolutely exterior to the *nomos*." (Coccia, *La trasparenza delle immagini*, 192). This exteriority to the *nomos* remarks how such an 'emplacement' cannot be considered a 'state', unless perhaps in a 'vanishing' way; in this sense, no 'state of exception' can ever properly exist: it stops being 'exceptional' in the very moment it is considered (or *actualised*) as a 'state'.

Averroes's 'anatomical dissection' of the intellect bears amongst its potential consequences an equal 'disassembly' of the notion of truth.[10]

The architecture of the Renaissance is perhaps the one to inherit and make use of such an original form of 'invention'. It is by looking through a *mirror* that Filippo Brunelleschi succeeds in reproducing a 'veritable' image of the Baptistery of Florence, 'inventing' drawing as *perspective*. By the means of a reflective (*speculative*) surface, the Florentine architect becomes capable of looking at things in their pure form, in their 'speciality'. As the closest thing to a 'space of absolute potency', the surface of the mirror seems to wipe out any pre-conception or disposition that the presentation of the image might be affected by, leaving nothing else but the sole point of observation, which is then posited as the 'scientific' gaze of the artist as a 'subject'.[11] The reality of the drawing, its 'truth' (or, to use a modern term, its 'high-*fidelity*'), stops relying on the preciousness of its materiality (like in a Byzantine icon), or in the correctness of its measurements (like in an axonometric drawing), and finds instead its truthfulness in that matching point of the lines that stands outside of its representation, and outside sensible experience *par excellence*—therefore 'vanishing'. Stepping in the focal point opened by such speculations earns Brunelleschi the glory of one of the first 'creative geniuses' of Renaissance, if not its invention. In a way, his famous cupola that covers the gothic cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore closes the open *fabrica* of medieval knowledge one century after the start of the averroistic quarrel. The *Last Judgement* depicted on its vaults comes now to obstruct and replace the unlimited sight of the open sky.

If not for the condemnation of Averroes's theories by Christian philosophers, the *episteme* that its *Commentary* had outlined would have left a permanent mark for the centuries to come. Benjamin's *phantasmagoria* can perhaps be seen as a first sign of uneasiness caused by the oblivion to which the 'third intellect' was condemned, as it evoked a sort of multitude of fetish-images (the phantasms) that could be summoned in the conversion of all goods in their exchange value. It is in fact money, seen as general equivalent, that is the operator allowing material goods to be *transfigured* in their phantasmagorical dimension. In this sense, money operates precisely as an *agent intellect*, being capable of indexing—or *actualizing*—an absolute field of potentiality (the material intellect), abstracting from any

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10 "The phantom does not generate a new form in thought, nor a new act of thought: it rather lays in us the foundation of a relation (*habitudo*) or of a certain disposition (*aptitudo*), which allows us to be connected with the unique intellect" (Coccia, *La trasparenza delle immagini.*, 157).

11 Cfr. Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing. The Semiotics of Zero* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

specificity, and remaining totally indifferent to the *object* of its operation. If Benjamin's notes, despite their extraordinary acuteness, seem to be still too narrowed down to a socio-economical field of concerns, it is perhaps Martin Heidegger who is the first to record the issue and to frame it under a more comprehensive standpoint. In the essay *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*, the German philosopher poses the question of the 'exactness' of modern science as an interrogation that finds its truth only in the form that has itself pre-casted, stressing how modern knowledge can only be attained in the form of a 'picture', but it does so in the illusion of a direct, 'objective' speculation, on the presupposition that what it 'sees' is the 'real,' and not its *medium*.[12] Man looks at the form of things in their reflection, but forgets about the optics (the *perspective*) of the mirror.

The conflation of such space of transparency into an 'immediate' coincidence between what *we* see and what *is* seen—into an 'objectivity' of things—presupposes (and is presupposed) by a parallel rise of the 'subject' as we know it. As Coccia brilliantly notes, the space that Averroes's *Commentary* highlights is not only the one of a transparent medium, but one between the *human* and the *rational*: Such a coincidence—of man as a *rational subject* of knowledge—is then 'sealed' in the very idea of *consciousness*,[13] a notion that will span through all of modernity, from Descartes to Freud. Subject and consciousness reveal themselves in their prime nature of *juridical* (and therefore *political*) categories. The urgency by which Thomas of Aquinas and Albert the Great condemned Ibn Rushd's readings of Aristotle—an urgency fully supported and even pushed by the political power of the time—is explained as the need to refer thoughts (and the actions derived from them) to an individual human soul, to *impute* them to a *subject*. The doubting of such coincidence entails not only the opening up of a space of *anomy*, but would put into question *free-will* itself, a notion of essential value for Christianity and for western thought; in order to be held 'accountable' for his *own* actions, the individual must be 'free' to commit them.[14]

This two-way entanglement between the emancipation of a free will and the foregrounding of a 'bearing subject' is perhaps one of the distinctive traits of the Modern: "The 'Enlightenment', which

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12 "We first arrive at science as research when and only when truth has been transformed into the certainty of representation." Heidegger, Martin, 'The Age of the World Picture', in Julian Young, and Kenneth Haynes, *Heidegger, Off the Beaten Track* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 127.
13 Coccia, *La trasparenza delle immagini.*, 58.
14 Ibid., 191, 196.

discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines."[15] The transparency (as immediacy) of the modern subject finds one of its most evident manifestations in the prison as a 'mechanism of control': here, the 'panorama' of the Heideggerian world-picture reverts into a *panopticon*. As Michel Foucault famously described, in such architecture man is both subject and object, observing and observed. The immediacy of the gaze is the sole principle upon which such a 'mechanism' works.[16] What man is looking at in the mirror is now only but himself: Subject and object appear divided just as for the effect of an 'optical illusion'.

The division and affirmation of an 'objective' reality, the objectiveness of which relies in the fact that it can be only experienced by *anyone* as long as this 'anyone' can be categorized as a 'subject', is constitutive for modern knowledge at large and in such a 'key of encryption' lays the foundation of its order. The understanding of 'science' as the product of *research* (Heidegger) or as what is 'proven' via *examination* (Foucault) highlights the 'submission' of such a modern form of knowledge to the principles of *law*: If the notion of 'subject' comes to support the modern scientific understanding, the one of 'person' rises in parallel as a figure of the modern political order. As Coccia points out, the modern notion of 'person' finds its roots in Roman law, according to which a *persona* was not necessarily a person, and a person was not necessarily a *persona*,[17] but was rather a legal entity by which contracts could be stipulated and judgement in court made.

The forgetfulness over such a 'categorical' nature of the subject—i.e. its relation to a legal and juridical discourse—can then perhaps be seen under the same need for order, advocated by the rising political powers of the West from feudal times on, to 'codify' the unordered and incoherent collection of laws they inherited from the past—a will that would eventually culminate with the French Revolution and the

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15   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 222. In the same regard, Heidegger: "What is decisive is not that man frees himself to himself from previous obligations, but that the very essence of man itself changes, in that man becomes subject. We must understand this word *subiectum*, however, as the translation of the Greek *hypokeimenon*. The word names that-which-lies-before, which, as ground, gathers everything onto itself. [...] However, when man becomes the primary and only real *subiectum*, that means: Man becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded as regards the manner of its Being and its truth. Man becomes the relational centre of that which is as such." (Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 128).

16   Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. In this sense we can refer to the panopticon as a "machinery designed to exclude" that 'third' (here the transparent medium) which is proper of the "will to truth" (Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. by Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 48–78). More at large, Foucault is undoubtedly the one to have more accurately graphed the 'seismic waves' of such an 'epistemic shockwave' as the one started by the Christian refusal of Averroes's readings; in this sense *The Order of Things* can be read as the most complete and articulated response so far to this *magna quaestio*.

17   Coccia, *La trasparenza delle immagini.*, 211.

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systematization of laws into a comprehensive 'legal code'. If the *subject* can be seen as the *co-incidence* of the person as a *persona*, then the legal code can be understood as an effort to equally 'cover' in a comprehensive and exhaustive manner the 'field of reality' with a set of laws conceived as a *system*. At the same time, the push by the Enlightenment to emancipate law from divine right gave birth to the first constitutions; right was not conceived to be coming from a transcendent, invisible ruler, but from the actuality (the so-called "naturality") of law itself, the truth of which was residing not in the skies above, but in the "contract" stipulated by its *subjects*.[18]

Such a wave of modernization that resulted in the conversion of absolute powers of feudal origin into constitutional monarchies and in the birth of the first modern republics found a singular exception in the Papal State, the sole European 'divine monarchy' that could survive the Revolution. Inside its boundaries, the 'memory' of a peculiar form of right was (and still is) preserved by the 'device' of the *jus canonicum*, a law that finds it source not in a social contract, but primarily in the interpretation (exegesis) of the divine message contained in the scriptures—that is to say in the Revelation. The 'canon' is here not only a rule, but a 'device of translation' between a transcendent law and a human one. In this sense, its notion precedes the Catholic state form and expands beyond the field of law, finding its first diffusion in the domains of art (literature, architecture, music, etc.). Generally speaking, a canon is a stick (from Greek *kanon*) that serves as measure, similar to a ruler. Different from a ruler, a canon is not 'prepared' with any pre-assigned 'units' nor follows any 'external' system of measurement other than the one dictated by its own form. The reason why a canon is fundamental in artistic practices is that it allows for the reproduction of an original order or, in other words, for the *equivalence* between two (or more) artefacts. What such equivalence entails is nevertheless a *reduction* (or an *expenditure*) *at the cost* of the artwork itself: The thing that is reproduced (or put in equivalence) is made so only by the terms and by the measure of the canon itself (by its 'picture').[19] What

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18   Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* and Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* stand, still with their differences, as the most clear example of this new attitude. It is nevertheless important to remark that British *common law* seem to be an exception to the continental codification effort.

19   This equivalence is precisely what is at work in the stipulation of the social contract, a juridical and political device for which all men are *equal* as long as their essence is 'reduced' to the 'figure' of the person; it is not a case that *persona* also bears in its etymology the meaning of a theatrical 'mask': *per-sonare* is 'to sound through'. The incommensurable reduction that the canon operates finds an even more powerful manifestation when applied to the communication of sacred texts, as it turns into a real 'ontological difference' between the divine *logos* and its human, 'Babelic' translation; see: Franz Overbeck, *Zur Geschichte Des Kanons. Zwei Abhandlungen* (Chemnitz: Ernst Schmeitzner, 1880).

the canon does is then to *encode* its objects by abstracting an image of them. Canon and code, initially appearing as distant from each other, find here a mutual relation.

As ruler, the canon cannot be used on the 'sea'—a compass, despite being an instrument that could be easily associated with a ruler, cannot be considered as such—a canon is an 'earthly' (a *geo-metric*) instrument, and as such it builds and cultivates; it separates only in order to harvest, lays the foundations for a *tradition*. Foundation and tradition save in their etymology the encoding or, better, *encrypting* power of the canon: If the Latin *condere* means 'to found', but also (as the Greek *krypto*) 'to conceal', the word 'tradition' shares its etymology with the one of 'betrayal', as an allusion to the fact that, in order to be preserved as the same, something must be first betrayed.[20] The constitution of a canon can then perhaps be seen as a peculiar form of forgetting and abstraction, of 'cleaning' the 'clay tablet' (the *codex*) while preserving in it a certain 'disposition' that *prepares* it to receive new information.

The Modern founds itself on and in opposition to an 'antiquity' that modernity itself declares as such, a 'classical' time whose *canon* is constituted only after its age has *passed*. It is then this in-between time of the Middle Ages, this sort of 'non-empty fracture' between antiquity and modernity, transcendence and immediacy, that seems to have known how to fabricate the 'secret key' of its encryption.

But what now? Since Lyotard's essay of 1979,[21] present time seems to have left modernity behind. The time in which we live is less and less attributed with such a label—except perhaps for colloquial terms—and is rather identified simply as 'contemporary' or 'postmodern'. The first definition seems to be entrapped in the loop of a self-referential equation: Every time is in a way 'contemporary' to itself. At the same time, 'con-temporary' may also suggest a time in which *everything is present* or rather in which everything is *actual*—a time that seems therefore to exclude that space of 'absolute potentiality', like Averroes's separate intellect, that so much troubled the 13th century. The second definition, the one of a 'post-modern condition' is equally interesting, as it evokes a similar kind of 'discomfort' of naming an age by avoiding to re-discuss the fundamental dichotomy of *antiquity* and *modernity* to which the Middle Ages were also subjected.[22]

Contemporary myths such as the ones of the 'creative genius' and of 'total transparency' (as the dream of an *immediate* information)

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20 It is the same 'mechanism' at work in the *sacrifice*; see: René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
21 Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport Sur Le Savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979).
22 An alternative denomination of the Middle-Ages is in fact the one of a "Post-Classical History."

can therefore be seen as the heritage that the unmastered reception of the modern condition left us with. The Crystal Palace seems to have entrapped us all in its phantasmagorical circulation of goods that follows no other 'intelligence' than the primacy of exchange value and trade economy. How can we escape from such a total system? How can we focus on and see its 'invisible' gears? How can we 'bury' modernity as tradition, when its ghosts keep on haunting us? How can we feel at home in the place of *any otherness* (of general equivalence)? A position that is not able to see such a 'third intelligence' except by evoking it as a *persona*—may it be human or fictitious: demons, God, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, the Hegelian Ghost, Rousseau's general will, Marx's general intellect, Freud's *Es*, sociology, progress and production, etc.—and by seeing itself as its *subject* will be condemned to its 'universal plan', and doomed to a deterministic and an *apocalyptic* worldview.[23] Looking at the separate intellect as if its 'disposition' was not the one of an absolute potency (the one of an absolute receptivity) but as if it was conceived as already informed and 'flooded' with data would be like staring directly at the sun from outer space: The eyes would burn without seeing any light at all. It is, in a way, the description of a *universal judgement*, a supreme intellect that summons to its tribunal all the souls of the universe—it *actualizes every potency*, bringing it in an 'absolute contemporaneity'—and 'burns' them with its own splendour. What Averroes's intellect seems to suggest then is that the only way to look at the sun is in the 'lunar' translucency of the *diaphanous*, of the transparent medium.[24]

Very few houses can reach the same fame and be equally described as '*the* modern house' as Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House. Built between 1945 and 1950—just a decade before the period which Lyotard pointed to as the 'beginning' of the post-modern condition—Mies's iconic villa is undoubtedly the archetype of the glass-house *par excellence* (even if 'robbed' of the label by its post-modern yet anterior copy designed by Philip Johnson). Despite its clear essence of house, this architecture seems all but cosy and 'homey'. It is a house with no walls, where any 'individual privacy' relies on nothing but a white curtain that slides behind its transparent screens. Most of its photos show it as completely empty, almost as if the presence of someone would corrupt its image. If Averroes forces us to ask ourselves whether there is thought when no man thinks, it is as if Mies asked himself how a house can be such when no one dwells. Yet, the less it

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23 "The real system of science consists in a solidarity of procedure and attitude with respect to the objectification of whatever is—a solidarity that is brought about appropriately at any given time on the basis of planning." M. Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', 126.

24 This is, to my understanding, the very legacy of Europe's "negative thought": not the one of a dialectical opposition, but rather one of a triadic disposition, that 'hosts' the unconceivable without 'positivising' nor negating it.

appears as inhabitable and inhabited, the more it emerges as an absolute icon of modern 'houseness': Its figure ripples like a wave, reproduced by a countless number of projects and circulated in magazines, movies, books, websites; its image transcends the 'real extension' of the house and finds its place in the symbolic space of the collective imagination of an age. Contrary to most of Mies's projects, the house has no plinth nor precinct, but 'floats' on its steel columns, 'abstracting' itself from the ground. Farnsworth House is then perhaps an 'ark', ready to survive the 'end' of the modern time of which its architecture is a product. Invested by the 'deluge' of the post-modern condition (the 'liquid modernity', as Bauman would call it), Mies's house lets it 'wash away' its own age and settles down in the *tabula rasa* that comes after it. By the intelligence of its own abstraction, it ensures its 'heritage' not through a rush to a total accumulation, but in the 'fertility' provided by its design as a dwelling space of absolute potency.