

To the conference in memory of Dalibor Vesely

I should like to begin by thanking the initiative of bringing everyone together in this event, in memory of Dalibor's teaching and legacy, and especially the organisers, Peter, Eric and Wendy who were immensely kind and generous to invite me to take part in the first panel. It is therefore with much regret that I am unable to attend on this occasion, but having been asked by Peter to produce a few words, I will gladly join my own voice, however briefly and should it be useful, to the proceedings.

In our current situation, and it is perhaps never quite too much for us to remind it, our own world is facing what is perhaps one of the most momentous crises even with regard to its own recent past. The disappearance of common fields of reference is a daily given in our activity, whether we are scholars, architects or educators (and not necessarily in that order). This is especially apparent in the vanishing ground of culture, the commonality of language, and finally the "communicative space of culture" undergoing a rapid and crucial transformation in our own time. The situation has long been described as fragmented. The attempt at recovering an understanding of the changing nature of our world has long been undertaken in a variety of fields, ranging from history to philosophy, and significantly in the approach to the world in which we live, by architecture and the scholarly work produced in its wake.

As we all know, perhaps our most significant background is the living legacy of twentieth-century thought, and in particular, in its enquiry and approach to the phenomenon of body sometimes if not often seen as a possible point of departure to our understanding of an otherwise fragmented world. Its fundamental questioning, which I will not be able to summarise here in such short time, has long been recalled across intellectual history.

More closely to us, the field of questioning that we are called upon by the notion of body was intimately related to the enterprise of modern ontology and the understanding of being-in-the-world. We need only recall

Heidegger's own words in *Being and Time*: "Being-in-the-world *is* spatiality." From the early stages of questioning, Heidegger's own pursuit of the problem would appear briefly reflected throughout his work. But we know now, that by the end of the War, Heidegger had been introduced to the work of Merleau-Ponty, that had been published that same year, in 1945. And while the extent to which it will have been reflected in his work is a matter for critical interpretation, it is clear that the topic of embodiment would make its appearance now and again until his later essays. As an example, and it is not the most important one, we need only think perhaps of his short essay *Die Kunst und der Raum* (*The Art and the Space*) – written in 1965 and published the next year, reflecting in particular on the being of sculpture as the embodiment of places.

In our common thinking and everyday discourse, it is perhaps not unusual for us to take embodiment in a general sense, for instance, whereby something or someone is the embodiment of a particular virtue or defect, of a particular field or a more general category of our world. And yet, we are often unaware of the historicity of embodiment. It is widely known and understood, and we needn't perhaps repeat it, that – while throughout most of our history, space and time have been approached for their identical relevance to human enquiry – from the very beginning of Heidegger's work the notion of time was primary to the enterprise of modern ontology, and that the notion of space took therein but a secondary role.

We should not be surprised then, if by the 1960s, and coming back to his later essay, "even a cautious insight into the special character of this art [sculpture] causes one to suspect that truth, as unconcealment of being, is not necessarily dependent on embodiment". And this statement is complemented with a quote: "It is not always necessary that what is true embody itself; it is already enough if spiritually it hovers about and evokes harmony, if it floats through the air like the solemn and friendly sound of a bell." – these are of course the words of Goethe.

Many of the questions raised and paths opened by Heidegger were left open, and deliberately so – “*Wege nicht Werke*”, “paths, not works” –, but of course the brevity of the motto, if there ever was one, was everything but absolute. And many of the questions first raised in *Being and Time* and pursued by Heidegger would find their reflection and answer in Gadamer’s contribution. The notion of embodiment, and field of questioning it represents has often been misunderstood; and an explicit contribution to its clarification was made by Gadamer in the third part of *Truth and Method*, with reference to the primary nature of language in structuring our world – from the Classical notion of embodiment to the Christian notion of incarnation, the Word made flesh. The difference that separates the enquiry of Antiquity in the Classical world ranging from the essence and finality of bodies to the mystery of the animation of the living body and the fate of the wandering soul is, but a rough summary of the span of enquiry on the nature of embodiment. And yet, Gadamer tells us, and it should not be news to us if we are already familiar with the history of Christianity, that this is evidently different from, its central message and tradition of thought. We should also not be surprised, and it is almost as a logical sequence – and this is something that I heard from Dalibor – that Gadamer’s longstanding concern was until the time of his passing – “words and things”. (This Dalibor told me in conversation during our time for supervision in his office in the Department; it was in March 2002, just days after Gadamer died.)

“Words and things” – which no doubt was but one of the many summits of a landscape of thought upon which correspondence was shared, heartwarming thanks conveyed or disagreements made plain –, was also the reflection of this latter concern with the wide vision and mystery of Christianity and the primary role of language in our world. “Words and things” was, and is still, the almost silent background of our everyday activity and work, in the silent hope – and it is a wager we make – that sometimes words may become flesh. Known and understood throughout most of Western history which, we should now recall, has largely been guided by the Christian tradition, this is a vision tragically forgotten by our secular world. This almost silent

understanding is of course entirely different from the Classical Greek vision of embodiment. We need only recall in the words of Gadamer that: “Incarnation is obviously not embodiment. Neither the idea of the soul or of God that is connected with embodiment corresponds to the Christian idea of incarnation.” It would be impossible to summarise here the significance of this distinction in historical and intellectual terms, a distinction that was once widely and deeply understood and that guided also most of the history in our own field. The vision of architecture, the role of geometry, of light and vision – which Dalibor especially appreciated – and the metaphysical background of that exploration was founded on the very understanding of “words and things” – on the understanding of a fundamental ground of communication, which we see perhaps even in our own lives and experience, and yet will never be fully able to comprehend. And still, how can we approach architecture and our own work, on a different assumption? It is perhaps, in our poor comparison to Pascal... a wager we make.

*J. de P.*