

BABYLONIAN SCIENCE

The Calamity of the Superficial

Critical notes on Kenneth E. Foote's bookreview on
Architectural Anthropology
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By Nold Egenter

Foote's Review was published nearly 10 years ago. It never received a critical answer. There were other priorities. Recently it came up again. Probably it did a lot of 'subconscious' damage: if this is the way people are reading in science today, what is it worth then to invest energies? In view of this perennial relation between superficiality and misinterpretation the following critical reply still has its place here.

In central Europe there still exists a marvellous carnaval tradition which may be quite old. Two persons are talking to each other on a stage, but one is hard of hearing and, repeating the sounds more or less, turns the others' sentences into quite different topics, often alluding to something which should not be said in public. Evidently a "deep truth game"! It makes people laugh: we all talk at cross purposes to some extent.

However, this laughter level should be absent in science. In science everybody should be well capable to hear, or better, to read. Misunderstandings should be avoided. Unfortunately this is not the case with Kenneth E. Foote's bookreview about volume one of Architectural Anthropology (AA1). It sheds a rather penible light on standard procedures of scientific communication and raises some basic questions on the validity of such book reviews, particularly if they are as negligent, as it is evident in this case. What does it help to go all through those processes to write a book and have it published if a reviewer then completely distorts it? What if the author of a review does not even care to look at the bibliography of the book he writes about? Should he not have at least a minimum idea of the author's background?

Foote measures the value of the book essentially by using one of its important theoretical outlooks, that is, the dichotomy of micro- and macrotheoretical approaches

in the discussion of architectural phenomena. Foote extensively emphasises the book's macrotheoretical perspective and, on the other hand critically maintains, that it lacks the necessary empirical basis, the microtheoretical view. Some sort of castle in the air. This is further cemented by positively enumerating a series of heterogeneous studies that are definitely micro-dimensional. The book now sounds like a "rallying cry"

- Evidently Foote has not even taken notice of the short biography which mentions the author's "Ten years research in Japan". It also describes the object of these 10 years of study: "symbolic-semantic architecture of village shinto in 100 villages of central Japan". Foote misunderstands these dominantly symbolic and semantic materials of the fetish-lifetree type as 'vernacular architecture' which is deeply misleading, Vernacular architecture implies essentially 'domestic architecture' and its derivatives.
- Further, the slightest glimpse into the fairly extensive bibliography would have shown even more clearly that the author comes exactly from the milieu Foote uses against him, namely what Geertz (1983) called the "local knowledge".
- The suggestion of an 'Architectural Anthropology' is also based on a very detailed monography available in English at that time.
- And, further, there is a similar study published in 1980 (in German; English 1995) about the constructive ritual behavior of 100 villages in Japan. A simple glimpse into this book with its roughly 1000 illustrations would have made Foote's reasoning impossible.

Foote writes: "In proposing an outline for his architectural anthropology, Egenter is perhaps placing too little weight on "local knowledge" and the lessons to be gained from microtheory. Egenter's dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs has led him to propose too drastic a solution, one that goes against the grain of contemporary research. Certainly, macrotheory is a laudable goal, but not at the expense of so much insightful research."

Architectural Anthropology, "a manifesto"? "A rallying cry"? The image alludes to someone who beats the drums because he has not much to say.

In such situations it is best to seek some sort of platform for comparison. The book which Kenneth E. Foote did not consider of any validity in the process of clarifying his writing on 'Architectural Anthropology' has been reviewed by various authors of other disciplines. Some citations in the following.

Mircea Eliade called it a very important work. A professor of European Folklore Studies said: "this study will still be read in 100 years." (A. Niederer) And R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, a historian of religion, says: Egenter's presentation and discussion are

invaluable, not only because of the wealth of material, the penetrating analysis and his bold hypotheses, but also because he teaches historians of religion to re-think their own matter of course axioms and assumptions." We add Theodore M. Ludwig's Review from 'History of Religion' (Chicago 1983/3) in the notes, to indicate what this book contains.

Once more, as a contrast, Kenneth E. Foote's last sentence of the citation above: "Certainly, macrotheory is a laudable goal, but not at the expense of so much insightful research." Before writing such a sentence, referring to Popper, one should probably check the potential of black swans. Otherwise we get close to a new type of secular theology.

In fact, it would not have been so difficult. The volume Architectural Anthropology is in fact macrotheoretical, but this is a generalisation of a new system of four classes in which semantic architecture is the key, the access to the whole. Semantic architecture is plausibly considered as an important laboratory of culture. But of course, to judge the validity of an anthropology dominantly related to architecture in the wider framework of culture some systematic or structural understandings of cultural processes are essential.

Thus, the obvious paradox that the 'Theory of Religion' is more interested and more competent in regard to 'Architectural Anthropology' than the domain of the 'Design' disciplines must have a reason. There are many today to whom the name of vanGogh is most closely related to an ear cut, in the first rank, then to a man who was a painter with a beard. MARVELLOUS! A reduction that happens to everybody in many ways today. But, on this level of information, probably one should not write about. Certainly not in science.

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