

Myths and Desires: Nomadic Spaces of Reality and Thought

From there, after six days and seven nights, you arrive at Zobeide, the white city, well exposed to the moon, with streets wound about themselves as in a skein. They tell this tale of its foundation: men of various nations had an identical dream. They saw a woman running at night through an unknown city; she was seen from behind, with long hair, and she was naked. They dreamed of pursuing her. As they twisted and turned, each of them lost her. After the dream, they set out in search of that city; they never found it, but they found one another; they decided to build a city like the one in the dream. In laying out the streets, each followed the course of his pursuit; at the spot where they had lost the fugitive's trail, they arranged spaces and walls differently from the dream, so she would be unable to escape again.

This was the city of Zobeide, where they settled, waiting for that scene to be repeated one night. None of them, asleep or awake, ever saw the woman again. The city's streets were streets where they went to work every day, with no link any more to the dreamed chase. Which, for that matter, had long been forgotten.

New men arrived from other lands, having had a dream like theirs, and in the city of Zobeide, they recognized something from the streets of the dream, and they changed the positions of arcades and stairways to resemble more closely the path of the pursued woman and so, at the spot where she had vanished, there would remain no avenue of escape.

The first to arrive could not understand what drew these people to Zobeide, this ugly city, this trap.

—*Cities & Desire 5, Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino*

In Zobeide, desire, initially embodied as a woman, is manifested as a city. The city has long been the place where the nomad and country folk's desires have been sought; it has also been the place where the possibility of reaching these desires has vanished, in return trapping the nomad in a concrete labyrinth of rational space.

*"Introduce an observer into any field of forces, influences or communications and that field becomes distorted."*¹

Urbanization is as much a myth to the nomad as nomadism is to the city-dweller. Whether in case of the nomad and the city or the city-dweller and the country, the subject projects on the object that which s/he desires. The projection is where the distortion takes place because it is not a projection from a lived experience but one from desired expectations of an outside observer. The question I have chosen to tackle is that if the reality of nomadism is a myth, is it unreasonable to desire it?

Myth 1

The myth of country life is best exemplified in the concept of the villa, a retreat away from the urban city. The villa has not changed much over centuries mainly because “it fills a need that never alters, a need which, because it is not material but psychological and ideological, is not subject to the influences of evolving societies and technologies. The villa accommodates a fantasy which is impervious to reality.”² The myth, or as Ackerman words it, the “ideology”, of the villa lies in the contrast of the city to the country: the simplicity and purity of life in the country as opposed to the complexities and vices of the city. The specifics of the luring myth can be anywhere from the purification of labour on land, the idea of growing one’s food with one’s own hands, to the abundance of nature and unbounded space, to the unmediated connection of the body to the natural environment.

The villa generally has been a bourgeois concept requiring paid or slave labour depending on the era and location; however, it is fair to say that in past few decades with increased interest in sustainable living and available technologies the villa is slowly

moving away from its initial position as a temporary summer retreat to a more permanent lifestyle for those willing to forego the luxuries of the city. Many recent examples of homes on solar and wind power are strong proof towards this move away from the city and back to the land. Though they are still sedentary, we must look at the shift as a process where creating a self-sustaining system off of the urban infrastructure is the first step and where semi-nomadism (if not pure nomadism) is a possible next step for a demographic whose lifestyle allows it.³ Given our technological abilities, the myth of a shift back to our ancient ancestral modes of living appears plausible though our empirical knowledge of living in a raw environment may be lacking.

Myth 2

The myth of city life and urbanization, however, is stronger and less successful for the nomad, whether by choice or by force. Currently over half the world's population live in cities, abandoning their generations-old modes of living off the land, placing one third of this population in poverty and urban slums.⁴ The nomad and country folk romanticized the migration from the pasture and country to the city in the same way we romanticize the reverse. Each of us face traps in our current ways and seek their outlets elsewhere. In the past fifty years many nomads have been wiped out by being forced into city life by their governments. Deleuze and Guattari's treatise on nomadology identifies the nomad as "the nomadic war machine", one that traverses in the smooth spaces of opposition to the State apparatus. The territorialization of the nomad by the State is justified by their "sins" of stupidity, deformity, illegitimacy, and usurpation.⁵ The assimilation of nomadic space by the State, is the first move towards urbanization. Urbanization is the repetitiveness of the same, a concretization and homogenization that destroys the city.⁶

Urbanization is placed in opposition to the city and the country as an excess of the functions of the two, creating fake and unwarranted desires for more of the same. It becomes an apparatus for the destruction of the country and the deformity of the city.

If there is a minutia of truth to the country folk's stupidity for choosing to be citified—that is to be defined by the boundaries of the city as opposed to being undefined and boundless in the desert—it is the unawareness of the political difference between the nomadic body and the citified body.

In *Sexuality and Space*, Elizabeth Grosz identifies two relationships between body and city. First, the body and city have a contingent rather than constitutive relation. In this model the body predates the city and the city develops based on human needs, developing from nomadism to sedentary agrarianism. Additionally, the human subject is conceived as a sovereign and self-given agent responsible for all social production. In the second model, the body and city are seen as congruent counterparts, where one reflects the other, however, more likely in this model is that the body reflects the State.⁷ The second model is also true and possible in the nomadic space, where the body reflects the environment that it functions in, a relationship that is unavoidable. However, I will add a sub-relationship to Grosz's first model (if not a third relationship): There are no contingent relationships. The city—or more appropriately, the State—regardless of being predated by the body and only by virtue of the way things are, is superior to and in control of the body.

The assimilation of the nomad by the State does not stop at the control of the land/city but extends unto the citizen. Private citizens have continually been harassed in order to fit the State's ideals, and likewise nomads have been stripped of their traditions in order to be assimilated into the political and economical fabric of the State. The nomad who existed outside the confines of the State, once within it, becomes a political body carrying the capacity for biopolitics, the first product of sovereign power and the core strength of Capitalism, allowing for the creation of "docile bodies".⁸

Hybrid Myths

In 1960, Constant Nieuwenhuis presented an architectural and social utopia, an ephemeral site of New Babylon, a hybrid of the city and the nomadic space. In New Babylon work has given way to a nomadic lifestyle of creativity and play, and traditional architecture has disintegrated. It was a response to the urbanization of the city, an outlash to our exploitation by bourgeois and avant-garde high culture (in today's terms, manufactured culture of industrial entertainment complex). These cultures drain productivity, traumatize inhabitants, replace nature, and produce pathological citizens. The architecture of these cultures, where all activity takes place, is the main antagonist to disappear in New Babylon. These anti-social spaces influence the behaviours of the inhabitants; therefore static architecture gives way to spontaneous spaces defined by interactions and desires. New Babylon was the grand reincarnation of the *dérive*, the aimless movement through urban landscapes and the *détournement* of spaces and architecture to meet one's own desires. This wandering through physical space lead to a virtual space: a new mental one, and one that Constant had explored with electronics in order to define (walkie-talkies) or to operate (movable architectural elements).

"New Babylon is... a way of thinking, of imagining, of looking on things and on life..."⁹

The way of thinking and imagining on life stems from the desires one has for life. The Bedouin life is a precursor to city life and the toughness of desert life precedes the softness of sedentary life¹⁰ and only after obtaining bare necessities, does the Bedouin amass luxury. However, will there be a desire to return to the country once luxuries are achieved and generations have past that do not understand the draw of the city? The nomad's desires, be it a desire of more wealth, a better home and other luxuries or a move away from what is considered backward and primitive, has perpetuated and lead our current situation into one that is trapped in urbanization, destructive individualization and an endless and reckless pursuit of more desires.

Necessary Myths

I have no intention of demonizing desire—without it we would not have moved beyond the cave or from eating raw rodents—and on the contrary see desire, the product of mythicism, exactly as what is necessary for creativity. Nomadism is an intelligent and highly creative lifestyle of freedom and the nomad exists as deterritorialization par excellence, in a smooth space of endless paths. The creativity of the nomad is inherent in their existence and without material desires other than ease of movement, navigation and provision of bare necessities. Nomadic architecture is a creative process, not an end product: nomads constantly recreate and reinforce physical boundaries.¹¹ It is a moving volume, in a temporary landscape of the desert, but it is not temporary in that it is a process of identical recreation of a space with permanent boundaries and functions

relative to itself. It is a mode of creative expression, a way of reordering a person's relationship with animals and plants, with the earth and the sky, with the rhythms and forces of nature.¹² The necessity of the myth and the production of desire and creativity are therefore not for the already existing nomad, but for those who desire to become the nomad, whether physically or philosophically.

"The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.). But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo."¹³

The primary determination of a nomad is to occupy and hold smooth space. Smooth space is free action in a collection of spaces that are juxtaposed but not attached, i.e. the space between points of interest (water points), or a technical example of felt versus the grided woven¹⁴. A point system, or a grid, is an emblem of striated space: it belongs here, not there. War is a clash of striated space and smooth space; when the City takes over the Countryside.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the nomad's space is the ultimate philosophical space of no bounds, in which oppositions to imposed conventions lie. "It is the subversion of set

conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling"¹⁵ and in the context of this course, conventional tools of representation (Rhino, AutoCAD, Illustrator and Maya) were deterritorialized and nomadic thought was applied to conventional representational techniques in order to contextualize the Bedouin tent in a formal architectural discourse. Similar to the nomad's perception of space in the desert, where there are no objects to compare for distance and size, and no points on the horizon to measure height, each group of students had to find new features to use as topographical references for the rationale of their concepts. The students, like the nomads, began journeys on directed smooth spaces, paths of trajectory studying the seas of sand and air, and staked theoretical tents at variable points of interest.

Required Myths

*"In the smooth, materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them. It is an intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties."*¹⁶

Through the study of the atmospheric qualities forming and affecting the Bedouin tent and reapplying the results, some students achieved controlled symptoms; others produced the symptoms through the study of the material behaviours. Ultimately, they collectively employed the tactic of the Situationist tract, to inspire rather than prescribe.¹⁷ Their method of inspiration has taken form primarily in drawings, very much in the same manner as Constant's utopia, where the "image in terms of artifact"¹⁸ has been instrumental in creating the spatial dimensions and architectural context of their object of study.

In order to inspire, a convincing level of self-immersion in the myth of nomadism is required on behalf of the creator, which should ultimately allow for a mutual projection between the creator and the viewer. "What we lose in geometrical space we must recover in the form of psychological space"¹⁹ and in the absence of geometrical space we create ideological spaces: in the absence of nature, the city dweller idealizes the country life. Going back to Ackerman, "ideology" in terms of the idealized villa and country life was not used in the "current colloquial sense to designate a strongly held conviction, but rather in the sense of a concept or a myth so firmly rooted in the unconscious that all who hold it affirm it as an incontrovertible truth."²⁰ He continues that this myth is held by those in privileged positions in order to expropriate rural land for the realization of the myth.²¹ Therefore, rather than seeing oneself as a tool to myth, the students deployed the myth of nomadism as a tool to create a meaningful space in which to present their objects.

Sustained Myths

"When we see objects in an exhibition, we see them detached from the field of meaningful space in which they had existed."²² I find it difficult to argue with Dr. Prussin, a leading scholar on African nomadic architecture, but is there really a dilemma on how to sustain the myth once it is placed out of context and in a sterile environment?

From the point of view of the laborer and farmer, country life is not a desired and idealized myth; it is their reality and one in which the land requires plowing and sowing. Ackerman is able to provide numerous literary accounts of villas and country life from ancient Greece, to Classical Rome and up until Le Corbusier, however, he points out that

“History records little evidence that farmers, peasants or slaves—who have no option but to stay put—experienced the charms of rural life depicted in the villa literature. Indeed, it was typically by the sweat of the laborer's brow that the delights of rusticity were made available to the proprietors.”²³ Can we therefore rationalize that de-contextualizing objects, placing the country life, or in our case the nomadic life, out of the daily experiences of the city dweller, can sustain their myth? The final presentation of the coursework leads to this conclusion.

The beginning question stands: Is it unreasonable to desire the myth of nomadism, even if the myth is perceived to be unattainable? If the myth is a means to a desirable, productive and creative end, it is by all means reasonable and absolutely necessary to dream and sustain it in order to one day realize it. Its realization is not out of the question considering our exponential technological advancements. If we momentarily consider Deleuze and Guattari's theories, which are interwoven with historically based current commentaries, as futurist predictions—which I do based on their track record in many instances—the smooth and the striated are in constant flux where one breeds the other: the smooth nomadic space becomes the striated city space which in return harbors the smooth space of the homeless, or in more positive terms the transient who in optimal conditions is the nomad.

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- ¹ Banham, Reyner. *The New Brutalism: Ethic Or Aesthetic*. Vol. Documents of modern architecture, London: Architectural P, 1966.
- ² Ackerman, James S. *The Villa*. Bollingen, 1993. p10
- ³ Cf. <http://www.nunomad.com/>
- ⁴ Urbanization: A Majority in Cities: Population & Development: UNFPA. <http://www.unfpa.org/pds/urbanization.htm>
- ⁵ Deleuze, Gilles, Felix Guattari, and Brian Massumi. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. p390
- ⁶ Bookchin, Murray. *Urbanization Without Cities*. Black Rose Books, 1996.
- ⁷ Grosz, Elizabeth. Bodies-Cities. *Sexuality & Space (Princeton Papers on Architecture)*. Colomina, Beatriz; Ed. Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. pp245-247
- ⁸ Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics)*. Stanford University Press, 1998.
- ⁹ Wigley, Mark. *Constant's New Babylon: Hyper-architecture of Desire*. 010, 1999.
- ¹⁰ Khaldun, Ibn. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*. Princeton University Press, 1981.
- ¹¹ Prussin, Labelle. *African Nomadic Architecture: Space, Place and Gender*. Smithsonian, 1995.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Deleuze, Gilles, Felix Guattari, and Brian Massumi. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. p380.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. Chapter 14
- ¹⁵ Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects*. Columbia University Press, 1994.
- ¹⁶ Deleuze, Gilles, Felix Guattari, and Brian Massumi. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. pp475-479
- ¹⁷ Sadler, Simon. *The Situationist City*. The MIT Press, 1999.
- ¹⁸ Wigley, Mark. *Constant's New Babylon: Hyper-architecture of Desire*. 010, 1999.
- ¹⁹ Ibid
- ²⁰ Ackerman, James S. *The Villa*. Bollingen, 1993. p10
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Prussin, Labelle. *African Nomadic Architecture: Space, Place and Gender*. Smithsonian, 1995.
- ²³ Ackerman, James S. *The Villa*. Bollingen, 1993. p36