

BOOK REVIEW

The Ring Metaphor and the Spirit of Sofia and Other Essays

Lino Bianco

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Lino Bianco, both as editor and contributing author, has attempted in his book entitled *The Ring Metaphor and the Spirit of Sofia and Other Essays* to expose his philosophy of the spirit of the arts - architecture, planning, literature and music. He ventures to ask, what at face value appears to be a simple and straight forward question: 'Where do I live?'. Nevertheless, the reply that he gives is not as elementary as one would imagine for his answer is not a simplistic one of providing his home address but something more in-depth, philosophical, religious and spatial that transcends space and time, two recurring philosophical themes in this book and in philosophy in general.

Essentially, Bianco travels with his mind, body and especially, soul all over the place, being fascinated by buildings, roadways, and other human-made structures and artefacts. He even goes beyond the physical to the transcendental whereby he tries to discover, as it were, the soul behind structures, film and music (the arts) in the same way that a theologian inquires about the soul that animates the body. He, therefore, sees himself not just as a citizen of planet Earth but as a person who interacts with the spirit behind those human constructs that we perceive or engage with in our daily life, with the difference that Bianco's conception of these human constructs is not simply sensory - one that appeals to the human senses - but even spiritual that appeals to the human psyche. With his inquisitive mind, Bianco not only perceives these human constructs but scans them with his mind in search of their innate soul. What is thus important to him is not really much the dimensions, texture, colour, materials, techniques, compositions, tonality and other physical and human traits that compose them but how they interact singularly and in combination with the space where they are situated, the message that they want to convey to the observer, and how to unravel the whole philosophy that captures them within the forms they have been given by the human hand or mind.

As to book structure, the work is divided into a Preface, a Foreword, an Introduction, and six chapters. In the Preface, Bianco exposes his philosophy of the spirit of the arts - mainly focusing on a triad, these being architecture, literature and music. The Foreword has appositely been penned by His Majesty

King Simeon II of Bulgaria, an Introduction by Vladimir Gradev as well as four sole authored chapters by Lino Bianco, ‘The Ring Metaphor and the Spirit of Sofia’, ‘Valletta: A City in History’, ‘Limestone in Post-War Architecture: Is it a Plea for a Return to Pugin?’ and ‘Hegel’s Notion of Gothic Architecture’ together with two co-authored essays, the first with Saviour Catania entitled ‘L’Année Dernière à Mariebad and the Cartography of an Orphic Life-in-Death: The Modern Katábasis of Resnais’ and the second with Irene Dillon and Marlene Gatt entitled ‘Music in Teaching Religion and in Primary Schools’. This is, undoubtedly, an interdisciplinary oeuvre that traverses from Literature to Architecture, from spatial planning to Philosophy, from cartography to religion, from music to filmography, from teaching to education. It is, therefore, not a monodisciplinary appraisal of different human constructs but is enriched through recourse to other human disciplines of knowledge, which produce a more holistic and all-embracing literary output.

His Majesty King Simeon II of Bulgaria graces this book with a Foreword that majestically observes that Lino Bianco’s volume consists in a collection of essays that express the author’s “sensitive insights into Bulgaria’s past, present and future” written by Malta’s Ambassador Emeritus to the Republic of Bulgaria whose “whole love for Bulgaria stems from scholarly work undertaken on our Capital City” where, in a scientific paper, “Bianco argued that Sofia is the Ecumenical City par excellence” (page xiii).

In the Introduction, Professor Vladimir Gradev points to Bianco’s inquisitive mind in answering the biblical question ‘Where do I live?’. It can be answered through travelling in time and space by unravelling the ‘hidden soul of space’. Such an inquiry is not much interested in the superficiality of things, important as they might be in daily life, but attempts to delve deeper to “capture the ideas, mood, passions, hidden thoughts, impulses and fantasies that time has invested in the buildings, especially sacred edifices, and which he attempts to translate for us” (page xvi). However, to achieve such task, it is not sufficient to rely only on one’s sight of these diverse buildings in terms of spiritual aspirations and technical skills, but to search elsewhere - in Theology, Philosophy, Architecture, spatial planning, Literature, Music and Cultural studies so as to untie the Gordian knot that binds them together. The various sacral buildings alluded to in Bianco’s publication located principally in Sofia point to the direction of coexistence of monotheistic religions, a unique phenomenon in Europe rivalled only by Jerusalem. Such inter-faith dialogue evokes the spiritual dimension that accompanies and transcends the material dimension of the sacral buildings. Such spirituality however is not something abstract or intangible: it has been concretised and given flesh in the history of Bulgaria. It is a manifestation of the spirit of the buildings and architecture that have come to live.

Professor Gradev illustrates one typical example of this incarnation of the spirit into flesh: “the brightest testimony to this spirit of Sofia is the protection of Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War. At that time, the Bulgarian government was an ally of Nazi Germany yet it refused to deport the Bulgarian

Jews to the death camps” (page xix). Years later, under a communist regime, the religious denomination was side stepped but still failed to eliminate the tolerance and solidarity that existed amongst the diverse religious communities in Bulgaria nor sow disharmony between the large Turkish and Muslim majority. Sofia, as depicted by Bianco, is where there occurs a reconciliation of the perennial contradiction between the ideal and the practical needs of life.

Chapter one contributes its title to this collection of essays. Penned by Lino Bianco, like chapters 2 and 3, it focus primarily on spiritual freedom and tolerance based on religion and takes its cue from the playwright and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s play *Nathan the Wise*. For Bianco this philosophy manifests itself in the Jerusalem of the Balkans - Sofia - that bears witness through its living spiritual heritage to the three monotheistic religions practiced in the capital of Bulgaria that in a single geophysical space enshrines multicultural and multireligious coexistence and tolerance, where unity is cherished and division abhorred. It is in the city centre that one finds in proximate vicinity to each other the contemporary landmarks of sacral architectural and cultural significance of the spirit of Sofia. Yet these buildings convey in actual life the values of harmonious co-existence and tolerance that have imbued the Bulgarian nation notwithstanding the historical turmoil it has witnessed. This is why Sofia can be considered the Ecumenical City.

Bianco’s second essay moves to his homeland and to its capital city - Valletta. It is inspired by the Sociologist Richard Sennett’s *Flesh and Stone* who explains ‘sensate passivity’, the treatment of the body in relation to built space, that emerged in the French Revolution where the body isolated itself from other bodies and built space thereby detaching itself from pain. Valletta is a gridiron fortified planned city which still catered for the non-military needs of its inhabitants such as well-designed streetscapes and well-thought out public spaces. Planning regulations controlling sanitary and aesthetic matters followed its construction. After having outlined the development of various buildings and squares in the city of Valletta, as well of the socio-political, economic, and demographic situation under the Hospitaller Knights of the Order of St John, when the Order departed Malta, they had transformed Valletta “from a barren rock to a cosmopolitan city, an administrative and a cultural centre with magnificent auberges, palaces, a hospital, a university, a public library and a public theatre” (page 35).

Further changes followed the Napoleonic occupation of Malta and by the British who had in the meantime expelled the French. After obtaining independence, several other initiatives were taken in Valletta in an attempt “to return soul and life to some of the buildings” (page 43). But although Valletta “was a soul of the nation for more than three-and-a-half centuries, [now it] becomes a graveyard after office hours and during weekends” (page 44). Today, it can be safely stated that Valletta is “no longer flesh and stone; it is corpse and stone” (page 46) - it has lost its vibrancy. The prospects for Valletta, today, are bleak: during the last decades the city has deteriorated both physically and socially yet not enough has been done to arrive at the stage where the city is

incarnated through a lively socio-cultural atmosphere that makes it the hub of attraction after offices and shops close down.

‘Limestone in Post-War British Architecture: Is it a Plea for a Return to Pugin?’ is the title of the third essay penned by Bianco in this collection. From Sofia and Valletta the author moves to London where he studies three post-World War II buildings: Bracken House, the Shell Centre, and the Economist Development. In 1841 Augustus Pugin published his *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* whereby he expounded on ethical issues in architectural design arguing that architecture is moral and truthful. This implied that construction “should be evident and materials should be used according to their specific properties” (page 58) without being painted to look like other materials as in that way they would convey a falsity. Nevertheless, when Pugin’s architectural philosophy is applied to post-war British modernist buildings, a mismatch is noted as in frame structures, “limestone is employed to deceive the viewer as to the actual materials utilised in construction” (pages 60-61). Bianco calls for architecture that is truthful in four ways: truth to structure; truth to function; truth to materials; truth to the spirit of the time. Bianco concludes that talk about truthfulness in post-war British architecture is mere rhetoric.

‘Hegel’s Notion of Gothic Architecture’ is the theme of Chapter 4. Here Bianco attempts to square the circle between Hegel’s aesthetic theory, theory of art history, and the fine arts with the German’s philosopher’s philosophical writings on Romantic architecture that are founded on “the symbiotic relation between art and religion, both intrinsic expressions of the spirit” (page 77). For Bianco reads Hegel in the sense that art, Philosophy, and religion are an intrinsic socio-cultural expression of the spirit and the relationship between art and religion - both grounded in sensation - form the pivotal node of Hegel’s theory of art history. Religion plays a mediatory role between art and philosophy whereby sensation traverses into conception. Architecture - together with sculpture, painting, music and poetry - is one of the five fine arts that can be expressed in the Symbolic, Classical and Romantic styles. Nonetheless, for Hegel, Architecture - and sculpture - were more appropriately expressed in the Symbolic and Classic styles due to their external and impersonal nature that do not contribute to fully express the godlike.

Bianco recounts that Hegel classifies Gothic architecture within the Romantic style with the ecclesiastical type of building being its characteristic trait. The structure, form and texture all enfold its spirit. Bianco interprets Hegel’s philosophy as an expression of the strong Prussian state: “In the Prussian State of his time, the existing spirit is the relative and not absolute reality of the spirit” (page 90). Thus, Hegel’s conception of the Prussian State is akin to his philosophy of Gothic Architecture that is imperfect and relative.

Two co-authored essays follow. The first, with Saviour Catania, is entitled ‘*L’Année Dernière à Mariebad* and the Cartography of an Orphic Life-in-Death: The Modern Katábasis of Resnais’. *L’Année Dernière à Mariebad* happens to be a 1961 black and white Franco-Italian film co-production with Alain Resnais as its director and Alain Robbe-Grillet as scriptwriter. Mariebad is situated in

Western Bohemia. The film's theme centres around a baroque hotel where reality and time are the focal point of the plot with contemplation and its escape being the by-products. Diverse interpretations in film critique have been assigned to the intricate and opaque plot such that it can be considered to be premised on a love story of the Orpheus-Eurydice kind that can be interpreted through the descent theme in modern film, the *katábasis*. Critics have viewed Resnais as a cartographer of an unknown world who deploys camera movements that evoke a life-in-death preoccupation within a baroque palace setting. The underworld in Greek mythology, like Resnais' film technique, integrates two critical concepts of moving motionless and endless repetitiveness. Indeed, the film's conclusion - if it can be considered to be so - is left deliberately open-ended to endlessness with no beginning and no end but an ongoing continuum.

Ovid's *Metamorphosis* depicts the death of Orpheus as a static activity and this inspires the case of personages X and A in Resnais' film. Bianco and Catania compare these two artistic works as follows: whilst Orpheus and Eurydice constantly change positions nothing changes their basic situation, which Ovid pivots on the act of endless gazing. But so does Resnais' film, where X and A are portrayed as interacting repeatedly in terms of gazing statuary. Like Orpheus, X and A adopt a modernist sensibility of existential disintegration. Bianco and Catania conclude that although the film is subject to diverse interpretations, the Orphic does not counterpoise the film's principle of uncertainty.

Bianco's second co-authored paper, with Irene Dillon and Marlene Gatt, is entitled 'Music in Teaching Religion and in Primary Schools'. It is the book's last chapter that is then followed by the Index. In this ultimate chapter, the authors note that singing unravels the spiritual dimension of human experience enabling children to enter enthusiastically into an imaginative world distinct from the real one. Communication via singing is a process of creating, sharing and conveying understanding. Music shapes and moulds the child's spiritual dimension whilst stretching a child's memorising power, personal enrichment, classroom effectiveness, emotion development, imagination, and fantasy. Music in children provokes them to socialise, share, and sustain feelings of joy. Song is an essential medium to convey a message that has a purely spiritual dimension. As the authors premise: "Every song presented to the class has an important and specific role, that is, to create a human and habitable world. Within this ring of creativity, music generates peace and tranquillity, and relieves stress in its simplest form." (page 125) In pastoral music, children stretch their human imagination about God and "are invited to think, wonder and breathe God with their bodies, skins and ears and not merely with their mind" (page 126).

A study for 44 Year 3 primary school children from two schools was conducted to test the validity of music and lyrics designed to accompany religious education. The children were involved in every song such that a harmonic blend between child and song ensued. Repetition, expression of emotions, and the coming together of children was the end result to this study. Faith is developed in children through Bible stories and songs that excite their

minds through thought and fantasy. For the authors, songs are the sacred medium of reconciling the created world and God: “The joy of Jesus is the strongest energetic element that can stimulate a child’s interest in keeping faith alive” (page 136). The chapter concludes that song in religious education contributes to empower children to be creative in expressing their faith, to integrate song in the classroom, and to develop greater insights in the spiritual formation of children.

This collection of essays expounds Bianco’s philosophy of the spirit of the arts studied in six chapters. His main contention is that the arts cannot be valued and understood if they are disentangled from their spiritual component. Were this to materialise, then much would be lost in the appreciation of the arts. An important dimension of the arts is lost if their spirit is not comprehended. Without their spirit the arts would be as cold as marble, as dead as a doornail, as hollow as a drum, as devoid of values as a whited sepulchre. Like the human body that has a mind but also a soul, the arts have their various branches of human creative activity as well as their spiritual dimension: the latter may not, at face value, be visible to the naked eye but can be unravelled only by delving deeper and beyond the physical, perceptive and sensory image of human constructs to get to their real, hidden and enriched meaning of the arts.

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