Bunschoten meets Dracula

Arthur Wortmann

In the morning of August 8th of the year... – was it 1890? – a severe gale scourged the coast of northern England. Miraculously, a schooner named Demeter, sailing under Russian colours and completely adrift, was safely swept into the harbour of Whitby. The bewildered population, gathered on the quay, found the ship's captain tied to the helm, clutching a cross and a rosary in his rigid hands. He had been dead for two days. There was no trace of any crew members. The schooner's cargo, however, was intact. It consisted of fifty wooden boxes filled with mould.

These peculiar facts can be found in a book by the Irish philosopher Bram Stoker, published in 1897. Unlike his other books, it became world-famous, and not primarily among philosophers.[1] The book deals with count Dracula's effort to emigrate from Transylvania to England. To be able to take root in his new surroundings, the count had to bring with him the ground on which his forefathers had lived and in which they were buried. No new life without old ground.

Stoker's account springs to mind when Raoul Bunschoten, in his text 'Cutting the Horizon. Two Theses on Architecture' (partly included in this issue of *Forum),* suggests that the viking ship, more than any other ship, carries along with it the projection of the horizon in its prominent, raised edges. In this concept, the ship is a temporary place of residence, in the sense that the fixed horizon defines the boat itself as a place. The place is displaced by the ship's movement. In Stoker's book the place is not defined by the ship's edge, but by its cargo. But the Demeter also displaces the place.

Bunschoten is fascinated by the horizon and by man's efforts to break through his own horizon. The *Tricycle,* for instance, an object from his *Skin of the Earth* project from 1990, is a device that teaches you how to walk and to displace your own horizon by pushing the tricycle colossus, the horizontal element of which is at eye level, in front of you.

This fascination with the horizon is connected with a fascination for the relation between man and the ground he lives on. Count Dracula not only wants to displace his horizon, he also carries his 'own' ground with him to be able to accomplish it. The ship that transports the earth isn't called Demeter for nothing. Demeter was the Greek goddess of the cultivated earth. The earth on which the forefathers lived and in which they were buried, is the breeding ground for one's own life.

Dracula's course of action is reminiscent of an Etruscan ritual described by Fustel de Coulanges in *La Cité Antique.* When a new city was founded, a hole was dug in the ground in which the new inhabitants deposited earth from their old town. '"Where their hearth had been, where their forefathers had lived and were buried." Religion forbade them to leave the place where they had set up hearth and where the forefathers that had become gods were buried. In order to expiate their lack of deference, each had to make

use of a fiction, and bring the holy ground (a clump of earth) with them, in which their forefathers had been buried and to which their 'manes' (shades) were bound forever. No one could move without bringing their ground and their forefathers.'[2] Was Martin Heidegger, with his unshakable belief in the sacral dimension of the alliance between man and the 'place' he inhabits, familiar with this old Etruscan rite, or had he been an attentive reader of *Dracula?*

In 'Cutting the Horizon', Bunschoten describes two different situations. The first deals with architectural intervention in a limited world, the second with the network space created by the worldwide ramifications of transport and information systems. He describes them as if they were situations of equal value, though creating the impression that there is a chronological connection between them. The distinction between these two situations was not invented by Bunschoten. Other writers have dealt with it at great length, but Bunschoten's very personal reformulation of the problem is quite interesting. Establishing some links between Bunschoten and others, however, might well help to illuminate the essential characteristics of both situations.

Ground and boundary

Central to the first part of Bunschoten's text is the incision of the earth, the cutting into the ground. The underlying idea is that, through these interventions, man marks the surface of the earth. From these marks he can derive an identity. This makes building a process that gives meaning, an intermediary between the earth's crust and the life that takes place on it. In architecture, the traces of this process can still be found. Like Walter Benjamin, who was interested in the traces left behind by the residents in the interior of nineteenth-century bourgeois houses, Bunschoten is fascinated by the traces of living left behind on the earth's crust. And like the detective who can solve a crime in a nineteenth-century house by looking at the traces, architectural research can tell us something about the relation between man and the place he inhabits by looking at the traces. The space of the incision, writes Bunschoten, is a reminder of the knife, the instrument that did the cutting. Memory is activated here. The cut splits two things that are one, but the shape of the cut sees to it that, however modestly, they will always refer to each other, even in their severed state.

If we think of architecture as such a cut in the earth's crust, then Bunschoten refers to the symbolic value of architecture. 'The Greek *symbolon* means a token or tessera – half a broken bone or pot which may be reunited with the other half in order to prove the identity of the bearer.'[3] The assumption is that the line of fracture of the two potshards is unique, so that the shards will always refer to each other and supply their bearers with a means of identification. Life itself and the earth's surface are also connected through the architectural incision.

An essential aspect of the first situation that Bunschoten describes, is its liminal character, meaning that there is a fundamental difference between the place where one finds oneself and the space outside it. Between both domains there is a boundary. Not only is there a symbolic relation with the own place, but the crossing of this boundary is

also a ritual act, which necessarily has to do with a 'liminal experience', the becoming aware of the transition from the familiar to the foreign, from the 'same' to the 'different', like Dracula's boat or the vikings' longship displace the material 'here' to the immaterial and imaginary 'there'.

There are clear connections with the so-called 'deconstructivist' theories, which centre around notions like the 'absence' and the 'other'. Jacques Derrida thinks very little of the 'metaphysics of presence', and Peter Eisenman, to mention the most outspoken representative from the world of architecture, in line with Derrida's critique, never misses a chance to talk about instability and disruption, proclaiming that architecture must 'displace' the 'place'.

In the Romantic era the 'foreign' was glorified as a remnant of what was naturally 'good', and during imperialism the 'foreign' was colonized to exploit its natural resources. In the same way, deconstructivism now celebrates the 'foreign' because of its aura of intellectual openness, and because of the possibilities of commercial exploitation in a time when faith in 'métarécits' has become lost, and when there is an acute shortage of new theories disguised as anti-theories. So we are all looking – as always, but for different reasons – for the 'foreign', a quest that brings satisfaction because the experience of the 'different' affirms the own identity. This is why suspension of this liminal experience is not experienced as a relief: for Dracula, for instance, the 'undead' one who lacks the most fundamental liminal experience – that between life and death –, eternal life is no suspension of suffering, but unremitting torture.

Reticule and monster

In the second situation that Bunschoten describes, there can be no liminal experiences or symbolic relations between man and place. The horizon is no longer a genuine boundary, because information technology has made the entire world accessible to everybody. This is the 'global village', as it was dubbed some decades ago. Instead of incisions and scores in the earth's crust, we are now dealing with a reticule or 'web', as Bunschoten calls it in his text.

Martin Heidegger has complained about this in essays like 'Building Dwelling Thinking'.[4] Heidegger makes a distinction between place and space. Space, according to Heidegger, is the analytic-algebraic relation between things in our modern objectifying world. Space is the expanse in which measurable distances – intervals – between places exist. Between this mathematic space and man there is an opposition: space is external, alien to man, while place, according to Heidegger, is something with which man has a meaningful, even ontological relationship. In other words, place is not a neutral space in which man moves, but rather something that man carries along with him. Actually, it is what makes him a human being.

In Bunschoten's second situation Heidegger's space is called 'limitless vastness', an expanse which has been made into a 'domesticated object' and incorporated 'in our catalogue of utilitarian things'. This entirely coincides with Heidegger's lament in his

essay 'The Thing', where he describes how all things that used to have some sort of autonomy, a certain 'foreignness', we could say, are made into objects and fitted into our present mode of functional thinking. They are no longer appreciated as things in themselves, but only as objects that can be used by subjects.[5]

The distinction that Bunschoten makes between both situations is also reminiscent of a concept by Cilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. They distinguish between 'smooth space' and 'striated space'; nomadic space versus the space of the settlements; the space in which the war machine develops versus the space of the State apparatus.[6] When Deleuze and Guattari mention nomadic space and war machine, the comparison with the viking ship props up again.

The 'reticule', on the other hand, is part of 'striated' space, the space of settlements and State apparatus. Bunschoten states that it is now once again possible to break through this tissue, through this electronic space that stretches out all over the earth, and whose shape is reminiscent of 'an inverse carapace'. He is not so much thinking of breaking through the earth's crust – which would be of little advantage to us –, or about breaking through a boundary in the other direction. Although Paul Virilio has written that the stratosphere is our vertical horizon, which it could be our aim to break through, which we do on occasion, Bunschoten refers to experiments with 'microwaves testifying of the "edge" of the universe'. So, in that direction there is not much to gain either.

The break-through activity that Bunschoten proposes is the creation of monsters and models. This is a surprising notion. The objects or installations he makes – a heavily subsidized activity often performed in collaboration with large numbers of students or 'workshoppers' – must be seen as monsters, as constructions 'of an architecture or of architectural objects which are not directly applicable', and therefore create 'a kind of liminal period'. By re-arranging matters which are only too well-known in our network space, our reticule of expanse, something new, something strange, something different is created. The 'destabilising effect' of this 'may lead to possible rethinking', concludes Bunschoten, without specifying what exactly is being rethought. The making of these monsters is an effort to achieve artificially a liminal experience in a world where all boundaries have been eliminated. Those who have seen the objects – those from *The Skin of the Earth* project, for instance – or pictures of them, can decide for themselves whether this provocation of our imagination leads to results, whether these monsters do indeed displace us to the immaterial and imaginary 'there'.

For the time being, I am inclined to say that the texts dealing with the themes mentioned above are more successful in appealing to the imagination than the monsters themselves, perhaps because monsters become recognizable and predictable too quickly. Bram Stoker's monster, for instance, created in the late nineteenth-century from an amalgam of imagination, superstition, occultism and mesmerism, has lost all its inspirational power since a host of variations and screen adaptations have passed in review. In the present cultural tissue, in which information technology and distribution networks make everything subject to assimilation, even rearrangement is overtaken by habituation.

1. Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Penguin Books, London 1979 (1897).

2. Fustel de Coulanges, quoted and paraphrased by Joseph Rykwert, 'Het idee van een stad [The idea of a city]', in: Jan Brand and Han Janselijn, *Het idee van de stad [The idea of the city],* AAP, Arnhem 1983, p. 23.

3. Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin,* Macmillan Press, London and Basingstoke 1982, p. 106.

4. See Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking' in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper & Row, New York 1971, especially p.154 ff.

5. 'The Thing', in: Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought,* pp. 163-186.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri, *A Thousand Plateaus,* The Athlone Press, London 1988 (1980), p. 474.