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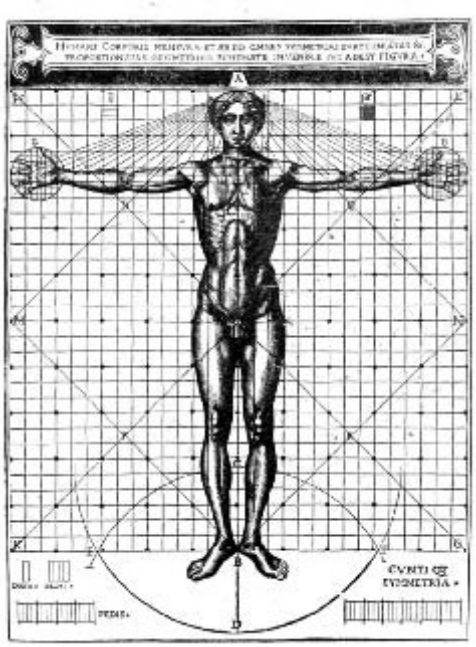
Vitruvius Crucifixus: Architecture, Mimesis, and the Death Instinct

This chapter takes its point of departure from a discussion of links between representations of Vitruvian man and the 'dying,' crucified Christ. The theme of death is then taken further as I argue that the principle of harmony that underlies proportional systems may be understood in terms of Freud's death instinct—the instinct that seeks to bring everything to a peaceful resolution. I explore how psychoanalysis might offer an insight into how proportions help us relate to architecture by providing a mechanism that facilitates the way in which we read ourselves into the built environment. Representations of the human figure inscribed into plans and other drawings of the Renaissance might therefore be understood as emblematic of an attempt to relate to a building by a process of mimetic identification.

Vitruvius's comments on the subject of proportions have proved to be highly influential within the history of architectural theory. They have provided the grounding for much subsequent theoretical work on the relationship between buildings and the human body. The tradition of relating the layout of temples and churches to the form of the body is captured explicitly in the drawings of Francesco di Giorgio, where the ghostlike figure of a human body is quite literally mapped onto the plans and elevations of buildings. It is these drawings, along with those of Fra Giocondo, Cesariano, Leonardo da Vinci, and others, that Rudolf Wittkower addresses in his discussion of proportions in his seminal work on the centralized church of the early Italian Renaissance.[1] Joseph Rykwert and John Onians, among others, have continued the tradition of scholarship stemming from Wittkower's earlier insights on the links between the human body and buildings. It could be argued, however, that the full significance of Vitruvius's comments has yet to be understood. The concern of these scholars has been largely for the symbolic meaning of these proportions and the mathematical ratios that underpin them. So far there has been little investigation



13.1
Vitruvian man within a square, after Cesare Cesariano, *De architectura* (Como, 1521).

into the question of how the use of these proportions might help human beings relate to buildings at a psychical level.

Traditionally, proportions have often been viewed as something "out there." It is perhaps only for God to recognize them. If we are to pursue an existing model of how we might identify with those proportions, at best we might perhaps follow the logic of the *Phaedrus,* where Plato argues that when we sense something "harmonic" our souls recognize the fundamental order of the universe.[2] According to Plato, souls are mixed in the *chora* of the universe of the same substance as the universe itself. The tension that exists between the imperfect mortal body and the perfect immortal soul, composed as it is of the stuff of the universe, is set right by recognition of the essential harmony of the universe, revealed in a harmonious sound or image. It is this Platonic tradition that informs more recent ontological enquiries, notably the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer in *The Relevance of the Beautiful.*[3]

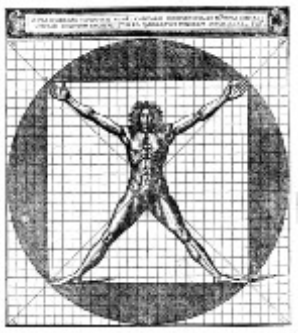
Questions about the body, however, and about the way in which human beings identify with the world have been central to much recent theoretical debate, not least in the domain of psychoanalysis. It is to psychoanalytic theory that we might turn for fresh insights into these issues and to further our understanding as to how the use of proportions might offer a mechanism to enhance the way in which human beings relate to their built environment at a psychical level.

Vitruvius Crucifixus

We start with one of the most famous illustrations on the theme of proportions, that of Vitruvian man found in Cesariano's 1521 edition of Vitruvius's, *De architectura* (figure 13.1). This is one of two images with which Cesariano illustrates Vitruvius's comments on the human body, which is so perfectly proportioned that it may be inscribed within either a circle or a square:

> For if a man be placed flat on his back, with his hands and feet extended, and a pair of compasses centred at his navel, the fingers and toes of his two hands and feet will touch the circumference of a circle described therefrom. And just as the human body yields a circular outline, so too a square figure may be found from it. For if we measure the distance from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, and then apply that measure to the outstretched arms, the breadth will be found to be the same as the height.[4]

One of the intriguing aspects of this illustration is the similarity that the figure bears to images of the crucified Christ. There are a number of incidental parallels between the two persons and a clear stylistic indebtedness to the crucified Christ in representations of Vitruvian man. In some, for example, the head slumps to one side. But in this one by Cesariano, not only is there a scroll above the head of the figure reminiscent of the INRI of the crucifix, but the hands and feet are displayed precisely as though they have been affixed to the cross. The parallels extend to Cesariano's other famous image of Vitruvian man. Alongside the image of Vitruvian man inscribed within the square, Cesariano includes a second image of Vitruvian man, a man spread-eagled within a circle, his hands and feet touching the circumference of that circle (figure 13.2). As Vitruvius describes in the original text, here the man is "stabbed" in his midriff by one arm of a pair of compasses, while the other arm is used to circumscribe the figure, "striking" the hands and the feet. Vitruvian man is thus "wounded" in the same parts as Christ. But it is the first image—Vitruvian man inscribed within a square—that is more immediately reminiscent of images of the crucifix.



13.2
Vitruvian man spread-eagled, after Cesare Cesariano, *De architectura* (Como, 1521).

The links between Christ and Vitruvius have been observed by a number of scholars. The two, it has been noted, were near contemporaries.[5] Furthermore, Vitruvius's comments on the ideal proportions of the human figure, which should also be present in the layout of temples, exerted a major influence on the design of Christian churches throughout the Renaissance. Not only do we find proportions of idealized human figures inscribed in various plans of Christian buildings, but representations of Christ himself take on the proportions of Vitruvian man. As has been observed, Brunelleschi's wooden crucifix in the

church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence shows Christ with the proportions of the *homo ad quadratum,* the distance between his outstretched hands matching his height from head to toe.[6] Nor is it out of place that Brunelleschi should have chosen to portray Christ, the very manifestation of God on earth, with the perfect proportions of Vitruvian man, proportions that echo the cosmic harmony of the universe. With Brunelleschi's crucifix, Christ has become "Vitruvianized." Yet the Renaissance was as much about the Christianization of a Vitruvian tradition as it was about the Vitruvianization of a Christian one. Hence we find in Cesariano's illustrations a clear allusion to the crucified Christ, which develops the links between architectural form and the crucifixion of Christ, already evident in the cruciform layout of the medieval basilica.

This connection—this Christianization of Vitruvian man—is corroborated by Vitruvius's manuscripts. Two variants in the text describe the way in which the hands are held out in the figure of Vitruvian man. The manuscripts here vary between the use of the (more common) form *manus pansas* and the variant *manus spansas.*[7] The verb *pandere* simply means "to open out," or "to extend." The hands are "outstretched." In the variant, the verb *spandere* is used. This has a secondary meaning of the way that a priest holds out his hands "in prayer."[8] The variant *manus spansas* therefore marks a religious moment in the representation of Vitruvian man. From Vitruvian man with his hands "outstretched," we move to Vitruvian man with his hands "outstretched in prayer." In this shift from *manus pansas* to *manus spansas,* from the hands "outstretched" to the hands "outstretched in prayer," Vitruvian man becomes in effect Christianized. In this shift we recognize not only the Vitruvianization of the Christian world but also its corollary, the Christianization of the Vitruvian world. In effect, Vitruvian man adopts the posture of Christ on the cross. Vitruvian man becomes crucified: *Vitruvius crucifixus.*

Freud and the Death Instinct

How might psychoanalytic theory help us to understand the role of proportions? It is through the emblem of Vitruvian man on the cross—the dying, crucified Vitruvian man—that we might approach the theme of death and through this engage with one of the central themes in psychoanalysis. And it is through a creative and deliberately indulgent reworking of Freud's work on death that we might begin to understand the role of proportions in helping the individual to identify with the built environment.

The theme of death is fundamental to Freud, especially to the later Freud, the metapsychological Freud. Freud's later theory is centered around the conflict between eros and thanatos, between love and death, between life instincts and death instincts. Eros, as the life instinct, serves to counter the tendency toward thanatos, the death instinct, and acts as a

force to complicate life. It continuously counteracts and delays the death instinct. Eros is therefore set in opposition to thanatos, that which seeks resolution and quiet. Thus, the death drive becomes for Freud one of the fundamental impulses within human behavior.

The death drive can be seen to emanate from the moment of birth itself, a violent trauma that upsets the pleasure of the time in the womb. For Freud the time in the womb relates to the development of the *id,* the faculty that absorbs and enjoys pleasurable sensations. The id is the domain of the unconscious. Herbert Marcuse defines the id as follows: "The 'id' is free from the forms and principles which constitute the conscious, social individual. It is neither affected by time nor troubled by contradictions: it knows 'no values, no good and evil, no morality.' It does not aim at self-preservation: all it strives for is satisfaction of its instinctual needs, in accordance with the pleasure principle."[9]

The womb provides the id with a refuge, a state of placid protection and constant gratification. With birth this freedom from disturbance is lost forever. Yet the memory of this period in the womb remains, and subsequent life is governed by a desire to regain this lost quietude, this lost paradise. Life is dominated by a regressive compulsion, a desire to return to the womb. This striving for integral gratification dominates all subsequent life. Thus, for Freud, the drive toward equilibrium that results is none other than a "continuous descent toward death," where death finally provides that longed-for resolution and quiet. According to Marcuse, "The death instinct is destructiveness not for its own sake, but for the relief of tension. The descent toward death is an unconscious flight from pain and want. It is an eternal struggle against suffering and repression."[10]

From this drive toward equilibrium, Freud develops the "nirvana principle"—the urge to return to the nirvana of the womb—which becomes for Freud "the dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps nervous life in general."

Related to the nirvana principle is the pleasure principle, which is, in effect, one expression of the nirvana principle: "The effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli [the 'Nirvana principle' . . .] finds expression in the pleasure principle; and our recognition of this fact is one of the strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death instincts."[11]

At a straightforward level, then, we might recognize an apparent parallel between the drive for harmony within the principle of architectural proportions that Vitruvius recognized and the drive for resolution that underpins the death instinct in Freud. There is an obvious point of comparison between the state of equilibrium sought in proportions, and the equilibrium of the nirvana principle. The harmony sought in the proportions of Vitruvian man—the "dying, crucified" Vitruvian man—matches the harmony sought in Freud's death instinct. Proportions offer a mechanism that strives for a resolution, a rec-

13.3
Caravaggio, *Narcissus* (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica).

onciliation of tensions. The aesthetic gratification of harmonic proportions in architecture might therefore be seen to represent a return to the nirvana of the womb, to the sensory realm of the protected. Yet this realm need not be a closed, interior space a womblike space. Indeed, according to the logic of the argument, open architecture would have a similar effect, providing that it is harmonious.

By itself, however, this model appears to be somewhat inadequate. It cannot account for the stimulation that may be induced by this release of tensions. Harmonious architecture may equally prove to be innervating. It is as though the gratification of aesthetic contemplation might serve not so much to resolve the death instinct as to transcend it.

Here we might refer to the work of Herbert Marcuse, a somewhat unlikely figure in this context in that his work has been concerned largely with the theme of eros rather than thanatos. Yet he offers a further interpretation of the interplay of eros and thanatos in the moment of aesthetic contemplation and thus sheds some light on this question. According to Marcuse, the distinction between eros and thanatos is not fully resolved in Freud. Marcuse goes on to suggest that these two seemingly opposite drives have a common origin and may therefore be reconciled. For Marcuse, the crucial images that bring together eros and thanatos are Orpheus, the poet who plays so beautifully on his lyre that he is able to hold even wild animals spellbound, and Narcissus, the beautiful youth whom Aphrodite punishes for spurning the advances of Echo by making him obsessed with his

own image (figure 13.3). His frustrated attempts to grasp his own image reflected in a pool lead to his despair and death. On his death Narcissus's body turns into a flower of the same name.

Marcuse picks up on the models of Narcissus and Orpheus. For Marcuse, the images of Orpheus and Narcissus reconcile eros and thanatos:

> They recall the experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but to be liberated—a freedom that will release the powers of Eros now bound to the petrified forms of man and nature. These powers are conceived not as destruction but as peace, not as terror but as beauty. It is sufficient to enumerate the assembled images in order to circumscribe the dimension to which they are committed: the redemption of pleasure, the halt of time, the absorption of death; silence, sleep, night, paradise—the Nirvana principle not as death but as life.[12]

In this fusion of the Orphic and the Narcissistic world, Marcuse sees a reconciliation of eros and thanatos. In this sense, he goes beyond Freud to offer a vision in which art plays a creative role. It is a world that embodies the principles of both eros and thanatos, a static world, a world at rest, but a fundamentally poetic world. It is a world where "static triumphs over dynamic; but it is a static that moves in its own fullness—a productivity that is sensuousness, play and song."[13]

The nirvana principle—the return to the womb—gives us a sense of the real meaning of "death" in the death instinct. Death is not death as finality, as absence of life. The death instinct calls for a death that is not death, a death that transcends death, a death that is put in the service of life. This death is akin to the death of Christ on the cross (to return to our starting point)—a death that gives others life. And it is akin to the death of Narcissus—the ecstasy of the narcissistic absorption into the self—which results in the birth of a flower. It is in the resurrection from the cross, the blossoming of the flower, that the death instinct is realized and death itself is transcended.

The myth of Narcissus also gives us an insight into the way in which we interact with our environment. Unlike Orpheus, who worked with song, Narcissus was obsessed with contemplation and aesthetic beauty and as such relates more to the realm of architecture. Marcuse's model of Narcissus comes from the world of myth and painting. We should also consider, however, the motif of Narcissus as Freud pursued it.

In Freud, Narcissus becomes one of the two models of object love: anaclitic and narcissistic. According to Freud there is a primary narcissism in everyone. This narcissistic love can take four forms. To quote Freud, a person may love:

1. What he himself is.
2. What he himself was.
3. What he himself would like to be.
4. Someone who was once part of himself.[14]

Freud sees narcissism as a negative mechanism—a regressive, childish delusion that in effect prevents us from recognizing the "other" in the "other." Narcissism, for Freud, would mean that we constantly see ourselves in the other, and cannot fully grasp the alterity of the other. Anaclitic love, by comparison, is preferable, because it respects otherness. Here, however, I want to read Freud against Freud and suggest an alternative approach to narcissism, in line with a number of more recent theorists: that there is something positive in narcissism that needs to be rescued.

Narcissism in Freud refers to a mechanism for potential engagement with the other, even though the other may in fact be the self. Subjects read themselves into the other, see themselves reflected in the other. In effect the figure of Narcissus is emblematic of a mode of engaging with—identifying with—the other. It becomes, in other words, a means by which the subject can identify with the object. Narcissus stands for the "refusal to accept separation from the libidinous object."[15] As Marcuse explains:

> Primary narcissism is more than autoeroticism; it engulfs the "environment" integrating the narcissistic ego with the objective world. . . . The striking paradox that narcissism, usually understood as egotistic withdrawal from reality, here is connected with oneness with the universe, reveals the new depth of the conception: beyond all immature autoeroticism, narcissism denotes a fundamental relatedness to reality which may generate a comprehensive existential order.[16]

Narcissus, for Marcuse, offers a model of a "non-repressive order, in which the subjective and objective world, man and nature are harmonized."[17] In this respect narcissism retains a sense of the childishness that Freud associates with it, in that the dissolution of the self into the other parallels that stage in childhood when the subject-object split has yet to be developed. The model of Narcissus gazing at his own reflection without recognizing it as such would therefore parallel the period preceding the mirror stage, as defined by Lacan, in which the child has yet to recognize its own reflection. In this context, however, narcissism should not be seen as an immature regression into a childish state, but as a positive development that broadens the subject and overcomes the divide between the self and the other.

The myth of Narcissus offers us an insight into the way in which human beings relate to the world. This relatedness involves identification with the object at the level of the symbolic, by which the image of the object is, in effect, a reflection of the subject. This identification between subject and object operates within the realm of the unconscious. In effect, an unconscious—narcissistic—identification takes place.

Adorno and Mimesis

This is a mechanism that Adorno has already observed in the context of architecture. In "Functionalism Today," the only article of his specifically devoted to the question of architecture, Adorno addresses the way in which humans constantly attach symbolic meaning to the built environment: "According to Freud, symbolic intention quickly allies itself to technical forms, like the aeroplane, and according to contemporary American research in mass psychology, even to the car. Thus, purposeful forms are the language of their own purposes. By means of the mimetic impulse, the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings."[18]

This last sentence, "By means of the mimetic impulse, the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings," surely holds the key to exploring the whole question of how human beings situate themselves within the built environment, and it points to an area in which the domain of psychoanalysis may offer crucial insights into the mechanism by which humans relate to their habitat. It begins to suggest, for example, that the way in which humans progressively feel at home within a particular building is precisely through a process of symbolic identification with that building. This symbolic attachment does not come into operation automatically. Rather, it is engendered gradually through (in Adorno's terms) the mimetic impulse. Mimesis here should not be understood in the sense used, say, by Plato, as simple imitation. Rather, mimesis in Adorno, as indeed in Walter Benjamin's writings, is a psychoanalytic term, taken from Freud, that refers to a creative engagement with an object. It is, as Adorno defines it, "the non-conceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and unposited other."[19] Mimesis, as Freud himself predicted, is a term of great potential significance for aesthetics.[20]

To understand the meaning of mimesis in Adorno, we must recognize its origin in the process of modeling, of "making a copy of." In essence it refers to an interpretative process that relates not just to the creation of a model but also to the engagement with that model. Mimesis may operate both transitively and reflexively. It comes into operation in both the making of an object and making oneself like an object. Mimesis is therefore a form of imitation that may be evoked by both the artist who makes a work of art and also the person who views it. Yet mimesis is richer than straight imitation. In mimesis, imagination is at

work and serves to reconcile the subject with the object. This imagination operates at the level of fantasy, which mediates between the unconscious and the conscious, dream and reality. Here *fantasy* is used as a positive term. Fantasy creates its own fictions not as a way of escaping reality but as a way of accessing reality, a reality that is ontologically charged, and not constrained by an instrumentalized view of the world. In effect mimesis is an unconscious identification with the object. It necessarily involves a creative moment on the part of the subject. The subject creatively identifies with the object, so that the object, even if it is a technical object—a piece of machinery, a car, a plane, a bridge—becomes invested with some symbolic significance and is appropriated as part of the symbolic background through which individuals constitute their identity.

It is important to recognize here the question of temporality. Symbolic significance may shift, and often dramatically, over time. What was once shockingly alien may eventually appear reassuringly familiar. The way in which we engage with architecture is therefore not a static condition but a dynamic process. The logic of mimesis dictates that we are constantly assimilating to the built environment and that, consequently, our attitudes toward it are forever changing. The very process of assimilation within mimesis, as it is used here, implies an appropriation, a "claiming" of the object, and it is here perhaps that parallels with hermeneutics are most obvious.[21] The understanding of mimesis as a form of creative appropriation echoes the theme of Narcissus's trying to reach out and appropriate his own image. Benjamin evokes this theme in his description of the mimetic impulse: "Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction."[22]

The assimilation that mimesis demands with the inanimate world reveals the link with the death instinct. The action of mimesis constitutes an almost chameleon-like process of adaptation. This process, as Miriam Hansen observes, "involves the slippage between life and death, the assimilation of lifeless material . . . or feigning death for the sake of survival."[23] The origin of this process lies in the instinctual mechanisms of self-preservation. Animals, when trapped in potentially life-threatening situations, often freeze into seemingly lifeless forms rather than run away. Through this action, they attempt to blend with their environment and thereby escape the gaze of the predator. A similar trait is found in humans. "The reflexes of stiffening and numbness," as Adorno and Horkheimer note, "are archaic schemata of the urge to survive, by adaptation to death life pays the toll of its continued existence."[24] Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the feigning of death preserves life. "Death" is used in the service of life. This is a tactic that represents not simply the subordination of the self to nature, but also an overcoming of nature, a defense against the dissolution of the self. Benjamin himself distinguishes between a mimesis of pure sublimation of the self, which seeks to blend in with the environment purely defensively, and a mimesis

of "innervation" which sees the environment as a source of empowerment. A mimesis of innervation stresses the creative act of self-expression against a given background. And it is precisely this active—rather than defensive— form of mimesis that offers a basis for creative expression in art.

Mimesis therefore constitutes a form of mimicry, but it is an adaptive mimicry, just as when a child learns to speak and adapt to the world or when owners take on the characteristics of their pets. In fact it is precisely the example of the child's "growing into" language that best illustrates the operation of mimesis. The child absorbs an external language by a process of imitation and then uses it creatively for its own purposes. Similarly, within the realm of architecture, we might see mimesis at work as architects develop their design abilities; this process also allows external forms to be absorbed and sedimented as part of a language of design. Clearly, mimesis goes beyond straightforward mimicry, if by mimicry we understand a response that is merely instinctual. Mimesis necessarily involves a sense of volition and intentionality on the part of the subject. It does not simply look back and mimic what is already given, but it relies on a process of creative engagement, of conjuring up something for the future. It is in this moment that the magical base of mimesis manifests itself. Like the magician who plans the trick, mimesis contains within it the sense of control of some organized project. Yet what distinguishes mimesis from magic is that it does not attempt to deceive in the same way. Thus, for Adorno, art as a form of mimesis is "magic delivered from the lie of being truth."[25] In distancing itself from the illusionistic claims of magic, mimesis surpasses magic while nonetheless remaining within its conceptual orbit.

Although mimesis involves a degree of organized control and therefore operates in conjunction with rationality, this does not mean that mimesis is part of rationality. Indeed, in terms of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, we might perceive mimesis as constitutive not of rationality but of myth, its magical "other." Mimesis and rationality, as Adorno observes, are "irreconcilable."[26] If mimesis is to be perceived as a form of correspondence with the outside world that is articulated within the aura of the work of art, then Enlightenment rationality, with its effective split between subject and object and increasing emphasis on knowledge-as-quantification over knowledge-as-sensuous-correspondence, represents the opposite pole. In the instrumentalized view of the Enlightenment, knowledge is ordered and categorized, valorized according to scientific principles, and the rich potential of mimesis is overlooked. All this entails a loss, a reduction of the world to a reified structure of subject-object divides, as mimesis retreats even further into the mythic realm of literature and the arts. At the same time, mimesis might provide a dialectical foil to the subject-object split of Enlightenment rationality. This is most obvious in the case of language.

Language becomes the "highest level of mimetic behavior, the most complete archive of non-sensuous similarity."[27]

Mimesis for Benjamin offers a way of finding meaning in the world through the discovery of similarities. These similarities become absorbed and then rearticulated in language, no less than in dance or other art forms. As such, language becomes a repository of meaning, and writing becomes an activity that extends beyond itself, so that in the process of writing, writers engage in unconscious processes of which they may not be aware. Indeed writing often reveals more than the writer is conscious of revealing. Similarly, the reader must decode the words resorting to the realm of the imagination, which exceeds the purely rational. Thus, the activity of reading also embodies the principles of mimesis, serving as the vehicle for some revelatory moment. For Benjamin the meaning becomes apparent in a constellatory flash, a dialectics of seeing, in which subject and object become one for a brief moment, a process that relates to the experience of architecture no less than the reading of texts.

Vitruvius Crucifixus

Architecture, along with the other visual arts can be viewed as a potential reservoir for the operation of mimesis. In the design of buildings, the architect may articulate the relational correspondence with the world that is embodied in the concept of mimesis. These forms may be interpreted in a similar fashion by those who experience the building, in that the mechanism by which human beings begin to feel at home in the built environment can also be seen as a mimetic one.

Mimesis, then, may help to explain how we identify progressively with our surroundings. In effect, we read ourselves into our surroundings, without being fully conscious of it. "By means of the mimetic impulse," as Adorno comments, "the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings." Understood in the terms of our discussion of Narcissus, this mimetic impulse might be seen as a mechanism for reading ourselves into the other. We relate ourselves to our environment by a process of narcissistic identification and mimetically absorb the language of that environment. Just as Narcissus saw his own image in the water without recognizing it as his own image, so we identify ourselves with the other symbolically, without realizing that recognition of the "other" must be understood in terms of a mimetic identification with the other as a reflection of the self. And this refers not to a literal reflection of our image, so much as the metaphorical reflection of our symbolic outlook and values.

The aim throughout is to forge a creative relationship with our environment. Seeing our values reflected in our surroundings feeds our narcissistic urge and breaks down the sub-

ject-object divide. It is as though—to use Walter Benjamin's use of the term *mimesis*—in the flash of the mimetic moment, the fragmentary is recognized as part of the whole, and the individual is inserted within a harmonic totality.

Within this framework we can begin to address the role of proportions, which can be understood as emblematic of an attempt to relate to the built environment, not through empathy but through identification. The use of the human figure—and the use of human proportions, albeit of an idealized human figure—represents an enabling mechanism by which this process might be enhanced. The human figure is "reflected" back out of the object. The human figure is echoed—to use a term from the myth of Narcissus—in the building. Yet, here equally, the limitations of proportions are exposed. If proportions are to achieve their objective, they must offer a framework for a creative engagement with the world. The subject must be able to abandon itself in assimilation with the nonidentical. Once proportions become codified into an instrumentalized system, however, they enter into a terroristic standard of totalitarian rule, a logic of domination. Human values are imposed on the environment, rather than humankind's subjecting itself to the environment, assimilating to it in a process of mimetic identification. It is a case of *natura naturata* versus *natura naturans.*

In this respect, the tradition in the Renaissance of inscribing human figures into the plans of buildings, the elevations of columns, and so on can be seen as a form of mimetic device that vicariously evokes the desire for identification. The figure inscribed within the plan becomes a mimetic emblem for a physical body within the actual building. The emblem must be understood here as a device that is "magically" invested with the properties of an originary object, much as in the sacrifice when the victim is offered up as a substitute for others. Thus, the figure incised in the ground plan transcends mere representation. The figure takes on a symbolic significance, that can be understood only beyond the framework of Enlightenment rationality. It is precisely this investment that locates such devices within the realm of the mythic. These emblems become vehicles of identification, the objects of wish fulfillment, that evoke the principle of the sacrifice, as Lévi-Strauss has described it: "For, the object of the sacrifice precisely is to establish a relation, not of resemblance, but of contiguity, by means of a series of successive identifications."[28]

Hence we might read these inscriptions of the human body as being informed by a mimetic impulse, an attempt to relate to an inanimate object. They act as mimetic devices, vicarious objects of identification, charged with symbolic significance like the victims in a sacrifice.

It is here that the significance of the image of *Vitruvius Crucifixus,* Vitruvian man as the dying, crucified Christ becomes apparent. The theme of sacrifice also operates at a broader

level. In our mimetic engagement with the built environment, it is precisely the self that is sacrificed. The subject effectively surrenders the self to the other in order that it might live on through a creative engagement with the other. Narcissus can therefore be seen as the quintessential emblem for aesthetic contemplation. Gazing at his own reflection, he identifies with the image, surrendering himself to it. In trying to grasp the beauty of that image, he drowns, only to give life to a flower. He thereby enacts the sacrifice of mimesis.

This sacrifice—this surrendering to the other—remains a precondition of aesthetic experience. As in the myth of Narcissus, the sacrifice transcends death. In the shock of aesthetic recognition, the subject is forced open and exposed to a meaningful relationship with the object. The subject is decentered and broadened. The subject identifies with the object, and it is in the forging of new identities during the dynamic process of mimetic assimilation that death itself is resisted and overcome. Hence, we might recognize the 'sacrifice' that lies at the basis of all architecture. As such, myths of sacrifice, which have filtered into architectural folklore, might be understood within the framework of mimesis.[29] It is as though the sacrifice of a human life is required in order to animate the inanimate stone. And we might read this sacrifice replicated in the sacrifice of the self within the mimetic identification of aesthetic experience.

In this process, we can recognize an almost mystical moment that shares something of religious ecstasy and the experience of love. If love, in Lacanian terms, is what fills the gap between the self and the other, mimesis can be seen to be the aesthetic equivalent of love. Hence we find terms with clear references to the world of love, like *jouissance,* being used to describe aesthetic experiences, while thinkers such as Julia Kristeva have made explicit comparisons between aesthetic experience and love.[30] And if the "death" of Vitruvian man can be seen as a sacrifice that transcends death and thereby serves the life instinct, a sacrifice where thanatos is put at the service of eros, the erotic character of this moment is evoked by Cesariano's other image of Vitruvian man spread-eagled within a circle (figure 13.2).

For Benjamin, art, through mimesis, takes on a quasi-religious turn, in offering the possibility of a return to some lost paradise following the fall of humankind through the instrumentalization of the world. If we are to understand mimesis as offering access to some form of paradise, then this promise is evoked in the mimetic emblem of Vitruvian man. Just as the death of Christ on the cross opens up the possibility of a life after death, just as the death of Narcissus gives rise to a flower, so the emblematic death of Vitruvian man leads to the possibility of a deeper, more meaningful engagement with the built environment.

The aesthetic gratification that results from this mimetic moment—the recognition of the self in the other, the self as part of, at one with, the whole—induces the nirvana prin-

ciple. The narcissistic gratification of the self-reflected back in this stimulating engagement with the environment recreates the sensuous oneness of the womb, the integral gratification of the womb. The memory of the nirvana of the womb is recognized, and a state of pleasurable bliss is reached.[31] All conflicts are resolved as the death instinct is both realized and transcended. The vital experience that flares up in this sensuous engagement evokes the blossoming of the flower on the death of Narcissus. And in the *jouissance* of this intensely poetic moment, paradise is regained.