Architecture and the Cosmos. Lesabéndio, Walter Benjamin and Utopia

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This contribution focuses on the relation between architecture and utopia as it is articulated in Paul Scheerbart's 1913 sci-fi novel *Lesabéndio* and Walter Benjamin's reading of it. After briefly introducing the complex relation that ties architecture to utopia by drawing on Manfredo Tafuri's work, I will propose a reading of the way in which this relation is articulated in Scheerbart's novel. In particular, I will bring to the fore the tensions that traverse *Lesabéndio*'s utopia and its mysticism. In the second section, I will then explore Walter Benjamin's reading of the novel and put it in dialogue with his own understanding of the (non) relation between technology and utopia—one that suggests a radical alterity between the two. To conclude, drawing on the works of Frédéric Neyrat, I will propose the notion of *cosmo-architecture* as a signifier capable of naming an architecture that does not repress the radical alterity that the discipline is confronted with in the geological era of the Anthropocene.

— LESABÉNDIO
— WALTER BENJAMIN
— UTOPIA
— ARCHITECTURE
— COSMO-ARCHITECTURE

Philosophy Kitchen. Rivista di filosofia contemporanea
#23, II/2025, 93 — 105

Introduction: Architecture and Utopia

Architecture historically entertains a tight relation to utopia. As Manfredo Tafuri has brilliantly argued in his book *Architecture and Utopia*, the practice of architecture—since the 18th century—is marked by the dream of ridding reality of its contradictions in order to realize a pacified utopia—a paradise on earth (1976). This ideological position is crystallized in Alvar Aalto's formulation: «every building, every architectural product that is its symbol, is intended to show that we wish to build a paradise on earth for man [sic.]» (1998, 215). Yet, as Tafuri's historical investigations make clear, with modern architecture, this wish to build paradise on earth cannot coincide with a return to an original Eden or the realization of a secular Kingdom through the project. In other words, modern architecture is confronted with the necessity of «giving up the dream of a "new world" arising from the realization of the principle of Reason made Plan» (1976, 171, translation modified).

Yet, this does not mean that architecture—defined by the temporal and spatial dimensions of the project—can simply ignore or repress utopia as contemporary architectural theory, imbued with Donna Haraway's call to «stay with the trouble» and be «truly present» (2016, 1) and Bruno Latour's injunction to «land» (*atterrir*) (2017) would suggest. The question of the relation between architecture and utopia, if addressed seriously, is more complex and entails returning to a central problem brought forward by Tafuri:

> […] how to question *radically*—without entertaining any useless illusions about recomposing what has been shattered or resynthesizing plurality—an era that no longer permits an agreement between wholeness and multiplicity, but also does not oblige one to comply with its most recent victors. (1989, 199, translation modified)

Put differently, the problem is how to address our era critically without entertaining «useless illusions of totality» while also avoiding simply complying with the «recent victors». Or, it is a problem of how to conceive of a world that is radically *other* without predicating this radical change upon a *One* or a wholeness that can be materialized by architecture. Tackling this problem forces architectural theory to situate itself within the, at times ambiguous, «field of differences between the project and utopia» (199).

In order to explore a possible way of articulating these differences, this contribution will focus on the role architecture plays within Paul Scheerbart's utopian novel *Lesabéndio* and on the way in which this novel informs Walter Benjamin's thought on technology by bringing forward the problematic aspects and liberating potential of both. To conclude, I will then briefly explore the theoretical tools that *Lesabéndio*, through Benjamin's reading, can offer architectural theory in the Anthropocene.

Lesabéndio's Tower: Architecture and Mysticism in Scheerbart's Utopia

The tropes of architecture and utopia traverse Paul Scheerbart's literary oeuvre. A clear example of Scheerbart's articulation of the two is his

manifesto on *Glass Architecture* (Scheerbart 2003), which has highly influenced modern architects like Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut (Turner 2014, 12-16; Elcott 2014, 111-117). Yet, it is arguably in Scheerbart's 1913 novel *Lesabéndio: An Asteroid Novel*, that the field of differences between architecture and utopia is explored in more depth. [1] His «Asteroid Novel» narrates, in great architectural and spatial details, life on an asteroid named *Pallas*. Its inhabitants, named *Pallasians*, hatch from eggs found under the asteroid's surface, absorb sustenance from the planet without any need for transforming it and, when they die, are absorbed by other Pallasians. [2] These specificities make Pallasians an organic part of the asteroid itself.

Yet, this does not mean that Pallas is a sort of cosmic arcadia from which technology is excluded, quite the contrary. Pallasians developed an important series of technological and specifically architectural works on the asteroid: there are towers, lighthouses, giant workshops and «conveyor belts» that allow them to move at great speed through their barrel-shaped asteroid (Scheerbart 2012, 13). Moreover, Pallasians integrated technology into their own bodies (Syrén 2023): their eyes work like telescopes and their rubbery bodies provide them with shelter and means of transportation. In this regard, life on Pallas seems to point toward a post-human world that goes beyond «the distinction between technology and nature» (Svendsen 2012, IX).

Technology, specifically in the form of architecture, is also central to Scheerbart's «asteroid novel» narrative. The novel revolves around a group of intellectuals and technicians (Biba, Dex, Labu, Manesi, Nuse, Peka, Sofanti and Lesabéndio) and focuses on the utopian efforts of Lesabéndio—the novel's hero—to convince all Pallasians to participate in their project of building a giant tower on the asteroid. Through this narrative Scheerbart imagines an architectural project—Lésabendio's tower—capable of radically changing life on Pallas through «a technology [that] alters its users and their entire ecological and cosmic niche» (Svendsen 2012, IX).

Indeed, Lesabéndio's tower which, at the beginning of the novel has no precise function, ends up being big enough to alter the asteroid's gravity, changing the whole ecosystem of Pallas and triggering new relations between Pallasians and their asteroid as well as between the latter and the cosmos. One of the main effects of Lesabéndio's tower is in fact to allow Pallasians to better understand their own asteroid and, more specifically, to discover that their asteroid is not a single celestial body as they have always believed but has a «head-system» (Scheerbart 2012, 62), and is in reality part of a binary star (i.e. a system of two stars that orbit around each other). Architecture *qua* technology therefore emerges in Scheerbart's «asteroid novel» as playing a crucial role in bringing about a radical change of life at odds with the *status quo*—suggesting a relation between architecture and utopia. [3] Yet, this does not mean that Lesabéndio's tower or «the Tower» (Scheerbart 2012, 113) has utopia as its goal—as we have seen, the construction of the Tower had no specific goal, let alone the one of building a utopia.

[1] Fabrizio Desideri, in his introduction to the Italian edition of *Lesabéndio*, noted that the novel is not strictly utopian because it does not propose «another State» [un altro Stato] but rather «another part», a different possibility of existence (Desideri 1982, xxiv). Yet, I believe that we can consider the novel utopian precisely in the sense that it is aimed at offering a critical perspective capable of emancipating us from the constraints of habits by tying together utopia and critique.

[2] Since Pallasians hatch from eggs and do not have sexes, I will refer to them using the pronouns they/them.

[3] It is important to specify that Lesabéndio's Tower—while it is undeniably an architectural project—cannot be reduced to a formal arrangement of space. Rather, it is first and foremost a technological means capable of mediating between the

As I will argue below, the relation between architecture and utopia in Scheerbart's novel takes the form of a non-relation. However, even though the Tower does not have the totalizing goal of materializing utopia, the novel is not entirely free of the totalizing tropes often present within utopian narratives. Radical change in the «asteroid novel» is predicated upon a single individual—Lesabéndio—who is deemed spiritually superior to the others. In this, Scheerbart's work is consistent with an understanding of the individual architect as a modern demiurge capable of changing life through their ambitions and technical knowledge.

Yet, the more the construction of the Tower advances, the more the architect Lesabéndio is subject to a mystical form of dissolution of the self, which ultimately leads them to dissolve into the asteroid's head-system (and not into another Pallasian, marking, again, their spiritual superiority). [4] This mystical dimension emerges with clarity when Lesabéndio states:

> We only seem like independent beings. Something unconscious is active in us and is the most powerful force in our beings. I believe that the Guiding Principle lives high above us in the head-system of Pallas [...] in the shackled comets—towards which we strain and strive. It's for them that we continue to work on the great Tower. This is no longer an artistic quest, but something else—something beyond our understanding. [...] I want to merge totally with it and become a single being. Maybe He up there—the Powerful One—will take me in when I become weak and transparent. (Scheerbart 2012, 113-114, Italics in original)

This mysticism, and its apophatic theology (Lesabéndio's quest is beyond our understanding), bears a certain ambiguity that is important to address. On the one hand, Lesabéndio's kenosis, their mystical dissolution of the self, calls into question their role as an individual architect demiurge as well as the very notion of the individual («we only seem like independent beings»). The Tower is not aimed at fulfilling Lesabéndio's own ambitions, quite the contrary. The Tower, and Lesabéndio themselves—as Palma (2022, 102) clearly pointed out—are only the means of the asteroid's collective will. Lesabéndio is therefore only submitting their thought to a collective project or a «greater thought» (Scheerbart 2012, 90). [5] As they note, «I no longer think about the fact that I personally want something. I'm carried forward by a strong wind. I have to do what the wind wants» (181). Understood in this way, the mystical dimension of Lesabéndio's project bears a liberating potential because it allows merging of or, rather, dissolution of «our own thoughts» into «a greater thought» (90) which does not entail a renunciation of the individual in the name of the collective, but rather a new liberating articulation between the two that can only emerge from a collective engagement.

On the other hand, this liberating project rests on the existence of a higher *One* which, in the form of a «great leader» or «the Greaterness [dem Größeren]», guarantees the possibility for this (happy) dissolution

asteroid Pallas and its inhabitants. The technical aspect of Lesabéndio's tower is stressed by Peka—a Pallasian who embodies a formalist understanding of architecture. In commenting on the Pallasians' enthusiasm for the Tower, Peka notes: «Their entire train of thought has become technical. The great art of creating rhythm through sections of surface-play and voids means nothing to them any longer» (Scheerbart 2012, 154). Yet, the fact that Peka is eventually absorbed by Lesabéndio points to the fact that, in Scheerbart's utopia, technology is not opposed to art or to a formal understanding of architecture; rather this formal understanding is put in the service of technology *qua* mediation between Pallasians and the cosmos.

[4] On the importance of this dissolution of the self within the mystical tradition see e.g. Critchley (2024).

[5] As Michael Lowy notes, in Scheerbart's novel, architecture is ultimately a tool at the service of «cosmotheism, a religious-astral aspiration» (1985, 48).

into the *One*, «more powerful that we are» (90). This monistic belief in the *One* which «must raise us up higher» (90) is at odds with the liberating dimension of *Lesabéndio*'s utopia mentioned above because it ties Pallasians to a totalizing and unifying principle to which they must submit. [6]

This problematic aspect emerges with clarity in the theodicy at work in Lesabéndio's utopian project. Indeed, before the construction of the Tower, Pallasians were unaware of pain, to the point of forgetting what tears were (102). Yet, the construction of the Tower brings about a series of injuries and the return of tears through the desperation of Peka—an architect and friend of Lesabéndio opposed to the project. This resurgence of pain, in the novel, is justified by a theodicy that a celestial body—one whose speech Lesabéndio can hear after having merged with the head-system—summarizes as follows:

> One of the biggest pieces of wisdom of our great and actually not so very kind-hearted Sun is that pain and suffering should actually be seen as the biggest generators of happiness. We have no right to fear what is terrible. Terrible things always lead us forward. They transform us. We are not able to transform ourselves if we flee pain and torment. (198)

As this passage makes clear, pain and suffering emerge in Scheerbart's asteroid novel as generators of happiness through a theodicy grounded on the necessity of pain for a process of transformation that ultimately will allow Pallasians to dissolve into a higher *One*. While this dimension of Scheerbart's novel does not erase its liberating collective potential—and the peculiar non-relation it exposes between architecture and utopia—it nevertheless has the capacity to make us feel uncomfortable by pointing toward a totalizing and, one could say totalitarian, form of utopia grounded on a vital force and a *One*.

Utopie des Leibs: Technology in Walter Benjamin's Reading of Lesabéndio

To further explore the way in which *Lesabéndio* articulates the non-relation between architecture and utopia, as well as the problematic aspects of this articulation, we can turn to Walter Benjamin's commentary on the novel and his thought on technology more broadly. Benjamin held Scheerbart's novel—a wedding present from Gershom Scholem—in extremely high regard. [7] The importance the novel had for Benjamin is proved by the prominent role it should have played in Benjamin's lost manuscript on politics (Steiner 2001: 62).

But what did Benjamin see in *Lesabéndio*? As Sieber (2019) has convincingly argued, Benjamin was drawn to Scheerbart's work, among other reasons, because of its depiction of technique or technology. *Lesabéndio*'s depiction of architecture, understood as the canon of all production (Benjamin, 1985, VI, 148), offered Benjamin the utopian image of a technology capable of working as « the medium in which humanity shapes the world as well as its social relations with happiness as its aim»

[6] On the monistic dimension of *Lesabéndio* see e.g. Syrén (2023); Gelderloos (2023).

[7] On the importance of *Lesabéndio* for Benjamin see e.g. Scholem [1982, 38, 208].

(Sieber 2019, online), a technology radically opposed to the one Benjamin saw at work in the First World War. The importance Benjamin gave to *Lesabéndio*'s depiction of technology, and its relation to utopia, already emerges in a fragment from 1919, where the German thinker, after praising Scheerbart's novel for narrating life on an entire planet without giving into psychological explanations or interiority, notes:

> The intricacies of love, the problems of science and art, yes, even the ethical perspective itself are entirely excluded in order to develop, through the purest and most unequivocal phenomena of technology, the utopian image of a spiritual astral world. (Benjamin 1977, II, 619, my translation)

For Benjamin, technology in Scheerbart's novel serves as the means to develop the utopian image of an astral and spiritual world. Yet, this does not mean that utopia is the goal of technology. Rather, I claim that Benjamin saw in the novel a complex non-relation between architecture and utopia that becomes clear when one puts the 1919 text on *Lesbéndio* in dialogue with two other Benjaminian fragments written in the same period—the «Theological-Political Fragment», arguably written in 1921, and the «Outline of the Psychophysical Problem», written between 1922 and 1923. [8]

The first one famously posits two distinct orders through which collective human life is articulated: the messianic order (related to the Kingdom of god and utopia) and the secular (pertaining to politics and, as we will see, technology) (Benjamin 2002, III, 305). These realms have to remain distinct for Benjamin. Yet, this does not mean that there is no relation between the two, quite the contrary. Benjamin traces the possibility for a non-relation between the messianic and the secular when he writes that: «the secular order—because of its nature as secular—promotes the coming of the Messianic Kingdom» (305). [9] For Benjamin, the goal of the secular is not the Messianic Kingdom (or utopia), but happiness (305). Yet, in pursuing this (secular) goal, the secular order inevitably leads to the downfall of «all that is earthly» (305), thus promoting the messianic. Put differently, in pursuing happiness, the secular brings about the annihilation, or the downfall, of what is earthly, and it is this annihilation that promotes the Messianic Kingdom. This is why to bring about this downfall is « the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism» (306).

Yet, politics is not the only domain that Benjamin charged with the task of annihilating what is earthly. In his «Outline of the Psychophysical Problem», addressing what is known as the mind-body problem, Benjamin sketches a dual structure that doubles the one proposed in the «Theological-Political Fragment». For him, mind and body are given as one and yet this oneness is doubled because of the existence of two distinct contexts to which the human species pertains: «with his body [Leib], man [sic.] belongs to mankind; with his [sic.] corporeal substance [Körper], to God» (Benjamin 1996, I, 395). The *Leib*—just like the secular—is directed towards happiness and, in pursuing this goal, will bring about an annihilation of

[8] I am aware of the endless debates concerning the date of Benjamin's «Theological-Political Fragment». Here I follow Sieber's lead (2019) and date the fragment to the early 1920s in order to draw on the fruitful dialogue he proposes between this fragment and the one dedicated to the psycho-physical problem. However, given that Benjamin dedicated another text to Scheerbart in 1940 where he maintains a similar understanding of technology, to date the «Theological-Political Fragment» to the late 1930s would not invalidate the argument.

[9] This emblematic and somewhat obscure phrase was at the center of many compelling commentaries. See e.g. Butler (2016); Salzani (2021).

«all that is earthly» (Benjamin 2002, III, 305). Yet, the task of this annihilation here is not given to politics but to technology. Benjamin writes:

> Humanity as an individual is both the consummation and the annihilation of bodily [Lebliches] life. "Annihilation" because with it the historical existence, whose function the body [Leib] is, reaches its end. In addition to the totality of all its living members, humanity is able partly to draw nature, the nonliving, plant, and animal, into this life of the body [Leib] of mankind, and thereby into this annihilation and fulfillment. It can do this by virtue of the technology in which the unity of its life is formed. Ultimately, everything that subserves humanity's happiness may be counted part of its life, its limbs. (395)

As Sieber (2019) suggests, technology is what allows for the annihilation and dissolution of the *Leib*—understood here as a collective body including «the nonliving, plant and animal»—in the name of happiness. Yet, in a movement recalling the non-relation between the messianic and the secular, while «[b]odily nature advances toward its dissolution; that of corporeal substance, however, advances toward its resurrection» (Benjamin 1996, I, 395). Put differently, just as secular annihilation promotes the messianic, the dissolution of the *Leib* promotes the resurrection of the *Körper*.

I believe that *Lesabéndio* offered Benjamin a utopian image of what a dissolution of the *Leib* through technology and, more specifically, architecture, might look like. Indeed, Lesabéndio's Tower brings about a radical change in life on Pallas, one that rests on the dissolution of different Pallasians into Lesabéndio and of Lesabéndio into the head-system. When Benjamin praises Scheerbart's novel for bringing to the fore «the purest and most unequivocal phenomena of technology» (1977, II, 619, my translation) or its characters for being «creators of an ideal technology» (1991, VII, 880, my translation) it is because he sees in *Lesabéndio* the illustration of a technology at the service of the annihilation of *Leib*. This hypothesis is confirmed by Benjamin's description of *Lesabéndio* as a «Utopie des Leibes», a Utopia of the body *qua Leib* (1985, VI, 148).

Yet, to focus solely on the *Leib* would mean to interpret Benjamin's reading of *Lesabéndio* as bringing to the fore a utopia that takes the form of a post-human nihilism through the means of an ideal use of technology. I believe this reading would be problematic because it neglects the radical alterity, or the non-relation, Benjamin draws between technology and utopia, the secular and the messianic, or the *Leib* and the *Körper*. Put differently, I believe that when Benjamin notes that Scheerbart's utopian image is developed through technology he does not entail that *Lesabéndio*'s astral spiritual world is the *telos* of this architectural project. It is true that Benjamin saw in *Lesabéndio* an ideal technology that is put at the service of the dissolution of the *Leib*, but this dissolution is not equivalent to the Messianic Kingdom or the fulfillment of utopia, but rather to something that comes before it. Put differently, the dissolution of the *Leib* is what opens the possibility for a utopian change and not the fulfillment of utopia itself, which, as such, cannot be represented. Scheerbart's novel, for Benjamin, merely describes the movement of annihilation that pertains to the secular and the *Leib*: «[o]f that which is greater—of the fulfillment of utopia—one cannot speak, but only testify» (1977, II, 620, my translation).

Nevertheless, technology's bodily and secular role remains that of organizing nature and mediating the relation between the cosmos and its inhabitants in new ways. As Benjamin notes in «To the Planetarium», the concluding paragraph of *One Way Street*, «[i]n technology, a *physis* is being organized through which mankind's contact with the cosmos takes a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families» (1996, I, 487). Technology's aim is therefore to weave a different relation between humans and the cosmos, understood as a nature that exceeds «that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call "Nature"» (487). I believe that this is precisely the role that technology, and more specifically architecture, plays in *Lesabéndio*, where the Tower not only alters the relation between the Pallasians and Pallas, but also renews the relations between Pallas and other celestial bodies.

It is important to note that, while in *Lesabéndio* this renewal of the relation between the cosmos and its inhabitants bears a positive and revolutionary potential, this renewed relation is not by definition radical. Indeed, for Benjamin, the First World War was also an «immense wooing of the cosmos» (487) that was put at the service of the «lust for profit of the ruling class» (487). In this terrible event, Benjamin saw a re-articulation of the relation between humans and the cosmos through technology, but one that was highly distorted, since the interests of the ruling class turned the «bridal bed» between humans and the cosmos «into a bloodbath» (487).

I believe that this distinction between a revolutionary and a reactionary wooing of the cosmos is of particular importance. What Benjamin is arguing for is not simply a dissolution into the cosmos via ecstatic trance [*Rausch*]—an idea that, while it can be read within an anarchist and mystical framework, could also fit with a fascistic idealization of war *qua* ecstatic experience. Benjamin's agenda is to «win the energies of intoxication [Rausch] for the revolution» (1999, II.1, 215) and he argues for a revolutionary role for technology. [10] This perspective allows Benjamin to maintain a certain distance from the pseudo-fascist ideology of thinkers like Ludwig Klages (2023) as well as the problematic aspects of Scheerbart's novel addressed above. [11]

[10] On the notion of *Rausch* in Benjamin see e.g. Palma 2024.

[11] Indeed, as Irving Wohlfarth (2002) has argued, Benjamin seems to rewrite Klages's work—central to his own thought—in order to rid it of the fascist tendencies at work within it, tendencies that Benjamin himself will later label as fascist (Benjamin 2003, IV, 314).

Yet, we must not forget that even in its revolutionary and emancipatory articulation, this weaving together of humans and the cosmos through technology, the goal of which is happiness, has a destructive end; it moves towards the annihilation of the *Leib*. Brutally put, technology has a «destructive character» (Benjamin 1999, II.2, 541-542). Given *Lesabéndio*'s annihilation of the *Leib* through the construction of the Tower, it is not a surprise that, in his essay on Karl Kraus, Benjamin turns again to Scheerbart—alongside Adolf Loos and Paul Klee—in order to offer an image of the destructive character he is arguing for. Benjamin writes:

> One must have followed Loos in his struggle with the dragon 'ornament,' heard the stellar Esperanto of Scheerbart's creations, or seen Klee's New Angel (who preferred to free men by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them) to understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction. (456)

What Benjamin saw in Scheerbart's work, and in particular in *Lesabéndio*, was a technology capable of dealing with the necessary destruction of the *Leib* without any form of nostalgia for the past. As Benjamin notes in «Experience and Poverty», Scheerbart's work presents «the naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present» (733) by «inquiring how our telescopes, our airplanes, our rockets can transform human beings as they have been up to now into completely new, lovable, and interesting creatures» (733). This is an obvious reference to *Lesabéndio* where Pallasians incorporate technology into their own bodies, which cannot be described as human since «humanlikeness—a principle of humanism—is something they reject» (733). Once again Benjamin draws on *Lesabéndio* in order to point toward a technology aimed at annihilating and destroying the human in order to open a space for the fulfillment of a utopia that is not the *telos* of technology but rather what remains radically *other* from it. [12]

The importance of this non-relation also emerges from Benjamin's second text on *Lesabéndio*. This short text, written in French in 1940, begins with a quote from Scheerbart that Benjamin writes down from memory: «Let me protest first against the expression "world war." I am sure that no heavenly body, however near, will involve itself in the affair in which we are embroiled. Everything leads me to believe that deep peace still reigns in interstellar space» (2003, IV, 386). Here, Scheerbart ironically points to the non-relation at work between Earth and a cosmic nature that exceeds «that tiny fragment of nature that we are accustomed to call "Nature"» (Benjamin 1996, I, 487), recalling the necessity to confront this radical alterity.

Moreover, further in the same text, Benjamin stresses once again how the fulfillment of utopia will not be materialized by or in technology. Rather, utopia can only be promoted by a technology that works towards its own dissolution together with the dissolution of the *Leib*:

> Lesabéndio's tower is designed to connect the body of the asteroid with its head, which floats above it in the form of a luminous cloud. But this *restitutio in integrum* of Pallas can succeed only at a price: Lesabéndio must allow themselves to be dissolved in the body of the asteroid. Up to this point, the people of Pallas have never known what it is to die a painful death; they have simply dissolved into the body of a younger Pallasian. But now they will comprehend pain thanks to Lesabéndio, who, when he dies, will be the first to experience it. The tower, which grows higher day by day through the zeal of the Pallasians, will bring about changes in the stellar order. At the same time, the dissolution of its architect in the asteroid will begin to change the rhythm of this heavenly body. It will awaken to a new life and will reach out to its brother stars. It will dream only of uniting with them, forming a link in the chain of asteroids which one day will encircle the sun. (2003, IV, 387)

Lesabéndio's Tower will bring about «changes in the stellar order» that we can safely define as utopian. Not only that, as Benjamin makes clear elsewhere in the text, the Tower is the image of a technology that, in a form of *restitutio in integrum*, «by liberating human beings, would fraternally

[12] Pier Vittorio Aureli has also explored the importance of Benjamin's notion of «destructive character» for architecture, albeit in a different perspective. See e.g. Aureli (2013); Aureli (2022).

liberate the whole of creation» (386). [13] However, this liberation is not the goal of technology; rather, technology has to facilitate a destruction that in Scheerbart's novel takes the form of the «dissolution of the architect» that will make space for the fulfillment of utopia.

Yet, there is more to this passage. Benjamin's endorsement of Scheerbart's theodicy as well as the acceptance of the fact that radical change has to be brought about by a spiritually superior Pallasian reiterate the ambiguities I have already pointed out in the previous section. It would seem that, in these specific sentences, Benjamin might have packed «too much Klages into his knapsack», to use Irving Wohlfarth's formulation (2002, 81). Yet, following Wohlfarth's lead (2002: 85), I believe that instead of asking what we can save from Benjamin's reading of *Lesabéndio*, it would be more important to ask what it can salvage for us.

As I will articulate in the conclusions, I believe that what this reading can salvage for us is the possibility for a non-relation between architecture and utopia capable of articulating them without falling into the trap of foreclosing utopia in the name of «staying with the trouble» (Haraway 2016, 1), while also avoiding a form of reactionary nostalgia for a lost wholeness.

[13] The term *restitutio in integrum*—proper to Origen's doctrine of *apokatastasis* in which *all* souls will be saved in a return to an original condition—points toward what Irving Wohlfarth aptly describes as «the Messianic triad: Paradise, Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained» proper to Benjamin's thought (2002, 80). On the role of the notion of *apokatastasis* within Benjamin's thought see e.g. Kathib (2013); Jennings (2016); Desideri (2016).

Conclusions: Towards a Cosmo-Architecture for the Anthropocene

Philosopher Frédéric Neyrat, in a book dedicated to Benjamin's engagement with the cosmos, claims that the latter's work can help us «envision a cosmo-technology capable of expressing and promoting a relation of non-mastery over nature» (2022, 182, my translation). [14] For Neyrat, Benjamin's work opens onto a technology that is capable of relating to something that cannot be owned or appropriated—nature. As I have shown in the previous section, Benjamin's reading of *Lesabéndio*—by articulating a non-relation between technology and utopia—confirms this interpretation. Moreover, given the centrality architecture plays in the novel, I believe that Benjamin's reading of *Lesabéndio* offers some initial tools to envision what we can provisionally call, drawing on Neyrat, a *cosmo-architecture*.

[14] This book is part of what we could name the cosmic turn in Neyrat's oeuvre, one that started with his essay *L'Ange Noir de l'Histoire* and is central to his most recent work *La Condition Planétaire*. See. Neyrat (2021); Neyrat (2025).

What I propose to call a *cosmo-architecture* does not rely upon a series of specific formal aspects. Rather, a *cosmo-architecture* (like Lesabéndio's Tower) proposes the possibility for a different relation between architecture *qua* technology and a radical change that we can call utopian. While maintaining the necessity for a radical change of life, a *cosmo-architecture* does not have this necessity as its goal. Rather, in line with the non-relation between technology and utopia we have seen at work in Benjamin's reading of *Lesabéndio*, the prefix *cosmo-* serves as a reminder of what architecture *cannot* achieve – neither in the form of a technological solution to a given problem, nor in the form of a practice relating different actors in a field of immanence.

I believe that this new perspective for architectural theory is particularly needed within the geological and ecological era we have come

to term the Anthropocene. Climate change has in fact made patent that, to paraphrase Sigmund Freud, human beings are not the masters in their own home. Yet, architectural theory continues to repress this *otherness* of the Earth itself in the name of urgency (sustainability) or the interconnection of everything with everything (new materialisms). [15] Yet, this is not possible anymore since, in the Anthropocene, the radical alterity that the *cosmo-* serves to name is not only located in foreign celestial bodies, but also in the Earth itself. Borrowing Scheerbart's formulation, we could say that even the Earth will not «involve itself in the affair in which we are embroiled» (Benjamin 2003, IV, 386), forcing architecture to confront an alterity that cannot be designed or planned.

Yet, by calling for the necessity of a *cosmo-architecture*, I do not mean to dismiss the discipline's engagement with sustainability. To use sustainable materials and engage with sustainable practices is something architecture should strive towards. Yet, this cannot happen at the price of conflating this necessity with utopia or—and this amounts to the same thing—repressing utopia *qua* radical change of life in the name of urgency. By adding the prefix *cosmo-* I therefore argue for an architectural theory capable of articulating the «field of differences between the project and utopia» (Tafuri 1989, 199) in the Anthropocene in order to better understand the role of the discipline within this geological era.

[15] The first position is at work within the solutionist agenda of sustainability as it emerges from theoretical interventions like the ones of Richard Rogers (1998) and architectural projects like, for example, the buildings designed by Grimshaw Architects for Cornwall's *Eden Project*. The second position, which does not necessarily, or not always, counter the one of sustainability, is at work, for example, in the theoretical works of Albena Yaneva (2021) and Hélène Frichot (2019) and is visible in architectural projects like Andrés Jacque's *Reggio School*.

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