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ANTHROPO-SCENIC STRANGENESS: EXTRAPOLATION FROM THE *NEW* GREAT TEMPLE OF ABU SIMBEL

JEAN-JACQUES JUNGERS

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Abstract

The appearance of the term “Anthropocene” attests to the birth of a new era in which the human being stands out as the main geological force of the planet. A large number of indicators shows from 1950 a sudden increase of both urban and world population, pollution, area of domesticated land, etc.

This visible superstructural evolution has its downside. Behind the scene, it is accompanied by the production of numerous invisible infrastructures dedicated to transport, human and urban metabolism, telecommunications, etc. The prevailing dream of a global dematerialization obscures the real part of our artefacts to such an extent that it is surprising to hear Stiegler, a French philosopher, describing our era as *hypermateral*.

Is this hidden hypermateriality generating a new kind of environment, an *anthropo-scene*? Does it alter the relation between humans and their built environment and inaugurate a new phenomenal era?

To answer those questions, the article briefly introduces the role assigned to architecture considering the original division of the speaking being (Lacan). To him, architecture has the task to mediate *the difference*, the one between his *ideal I* and his *real condition*.

The article proceeds, afterwards, to analyze the *New Great Temple* of Abu Simbel considered as being symptomatic of our time because it concentrates its distinctive symbolic and technical forces. This architectural piece of art built for the gods in the 13th century BC has been relocated for the humans in 1964 to be kept from the waters of Lake Nasser. The analysis highlights that the temple has not only been relocated but substantially modified (rock cut into pieces, new concrete structure, artificial site, etc.). Even if most of the differences between the original temple and the new are hidden, some indications make the experience of the visitors very strange.

To better understand this experience, the article spells out the Freudian approach of the *Unheimlich* (*Uncanny*) later pursued by Mori (*Uncanny Valley*). It proposes that two different objects, a robot and a human for example, can cause anxiety from a certain degree of resemblance. This is because it questions the *ontico-ontological difference* of the speaking being.

By analogy between the specificities of the *New Great Temple* of Abu Simbel and those of the *anthropo-scene*, the article postulates finally the generalization of this particular feeling to the whole of our built environment because it tries to imitate what it was but no longer is. This underlines the necessity for architects to propose another form of environment considering the new infrastructural context of the Anthropocene.

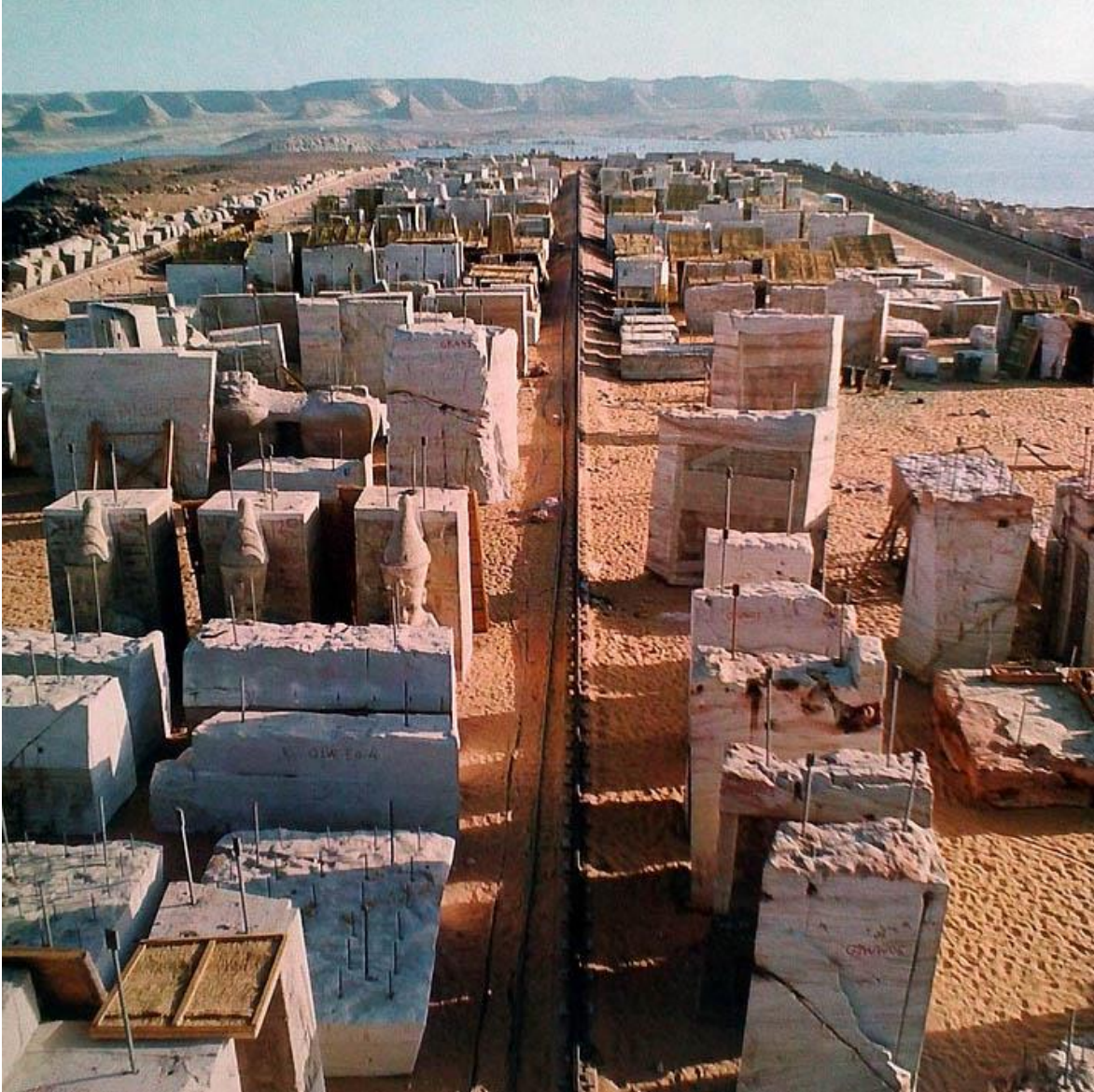


Figure 1. Deconstruction of the temples of Abu Simbel (Image from the documentary of Deparnay, 1993).

Introduction

The appearance of the term Anthropocene attests to the birth of a new era in which the human being stands out as the main geological force of the planet. A large number of indicators shows from 1950 a sudden increase of both urban and world population, pollution, area of domesticated land, etc.

This visible superstructural evolution has its downside. Behind the scene, it is accompanied by the production of numerous invisible infrastructures dedicated to transport, human and urban metabolism, telecommunications, etc. The prevailing dream of a global dematerialization obscures the real part of our artefacts to such an extent that it is surprising to hear Stiegler, a French philosopher, describing our era as *hypermaterial*.

Is this hidden hypermateriality generating a new kind of environment, an *anthropo-scene*? Does it alter the relation between humans and their built environment and inaugurate a new phenomenal era?

To answer these questions, the article briefly presents the particularity of the human spatial condition (I) and its corollary, the *hontological* role of architecture (II). It proceeds then to the material and phenomenal analysis of the new Great Temple of Abu Simbel (III.a), architectural work considered as being symptomatic of our time because it concentrates its distinctive symbolic and technical forces. Therefore, this analysis highlights the appearance of a particular phenomenon produced by the new building. To better understand this phenomenon, the article spells out the Freudian approach of the *Unheimlich* (*Uncanny*) later pursued by Mori (*Uncanny Valley*) (III.b). By analogy between the specificities of the *New Great Temple of Abu Simbel* and those of the *anthropo-scene*, the article postulates finally the generalization of this particular feeling to the whole of our built environment (III.c).

I. Spatial inhibition: facing the Other

Torn away by the language from his instinctive relationship with his environment, the human animal realizes that he is surrounded by moving boundaries (the sky, the depths, the horizon). They confront him with his inability to understand (etym. to seize together, to surround something) the world and, thereby, to face its own lack of definition. This undefinition is intolerable to him because it confronts him with forces he does not control and imposes him to “*experience what he is not, but what he is however condemned to be*” (definition of the shame by Anders, 1956) namely an undefined animal surrounded by the void. According to psychoanalysis, the subject feels in this way like a stranger to himself. This cut between his essence and his existence is called the ontico-ontological difference. Like Adam after he bit into the forbidden fruit discovered himself naked, he feels the fundamental shame (in French *la honte fondamentale*).

II. Architectural prosthesis: from the Other to the Same

At the constitutive cleavage of the human answers the symbolic division of space. The human divides the expanse that is unsuitable for him to create a (de)finite and comfortable scene; (de)finite because it makes possible a staging of the human consistent with the idea he has of himself and comfortable because it allows him to keep away all the elements that could remind him of his own undefinition. “*Every human being is stretched in an ongoing effort to get rid of the nonhuman part he feels within [and outside of (we had)] himself*” (Tisseron, 1998).



Figure 2. Process of civilization: World | Scene | Obscene (Diagram made by the author as part of his research). The human transforms the expanse to create a scene corresponding to the representation he has of the world and the ideal role he thinks he should play in it. To comfort himself in this ideal, he rejects out of the scene all that could remind him of his undefinition (Jungers, 2016). In this process, the technique modifies the relationships between humans and matter in many ways; through the

representation means (T1), through the means for informing, transforming or moving the matter (T2) as well as through the means for producing, rejecting or extracting it (T3). On the horizon of the horizon (horizon²) that is the human ideal, responds a familiar environment where everything can be named (architecture gives it order and form). It is the human environment of the environment (environment²) or the scene. The arrow in dashed line suggests the inevitable return in a finite world of what is put out of the scene.

Kahn (1969) illustrates this ability of architecture to surrender the human from a part of its condition when he talks about the landing of a staircase.

"It is good also [he says] to consider its landing as a place to sit, near a window with possibly a shelf for a few books. The old man ascending with the young boy can stop here showing his interest in a certain book and avoid the explanations of his infirmity."

The architecture can thus be considered as a prosthesis that allows the human to conceal from others and to himself a part of his own condition in attenuating the difference between what he thinks or wants to be (imaginary) and what he really is (real). We call this process the *hontological* role of architecture (the word *hontologie* – fusion between *honte* (shame) and *ontologie* (ontology) – was proposed by Lacan in 1969). But if architecture contributes to the preservation of the dignity of the human, it also takes part in the building of his blindness by reducing the inadequacy (the difference) between the imaginary and the real. This reduction can for example be found in the classical column with the entasis (Figures 4 et 5). From this point of view, we can argue with Grabar (2013) that architecture "*adorns life*."

The boundary that separates the scene from the obscene evolves with time, Elias names this evolution the process of civilization. Until the eighteenth century, the sea was for example considered as a "*threatening relic of the deluge* [which inspires] *the horror*, [just as the] *mountain, another chaotic trace of the disaster*" (Corbin, 1988) until the romantics find there the possibility to escape from the ubiquitous scene (Morris) and rub themselves to the sublime.

Let us remember from the above that architecture is able to convert the Other (the obscene, the unknown, etc.) into something (re)cognizable, the Same.

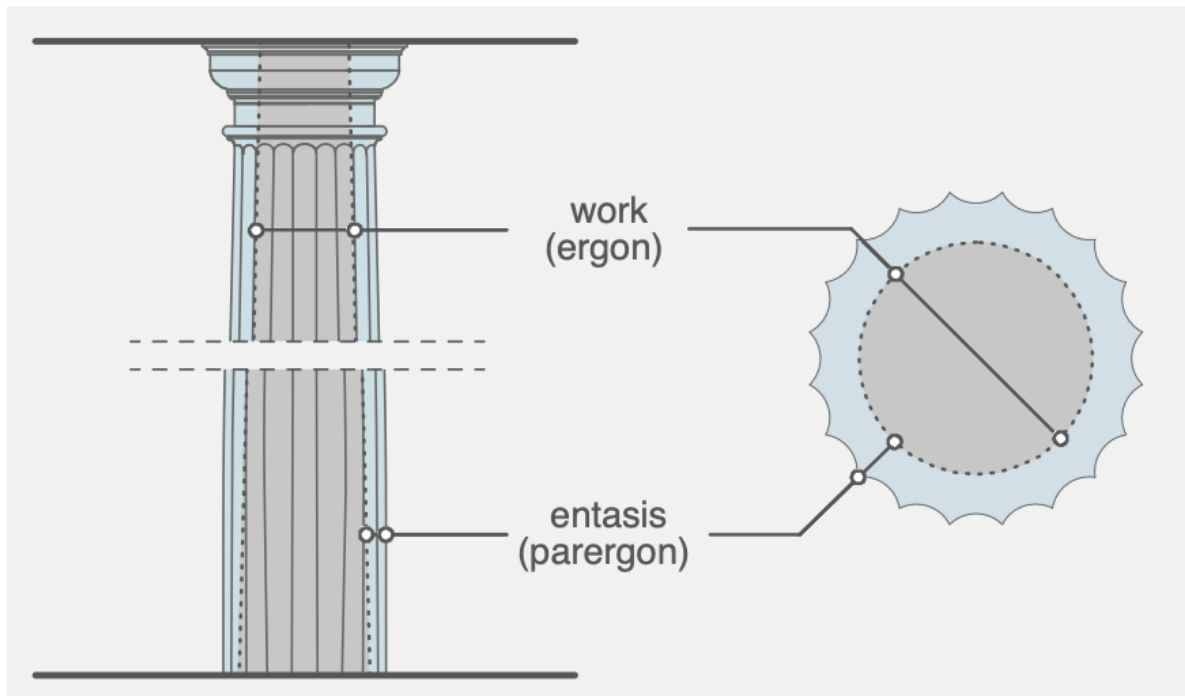


Figure 3. The classic column. The difference: the outline of the column – the optimal column (ergon) = entasis (parergon) (For reasons of readability of the drawing the difference is here accentuated. The optimal column is drawn according to Belluzzi (1996), reference reported by D. Zastavni).

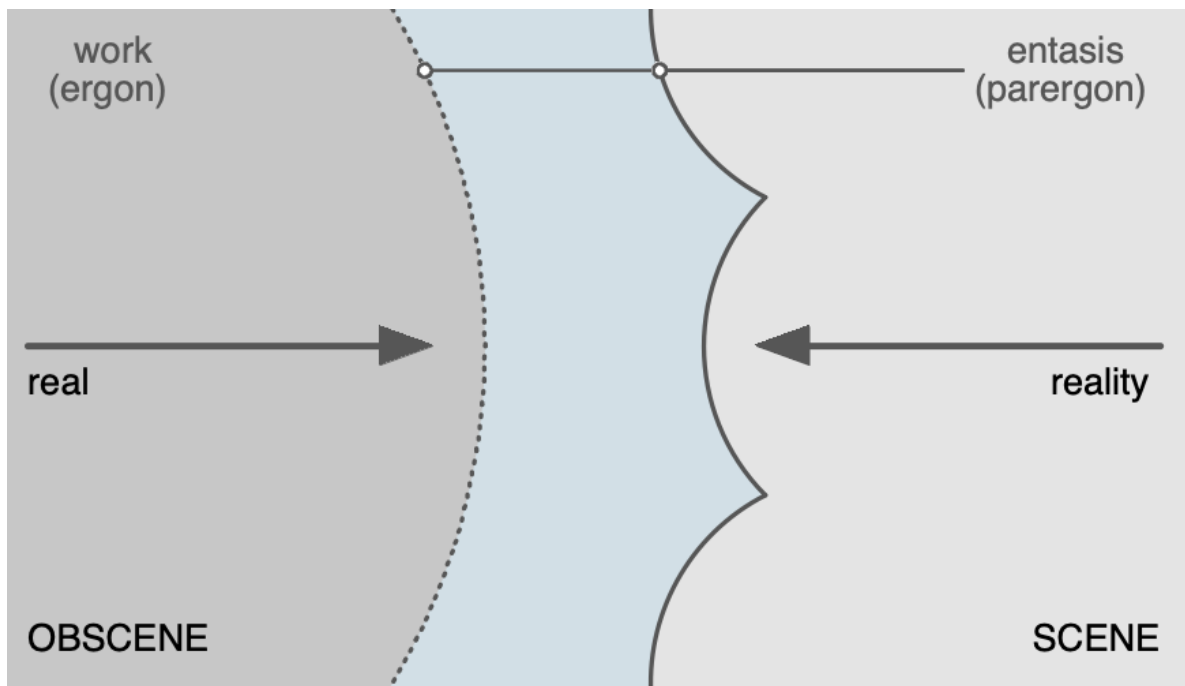


Figure 4. The thickness of the difference (Diagram made by the author as part of his research). Among Greeks of antiquity, the outline of the column is dictated by the perception of the human. The result is an overthickness (entasis) that encapsulates the real of the column. This represents either the inability of the

human to determine the outlines of the optimal column or an aesthetic inadequacy between the optimal column and its perception by the human.

Let us now see with the temple of Abu Simbel how hypermodernity reaches this point of tilting which ends up with the inability of producing the Same.

III. Anthro-scenic crisis: the return of the Other

a. Abu Simbel, the hypermodern tipping point

Originally built around 1300 BC AD, the two temples of Abu Simbel, the great and the small, are considered as two architectural wonders of Egypt. They were dug in a double rocky outcrop near the Nile. Because of the construction of the Aswan High Dam, these two temples had to be displaced (figure 5).

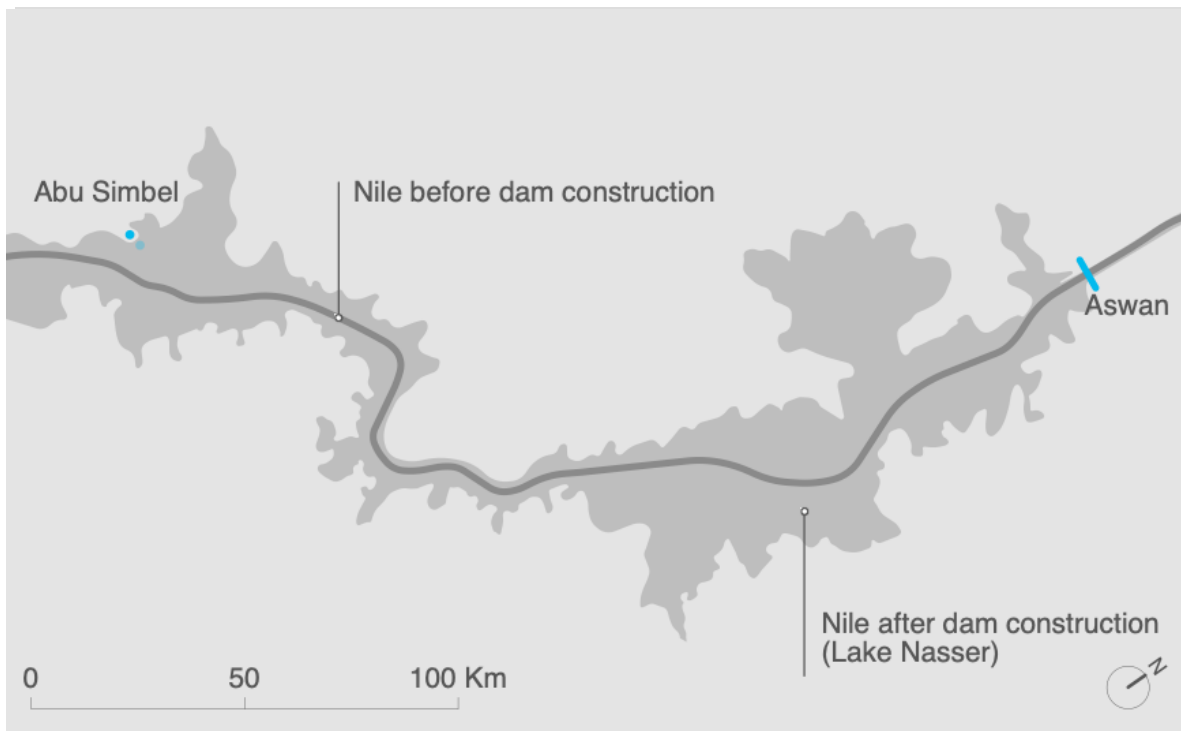


Figure 5. Location of the Aswan High Dam and Abu Simbel (Drawing made by the author from <https://egypte-eternelle.org/index.php/fr/sites/35-le-pays/nubie>). This work bears witness to human power and its geological impact in the Anthropocene. As the crow flies, Abu Simbel is located 280 km from Aswan. The dam was nicknamed the pyramid of Nasser. Its water capacity is 165 billion m³. It covers an area of +/- 7000 km² or 1/5 of the Belgian territory.

Those two displaced building are in our opinion the paragon of what should be called an anthro-scenic architecture for three reasons: (1) the cause of their displacement, (2) the symbol that they constitute and, last but not least, (3) the ambiguity that opens their displacement on the nature of the new buildings.

(1) "*Egypt is a gift from the Nile*" said Herodotus. As wealth, it has only its river. It facilitates transport and irrigates the fields that border it, but it is capricious. It is the cause of floods or droughts that may last

more than three years. Also, to allow Egypt to develop, Nasser then president of the Republic of Egypt decides to build a dam to tame this natural phenomenon and to bring comfort (electricity), stability (flood and drought) and prosperity to his country. This dam is a good illustration of *"the human power [which] inevitably begins to surpass and destroy not the man himself, but the conditions under which life was given to him"* (Arendt, 1958). However, as evidenced by the controversial record of this achievement, if the human being has the rationality to design this dam and the strength to achieve it, this same rationality seems to fail when it comes to anticipate the effects of such a construction. If rationality allows the human to compete with the gods, it appears that it can also be a danger to him. In addition to the drama of the massive displacement of +/- 100 000 Nubians from their lands (Lempérière), it is still difficult today to measure the real benefits of this realization in function since 1964. The criticism is mainly based on the loss of silt, a natural fertilizer deposited by the Nile on the shore thanks to floods and its replacement by chemical fertilizers as well as the modification of the Nile ecosystem which, for example, resulted in the disappearance of sardines from the Mediterranean coast of Egypt (Ayeb, 2001).

(2) On the symbolic level, the human is today able to save the divine. He becomes the equal of the gods, more than that, thanks to the displacement of the two temples of Abu Simbel, their protector as highlighted in 1968 by the General Director of UNESCO during the inauguration of the temples:

"We have come, O King, to add our work to yours to preserve your quest for eternity. [...] Thanks to the efforts of all, here you are safe, ready to take back, intact, on the boat of Ammon, your journey through the centuries towards the rising sun of every day" (Maurel, 2013).

As the positive reverse of the destruction of the housing complex that Jencks had seized to illustrate the end of the modern movement, the new great temple of Abu Simbel inaugurates with great pomp the hypermodern phase of modernity (Giddens, 1994).

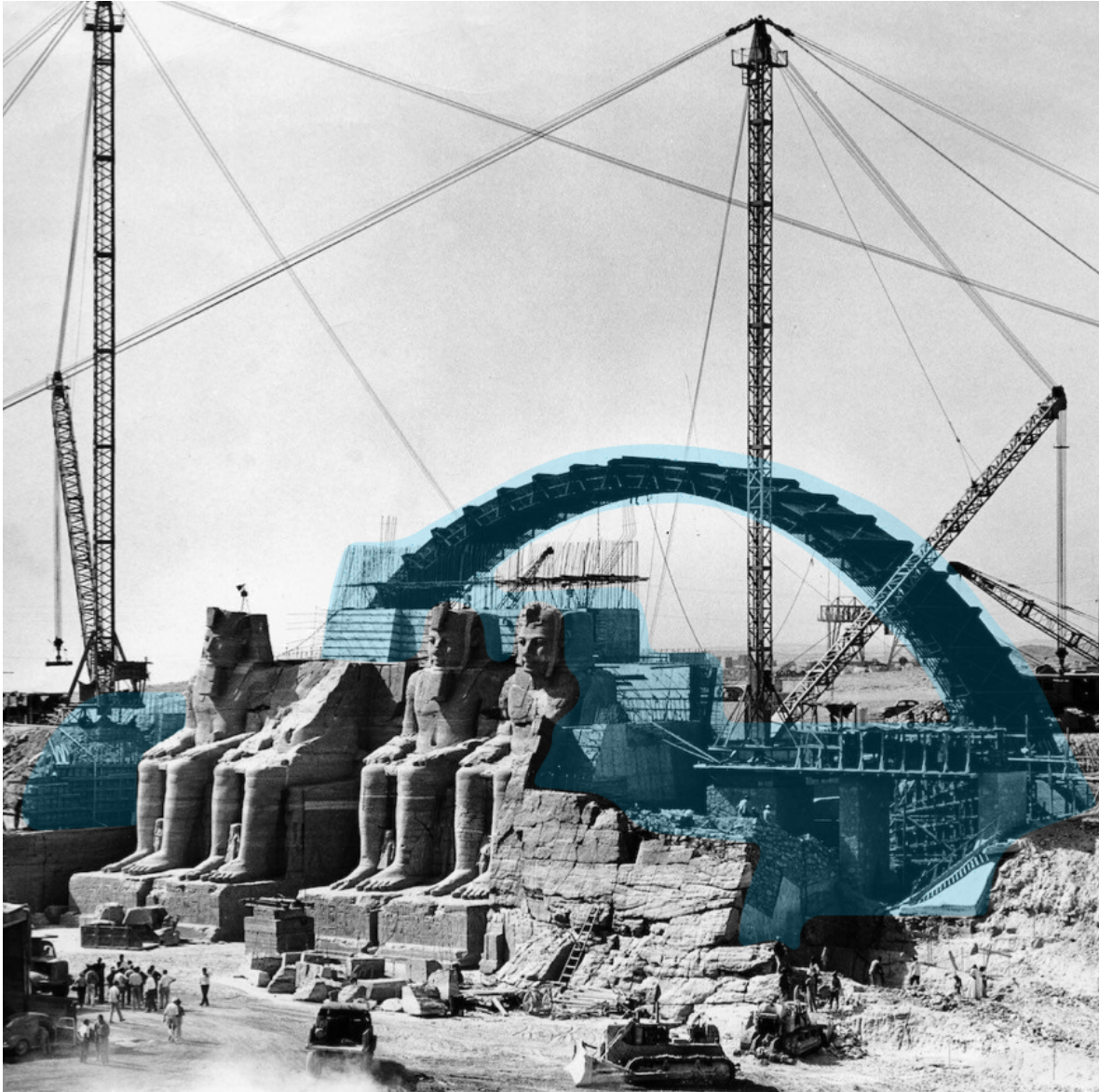


Figure 6. Construction of the new great temple of Abu-Simbel, 1968 (picture colored by the author from <https://egypte-eternelle.org/index.php/fr/sites/35-le-pays/nubie>). The demolition/reconstruction was orchestrated by UNESCO to prevent it from being permanently covered by the water held by the Aswan High Dam. The blue color highlights the infrastructural part of the building intended to be concealed.

(3) Several solutions are considered to save the two temples, from the building of a secondary dam to the raising of these. The choice of the site where *“to relocate the temples [was also] controversial : was it better to leave them in Nubia, or locate them further north, closer to the major tourist centers ?”* (Maurel, 2013). Ultimately, the facades as the visible faces of the rocky outcrop are cut into blocks of 80 cm thick with a helical wire and then move, assemble and rejoin 64 meters above the old site.

However, is it really a displacement? Moving an object from one point to another is not supposed to change anything to the object. Is this the case for the new great temple to which we will limit our analysis in the following? Although we continue in the press of the time to talk about relocation or rescue, the

new building is completely different from the original one (figure 7). This was hollowed out of the sandstone and consisted, so to speak, only of void, its edges uninterrupted, a pure negativity. The new building consists of two concrete structures. The first wears an 80 centimeters thick skin composed of blocks of authentic sandstone. The second supports a mass of sand concealing the structure by mimicking a natural hill. Consequently, to speak of a displacement seems at least abusive, at the most we can consider that it is a methodical demolition followed by the construction of new building.

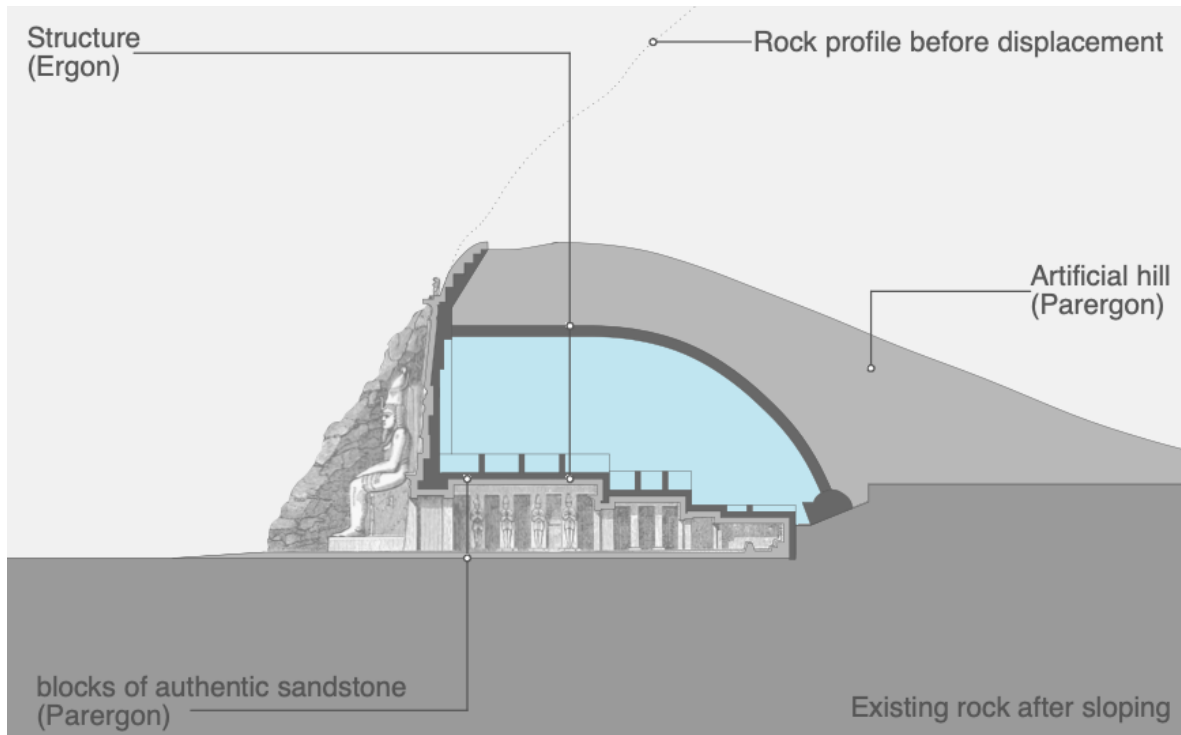


Figure 7. Section in the new big temple of Abu Simbel. (Drawing made by the author from http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/59100/59162/59162_abu_simbelcs.htm). The difference between the original temple and the new building is obvious. The highlighted portion of blue represents the invisible infrastructure that supports the 80 cm skin extracted from the original temple. A particular void appears in hollow between the two infrastructures.

Even if the tourists going on the site know that the temple was moved, a particular attention was nevertheless brought to the staging of it to dissimulate the differences. Everything is done to give the feeling that nothing has changed and to allow tourists to perfectly play the role they would hold in front of the real temple. However, around the temples, something special happens. Looking at it more closely, several inconsistencies in the immersive device make the experience very strange (a hill made up of sand on one side and of stone on the other side, the presence of enigmatic doors and walls, etc.). Another invisible logic, perceptible punctually by the visitors, seems to support the architectural device that appears accordingly not as the thing but as its travesty. A feeling of disturbing strangeness emerges from that particular situation. In our opinion, this feeling inaugurates the hypermodern era of false pretense. It consists of a visible space dedicated to the human, the anthropo-scene, and a hidden space dedicated to the technical, considered obscene (figure 8).

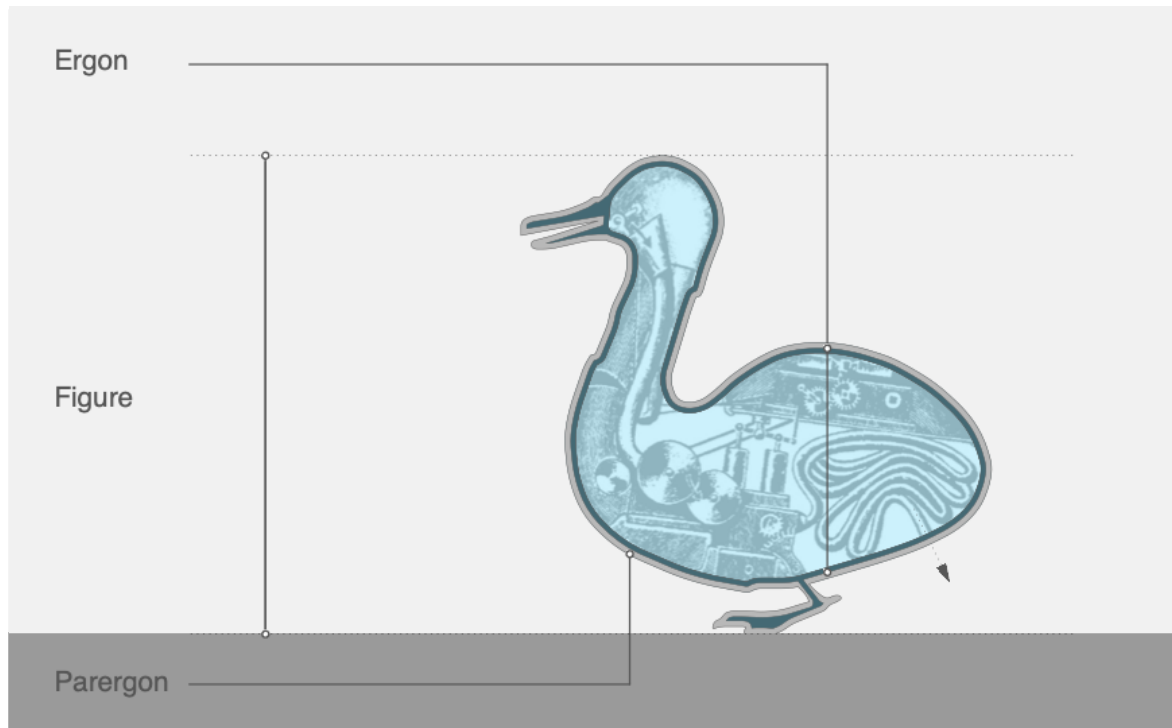


Figure 8. The digesting duck, 1738 (Drawing made by the author from https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canard_digérateur). Like the anthropo-scene, the duck of Vaucanson conceals in a familiar form what the human considers as strange. Unlike the duck of Venturi, whose role is to communicate a message (the building takes, for example, the form of what is sold in it), its form does not have the role of expressing a function or a content. It merely conceals it.

Based on this analysis, the understanding of the psychoanalytic subject and the role that architecture plays for him, let us now try to better understand this particular feeling, the feeling of the uncanny.

b. The uncanny valley

Freud considered the question of the uncanny or, in German, the *Unheimlich*. This term is difficult to translate. It comes from *Heimlich* which means familiar, intimate, hidden. It may refer to things that you want to keep secret, “we do not want others to know about it, we want to remove [this thing] from their knowledge”. This is the case of “*Heimlich* [hidden] places of the human body, pudenda, etc.” (Freud, 1919).

The *Heimlich* therefore designates something whose existence is not unknown to the subject. It is even familiar to him, but for some reason it was repressed and becomes uncanny when this thing is suddenly shown “in Freudian language, ‘something repressed that makes a comeback’” (Cassin, 2010). It is the “familiar repressed [...] which was to remain secret, in the dark, and that came out” (Freud, 1919). By extension, psychoanalysis believes that this feeling can be caused “by the appearance in the reality of something that would remind too directly what is the most intimate, the most repressed” (Chemama, 2009). We can think for example to the private parts, viscera, etc. or any other part of the body of which the human knows the existence but which he prefers to ignore because it does not fit the image he has of himself and, if it appeared to everyone, would make him feel his own strangeness.

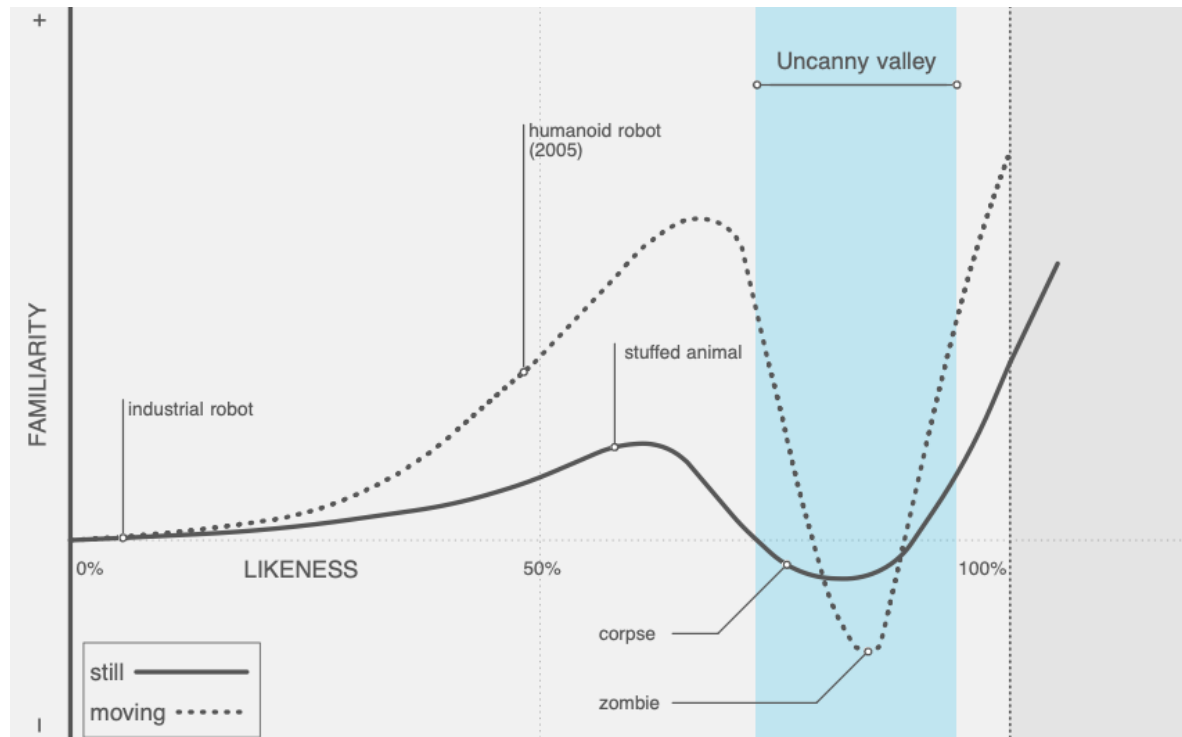


Figure 9. Graph showing the uncanny valley theory according to Masahiko Mori (Drawing made by the author from Mori, 2012). According to this theory, too much similarity between an android robot and a human can trigger anxiety.

Following Freud, the robotics Masahiko Mori observes in his profession that if a robot seems more human the feeling of familiarity towards him increases to a certain point where it falls and then rise again (figure 9). He calls this event in the ascent of the curve the *uncanny valley* (Mori, 2012). Also, he recommends the designer to preferentially target the first peak because the second is too sensitive.

"We think [he says] that a non-anthropomorphic design can produce a safer sense of familiarity. We strongly advise designers to take this into account. The glasses are a good example. Although they do not look like eyeballs, their design is appropriate, and they can make eyes more charming. We should therefore follow this principle for the design of prosthetic eyes."

Let us remember, then, that the feeling of uncanny connects a familiar or intimate object known to the subject but repressed. Its appearance at the sight of all causes the subject to develop deep anxiety. More than that with Mori, it is the perception of the subtle difference between two objects that is a source of anxiety.

c. The return of the repressed

In the current context, the scene seems to be unable to display its difference with the past. The political power that aims to stabilize it encourages architects to produce the Same through the production of shapes and scales of the past (facadism, etc.).

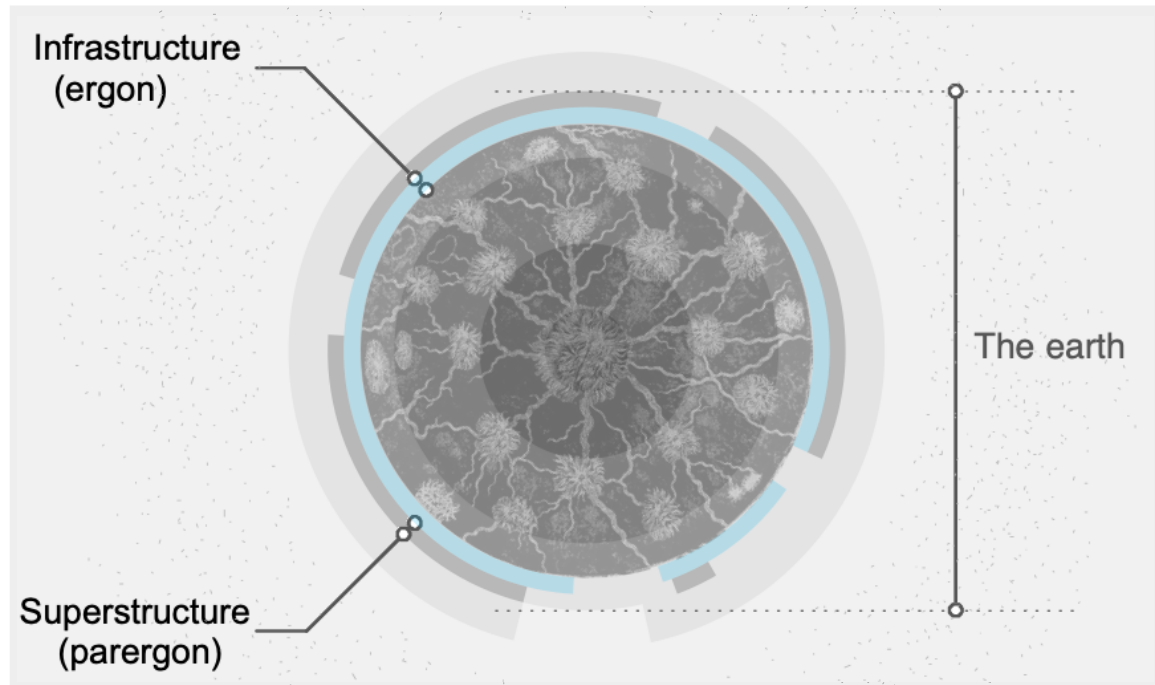


Figure 10. The biosphere in Anthropocene (Drawing made by the author from <https://web.stanford.edu/group/kircher/>). The Anthropocene is characterized by widespread artificial planet with few exceptions. The work or infrastructure contains the Kircher Mundus subterraneus, the chasms, the obsession with the depths and the chthonian powers.

Consequently, a dissociation each day more important appears between the infra and the supra that architecture can't resorb anymore. Like the new temple of Abu Simbel, our scene looks therefore stranger and stranger (figure 10). They seem to wear clothes (superstructure) of the past while the support is completely different (infrastructure) in the manner of a spectrum that mimics what he was but no longer is.

It is therefore time to question the following adage from Mumford: "*functions that remain constantly invisible are not in the architectural domain*"? (Mumford, 1951). This underlines the necessity for architects to propose another form of environment considering the new infrastructural context of the Anthropocene.

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