How are we to understand the role of aesthetics in the work of Rem Koolhaas? It is clear that his published work subscribes to a highly visual logic, where painterly writings are inserted within a seamless landscape of imagery and text. Koolhaas is a contemporary Baudelairean ‘painter of modern life’. This emphasis on the visual could be seen as not only the strength but also the potential weakness in Koolhaas’s methodology. On the one hand, it allows him to articulate with considerable graphic clarity the complex structures of society, but on the other hand it precisely traps him within the realm of the visual, and exposes him to charges of aestheticisation. The products are admittedly seductive, exquisitely designed visual objects. But are we then to accuse Koolhaas of turning the world into an anaestheticised domain of coffee table images and neat sound-bites?

The question is particularly apposite in the context of Koolhaas’s study on Lagos. Here one of the world’s most troubled cities is analysed through what has become a consistent methodological approach. Lagos may seem like ‘hell on earth’, a dysfunctional, chaotic city, but once it is subjected to the pentrating gaze of the AMO research machinery, a different city emerges, one in which complex processes of filtering, sorting and redistribution come into play. It is as though out of the complexity of Lagos certain self-organising patterns begin to emerge. Lagos, it would seem, is not so bad after all. This, in itself, is controversial enough. To be sure, many who have experienced Lagos, and who know it well, would criticise the project for being too optimistic. For many Lagos cannot be redeemed. It remains ‘hell on earth’, and no matter how ingenious the self-organising mechanisms that have been brought into play — mechanisms that, at best, merely serve to alleviate slightly a profoundly problematic situation — Lagos is still a troubled city.

The question that arises, however, is not so much whether the AMO view is correct, but whether there is something in the presentation that undermines the entire project. From the position of critics such as Jean Baudrillard, such studies amount to a form of aestheticisation. They turn the world into an escapist, rose-tinted version of itself.¹

¹To quote from my own work: ‘The aestheticization of the world induces a form of numbness. It reduces any notion of pain to the level of the seductive image. What is at risk in this process of aestheticization is that political and social content may be subsumed, absorbed and denied.'
The problem lies, then, in the very packaging of the project, the elegant, design-conscious presentation of Lagos in a Bruce Mau inspired product, that can be found for sale in all the bookshops of chic art galleries throughout the world alongside Aldo Rossi espresso makers and Philippe Starck lemon squeezers. Has Koolhaas turned Lagos into a bijou designer object? Has Koolhaas anaesthetised Lagos?

Here I wish to argue that to dismiss Koolhaas in this way would be to miss the subtleties in his approach. Many of the critiques made about aestheticisation within a culture of postmodernity need to be revisited. Indeed the conditions of postmodernity have themselves been transcended, as cultural production has evolved in response to changing material conditions. A new paradigm has emerged which engages more knowingly with the rich, visual terrain of contemporary culture.

I wish to present a theory of ‘camouflage’, which will allow us to judge Koolhaas in a more sympathetic light, and to understand the significance of design in both his written output and his architecture. This theory is presented as a retroactive manifesto for the visual logic within Koolhaas’s work that reveals the social role of design in his polemical stance against the junk spaces of our contemporary cultural horizon.

But why should any retroactive manifesto be necessary? One reason is that it serves to articulate concerns implicit within the work which are otherwise unaddressed. Among those concerns the question of aesthetics is primary. Most would agree on the elegance of his buildings, but Koolhaas himself makes few references to aesthetic considerations. In this, Koolhaas subscribes to a trait all too common in contemporary architectural circles. The work may be beautiful, but its beauty is never acknowledged. It is as though ‘aesthetics’ has become a dirty word in contemporary design culture.

The issue comes into focus when Koolhaas’s published work is taken into account. What seems to characterise his many studies undertaken under the auspices of either AMO or the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, is that they are all attempts to understand the workings of contemporary culture. Through graphs, diagrams and other forms of statistical analysis, they explore the factors that inform and influence society today.

The seduction of the image works against any underlying sense of social commitment. Architecture is potentially compromised within this aestheticized realm. Architects, it would seem, are particularly susceptible to an aesthetic which fetishises the ephemeral image, the surface membrane. The world becomes aestheticized and anaesthetized. In the intoxicating
Their emphasis is on the processes that lie beneath the surface level manifestations.\(^2\) What is curious, however, about these publications is that they are always elegantly presented and carefully designed. Although the primary concern is an attempt to understand process they nonetheless subscribe to an unacknowledged discourse of representation. These are not just diagrams and graphs. They are exquisitely designed diagrams and graphs. Koolhaas’s collaborations with designers such as Bruce Mau reveal that design is a crucial concern for him.

Representation – the realm of aesthetics – has become the repressed discourse in Koolhaas's works, whether books or buildings.\(^3\) Yet it is not as though Koolhaas completely ignores aesthetics. For what is his polemic against junkspace but an aesthetic crusade? The paradox, however, is that there is no theory of aesthetics to accompany Koolhaas's theory of junk – there is no gospel of beauty to go alongside the ‘new gospel of ugliness’. This article is therefore an attempt to supply the missing theory of aesthetics in Koolhaas’s work.

**Forget Baudrillard**

In recent years we have begun to see various visual strategies emerging in response to an image driven culture. These strategies have evolved as a knowing manipulation of the use of images, whose early antecedents include the work of the photographer, Cindy Sherman, but whose more recent articulations can be found in designer journals such as *Wallpaper*\(^*\), but also throughout popular culture. I wish to argue that it is precisely in this realm that we can locate works such as *S, M, L, XL*.

Visual strategies have always existed in one form or another in human operations, but they have become dominant within our contemporary image-based culture. They amount to an overcoming of the conditions of postmodernity. The temporal specificity of this mode of operating is important. Human beings are to be recognised here as mutant...
creatures, who are constantly evolving, and forever devising new strategies for dealing with their ever-changing material conditions.

These new strategies come to represent an effective response to contemporary conditions, but so too one that has begun to define those conditions. Far from being a distraction from the real business of living, the visual domain has come to delineate the very horizon of contemporary existence. As such, it forces us to call into question critiques of postmodernity which adopt a predominantly negative view towards our image-conscious society.

We need to recognise that human beings are no longer overwhelmed by the onslaught of images within a highly visual culture, but see images as a domain of self-empowerment. This realm of images should be read not in negative terms as a loss or concealment of some original ideal state, but rather in positive terms as a mode of self-expression. In this respect the concept of camouflage is aligned closely with psychoanalytic perspectives which recognise the important role of representation in the constitution of identity.

As such, this new visual paradigm exposes fundamental problems in arguments by critics of postmodernity who posit that reality is somehow lost beneath the play of surface imagery within contemporary culture. It is not, as Guy Debord once maintained, that in the Society of the Spectacle identity is lost as everything is mediated through images and commodities.\(^4\) Rather, in a culture of branding, identity is itself forged through that domain. Nor is it, as Baudrillard maintained, that reality itself has been so obscured by the ‘ecstasy of communication’ of our culture of hyperreality, that it has effectively been ‘stolen’.\(^5\) Rather, if we follow psychoanalytic thinking, what we take for the real is in fact the imaginary. It is precisely through the imaginary realm of representation that so-called reality is acted out.

Moreover, we can begin to see how the totalising treatment of images within much postmodern discourse is itself an impoverished one. Within the work of many critics of our image based society there seems to be a somewhat homogeneous understanding of images. No accommodation is made for design and composition. Yet an image can be effective or not at establishing some form of connectivity, and much depends on the nature of that particular image.


Simulacra, simulation, superficiality. Yet this depthless domain of hyperreality in which we live, this culture of surface effects, clearly has certain positive attributes. We need to move beyond the critiques of Debord and Baudrillard, which lead to something of an aesthetic cul-de-sac, and which leave architects and anyone else working in the visual domain radically disempowered and incapable of operating effectively. But more than this, we need to recognise the vital role that the visual domain plays within our contemporary cultural horizon.

Rather than hankering after some lost culture of depth, we should embrace our present culture as a shallow realm of the seductive and the alluring, yet one which compensates for its very shallowness by its universality of appeal. Images serve as the site of identification. They allow us to relate to the world, either in terms of the way we dress and present ourselves, or in terms of the way in which we read ourselves into the environment.

For it is not that reality has been lost beneath a world of simulation. Simulation itself has become the new realm of interaction. Tactics are therefore required that not only acknowledge this phenomenon, but also tap into it. This is already evident in the work of AMO, where as a means of supplementing meticulous data analysis, strategies such as ‘Tourism’ have been adopted as ways of navigating our contemporary cultural horizon, while key Baudrillardian concepts, such as simulation, have been re-appropriated and turned into productive tools.

As Jeffrey Inaba comments: ‘AMO has adopted ‘Tourism’ as a means of inquiry. To complement our investigation of ‘hard’ facts, AMO has turned to intensive observation. Despite criticism that it is subjective and circumstantial, observation in the form of ‘Tourism’ is an invaluable vehicle to take otherwise unattainable information from real world events. In this respect, we are willing to compromise critical detachment in exchange for the benefits of immediacy, objectivity for acute insight, and competency for acquired expertise. The concept of Tourism concedes that superficiality and adulteration are inevitable. At the same time, it announces that contamination is welcome. AMO is eager to take stock of mock realities. The more simulated the better.’

The manifestations of this new visual paradigm are everywhere evident, and play a central role in the work of AMO. But how exactly are we to explain them? How do they...
operate? Here I would like to offer ‘a theory of camouflage’ as a way of trying to understand the logic behind this visual paradigm.

A Theory of Camouflage

1.0 What are we to understand by the term ‘camouflage’? Let us start by clarifying that the term is being used here not within the narrow, conventional sense of military camouflage, but within the broader sense of representation and self representation that is always already at work within culture. Military camouflage is but a sub-set of a larger category of camouflage. Indeed the emerging use of camouflage combat clothing within the fashion industry reveals not only that camouflage can be a kind of clothing, but also that clothing can itself be a kind of camouflage. In this respect, the flamboyant formal outfits which make soldiers stand out on military parades are as much an example of camouflage as the outfits worn during military combat which serve to hide them within their environment.

1.1 Camouflage is a form of masquerade, a mode of representation. But camouflage is not restricted to self representation in terms of clothing, make-up, hairstyle and so on. Rather camouflage operates through the medium of representation itself - through art, dance, music, poetry, architecture, and so on. Camouflage does not entail the cloaking of the self, so much as the relating of the self to the environment through the medium of representation. Aesthetic expressions of all kinds, from high art to popular music, from jewelry to urban planning, operate as a kind of mediation between the self and the environment.

1.2 Camouflage, then, is understood here as a mechanism for inscribing an individual within a given cultural setting. This need not be a literal state of visual equivalence with that setting, such that the definition of the self is lost against the background of the other. The role of camouflage is not to disguise, but to offer a medium through which to relate to the other. Camouflage constitutes a mode of symbolisation. It operates as a form of connectivity.

1.3 Military camouflage, then, offers us a very limited understanding of the possibilities of camouflage. Nonetheless, the specific connotations of military camouflage are helpful

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in illustrating two important attributes of camouflage, its emphasis on the domain of the visual and its strategic nature.

2.0 Camouflage is not restricted to the visual domain. It can be enacted within the domains of the other senses, especially smell and hearing. Perfume is precisely part of the masquerade of self-representation that defines the operations of camouflage. So too is music which is often used to provide an ambient setting. Yet camouflage is primarily visual, at least within the realm of human behaviour. The chameleon, a creature that has little sense of smell or hearing, but a highly developed sense of vision, is perhaps the ultimate creature of visual camouflage. Human beings have a less developed sense of vision and more advanced capacities in the other senses, but nonetheless vision remains their most effective sense. Human beings are creatures that tend to privilege vision, and visual camouflage plays a key role in their behaviour. Many animals, by comparison, have a more sophisticated sense of smell or hearing. A dog, for example, may sense smells and sounds far beyond the range detectable by humans.

2.1 Camouflage can therefore be read as an interface with the world. It operates as a masquerade that re-presents the self, just as self representation through make-up, dress, hair style etc., is a form of self re-presentation. But this need not be a temporary condition. The surface masquerade may have a lasting impact on questions of identity. Far from denying any true sense of self beneath, it may actually contribute to a sense of self. Camouflage should therefore be seen as a mechanism for constituting human identity through the medium of representation.

3.0 Traditionally camouflage has been taken to refer to a strategy of concealment against a given background. It is important to recognise, however, that, within the more comprehensive understanding of the term being used here, camouflage refers to both revealing and concealing. Camouflage delineates a spectrum of degrees of definition of the self against a given background. The chameleon, after all, uses its changes in colouration both to blend into an environment on some occasions, and to stand out on others. These changes are dependent on the mood of the chameleon. Human beings replicated this behaviour. At various moments human beings wish either to stand out from the crowd or to blend in. Camouflage therefore acts as a device for individuals to relate to a given background through the medium of representation, either by becoming part of that background, or by distinguishing themselves from it.
3.1 Here we might cite the work of more positive thinkers, such as Fredric Jameson who looks to the realm of representation for a mechanism of reinserting the individual within society. Jameson has developed a notion of ‘cognitive mapping’, which serves to overcome the lack of spatial co-ordinates within a society of late capitalism. He sees the potential of such mapping within the aesthetic domain. What we need today, Jameson seems to be saying, is a viable form of aesthetic expression that reinserts the individual into society. The aesthetic domain can therefore be seen to be somewhat Janus-faced. It is both the source of many of our problems, in a culture in which everything is co-opted into images and commodities, and potentially the way out.

3.2 Camouflage offers a mechanism of locating the self against the otherwise homogenising placelessness of contemporary existence. It thereby promotes a sense of attachment and connection to place. Camouflage may therefore provide a sense of belonging in a society where the hegemony of traditional structures of belonging – the family, church and so on – has begun to break down. This aesthetic sense of belonging can be compared to other modes of belonging, such as religious devotion or romantic attachment.

4.0 The question remains as to what aesthetic expression these operations might take. It is clear that any such expression is governed by the conditions of the age. The aesthetic realm operates as a process of symbolisation that allows the individual to find meaning in the world. This meaning is not a question of signification, as though aesthetic expressions were to be valued only for their hidden meanings which are to be decoded. Rather meaning is produced through a dynamic interaction between the individual and aesthetic expression. Yet this meaning is context dependent, and may easily lose its relevance. Thus we find various artistic expressions that were once highly meaningful, now appearing redundant. The very example of outmoded art, which no longer holds any popular resonance, serves to illustrate how art does not escape fashion - in its broadest sense - but is precisely inscribed within a logic of fashion. Fashion determines what aesthetic expressions are relevant to a particular context.

4.1 Aesthetic production should maintain the capacity to operate as a mediation between the self and the environment, but only aesthetic production whose design has been carefully controlled can achieve this. The difference between productive and unproductive modes of expression is therefore a question of design. In this respect we

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can recognise the important social role of design in providing a form of connectivity for ‘cognitively mapping’ an individual within the environment. Design becomes a crucial consideration for the effective operation of camouflage.

Conclusion

The concept of ‘Camouflage’ begins to highlight the significance of design in contemporary society. Beyond any critiques of the anaestheticised nature of the aesthetic realm, design plays a crucial social role in offering a form of connectivity, a mode of symbolisation, that allows people to relate to their environment. Exquisitely designed works such as S, M, L, XL can therefore be interpreted not simply as highly aesthetic publications that could be accused of a process of ‘glossification’ — of turning the world into a designer representation of itself. Rather they can be seen to be operating in the very space of contemporary culture, a space that is highly visual.

The concept of ‘Camouflage’ can therefore also respond to some of the questions that Koolhaas himself raises. In his essay on the Generic City, for example, Koolhaas offers a critique of the placelessness of the contemporary cityscape, where each city is virtually indistinguishable from the next. The theory of camouflage, however, would seem to suggest that design itself can overcome this condition by providing a mechanism for relating the individual to the environment. Design here must be contrasted to junk. If the junk city has become the placeless generic city, the exquisitely designed city can become the city of a new form of spatial mapping. This theory of camouflage is therefore presented not only as a retroactive manifesto through which to appreciate Koolhaas’s work, but also as a contribution to the debates which he initiates.

The concept of ‘Camouflage’ will allow us, at least, to move beyond the often simplistic denigration of the aesthetic realm within recent critiques of postmodern culture, and to grasp the complexities involved in our negotiation with the world afforded through that realm. Above all, it will allow us to recognise the important strategic significance of aesthetics in contemporary culture in general and in Rem Koolhaas’s work in particular.

Neil Leach

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