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Adolf Loos. Theaters of Joy

Abstract

The manner with which Adolf Loos constructs the characters and plots of his controversial and sarcastic stories closely resembles narrative writing suitable for stage action.

In the light of this narrative writing, the essay examines two famous stories by Adolf Loos, the short, famous story of *The Saddle Maker* written in 1903, and the equally important story entitled *The Poor Little Rich Man* written in 1900. Starting from a theatrical interpretation of these two stories, the essay proposes an extension of the concept of theatricality, understood as a background capable of clarifying and better communicating the purpose of architecture. According to Adolf Loos, this ultimate purpose seems to lie in the search for joy.

Parole Chiave
Theater – Scenic Space – Joy

1

«Adolf Loos – this is Henri Matisse talking – is always the same, ready to fight and sacrifice himself when someone else's honor is at stake. His country, the whole world, can be proud of this man» (Beck 2014, p. 110-111). With these few words, Henri Matisse has left us a portrait of Loos as a man who cannot help but influence our anxious sensitivity: *Adolf Loos as a just man*. Perhaps only a great artist such as Matisse could fix Adolf Loos' life in its essential trait and at the same time highlight it against a background of similarity with the ideal attitude. But to better animate this ideal attitude we need the counterbalance of Loosian irony and disillusionment: «My life – Loos says - is a sequel of disappointments» (Beck 2014, p.14).

In my opinion, the mixture of aspiration to good, desire for justice, and human restlessness mixed with a feeling of general disappointment is appropriate for describing the scene in which the Loosian search for the meaning of things and our actions takes place. In this arena that is life and its destiny, Loos has always expressed himself in sarcastic and theatrical terms. Perhaps the statement of his fraternal friend Karl Kraus applies more to Adolf Loos than anyone else: «I am perhaps the first case of a writer who theatrically lives his writing at the same time» (Kraus 1987, p. 286). If we tried to replace the word “writer” with the word “architect”, we could easily say that Kraus's aphorism could have been written and proclaimed with the same inspiration by Adolf Loos himself.

It is strange and surprising that to this day, as far as I know, no theater or film director has ever attempted to stage the extraordinary life of an exceptional man whose head, as Else Lasker-Schüler wrote, «resembles the skull of a gorilla». Adolf Loos: «The liberator of life from the slavery of the instrument, the deviator from the crossroads, mortal to the soul that does not return to

itself, but departs from itself» (Kraus 1995, p. 119). Loos' writings and works possess an intrinsic poetry and provoke such amusement that perhaps only the theater stage, or the cinema, could increase it. It is no coincidence that his ironic, cynical, and controversial texts on the society and culture of his time and his legendary lectures in Vienna *fin de siècle* are now part of the legend of the paradoxical man (Maciuika 2000, Velotti 1988).

2

To evoke the theatrical spirit that animates Loos' *language* and *scenic space*, I will attempt, with all the risks involved in such an endeavor, to comment on some of his famous writings.

Where to begin? First of all, before outlining a possible *scenic action* of Loos' texts, it is useful, in this context, to connect his writings to some arguments by Ludwig Wittgenstein regarding the theme of language as a *game*. And since words are one of the main materials of man's fascination with the game of theater, Wittgenstein's statement is worth recalling in its entirety: «Here the word 'linguistic game' is meant to highlight the fact that *speaking* a language is part of an activity, or a way of life» (Wittgenstein 2014, p. 17). We know that the tone of the linguistic games is more or less the one registered in the relationship between rule and transgression. Which, in other words, would be between lying and sincerity. But the great magic of theater shows us how the game of language – pushing Wittgenstein's discussion a bit – is probably more unpredictable than any other game that man has always dealt with in life. Following the Viennese philosopher's reasoning, we can say that language, rather than a closed *structure*, is configured as an infinitely open *construction*. Language, this essential game of human experience with which men more or less unknowingly play, is constitutively unpredictable. As much as you want to cage words into previously constituted patterns, structures, and behaviors, sooner or later language snaps. If properly addressed, however, words can create a world and make it as poetic as possible. Between language, understood as a closed system and grammar, and the multiple linguistic games practiced by men daily, there is the unexpected. In other words, a creative residual exists between these two dimensions of language – the unexpected – which is out of the ordinary and which from time to time can be perceived as something revitalizing (Clemente 2017).

In fact, when we speak, we do not strictly and rigorously follow the rules, precisely because the application of a linguistic rule in concrete life is subject to the unpredictable. It is subject to the unpredictable insofar as the spaces for games and the *combinations* that a word – for example the word *saddle*, or *salt shaker* or *shit* – are unpredictable with its life, with its soul, with its history and its tradition, what it can open in terms of unprecedented questions about life and truth.

Wittgenstein said, «You must not forget that the language game is, so to speak, something unpredictable. I mean, it's not well-founded, it's not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life» (Wittgenstein 1999, p. 91).

3

The first text that we are going to read in an interpretation of scenic action is *The Saddle Maker*, published by Adolf Loos in the second and last issue of *Das Andere* in 1903 (2016, p. 52).

Once upon a time, there was a master saddle maker. A hardworking, good master. He made saddles in a shape that had nothing in common with the saddles of earlier centuries. Or with Turkish or Japanese saddles. So they were modern saddles. But he didn't know that. He only knew that he was making saddles. As well as he could.

Then a strange movement came to the city. They called it the Secession. It demanded that only



Fig. 1
Adolf Franz Karl Viktor Maria
Loos.

modern utilitarian objects should be created.

When the master saddle maker heard about this, he took one of his best saddles and showed it to one of the leaders of the Secession.

And he said to him: Professor - because that was the man's title after all the leaders of the movement had instantly made themselves professors - Professor! I've heard about your demands. I, too, am a modern person. I, too, would like to work in a modern way. So tell me: Is this saddle modern?

The professor examined the saddle and then lectured the master at length, the latter hearing over and over only the words "art in craft," "individuality," "modern," "Hermann Bahr," "Ruskin," "applied art," etc. But the conclusion was: No, it was not a modern saddle.

Ashamed, the master withdrew. And he pondered things, worked, and pondered again. But no matter how much he tried to meet the professor's high demands, he still kept producing the same old saddle.

Dejected, he went back to the professor. And he described his problems. The professor looked at the attempts the man had made and said: Dear master, you simply don't have any imagination. Aha, that was it. That was apparently what he was lacking. Imagination! But he had had no idea up till then that such a thing was necessary for making saddles. If he had possessed imagination, he would surely have become a painter or a sculptor. Or a poet or a composer.

But the professor said: Come back tomorrow. We are here to promote industry and to fertilize it with new ideas. I'll see what can be done for you.

And in his class he announced the following competition: Design a saddle.

The master saddle maker returned the next day. The professor was able to present him with 49 saddle designs. He only had 44 students, but he himself had produced 5 designs. They would now be realized in the "studio." After all. They had real spirit.

The master examined the drawings for a long time and his eyes grew brighter and brighter.

Then he said: Professor! If I knew so little about riding, about horses, about leather, and about my work as you do, then I would also have your imagination!

And so he lived happily ever after. Making saddles. Modern? He's not sure. Saddles.



Fig. 2
Frontispiece of the magazine edited by Adolf Loos *DAS ANDERE*, II, 1903.

4

This extraordinary text will never cease to amaze me. Every time I read it, I never tire of imagining the bewildered face of the master saddler looking at those unlikely 49 modern saddle designs, of which 5 were directly conceived by the "Professor."

The disbelief of the master saddler before the designs of the "modern saddles" is highlighted by Loos in the face of the craftsman who, unexpectedly facing those projects, gradually opens his eyes, and it's as if he asks himself: Is this a joke or are they teasing me?

According to Loos, in fact, the designs of the 49 modern saddles were made in less than 48 hours. A true modern design workshop ante litteram. We know that the stories told often leave us with doubts and uncertainties about certain individuals or characters, and yet reveal some points in which they seem to have an empathic relationship with general actions and, why not, have meaning. In this sense, the perplexity of the master saddler cannot only be attributed to the mocking contingency of his temperament. When he says, «Professor! If I knew so little about riding, about horses, about leather and about my work as you do, then I would also have your imagination,» he is not alluding to the imagination necessary to understand the shape, size and powder of Cleopatra's nose. He, the master saddler, certainly alludes to his workshop experience and obviously also alludes to the buttocks of a jockey or to those of any knight or squire and alludes above all to the anatomical curve of the back of the horse, a beast which, as is known, man began to domesticate later than other animals and in any case not before 3,000 years ago. Moreover, it is no small detail that scholars trace the evolution of the horse back to a time interval ranging from 55 to 45 million years. Without going too far into the anatomy of human buttocks, which also have infinite more or less interesting configurations, it is certain that these are anatomical shapes that take more than 48 hours to adapt well to the use of saddles that do not adequately conform to their rounded shapes. This is at least what can be understood from Loos's discussion.



Fig. 3
Adolf Loos with Karl Kraus and
Herwarth Walden, 1909.

It is almost a given that the short story of the master saddler, like almost all of Adolf Loos's controversial and sarcastic texts, develops with a progression suited to a scenic action that is attentive to the long and complex question of the representation of reality. In fact, within the short plot of the master saddler we can recognize sufficient compositional artifices that show the development of the *text's satisfaction* in becoming a theatrical staging. Among the *theatrical artifices* used by Loos, the first to stand out are three modes of compositional complacency: the taste for broken or syncopated rhythms, typical of the speech spoken; the poetics of contrast, with the illustrious and austere "Professor" and the master saddler, a humble and modest worker, a «craftsman who worked hard and well»; the amalgam of seriousness and skill that wins the game in the reader-observer's visualization of the plot.

"Once upon a time, there was a master saddle maker" is then the fairy tale and ironic incipit with which Loos begins the story, with the intention of opposing the popular perspective with the professor's solemn boria: «My dear, the problem is that you have no imagination». Loos's craftsman prefers to follow some good shop rules over the professor's scholarly imagination, which are necessary *to make* good saddles in the «best possible way.» What rules? Loos does not describe exactly which rules our craftsman follows, but it is easy to understand that they can be connected to those of the *language game*. Rules that on the one hand have been refined over time and generations, yet on the other hand these rules do not exclude the unexpected, do not disdain the even fortuitous appearance of the new. Rules and techniques that our saddler learned in the shop, probably following customs that have been strengthened and refined over time, but still not so absolute and binding as to prevent him from transforming the materials and making, as Loos says, «Saddles that had nothing in common with those of previous centuries.»

Rules and techniques that our craftsman trusts. And this trust is a sign of loyalty to the tradition from which such rules arise. Loyalty to shop rules is a

free choice. The almost measured, reflective and above all silent behavior of the master saddler on the relationship between rule and innovation leaves no doubt: it is his decision that relates to the transmission of values that can be found in tradition.

In any case, the lack of abstract imagination seems to be the necessary condition to also bring out a certain *comic* taste which is often freed precisely from the senselessness and concrete absurdity of daily life and from the decisions that we are called to make from time to time. A taste that reveals, as already mentioned, in the contrasting effects, both emotional and allusive, present in the text and that are directly linked to an irrelevant Loosian attitude with respect to certain all-encompassing and totalizing manifestations of reality.

5

Now we can imagine, just like a well-orchestrated scene, the master saddler who enters and exits the stage three times, and each time returns doubting what to do. He enters the scene questioning and perplexed, then humiliated and immediately afterwards afflicted, and again full of good will, and finally returns to the scene to end the story with liberating irony. However, the ironic lightness of the ending may not fully satisfy the liberating atmosphere. And this dissatisfaction is in my opinion intentional, it is a dissatisfaction Loos sought and desired.

Thus, and in fact always in a fairytale key, the story ends: «And so he lived happily ever after. Making saddles. Modern? He's not sure. Saddles.» Adolf Loos in absolute *surreal* style is as if, in the end, he worked by emptying the denotative relationship between the joke and the presence of the stage object: the horse saddle. What does this saddle possibly look like? What is the magic of our craftsman's saddle? What is so special about it that it has «Nothing in common with the saddles of earlier centuries. Or with Turkish or Japanese saddles»?

The moment the scene closes, the game of signs and symbols begins: each of us can immerse ourselves, in the wake of Loos' words, in our own thoughts. The rest of the story is now in our hands. We have become part of history, each of us can contribute to its development or abandonment or to the staging of an ending that can satisfy its expectation. In any case, an unexpected ending or regardless one capable of *transforming* the *lament* of reality or the very substance of life into a new and inexpressible joy. I can clearly see our master saddler returning to the scene, this time with a serene and smiling face, with a dozen or more horses in tow, each suitably saddled with a saddle made in his workshop. The horse is the great absence in the story that now manifests itself on the stage of our imagination. No animal has perhaps contributed as significantly to the history of mankind as the horse. So when a herd of horses emerges on stage an original force takes over within the scene and captures our gaze. That which Elias Canetti has indicated as a kind of transference of the will of the knight, latent in each of us, occurs with the meek and loyal horse which obeys. Indeed, Canetti says that man, since «He took possession of the horse and domesticated it, forms a new unit with it» (Canetti 2016, p. 382-383).

6

Man, the object, and the animal are the three constitutive figures of the Loosian plot which, treated with a different degree of visibility and intensity “move the story forward” and push us to continue reading. To a certain extent this plot, like every authentic theatrical event, seeks to understand how human life and relationships, its actions and products, its objects, can acquire a meaning. So as we continue to read it, the “main actors” emerge within a framework



Fig. 4
Adolf Loos tend the ear,
Dessau, 1931.

of contradictions and uncertainties that ultimately act directly on us who are reading or imagining the story in our heads. In fact, how many times have we too put ourselves in a habitual psychological attitude, suddenly discovering that our own character overwhelms us, or from a more usual perspective the same character suddenly appears to us as fake or even fictitious due to the absence of *spiritual resources* that could instead have nourished him? And this is where the magic of theater comes into play: the saddles of the craftsman, patiently made in the workshop with his hands, little by little reveal themselves to be an authentic *spiritual resource*: an object capable of redeeming the real, because it is intertwined with tradition and draws from the spirit of doing from tradition, of knowing how *to do something well*, with patience and the continuous exercise to perfect what is no longer there and what is not yet there.

In Loos's vision, the life of a master saddler and his saddles have something poetic, something that can offer a spiritual outlet. After all, the saddle is an object that can improve the day of those who, for the most varied needs, are forced by necessity or pleasure to use it.

The saddle somehow serves as something similar to a chair and as Canetti says, «Sitting there, the elements of riding are present». On the other hand, Loos's immense love for the chair is known, a simple and indispensable object for resting, so as not to unnecessarily tire standing up. To avoid *wasting* energy. It is above all an object that allows rest by being comfortable, dignified, still and well-disposed to «pleasant and lively conversation.» In any case, even if for a short interval, the saddle or chair of our craftsman, like any other object of use, or a lovely horse or puppy, can give man a small moment of joy. Adolf Loos often addresses these *small, great joys* in his writings. In July 1933, shortly before he died, in one of his last writings entitled Praise of a saltshaker, Loos returns the charm of small joys to life: «We are sometimes more satisfied with small things of no value in daily life than with precious objects. [...] I too have a small object that brings me great joy. It is a very normal wooden saltshaker, a new type of saltshaker, actually lacquered white, which I cannot do without at any meal.» (Loos 2016, p. 65)

7

The saltshaker and the saddle, like other things, are objects of use capable of dispensing *small, great joys*: their poetry consists of precisely this, which we cannot appreciate and see except within a life lived and observed as if we were in/at the theater. Or we can love them only after their *end*, when they are lost forever, like the chairs of Loos's old friend, faithful collaborator and teacher Josef Veillich, about whom Loos declares, «Deaf like me – and for this reason – we understood each other very well.» (Loos 1999, p. 372) But it is the house, as Loos says, the first human theater par excellence, «The scenario that people have obtained for the small joys and the great tragedies of this life!» (Loos 1995, p. 60)

The saltshaker, saddle and Veillich's chairs are objects of use made by the craftsman who holds “the secrets of a workshop”, that is, preserves the *technical mastery* inherited and acquired over time and necessary to transform any material into a *spiritual opening*. The *finale* of the story of the master saddle maker, in which we have now sufficiently identified ourselves, takes on a far different value: «And so he lived happily ever after.» Because acting “happily ever after”, carefully following the rules of the workshop, is a bit like interpreting a poem, rejoicing in the mystery of life or repeating a prayer. “And so he lived happily ever after” is a simple and important phrase that evokes the aspiration to make sense of his own *doing* and *being there: nunc et semper*. The *small joys* that Adolf Loos invites us to welcome with irony and

love unveil the theatrical openness of his compositions and his little dramas, and therefore somehow show us the *metaphysical* aspect of his theater of life. In Loos's theaters life and joy are assimilated, and here life must be understood above all as the unrepresentable origin of the performance. Life and joy are assimilated and then expressed in everything they contain and share that is unrepresentable, indefinite and incomplete. And thus with everything with which we might be able to reformulate what is real.

This is similar to how fostering the experience of joy is an intrinsic objective of theater play and is an important presence in Loos's reflections and texts. The importance of joy lies above all in its ability to transform human dryness, always ready to take over the fate of men, into a living look at the world and its objects. A look willing to generously give and receive. But how is it possible to touch the hearts of others and arouse joy in them? This is, in my opinion, the *secret question* that *haunts* Adolf Loos man and architect, and why not, also author-actor.

8

One of the original motivations capable of arousing joy in the human soul is poetry, as there are words, but more faithfully there is writing poetry. And writing poetry, according to Heidegger's (2007, especially pp. 7-37) famous argument, is saying by listening, but above all finding which reveals itself in that which gives joy. The notion that the first effect of poetry is joy is one of the oldest beliefs in Greek culture and history. The relationship between ancient Greek theater and joy is, in fact, the same as that of Greek poetry in which joy is understood as its first outcome, that is, of that art that was referred to as *mousiké* (Gentili 2006, Gentili and Catenacci 2010).

In the theatrical field it is clear that a performance is certainly what brings joy, it is the show of poetry. In this context, however, it should be remembered that "poetry show" must be understood as that set of elements that defines *mousiké*, that is, the presence of words, song, music and dance, i.e., the means of communication with which ancient Greek culture orally transmitted its messages through public performances. The complexity that these public performances entailed, together with the emotional and intellectual involvement that they managed to arouse in spectators, also explain why *mousiké* was felt as the most effective of all the arts for the education of man, and essential for orienting him towards authoritative, honorable, and just values and models of behavior, drawn mainly from the stories of the myths.

Aristotle speaks of the links between poetry, theater, and joy in *Poetics*, highlighting how poetry can favor the arrival of joy in that it manifests itself through a representation, that is, through that process of poetic production which is mimesis. Following Aristotle's indications, the original source of poetry consists on the one hand of humans' natural tendency to mimic representation, while on the other hand the profound reason of poetry lies in the search for the joy that a performance manages to arouse in the human soul. A joy capable of alleviating the afflictions, sufferings, and sorrows of reality. *Poetics* (1448b 4-17) states: «Two causes appear to have given rise to poetic art as a whole, and both natural, because doing as another is inherent to human beings as early as childhood, and in this they differ from other animals: in the fact that they are the most susceptible to emulation and learn their first things thanks to emulation, and in the fact that everyone likes performances. What actually occurs is proof of this: we like to look at as exact images as possible of things that we find painful to see in ourselves, such as the figures of the most despicable beasts and corpses». But the connections between theater, poetry, and joy are indeed important because, according to Aristotle, they allow viewers to learn something. And this learning, this knowledge, is the



Fig. 5
Adolf Loos with his second wife,
the actress Elsie Altmann, 1921

authentic and original source of joy. Knowledge produces joy. So if on the one hand joy serves to forget the evils and worries of life, on the other joy sinks its *reason for being* in the search for knowledge. The same passage of *Poetics* continues to say: «It is also due to the following fact: learning is the most pleasant thing not only for philosophers, but for others alike, even if they participate in it only to a limited extent. For this reason they rejoice in seeing the images, because when they look at them they learn and reason about what everything is, such as this is that.»

9

The search for the deep reasons of the human heart, its poetry, and its destiny are also some of the aspects of *Ode to Joy*, the poetic text by Friedrich Schiller written in 1785 and made universally famous by Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Precisely on the basis of Loos's love of music and theater, I would be tempted to say that it is possible that there is common thread connecting the *small joys* of which Adolf Loos speaks and the theme of joy in the composition of the fourth and last movement of the *Ninth Symphony*. The compositional message of the *Finale* of the *Ninth Symphony*, as Massimo Mila pointed out, is entirely concentrated in the idea of joy as a force, or as an entity, capable of giving the human soul the awareness of solidarity and universal brotherhood. Joy, Mila wrote, taking up Romain Rolland's statement, is «The active feeling of sympathy that unites all beings in the creation and enjoyment of an order of reason and harmony.» (Mila 1977, p. 169)

In other words, we can also say that the emotional hue of joy is *fullness*. Joy is fullness. And this fullness is the profound aspect of what reassures the experience. The connection between experience and music invites us, along this path, to the knowledge that everything we have loved and lost is destined, sooner or later, to become joy.

In the short text "Beethoven's Sick Ears" written in 1913, with his usual humor Adolf Loos even outlines a sort of parallel and supplementary universe between the facts of his existence and Beethoven's human history and depth of mind, which he considers «the spiritual face of the world» (Loos 1999, p. 268). After all, like the "divine Beethoven", Loos also considered himself a man whose life and practical activity constituted the reason for a broader cultural mission at the service of all humanity and its joy. Well, in the end

we could say that the very search for joy was capable of instilling a profound ethical motivation in Adolf Loos. So if Schiller's *Ode to Joy* represents the "inspiring booklet" that Beethoven used and modified in relation to his musical intentions, the same identical joy represents perhaps the "secret spark" that ignites Loos's narrative and compositional logic and the profound meaning that he assigns to architecture in relation to life and its contradictions.

10

It must be understood that the game of theater is entirely a possibility. It is like finding oneself in a state of unconscious danger, illuminated by unreality, with pieces of the real world combined with the clockwork of one's own spirit. In other words we can say that words, writing or, if you'll accept Loos's theatricality, his contemptuous irony, and his way of composing a story, seem oriented towards accepting life, and life accepting the miracles of joy and the unpredictable.

In this regard, it is worth recalling a story narrated by Claire Beck in her beautiful *private portrait of Adolf Loos*. In one of her memories, Claire Beck recalls a visit between Dolfi – her nickname for her husband Adolf Loos – and a ceramic craftsman in a remote village near Cannes. Once at his destination, in the back of the potter's shop, Loos – recalled his young wife – immediately started looking around: «He took a soup plate from a shelf, looked at it carefully and placed it in front of him. The owner was alarmed. 'Excuse me, monsieur,' he said, 'but that's trash!' Embarrassed, he took the plate away from Loos. Loos looked at him and laughed. 'That dish is especially beautiful. I'd like twelve soup dishes like that.' 'But it was an accident where the brown ended in the yellow,' the owner desperately replied. 'It will never happen again on twelve dishes!' 'It's quite a beautiful accident. It doesn't matter if the colors aren't perfectly uniform. Make me twelve reject plates... just like that'.» (Beck 2014, pp. 106-107) Perhaps Loos is telling us that there is a close and irresistible relationship between the theory of rejection and the exaltation of use as a means of transforming reality. So irresistible and seductive that only word and scenic action can unveil them.

11

The second story I would like to interpret within a key of scenic action is "The Poor Little Rich Man", bearing the date April 26, 1900 (Loos 1999, pp. 149-155). Here we find seduction and the need for the unimaginable and the unexpected. Here is how this tragic story begins:

I want to tell you about a poor rich man. He had money and possessions, a faithful wife to kiss away the cares of his daily business, and a gaggle of children to make even the poorest of his workers envious. Everything he laid his hands on thrived, and for this he was loved by his friends, But today, everything is very, very different; and this is how it came about.

One day this man said to himself: "You have money and possessions, a faithful wife, a gaggle of children to make even the poorest of your workers envious, but are you really happy? You see there are people who have none of the things you are envied for. But their worries are utterly wiped away by a great magician; Art! But what is art to you? You don't even know the name of a single artist. Every snob could drop his business card at the door, and your servant would throw it open for him. Nevertheless, you have not once really received art! I know for sure it won't come. But now I will call on it. It shall be received in my home like a Queen who has come to reside with me." He was a powerful man, and he carried through whatever he took on with great energy. It was his accustomed way of doing business, And so on the very same day he went to a renowned interior architect and said: "Bring me art, art under my own roof! Money doesn't matter!"

The architect needn't be told twice. He went to the man's house and immediately threw out all of his furniture. There he let floorers, packers, painters, masons, trestle builders, carpenters, installers, potters, wallpaper hangers, and sculptors move in.

You have never seen the likes of the art that was captured and well cared for inside the four corners of that rich man's home. The rich man was overjoyed. Overjoyed, he went through the



Fig. 6
Adolf Loos in America, 1895.

new rooms. Art everywhere he looked. Art in everything and anything. when he turned a door handle he grabbed hold of art, when he sank into a chair he sank into art, when he harried his tired bones under the pillow he burrowed into art, his feet sank in art when he walked across the carpet. He indulged himself with outrageous fervor in art. Since his plates were artistically decorated, he cut his *boeuf à l'oignon* with still more energy.

People praised, and were envious of him. The Art periodicals glorified his name as one of the foremost patrons of the arts. His rooms were used as public examples, studied, described, explained. But they were worth it. Every room was a complete individual symphony of color. Walls, furniture, and fabrics were all composed sophisticatedly into perfect harmony which each other. Each appliance had its proper place, and was connected to the others in the most wonderful combinations.

The architect had forgotten nothing, absolutely nothing. Everything from the ashtray and flatware to the candle extinguisher had been combined and matched. It wasn't a common architectural art. In every ornament, in every form, in every nail was the individuality of the owner to be found. (A psychological work of such complication that it would be clear to anyone).

The architect modestly refused all honors. He only said: "These rooms are not from me. Over there in the corner stands a statue from Charpentier. Just like anyone else would earn my digest, if he claimed a room as his design, as soon as he uses one of my door handles, as little as I can claim these rooms as my design." It was nobly, and consequently said. Many carpenters who perhaps used a wallpaper from Walter Cranesch and nevertheless would want to credit the furniture in the room to themselves because they had created and completed it were ashamed to the depths of their black souls as they learned about these words. After flying off at a tangent let us now return to our rich man.

I have already told you how overjoyed he was. From now on, he devoted a great deal of his time to studying his dwelling. For everything had to be learned; he saw this soon enough. There was much to be noted. Each appliance had its own definite place. The architect had done his best for him. He had thought of everything in advance. There was a definite place for even the very smallest case, made just especially for it. The domicile was comfortable, but it was hard mental work. In the first week the architect guarded the daily life, so that no mistake could creep in.

The rich man put tremendous effort into it. But it still happened, that when he laid down a book without thinking that he shoved it into the pigeonhole for the newspaper. Or he knotted the ashes from his cigar into the groove made for the candleholder. You picked something up and the endless guessing and searching for the right place to return it to began, and sometimes the architect had to look at the blueprints to rediscover the correct place for a box of matches.

Where applied art experiences such a victory, the correlating music can't lag behind. That idea kept the rich man very busy. He made a recommendation to the tramway company to replace the senselessly ringing bells on the trams with the characteristic motif of *Parsifal* bells. He didn't find any concession there, obviously they weren't ready for such modern concept. Therefore, he was allowed at his own cost, to change the cobblestone in front of his house, so that the carts rolled by in the rhythm of the *Radetzky March*. Even the electrical bells in his house got new Wagner and Beethoven motifs, and all the competent art critics were full of praise for the man who had opened up the new area of "art as a basic commodity."

One can imagine that all of these improvements would make the man happier. We can't hide the fact however, that he tried to be home as little as possible. Now and then one needs a break from so much art.

Could you live in an art gallery? Or sitting in *Tristan and Iseult* for months at a time? See! Who could blame him for collecting strength in restaurants, cafes, and from friends and acquaintances to face his own home. He had expected something different. but art requires sacrifice. He sacrificed a lot. It brought tears to his eyes. He thought of all the old things that he held so dear, and that he missed. The big armchair! Everyday his father had taken his afternoon nap in it. The old clock, and the old paintings! Art requires it! Don't cave in!

One time it came to pass that he celebrated his birthday, and his wife and children gave him many gifts. He was very pleased with all his birthday presents, and they brought him much happiness and joy. Soon afterwards the architect returned because of his right to check on the placement of objects, and to answer complicated questions. He entered the room. The prosperous man who had many concerns on his mind came to greet him warmly.

The architect didn't recognize the happiness of the prosperous man, but he had discovered something else, and the color had run out of his cheeks. "Why would you be wearing those slippers?" He blurted out. The master of the house looked at his embroidered shoes, and sighed in relief. The shoes were made from the original design of the architect himself. This time he felt guiltless. He answered thoughtfully. "But Mr. Architect! Have you forgotten? You designed these slippers yourself!"

"Certainly!" The architect thundered. "But for the bedroom! With these impossible pieces of color you are destroying the entire atmosphere. Don't you even realize it?" The prosperous man took the slippers off immediately, and was pleased as punch that the architect didn't find his socks offensive. They went into the bedroom, where the rich man was allowed to put his shoes back on. "Yesterday," he timidly began, "I celebrated my birthday, and my family gave me lots

of gifts. I sent for you so that you could give us advice as to where we should put up all of the things I was given.”

The architect’s face became visibly longer. Then he let loose: “How dare you presume to receive presents? Didn’t I draw everything up for you? Haven’t I taken care of everything? You need nothing more. You are complete!” “But,” the rich man replied. “I should be allowed, never ever! That’s just what I was missing, things, that have not been drawn by me. Haven’t I done enough, that I put the Charpentier here for you? The statue that steals all the fame out of my work! No, you are not allowed to buy anything else!”

“But what about when my grandchild brings me something from kindergarten as a gift?” “You are not allowed to take it!”

The prosperous man was decimated, but he still had not lost. An idea! Yes! An idea! “And when I want to go to Secession to buy a painting?” He asked triumphantly.

“Then try to hang it somewhere. Don’t you see that there isn’t any room for anything else? For every painting I have hung here there is a frame on the wall. You cannot move anything. Try and fit in a new painting!” Thereupon a transformation took place within the rich man. The happy man felt suddenly deeply, deeply unhappy, and he saw his future life. No one would be allowed to grant him joy.

He had to pass by the shopping stores of the city, perfect, and complete. Nothing would be created for him ever again, none of his loved ones would be allowed to give him a painting. For him there could be no more painters, no artists, no craftsmen again. He was shut out of future life and its strivings, its developments, and its desires, He felt: Now is the time to learn to walk about with one’s own corpse. Indeed! He is finished! He is complete!

12

We can follow Loos’s story and almost inadvertently transfer the intonation of Loos’s imaginary voices into our inner voice. The *identification* and *amusement* that Loos’s texts are able to arouse are the premise for the visualization of our personal staging. The space of such a staging is unveiled, also in this case, following the *subtle energies* of incompleteness and unpredictability.

In this sad affair, however, both incompleteness and unpredictability work negatively. They work indirectly by showing how their exclusion from *life forms* means, on the one hand, the inhibition of desires, and on the other hand, the removal of the occurrence of joy.

How easy it is to understand the story of the poor rich man is a case that presents the traits of a scenic type that best follows social conventions: he is loved and respected by all, loyal to duty, family and work, but suddenly feels within himself a dissatisfaction in which an original desire takes root, a desire to be happy. He wants to experience joy. And to be happy, to satisfy this original and impalpable desire, he would be willing to do anything, *sparing no expense*. But he does not know what to do, he does not know how to act to make his desire come true and fulfill his dream. On the other hand there is the architect, who on the contrary is so sure of the behaviors we each require to be happy, who expresses himself with the certainty of those who are the custodians of the absolute and revealed truth.

The theme of behavior – as noted by important critics and scholars of Loos – is the true center of gravity of Adolf Loos’s speeches and texts. It is no coincidence, in fact, that in his writings he deals with themes related to the fashion and gestures of modern man.

The connection between theater and behavior, understood as knowledge and investigation of the human soul, sinks into ancient experience and goes back with deep clarity and inspiration to when in the *Chained Prometheus* (310 ff) of Aeschylus, Ocean, addressing precisely Prometheus, forcefully warns him with the following words: «Realize your limits and change your behavior».

It is no coincidence that the two famous epigraphs “Know thyself” and “Not too much” were already engraved on the outer wall of the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. The first epigraph calls for the recognition of one’s abilities related to the limits imposed by one’s own condition and circumstances; in the second epigraph, however, there is a warning to avoid any free form of excess. To some extent both Ocean’s warning and the two epigraphs of Apollo’s temple



Fig. 7
First edition of *Words in the void*, published in Paris and Zurich in 1921.



Fig. 8
Inauguration of the *Café Museum*. Adolf Loos standing to the right, April 19, 1899.

seem to best synthesize Adolf Loos's thought and work. I believe, also on the basis of this last consideration, that it is not very difficult to find a certain "ascetic" opening in the compositions and in the conception of the Loosian *scenic space*, a composition of *empty* and *emptiness* within defined limits in which a way of *making room* for joy acts.

13

So how do we deal with the limits? How do we deal with their transgression or violation and how do we deal with their acceptance? Along this line of questioning and knowledge of the constituent limits of human behavior, perhaps we should also read the pages of the two issues of *Das Andere* (The Other). Pages that collect some of Loos's memorable writings and constitute a real mine of information and analysis of human behaviors described and recounted with merciless irony and playful lightness (Loos 1903, in Cacciari 1995, Borgomaineiro 2008).

As already mentioned, behaviors are very often intrinsically intertwined with desires. And the connection between desire and behavior is essential to the development and understanding of the story presented by Adolf Loos. And this connection is also one of the original motives of the theatrical event.

According to common place, what makes human life worthy of this name and different from other forms of life is the fact that the human being is the living being who desires, who cannot but desire, and who is always and in any case *beyond himself*. In short, the human being is not a mere sentient body, the human being is such because he is *inhabited* by desire. According to an equally widespread manner of thinking, in fact, the human being is never happy, is always dissatisfied, unbearably complaining, and is never enough for himself. That is why he is always restless, and he always needs something else. A bit like our poor rich man. This other could be an object, or as more often happens, another human being from which derives the insurmountable need to love and be loved. But this other could also be an inescapable need for a search for meaning. Although it seems strange, the poor rich man – who gradually becomes more and more sympathetic – wishes to enter the world of meaning. He does not need all the spaces, amenities, objects, furnishings, and accessories that the architect has effectively created for him and only for him. Our *poor friend* arouses sympathy because his behavior resembles that of



Fig. 9
Living room at the Müller house, Praga 1930.



Fig. 10
Adolf Loos with Claire Back, on
their wedding day, July 1929.

an *infans*. It resembles the behavior of an *infans* who does not have the right words to express his authentic desire for meaning and therefore appeals to art, which does not need words to make us happy, and entrusts himself to the architect, as a child entrusts himself to his mother taking care of him. But in his inner self he pushes to enter the world of meaning. Without the realization of this private *rite of passage* our lives, the life of our unfortunate rich man, as Loos recounts, seems destined to sink into apathy and despair.

14

In my opinion, “The Poor Little Rich Man” describes the link between seeking meaning and fulfilling desire well, and Loos wonders if this link can find a way out, he wonders if this link can be dissolved. This is why the staging of the relationship between the poor rich man and that of the architect is not only the representation of a *conflict* between characters, a typical aspect of bourgeois theater or realistic theater, but suggests the scenario of a conflict between destinies (Benjamin 1995, pp. 31-38)¹.

The plot of the story, in fact, stages the conflict between the *dominant* architect of existential spaces with his all-encompassing *language*, and the somewhat childish, *dominated*, common mortal, often unaware of the control that is exercised over his life, uncertain about what to do but always curious and eager and in search of unexpected and extraordinary moments of joy. The articulation of the relationship between *dominator* and *dominated* raises these questions: What is happening? What does it mean? How will it end? Where is the justice?

In general, this is the structure of a theatrical plot and this also seems to be the cloth of Loos’s small theaters, in which the *game* of the transformation of that which happens before our eyes takes place in relation to what this very

happening arouses deeply in our soul.

As is well known, primary human behaviors such as laughter and crying, affection or hatred, are often caused by incomprehensible motives that arise from unpredictable unconscious forces. And this regardless of the logical explanations that can be given later to prove their rationality.

This need to control the incomprehensible and unpredictable is in turn a characteristic of human behavior and its idea of self-control. To once again resume Wittgenstein's reflections, we can recall how behavior itself is organized like a *linguistic game* in which it resists a residual of unpredictability: Wittgenstein writes, «Our linguistic game is an extension of our primitive behavior. (In fact, the language game is behavior. [Instinct].)»² Laughter and crying, revenge and forgiveness, friendship, hatred, resentment, resignation, are forms of behavior. As such they are also expressive forms endowed with meaning, with which man reacts and expresses himself in situations of life. Even for Loos behavior, that of men such as that of material or of an object of use such as the saddle, the chair, or the saltshaker, are above all an expressive motion and suggest an orientation of sense in actual reality. An orientation of sense that seeks to have effects on long-term reality: things and facts that want *to last over time*.



Fig. 11
Adolf Loos with Claire Back and Kiki, their Japanese dog, 1930.

15

Now if we go back to the story of the poor rich man we see that the architect worked with the intention of completely guiding, or designing, behavior. Consequently, our *dear poor rich man*, now *stripped* of all forms of desire, wanders around the city like a corpse.

The epilogue of the poor rich man is hilarious and at the same time quite moving: «He was shut out of future life and its strivings, its developments, and its desires, He felt: Now is the time to learn to walk about with one's own corpse. Indeed! He is finished! He is complete!» The end of the story – the *exitus* of the fate of the poor rich man – ends with the image of a soulless man. It ends with the image of a corpse, of a body without any further vital expression. Just as in so many fairy tales, even in the case of the poor rich man, desires are fulfilled in a sinister and self-destructive way.

So on the one hand Loos shows us, without making a judgment, the consequences of the behaviors related to the satisfaction of desire, which would often be better to leave unfulfilled. On the other hand, when the games now seem to have ended and the story of the poor rich man seems definitively resolved with the punishment of the unfortunate man to wander around the city like a corpse - suddenly a new tension silently emerges: aspiration.

The role of desire in the affairs of the poor rich man is quite clear. But what is Loos alluding to when he says that in addition to desire, our *unfortunate friend* also feels shut out from any strivings? We have said that the *exitus* of the story of the poor rich man ends with the image of a wretched and unhappy man wandering around the city like a corpse. Precisely the image of the corpse, the word corpse, moves the Loosian scene from the space of a sarcastic story to one of a legendary-archaic staging. The vision of the corpse moves our story into the space of the archaic rite.

Theater, first and foremost an aesthetic knowledge, as many authors and scholars have shown, has its roots precisely in the experience of the archaic rite. And within the archaic rite, the desire of men to know in advance – or suspend in rhythmic repetition – the value and meaning of human events must also be traced.

Humans have always been interested in the outcome of a story. We like to go to the theater, to the movies, to read a novel, or listen to someone's story, because first of all we are curious and attracted by how a story will end. How



Fig. 12
Ornament und Verbrechen,
poster of the public conference
of March 12, 1909.

did he die? How was he killed? How is that possible? Did they meet again? Did they make up?

And very often we also feel pleasure in reviewing, rereading, or rethinking that same identical story that we already know from time to time. In addition to the pleasure of knowing how things will end, in fact, the ritual repetition of an action also provides a paradoxical liberation from the desire to know the end, perhaps to focus on other aspects and therefore imagine alternative developments at the already marked end. In short, what drives us to love stories, how they begin, how they develop, and then how they end is our innate ignorance in understanding our very existence – its limits – and how it will end.

At this point another question deserves to be asked: does staging also entail the recognition of a further, ethical-political end, inscribed in the end of the story told?

Isn't the insistence on the end also an insistence on the need to have an end? To put an end, a goal, to human actions and aspirations? In short, it seems that a surprising custody of the end appears hidden in the perspective of the game of theater. In theater, as in the events told by Loos, the end and the finale rejoice and suffer the same fate: representing an order, the idea that an order can be placed on contingency and contradictions (Tagliapietra 2010). An order that demands imagination and not imposition, of course.

16

Now speaking of the first ritual experiences, anthropology speaks of a knowledge that humans have developed in relation to the experience of death: from having seen death. In the vision of death, we see what we can call the first representation. Originally it was a matter of representing a mortal outcome, to see the final outcome. And what does he who sees the final outcome actually see? Whoever sees the final outcome now sees the wretched remains of man represented: he sees the corpse. The corpse is the last image of a series of events that completes the end of a human story.

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (2014) described the traumatic experience of the primitive man before the corpse. According to the French scholar, from the difference between the living individual and the corpse, man has gradually elaborated faith in the immortality of the soul against the corpse that inexorably disintegrates and vanishes forever in little time. With the vision of the corpse, archaic man feels for the first time that he possesses a body governed within by a vital spirit capable of animating its body and therefore guiding its gestures and behaviors. And that is a decisive point. The vision of the corpse raises man's awareness of being subjects of action and not subject to action. In other words, the image of the corpse makes the actor-man emerge, aware of using the body as an instrument according to his precise intentionality. And since we are in the archaic world, awareness of the difference between vital spirit and instrumental body becomes the interpretative model of all human experience and more. This opens the curtain of primordial animation in which everything that happens in some way occurs because it is part of a phenomenon and an actorial intentionality. So the sky, the stars, the sea, the rivers, the rain, the animals, the plants, can behave like benevolent or whimsical beings, hostile or generous. Everything that happens in reality is understood by the original knowledge as being something actorial, as something that is analogical and magical. Reality is populated by deities, who somehow say that the whole world is populated by actors, and takes on the traits of a theater in which good spirits and bad spirits, beneficial and evil forces, fight. And little by little, the whole world is configured as a great representation of life and death. In this scenario the human story is perceived as the set of events in which chance and

destiny, violence and wisdom, father and son, new and old, fight.

17

Especially in all primitive cultures and populations, as José Ortega Y Gasset (2006) wrote about original theater, life is understood as a representation in which the *exitus* becomes the mysterious center of existence. During the archaic rite, in fact, the *exitus* was staged. With dance and song, the shaman-actor approached the sacred dimension of invocation, evocation, and representation of a positive success of human actions. The detail was the staging of a ritual of invoking the invisible forces and spirits of life, whose friendship and protection was perceived as necessary to ensure the success of hunting trips. Actions full of dangers and surprises, but necessary for the survival of the community (Leroi-Gourhan 1976).

Of these mysterious, invisible, and unpredictable forces of life, the primordial shaman-actor was the representative, the one who during the ritual assumed neither the remains and aspects, pretending their behaviors. As is well known, the ritual is the opposite of irritation – *in-ritus* – which means vain and useless, devoid of any utility. The ritual is what makes things happen. Or rather, it is what predisposes things and events to happen with good *exitus*. The ritual is what is useful to do to begin an action that involves risks and unforeseen events, such as that of archaic hunting, such as the eternal search for the sense of doing (Sini 2004, 2005). As the philosopher Carlo Sini (2019) has often repeated, at the root of the Sanskrit word *Rta*, from which the word ritual arises, a series of words are linked that are important to give meaning to existence which otherwise seems to be devoted to inexperience and undoing. It is the basis of the word *order*, the word *rhythm*, *law*, and the word *art*. The original theater, and therefore every authentic theater of the forces of life, is included in these four dimensions through which the movement of human history unfolds. In theater, the *rhythm* beats the time of the performance – making it reappear in front. This time is a *topological* time, that is, it does not correspond, to the letter, to the passing of time in the ordinary world.

Each performance flows with its own specific rhythm. And this rhythm must be *ordered* and flow, even when it is held within insoluble contrasts, straight towards the *exitus*. It must flow straight to honorable and dignified *exitus*. It does not matter if it is tragic or comical. Law, as is well known, orders the rules and behaviors to be followed and with which we must proceed and act so that life and its representation assume, consequently, a direction marked by a beginning and an end rhythm by the order of an ethical sense (Severino 2001). Which would be the order of the sense of Justice (Cacciari 1995, especially pp. 9-17). These rules indicate, in fact, what is right and what is lawful to do within a community of belonging and where, in the end, everyone hopes to always obtain, from the noblest to the most futile opportunity of life, a dignified and good *exitus*. At this point if the spectator who witnesses the performance identifies himself in the story, receiving new strength and new stimuli, then art happens. Art is therefore configured as an action which is well-done and by extension as a know-how, a know-how to make something happen. So, somehow, life and theater, reality and fiction, almost coincide.

18

And so we return to the aspiration of the poor rich man who invokes and evokes art to give meaning to his behaviors so that his destiny takes on meaning in the community in which he lives. On the stage of the theater, as in the wider frame of life, the actor, the architect, or the poor rich man who lives in each of us, stage the rules and behaviors to follow, to be honored or laughed at. Every time he enters the scene, the actor *fakes* a way of life, indicating to the



Fig. 13
Adolf Loos with Lina Loos
Obertimpfler, Peter Altemberg
and Heinz Lang, 1904.

viewer how *to fake* himself, in the sense of *shaping* actions and behaviors in the direction of the search for a just *exitus*. But just in what sense? I would say it could be put this way: just is what has to do with good. And the good thing for the just man is that everything in front of us – beyond good and evil – is good. It is good that it is what it is, it is good that the *other* is. It is good to let the *other* be free in relation to me and in his full independence. The good thing is to desire and want the *other* to be. Thus in the oxymoron of the poor rich man, Adolf Loos encloses the high space of a secret well rooted in fidelity and in the search for Justice. Poverty and wealth, well-composed and realistically orchestrated among themselves in the great game of life.

From the portrait of Henri Matisse we can understand Adolf Loos's idea of *a just man*. A man who puts on the greatest aspiration for good: the good that is the *other*. It is good that our poor rich man is himself, that he pursues his aspirations and desires, that he is advised and guided but without an external hand artificially claiming to complete it at all costs and *sparing no expense*. And let us not forget that it is often precisely from the *other* that joy comes to us, the free gift of joy. The greatest joy is that the *other* is. Joy is infinitely higher than happiness, repeatedly recalled by Loos in the story of the poor rich man. Joy is deeper and closer to our being than happiness, which is always somehow a fulfilled will. As Heidegger (2007, p. 19) says, those who receive joy are in turn "full of joy" and «Those who are full of joy can in turn give joy. Thus the joyful is at the same time what gives joy.» Joy is infinitely higher and clearer than happiness and reaches us – even if only in the space and in the short time of a play, in the use of a saltshaker or in the drawing of a small chair – because it eliminates or suspends contradictions.

19

«No one could have given him a joy anymore [the poor rich man].» At this point we can also say that this statement by Adolf Loos appears to be a statement of unbearable injustice. The worst and most unforgivable *crime* that man can commit against man and his civilization is not ornamentation, it is not covering up or masking unconfessable lies or hiding otherwise cumbersome truths. The worst *crime* is to cancel the aspiration to good and together with it the search for the small, great joys of existence.

I believe that the call to *joy* and its connections with objects of use and places of architecture remains the great gift that Adolf Loos gives to the great theater of architecture. We leave it to architecture to bring joy to the world. The intensity that makes this joy so special, intrinsic to theater and architecture, is the fact that thanks to it Adolf Loos manages to break the spell that inexplicably makes the deep friendship between the energy of reason and emotional intelligence incommunicable. And without hesitation it also manages to break the bonds with every dusty legacy, awakening the freshness and unspeakable smile of life and reality. Awakening, in this way, the closeness between architecture, theater, and ontological knowledge.

Voiceover narration: "I have discovered and given the world the following notion: the evolution of civilization is synonymous with the elimination of the ornament from the object of use. I thought I was bringing this new joy into the world, but it was not grateful to me.» (Loos 1999, pp. 218-219)

Notes

¹ It is not possible to develop the connections between destiny, character and theater here, as they are intertwined in the pages of Walter Benjamin.

² Pages 40-46 are dedicated in particular to Loos.

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