

# Reflecting Basqueness: Bilbao from mausoleum to museum<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This paper studies the links between death and renewal in the city of Bilbao, and the tension between the city as museum and mausoleum – that is, the dynamic relationship between memory and oblivion. The uniqueness of the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum will be problematized, contrasting Adorno's and Benjamin's views on aura. The paper will also explore to what extent a new critical framework is necessary to study the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum as the paradigm of the new museum.*

La muerte no mata, entierra.

Jorge Oteiza<sup>2</sup>

The radical transformation of the image of the city of Bilbao has been showcased as the urban success story of the late 1990s. From being 'the museum of environmental horrors',<sup>3</sup> as the North American ecologist Barry Commoner described the city during his visit in the mid 1970s, it is now championed as the global paradigm of 'the museum of the future'.<sup>4</sup> The steep ecological price paid for its economic activity, a direct result of heavy industry, was eloquently summed up by a scar visible on the face of the city in the 1990s; a heavily polluted river running right through its heart, with no visible wealth associated with it and no longer a source of pride to *bilbaínos*. In this article, I want to explore how the city of Bilbao fought against its own death, by creating a flagship project that paid homage to the very death of the industrial forces behind the harsh aesthetics of the city. As a consequence, the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, is by its very definition, a project riddled with unsolvable paradoxes.

If we explore all the ramifications of death in connection with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, first and foremost comes the anxiety concerning the future (or lack of future) of the city before the project took place. As Michael Keating explored in his study on the city of Glasgow, the fear of urban decay and death is a powerful symbol that politicians utilize.<sup>5</sup> If Glasgow was the city that refused to die, Bilbao followed in its footsteps. Leaving the symbolic dimension aside, there is also a more literal connection between the Guggenheim and death. The Americans chose for its location a section of 'La Campa de los Ingleses, un cementerio de [in]migrantes británicos que la pujante actividad portuaria de Bilbao convirtió más tarde en muelle y almacén de maderas'.<sup>6</sup> By the time this burial site was chosen as the location for the Guggenheim Museum, all that was left was just one more industrial ruin cluttering the city; an empty warehouse, this one particularly

## Keywords

aura  
mausoleum  
museum

- 1 I would like to thank the Carnegie Trust in Scotland for granting me the funds to accomplish this project.
- 2 José Luis Barbería, 'Una visita a Oteiza', *El País Semanal*, 17 March 2002, p. 80.
- 3 Kike Antolín, Iñaki Barceña and Pedro Ibarra, 'Transporte e identidad urbana en el Bilbao metropolitano', in Iñaki Barceña (ed.), *Bilbo, nora zoaz?: ¿Es sostenible nuestro modelo de ciudad?*, Bilbao: Eki, Erreka and Bakeaz, 1998, p. 47.
- 4 Victoria Newhouse, *Towards the New Museum*, New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997.
- 5 Michael Keating, *The City that Refused to Die: Glasgow: The Politics of Urban Regeneration*, Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988.
- 6 Iñaki Esteban, J.A. González Carrera and Alberto Tellitu, *El milagro Guggenheim: Una ilusión de alto riesgo*, Bilbao: El Correo, 1997. The site is also reported to have been a Carlist graveyard by

the newspaper *La Vanguardia* (quoted by Xon de Ros, 'The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao' in Jo Labanyi (ed.), *Constructing Identity in Contemporary Spain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 291).

- 7 A photograph of the site is available in Cooje van Bruggen, *Frank O. Gehry: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*, New York: H.N. Abrams, 1997, p. 25.
- 8 Theodor Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum' in *Prisms*, London: Neville Spearman, 1967, p. 175.
- 9 For a detailed discussion of this project see Joseba Zulaika, *Crónica de una seducción*, Madrid: Nerea, 1997, pp. 29–30.

striking because it was directly facing the University of Deusto.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the Guggenheim, the museum has literally been placed on a site of death and, metaphorically, on the ashes of the industrial past. The chosen location invokes Adorno's words in his piece 'Valéry Proust Museum' where he speaks of the connection between museum and mausoleum:

The German word 'museal' ['museumlike'] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are the family sepulchres of works of art.<sup>8</sup>

The early twentieth-century avant-garde resisted the staleness and the perceived lack of dynamism of the museum as a social institution. It is no coincidence that the late 1980s-doomed proposal by the Basque artist Jorge Oteiza (1908–2003), which failed just before planning for the Guggenheim had started, was not titled 'museo' but 'centro cultural'. It was to be built in La Alhóndiga and was popularly known as 'el Cubo' due to its proposed modernist design.<sup>9</sup> The very name, 'centro' of this failed project embodies the resistance of the modernist artist, in this case Oteiza, against the connection between museum and mausoleum, between art and decay. Oteiza's attacks against the Guggenheim project can thus be set against his own resistance to the end of modernism: this iconic avant-garde artist is mourning modernism's demise. His centre would have encompassed an exhibition space for contemporary art but also a library, music auditorium and workshops for artists. Aesthetics, creativity and pedagogy were intrinsically linked in Oteiza's space.

By the time the Guggenheim project itself was proposed in 1991, Oteiza's modernism-inspired venture was truly dead and buried. A whole way of life for the city, revolving around heavy industry, had also been laid to rest by this time. If industrialization had forged the elements of the city's identity, then this had been progressively eroded and as a result the city, refusing to die, was desperately searching for an alternative. In 1992, the photographers Jesús Angel Miranda and Fidel Raso published a photographic essay capturing images from the industrial left bank ('margen izquierda') of the city. A series of black and white shots (120 images altogether) are presented as testimony of a disappearing world, as memento mori. Many of these images are of industrial ruins and all of them have the black framing evoking the standard Spanish death notice ('esquela'). It is significant that this collection of photographs is now available for sale at the shop inside the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum. These photographs, which inhabit the space between memory and oblivion, point towards a complex relationship between past and present in the urban landscape, particularly in the context of a post-Guggenheim Bilbao. Miranda and Raso present themselves as the last generation to have witnessed the industrial history of the city and as such conceptualize the function of their photography as being to record a world that was rapidly disappearing:

Durante ese largo período recorrimos de forma sistemática todo el escenario industrial de la gran cuenca del Nervión. Rincón a rincón, fiesta a fiesta, costumbre a costumbre, fuimos registrando con nuestras cámaras lo que entendíamos como *Últimas huellas de identidad*<sup>10</sup> de una cultura o civilización que fue pasando durante un siglo y dejó su marca propia e inconfundible.<sup>11</sup>

What exactly is being remembered here? If we go back to early 1992, Bilbao was struggling with a series of crises. Its heavy industries were no longer a source of wealth; steelworks and shipyards had been closed down. The demise of these heavily polluting industries brought environmental relief to the city, which could now begin to cleanse itself: the toxic river Nervión began to flow cleaner, shedding the metallic colour of its industrial past, and the construction of the underground system helped to reduce air pollution. Victoria Newman, like other critics, has viewed the design of the Guggenheim as a homage to the industrial heritage of Bilbao, connecting the formal aspect of the building to its industrial past.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Eusebi Casanelles, the director of the Museum of Technology of Barcelona, takes the opposite view. He thinks that the museum merely ‘winks’ at the city’s heritage by paying lip service to the technological advances brought about by heavy industry.<sup>13</sup> He considers Los Altos Hornos – universally viewed by architectural historians as one of the iconic ‘industrial cathedrals’<sup>14</sup> of the Spanish process of industrialization – as distinctively unique to Bilbao in a way that the Guggenheim is not. Gehry, he argues, could have easily built a similar structure in some other place, but Los Altos Hornos is unique, authentic and cannot be reproduced. The similarities between the recently unveiled Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles and the Guggenheim Bilbao, both designed by Frank Gehry, provide support for Eusebi Casanelles’s general line of argument. Industrial architecture is a potent emblem of the region’s identity: ‘Porque la cultura industrial que arrancó en el siglo pasado ha quedado ya obsoleta y la industrialización es uno de los hechos diferenciales más importantes de Cataluña y el País Vasco.’<sup>15</sup> From the perspective of Casanelles, the museum represents a kitsch replica of an authentic historical heritage that should be preserved in its own right. However, this position can also be problematic for the city. All cities change and adapt, shedding parts of their past in the process. Furthermore, not all of Bilbao’s industrial past can realistically be preserved – a fact that is acknowledged by Casanelles himself, who does accept that destruction is part of the process of selection. In his view, the role of industrial archaeology would be to select certain testimonial examples that will be preserved into the future to illustrate the industrial past.<sup>16</sup> If the goal was to preserve everything then the city itself would become both a museum and a mausoleum. Los Altos Hornos deserves its listed-building status, but, paradoxically, this monument to progress has become a symbol of the city’s decay. For *bilbaínos*, it is easier to reflect upon the play of light on the Guggenheim’s titanium surface as a means of projecting themselves into a better future, than upon the rusty structure of Los Altos Hornos, anchored in a heavy industrial era.

- 10 Bold in the original text and with use of capital letter in ‘Últimas’.
- 11 Jesús Ángel Miranda and Fidel Raso, *Margen izquierda/Ezkerraldea: Últimas huellas de identidad*, Bilbao: Bilbao Bizkaia Kutxa, 1993, p. 2.
- 12 Victoria Newman, op. cit., p. 245.
- 13 J.L. Azkarate, ‘El Guggenheim es un guiño al patrimonio técnico’ (30 June 1997) at <http://canales.elcorredigital.com/guggenheim/archivo/970630cu.htm>, accessed 27 September 2003.
- 14 For a more detailed analysis of the importance of Los Altos Hornos see José Eugenio Villar, *Catedrales de la industria*, Baracaldo: Ediciones de la Librería San Antonio, 1994 and Julián Sobrino, *Arquitectura industrial en España, 1930-1990*, Madrid: Cátedra, 1996.
- 15 J.L. Azkarate, op. cit.
- 16 J.L. Azkarate, op. cit.

- 17 Juan Carlos Eguillor, *Los Bilbaos soñados*, Bilbao: Exposiciones Ayuntamiento de Bilbao, 2001.
- 18 Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge*, London: Verso, 1993, p. 23.
- 19 J.I. Ruiz de Olabuénaga, *Bilbao, la ciudad soñada*, vols. 1 and 2, Bilbao: Bilbao Bizkaia Kutxa, 2000.
- 20 Jeremy MacClancy, 'Nationalism at Play: the Basques of Vizcaya & Athletic Club de Bilbao', in Jeremy MacClancy (ed.), *Sport, Identity and Ethnicity*, Oxford: Berg, 1996, p. 182.
- 21 Alberto Bacigalupe dreams up the following based on the fact that before San Mamés was built the site of 'La Campa de los Ingleses' had been considered for the football stadium: '¿se imaginan qué magnífico panorama se presentaría la zona con el Guggenheim, un gran campo de fútbol y el Palacio Euskalduna como iconos de referencia?' in Albero Bacigalupe, 'La campá de Las Vegas', *Periódico Bilbao*, May 2003, p. 45.
- 22 Jeremy MacClancy, op. cit., pp. 181-99.
- 23 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

At points of radical modernization, nostalgic views of the city emerge. The artist Juan Carlos Eguillor (1947-) pays homage to the old Bilbao in his drawings; that is, the industrial Bilbao, which he much prefers to the new one.<sup>17</sup> There is nothing unusual in this nostalgic display of the urban past when forces of modernization change a familiar urban landscape. As Beatriz Sarlo says: 'Borges affirms that "One function of art is to bequeath an illusory yesterday to men's memory."' <sup>18</sup> In this manner, Jorge Luis Borges writes a homage in his book and essay *Evaristo Carriego* (1931) to the minor poet Evaristo Carriego (1883-1912) and to the neighbourhood of Palermo as an *orilla* of the city of Buenos Aires, at a time when the area, as he describes it, is no more.

Neither does the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum represent the first time that the city of Bilbao has dreamt of change. Its colourful history is full of unrealized projects, as demonstrated in the two-volume study by the sociologist José Ignacio Ruiz de Olabuénaga, *Bilbao, la ciudad soñada*. He sees the historical emergence and development of the city of Bilbao in the context of its capacity to project itself into the future, and contextualizes the new Bilbao in a series of dreams.<sup>19</sup> If we focus on foreign influences and how Basques see themselves, again this is not the first time that the future has influenced definitions of identity. As the anthropologist Jeremy MacClancy argues, when discussing how football came to be embraced in Bilbao: the first football match in the city was between Britons and Basques and took place on 3 May 1894, and already then Basques were looking into the future when thinking about their own identity.<sup>20</sup> Coincidentally, these early footballing encounters took place in 'La Campa de los Ingleses'.<sup>21</sup> Thus British input into the city not only involved financial capital and technology, but also cultural practices. MacClancy bases his analysis on Jacki Urla's anthropological work:

Urla makes a related point in her work on current Basque ethnonationalist culture: that many nationalists wish to be seen as both the heirs of a laudable history and also as 'up-to-date' as those of their contemporaries in other lands interested in both the renovation and the recuperation of their way of life.<sup>22</sup>

MacClancy sees the dynamic interaction between present and past as being rooted in culture. Similarly, in the urban context, Andreas Huyssen sees past and present narratives interacting in space.<sup>23</sup> In the same way that football was adopted by *bilbaínos* during the period of industrial modernization and became one of the key identifiers of the city, the Guggenheim too has now been written into the city's contemporary narrative.

Nevertheless, in this process of rewriting Basque identity the traumas of the past have not disappeared, despite the projection into the future. One of the controversies surrounding the museum was the desire to bring the painting *Guernica* to the opening as a temporary loan. The petition was turned down by the Museo Reina Sofía on grounds that it would not be safe for the painting to be transported once again. This then developed into a bitter polemic when Xabier Arzalluz, head of the ruling nationalist party,

PNV, said controversially: ‘da la impresión de lo de siempre: para Euskadi, las bombas, y para Madrid, el arte’.<sup>24</sup> This is a great distortion of history, that blatantly ignores the bombings suffered by many Spanish cities and also ignores the fact that Picasso envisioned his painting as an antifascist symbol. These factors did not stop Thomas Krens from taking an active part in the debate: ‘[Krens] insistió en que “se trata de algo más que un préstamo. El pueblo vasco pagó por este cuadro con su sangre”’<sup>25</sup>. This is part of a wider debate on the ownership of art. The Spanish writer Félix de Azúa, in a provocative piece on the Basque claims regarding *Guernica* quotes the painter Antonio Saura, who described the painting as a big ugly poster. In Azúa’s view *Guernica* is an invaluable artistic commodity that in the eyes of the Basques has become an ‘itinerant relic’.<sup>26</sup> If the claims had been granted, then *Guernica*, one of the key icons of modernism and recent Basque history (and an endlessly reproduced antifascist poster) would have been situated in the postmodernist ‘Museum of the future’ as a temporary loan. Now the Guggenheim itself is every bit as much the main theme of posters sold to tourists in Bilbao. Nevertheless, it is telling that at this crucial point, when Basques were looking into the future, the past was still filtering through: *Guernica* was one of most widely reproduced images displayed in Basque households during the Franco years.

In parallel to these past traumas, Basque terrorism remained the single biggest threat to the success of the Guggenheim. Two days before the opening, a Basque policeman [*Ertzaina*] named José María Aguirre, who was investigating a suspicious looking truck, was murdered by ETA. Mourners left flowers in the museum grounds. The president of the Basque government, José Antonio Ardanza, declared in a tribute that ‘[Aguirre’s] sacrifice has raised this museum to a symbol of our freedom.’<sup>27</sup>

The Guggenheim effect has been linked not only to the economic renewal of the city itself, but also to the potential for effecting positive change on the latter’s social problems: a good example would be the start of the ceasefire which began not long after the opening of the museum. About a year later ETA announced a truce, and from 16<sup>th</sup> September 1998 to 28<sup>th</sup> November 1999 the organization did not kill anyone. Many started to believe that the Guggenheim effect had something to do with this, although time has proven that even if this was true, the initiative was not sustained. One immediately positive effect was the urban regeneration of the riverside area. It is interesting to note that the director of the Guggenheim Foundation, Thomas Krens, presented the finding of the site as an epiphany: that is, the moment, while running through the city that he suddenly saw ‘the geocultural triangle of Bilbao’ between Bellas Artes Museum, the University of Deusto and the Arriaga Theatre.<sup>28</sup> Cooje van Bruggen reproduces the map with handwritten notes by Frank Gehry that stress the visual presence of the building from the three angles mentioned.<sup>29</sup>

That visionary experience is also implicit in the description of the Bilbao writer and illustrator Asun Balzaola, when she describes the city in the 1940s and then goes on to compare the image of the new museum:

- 24 Aitor Guenaga, ‘Euskadi se lleva las bombas, y Madrid, el arte, según Arzalluz’, *El País: Cultura*, 15 May 1997, at <http://www.elpais.es/articulo.html>, accessed 27 September 2003.
- 25 A. Intxausti and J. Cavestany, ‘Aguirre admite que se traslade el “Guernica” tras un debate técnico’, 17 May 1997, at <http://www.elpais.es/articulo.html>, accessed 27 September 2003.
- 26 Félix de Azúa, ‘¿Pikasso?’, *Arquitectura viva*, 55 (July–August 1997), p. 112.
- 27 ‘Security tight as Guggenheim opens in Basque city’, CNN World News, 18 October 1997 at <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9710/18/spain.museum>, accessed 27 September 2003.
- 28 Cooje van Bruggen, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
- 29 Cooje van Bruggen, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

- 30 Lucía Iglesias, 'Bilbao: the Guggenheim effect', at [http://www.unesco.org/courier/1998\\_09/uk/signes/txt1.htm](http://www.unesco.org/courier/1998_09/uk/signes/txt1.htm), accessed 27 September 2003.
- 31 Fredric Jameson offers a contextualized discussion of the relationship between surface and postmodernism and says the following in connection with Gehry's Santa Monica house (1979): 'the strange new feeling of an absence of inside and outside, the bewilderment and loss of spatial orientation in Portman's hotels, the messiness of an environment in which things and people no longer find their "place" [...]', in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 117-18.
- 32 Victoria Newman, op. cit., p. 256.
- 33 Theodor Adorno, op. cit., p. 176.
- 34 Herbert Muschamp, 'The Miracle in Bilbao', *New York Times Magazine*, 7 September 1997, p. 54.

These were the years of iron and we lived at Bilbao, also a city of iron, always wet, gleaming and black because it was always raining ... [...] The district where I spent my childhood has changed beyond belief. Then it was a noisy industrial area, today it's a very peaceful place. Bilbao was a grey city like ... well ... Manchester perhaps. Now it's white, luminous. [...] When you are inside the building, the light, and the spirals of the architecture almost make you forget its contents. You would almost be willing to visit if it was empty. [...] You walk along a street and suddenly there is this great titanium-clad mountain in front of you. It plays tricks on you.<sup>30</sup>

This vision of light and loss of senses is problematic from a curatorial perspective since it implies that the building itself, with its reflection, is more important than the works inside.<sup>31</sup> However, Victoria Newman assesses this change in a positive manner:

Gehry's architecture of movement has produced flowing forms that appear as film stills: motion caught and made definitive at a particular moment. The result finally restores what Paul Valéry referred to as 'the mother' – architecture – to 'orphans' – painting and sculpture.<sup>32</sup>

This church-like quality is also emphasized in connection with Valéry in Adorno's essay, where he refers to the latter's ironic mentions of states such as 'contemplation' and 'sacred awe'.<sup>33</sup> If Balzaola's description ascribes a cathedral-like spiritual quality to the Guggenheim Museum, then there is another parallel cathedral in the city: San Mamés, the stadium of Athletic de Bilbao, is popularly known as 'la catedral' by their fans and followers.

Balzaola's miracle-like vision of the Guggenheim is echoed in the widely quoted article 'The Miracle in Bilbao' by Herbert Muschamp, the architectural critic of the *New York Times*. Muschamp's words, however, have a very different resonance after 11 September 2001. Suggesting tourism with a twist, this quest for danger and for the real is not as unlikely to be realized on American soil after the attack against the Twin Towers in New York:

This is Basque Country. A region proudly, if not officially, independent from the rest of Spain; it is also bleakly free from Spanish sophistication. Oh, and by the way, you might get blown up. Basque Country is not Bosnia. But it's not Disney World, either. History here has not been sanitized into a colorful spectacle for your viewing enjoyment. People are actually living history here, punctuated by periodic violence. Those who visit Bilbao, however, may come away thinking that art is not entirely remote from matters of life and death.<sup>34</sup>

If we look at the highly artificial golden image of the building reproduced in Muschamp's article (originally placed on the museum's first web pages) where the aura emanating from the cladding is the main focus of the photograph, we can see that this is a city in search of its own global *el Dorado*. The auratic image can also be linked to the commodity fetishism discussed by

Theodor Adorno in his essay 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening'.<sup>35</sup> Adorno's analysis of music is a response to Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', where mechanical reproduction represents the loss of aura.<sup>36</sup> This would be the opposite process to the one symbolized in the auratic image offered by Muschamp's review of the museum. Joseba Zulaika, following Benjamin, asserts that, just as in the era of mechanical reproduction, art was inevitably destined to lose its aura, the devaluing 'McGuggenheim' effect of museum reproduction was bound to happen, and that the franchise opened in Bilbao is an illustration of this.<sup>37</sup> However Beatriz Plaza, coming from the field of economics, takes as her basis the very same process, namely reproduction, but arrives at the opposite conclusion – reproduction leads not to the loss of aura but to its accumulation.

We should also bear in mind that the Guggenheim Bilbao is the result of a public/private partnership mirroring prevailing trends in the culture industries since the 1980s in the United States and Britain.<sup>38</sup> The wealth created by the museum through the sale of materials, from books to pens bearing the branded image of the Guggenheim Bilbao, is fundamentally based on the reproduction of that same image. Taken to its logical conclusion, this implies that the museum itself can be replicated elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> Beatriz Plaza's article forms part of a debate between her and María V. Gómez and Sara González. While Plaza defends the uniqueness of the Guggenheim, Gómez and González question the project's claim to uniqueness. As there have in fact been plans to reproduce the design of the museum elsewhere, these two authors are perhaps entitled to question whether the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum can truly be considered unique.<sup>40</sup> Is the franchise a miracle or a mirage? Does it lead to a loss of aura for the institution or to the creation of wealth? Huyssen sees the answer in the radical change experienced in recent times by museums as social institutions. His analysis is extremely useful in assessing these two conflicting views on the Guggenheim Bilbao which run throughout the critical sources: 'The original artwork has become a device to sell its multiply-reproduced derivatives; reproducibility turned into a ploy to auraticize the original after the decay of aura, a final victory of Adorno over Benjamin.'<sup>41</sup>

These two conflicting interpretations lead us to question the way we think about the role and identity of the contemporary museum. The critical framework of our theorizing about the museum as a social institution has to change, since from the very beginning of this particular project the stated agenda was to break away from institutional rules. Thomas Krens wanted to move away from 'the idea of encyclopaedia' i.e. the vision of the museum that has been presented to its audience 'in a nineteenth-century box – the extended palace.'<sup>42</sup> We therefore have to adapt our critical language to a different type of museum, one that explicitly aims to leave the twentieth-century model behind.

It has already been established that the model of the 'replicable museum' has turned out to be the emerging paradigm at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. For a while, and under the workings of

35 Theodor W. Adorno, 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', in Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, London: Routledge, 1991, pp. 26-52.

36 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1970, pp. 219-53.

37 Joseba Zulaika, 'Podlatch arquitectónico', *Arquitectura viva*, 55 (Jul-Aug 1997), p. 22.

38 For a detailed discussion of the changes brought by Reagan and Thatcher into the arts read the excellent book by Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s*, London: Verso, 2002. Wu's study offers the historical background to contemporary public/private partnerships such as the one formed to accomplish the Bilbao project.

39 Beatriz Plaza, 'The Guggenheim-Bilbao Museum Effect: A Reply to María V. Gómez' "Reflective Images: The Case of Urban Regeneration in Glasgow and Bilbao", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 23: 3 (1999), pp. 589-92.

40 María V. Gómez and Sara González, 'A Reply to Beatriz Plaza's "The Guggenheim-Bilbao Museum Effect"', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 25: 4 (2001), pp. 898-900.

41 Andreas Huyssen, op. cit., 1995, pp. 23-24.

- 42 Cooje van Bruggen, op. cit., p. 18.
- 43 Deyan Sudjic, 'Landmarks of hope and glory', *The Observer Review*, 26 October 2003, p. 6.
- 44 Llätzer Moix, 'El edificio cosmético', *La Vanguardia Cultura*, 24 July 2002, p. 17.
- 45 Deyan Sudjic, 'Reflective Glory', *Tate Art Magazine*, 13 (1997), p. 57.
- 46 Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 16.

the Guggenheim effect, this has been a successful model. However, critical voices have recently increased in volume. When does an excess of aura generate diminishing returns? Deyan Sudjic in his piece on the latest design by Frank Gehry (the Walt Disney Concert Hall) adopts a negative view:

This is the way to an architecture of diminishing returns in which every sensational new building must attempt to eclipse the last one. It leads to a kind of hyperinflation, the architectural equivalent of the Weimar Republic's debauching of its currency.<sup>43</sup>

Sudjic is pointing out a situation in which the icon is rendered non-iconic because of the sheer quantity of so-called flagship projects. In this new context, how unique is the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum? Without doubt it has proven extremely successful in terms of promoting a more positive civic image of Bilbao. But some of the initial claims – for instance that the Guggenheim effect would bring peace to the region – have been proven wrong over time. Llätzer Moix, in *La Vanguardia*, labels the Guggenheim 'el edificio cosmético' and calls Frank Gehry's artistic practice 'arquitectura maquillaje'.<sup>44</sup> Basques may well have been reflecting on the glory of its titanium surfaces, but time has proven that aesthetics are no substitute for real political dialogue. There is more to this issue than simply considering the museum as a civic panacea.

I would argue that Moix fails to take sufficient account of the fact that this populist project was riddled with paradoxes from the very beginning, and that it is because of these paradoxes that the Guggenheim has been so effective in its seduction. As Deyan Sudjic perceptively remarks in his initially enthusiastic reception of the Guggenheim Bilbao: 'So here we have the paradoxical spectacle of a small nation asserting its own cultural identity by importing culture wholesale, a Basque government funding the construction of an astonishingly impressive landmark by securing America's most admired living architect.'<sup>45</sup>

On the current boom in the development of new museums, Huyssen sees a real need in contemporary society to renegotiate the past and our own relationship with death:

Against the anti-museum discourse still dominant among intellectuals, one might even see the museum as our own memento mori, and as such, a life-enhancing rather than mummifying institution in an age bent on the destructive denial of death: the museum thus as a site and testing ground for reflections on temporality and subjectivity, identity and alterity.<sup>46</sup>

However, his words resonate differently in the Basque context, against the backdrop of political violence.

The auratic effect may have been rubbed off by the Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles and the global plans of the Guggenheim Museum have not been fully realized in the current world climate. Yet despite recent setbacks, the



Guggenheim effect in Bilbao is still a powerful symbol of urban renewal whose base has been firmly rooted in local visual and social tensions: its highly stylized reflective building confronts us in a city found among green hills yet scattered with industrial ruins and harsh architecture. The Guggenheim Bilbao Museum can be seen as a reflection on the anthropological need in contemporary society to 'negotiate and to articulate a relationship to the past that is also always a relationship to the transitory and to death, our own included'.<sup>47</sup> Alongside the tension between urban decay and renewal, the project would have not been realized without the political tensions, which forced Basques to reflect on their own future identity, at least in part. Bilbao achieved its refusal to die and to become an industrial mausoleum by building a museum that reflected a Basque identity as a projection into the future, a non-violent future that has yet to materialize – a potential only just glimpsed during the brief ceasefire.

47 Andreas Huyssen, *ibid.*

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