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*Future or Eclipse of Criticism*



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Edited by Lina Malfona  
Lucia Giorgetti  
Cecilia Marcheschi  
Elisa Barsanti

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# *Future or Eclipse of Criticism*

To Pierluigi Nicolin, in memoriam

## *Opening remarks*

- 12 **Margherita Guccione**, MAXXI Roma  
16 **Luca Lanini**, Università di Pisa

## *Introduction*

- 20 **Lina Malfona**, Università di Pisa  
Critical Measures

## *Essays*

- 40 **Marco Biraghi**, Politecnico di Milano  
The Destiny of Critique  
47 **Franco Purini**, Sapienza Università di Roma  
An Unsurpassed Gift  
52 **Cynthia Davidson**, LOG Journal  
In Critical Condition  
64 **Joseph Bedford**, Virginia Tech  
On the Value of Criticism within Architectural Education: The  
Open Jury and the Liberal Democratic Promise of Post-War Pedagogy  
89 **Albena Yaneva**, Politecnico di Torino  
Putting Things into Orbit: The New Style of Critique  
111 **Lorenzo Cicarelli**, Università di Firenze  
Critical Thinking and Architecture as a Commodity  
118 **Stan Allen**, Princeton University  
An Unfinished Debate? Revisiting the Critical and the  
Projective

## *Interviews*

- 136 **Nina Bassoli**, Triennale Milano  
148 **Giovanna Borasi**, Canadian Centre for Architecture  
154 **Pippo Ciorra**, Università di Camerino  
167 **Fulvio Irace**, Politecnico di Milano  
181 **Hélène Jannièrè**, Université Rennes 2  
191 **Pierluigi Nicolin**, Lotus Journal  
201 **Carlo Olmo**, Politecnico di Milano  
214 **Teresa Stoppani**, Norwich University of the Arts

## *Editors' Notes*

- 226 **Elisa Barsanti**, **Cecilia Marcheschi**, Università di Pisa  
Critical Echoes  
238 **Lucia Giorgetti**, Università di Pisa  
Annotated Bibliography

## *Index*

- 254 List of names

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*Essays*

## Marco Biraghi

Politecnico di Milano

### The Destiny of Critique

The question of critique is crucial, today perhaps more than ever, since we are—as is clearly evident—in a “post-critical era.” We must therefore dedicate the utmost attention to critique, trying to shed some light on it while avoiding at the same time to indulge in the usual “complaints” regarding its alleged “disappearance,” or declaring its death, as is often done. And this for the simple reason that in no way we can declare “dead” expressive forms such as critique, as well as art, architecture, the novel, cinema, whose definitive passing is affirmed in recurring phases, but at most we can note its/their temporary *eclipse*. And at the same time we should follow—and consequently try to interpret—its/their continuous transformations, incessant metamorphoses.

Having clarified this, what is meant by “destiny of critique”? At first glance it might appear to be an unnecessarily melodramatic expression. To understand the correct meaning of this expression, it is necessary to approach the two terms that compose it: destiny and critique. The word destiny derives from the Greek *ístemi*, which indicates something that is stable (a sense that resonates for example in words such as static, stele, obstinacy); something that is *established*. But in what sense is destiny “established”?

And above all, by whom or what? Here, we must be very careful, because we can believe that destiny is established by someone or something acting from the outside, in the sense in which we refer for example to fate, fatality, or “divine will,” or that it is established by him/her who embodies it. In short, the difference is between believing that we *have* a destiny, and that therefore what happens to us is completely “fatal,” and believing instead that we *are* a destiny; that is, that—at least to a certain extent—the orientation of the actions of those who accomplishes is the fruit of his/her decision, his/her *choice*. The difference is evidently essential, and through it passes the possibility of thinking of destiny as something in which each of us can have a say in the possibility of directing it in one way or another.

Faced with this, the perspective on the destiny of critique changes completely: from being something entrusted to a totally uncontrollable and therefore accidental “fate”—something about whose “disappearance” or “death” we can question ourselves as an inevitable event—to being on the contrary something on which we can in turn intervene: something that we can influence in some way, although certainly not completely control. In this sense, in making the decisive transition from having a destiny to *being* a destiny, it “happens” that we ourselves can *be* the destiny of critique: to the extent that we do something to keep it alive, even transforming it into its current forms, or if we confirm its “death,” with our negligent attitude towards it.

*Being the destiny of critique*, therefore, clearly implies, on the part of whoever is the subject of this “action,” the assumption of a responsibility: that is to say that its life or its (even if temporary) “death” can literally depend on this subject.

But what does the second term—critique—mean? The apparent

banality of the question should not distract us from the need to provide an answer that is as exact as possible. The term critique derives from the Greek verb κρίνω, I distinguish, I judge. For the Greeks, κριτική τέχνη was the art of judging. Critique then involves a judgment that has nothing vague about it, which is not simply based on “taste,” and which instead requires an ability to distinguish, to discriminate, or rather to see the differences.

As a specific activity, critique is what is practiced by professional critics. Outside of this perspective, however, critique belongs to everyone: that is, to all those who are endowed with thought, or rather, with critical thought. In order to judge, critical thinking is certainly essential: on the basis of what else could one formulate a judgment? Certainly not on the basis of superficial impressions, of an epidermal “pleasure” (like or dislike). To possess and express these, non-critical thinking is sufficient. To be able to be called such, however, a judgment needs to be based on fundamental reasons. And the founding reasons in turn are rooted in critical thinking.

But—one might ask—*what* critical thinking? Referring to architecture, critical thinking today should present itself first and foremost as ethical thinking. To make a judgment on today’s architecture one must possess ethical thinking, that is, ethics: since with increasing frequency in our era architecture finds itself facing issues related to the consumption of resources and environmental sustainability, for example, and therefore must be judged on the basis of its greater or lesser “correctness,” on its being more or less “appropriate.” Moreover, the judgment on architecture requires also aesthetic thinking, for reasons that are easily understandable. Finally (to limit it only to these), it requires political thought, because in an equally evident way architecture acts politically, that is, it acts on the *polis*: to be understood—the latter—not so much

in a literal sense, but as that extended social sphere, that “public sphere” within which architecture necessarily fits (architecture, as Paulo Mendes da Rocha said, is always public, even when its clients are private).

With all this, it is not easy to have an ethical, aesthetic and political thought. And it would be even more difficult if having it meant knowing Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Hegel’s *Aesthetics* or Aristotle’s *Politics*, to name a few famous works. Does this mean that we have to give up on critical thinking? And even more: should we give up making a judgment on architecture because we do not have a sufficiently well-founded thought on which that judgment can be based? But we actually *have* a thought! (We know we have a thought, otherwise we couldn’t even think this thought). What is this thought based on? One could say, in a large of cases: on an “unthought” thought; a thought that does not have precise roots, from an ethical, aesthetic, political point of view, but which was formed on the basis of cultural habits, school learning, circulating ideas. A sum of different factors, which change with the changing era and environment, which nevertheless provides each of us with “parameters of judgment” in the ethical, aesthetic and even political fields. Although they are very rarely based on solid “foundations” such as Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Hegel’s *Aesthetics* or Aristotle’s *Politics*, however uncertain and changeable they may be, we have critical judgments on ethics, aesthetics and politics (and of course on many other things too); judgments constructed by means of “instrumentation” collected during our experience of life.

And so, as subjects of that destiny of critique (of architecture, in our case), or—it should be remembered—as “incarnations” of the possibility of judging it in ethical, aesthetic and political terms, how should we exercise this “power”? First of all, we should exercise our

judgment in a more conscious way, strengthening our thinking as much as possible, giving it more solid foundations and making it more critically aware. Furthermore, we should always keep in mind that there is no fundamental difference—a constitutive difference—between exercising critical judgment as architecture critics and as any other thinking subject. As already mentioned, critical activity does not “belong” to the critic: it belongs to our being thinking human beings. But be careful: it does not belong to us as something that is *physiologically* part of us. As human beings, we *can* be critical, that is, we can exercise that critical judgment mentioned above, but there is no condition that makes being critical transcendently indispensable. To be critical or not is the result of our *decision*.

To what extent then can it be worth being critical, or to what extent is it worth deciding to be the *positive* destiny of critique, making it live, rather than the *negative* one, leaving it to remain in its condition of crisis, of eclipse? We could answer this question by saying that our freedom is at stake when we are critical. This statement, which might appear arbitrary, is founded on an evident reason: if in fact a thought is not critical—as already noted above—it does not mean that it is not a thought: a non-critical thought is not a non-thought. Rather, non-critical thought is a thought that has been thought by *someone else*. It is a thought that—rather than carrying out thinking as an activity, as an *active* fact—is thought in a *passive* sense; it is a thought that acts reflexively. And this determines the fact that non-critical thinking puts those who embrace it in the condition of not being free. Which necessarily means that those (like us) who believe they are free—and who actually make freedom a sort of “flag” of their own identity—end up revealing that they are not free at all, and they are rather “enslaved;” since freedom consists in the possibility of choosing. What other condition

makes us aware of being free, if not the fact of being able to make *choices*? As we well know, those who are not free have no choice.

This, therefore, is what is at stake in the destiny of critique: not only the possibility of giving (or not) a judgment on architecture or any other topic, but also that of exercising (or not) one’s freedom. And for this reason it is important to push the discussion on critique beyond the “specialist” dimension, concerning exclusively the professional critic, to broaden it to all its possible subjects: because it is only by broadening it to this collective dimension that we can understand the truly crucial dimension of critique. As long as it remains confined only to the small elite of “critics,” or in any case only to those who write in newspapers, magazines or online, the discussion on critique has a relative importance; and like all things that have a relative importance, sooner or later they risk disappearing. From this point of view, the eclipse of critique mentioned above evidently does not take place by chance; it is not an inexplicable event, a “fatal” event: on the contrary, it is the outcome of destiny—of *destination*, one could even say—in which we ourselves, with our lack of interest, with our negligence towards it, end up to direct it. This lack of interest does not mean that critical thinking is something that cannot be useful to us today; rather, it means that the contemporary era does not require critical thinking for the simple reason that in current times we are increasingly rarely active subjects of our “decisions,” and much more frequently “we are decided” by other wills. It means that—if we look closely—we are not as free as we usually think, and without realizing it we are often “enslaved.” Which makes critical thinking even more indispensable.

Marco Biraghi is Professor of the History of Contemporary Architecture at Milan Polytechnic University, where he graduated in 1986 under Massimo Cacciari. He is the author of remarkable books among which *Progetto di crisi. Manfredo Tafuri e l'architettura contemporanea* (Marinotti Edizioni 2005, The MIT Press 2013); *Storia dell'architettura italiana 1985-2012* (with Silvia Micheli, Einaudi 2013); *Identification Parade: Manfredo Tafuri and Rem Koolhaas* (Textem Verlag 2011); *Storia dell'architettura contemporanea I-II* (Einaudi 2008-2023); *Rem Koolhaas. L'architettura al di là del bene e del male* (Einaudi 2024).

## Franco Purini

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### An Unsurpassed Gift

In recent years, with few exceptions, critique—in these notes referring to critique in the visual arts and architecture—has, in my opinion, no longer sought, in the necessary explorations, the creative processes and their outcomes, the reason of the works. Instead, it has chosen not to engage with research directions, Instead, it has chosen to focus only on getting attention from the media and contemporary trends. Critique has narrowed its horizons by reducing itself to mere propaganda and celebration. In doing so, it has forgotten the precedents that have influenced our present and the differences in the content and meaning of recent works. In contrast to trends that thirty years ago could be identified in a limited number of works, today almost all critics believe that every painting, every sculpture, every installation, and every building is a carrier of a trend. In this way, the idea of an evolution of already known and active trends disappears in favor of an overestimation of each work. The result of all this is not only the impossibility of classifying and evaluating the meaning and language of what is being produced, but also a positive view of the *labyrinthine situation* of artistic activity, as if the *homogenization* of *writings* inherent in globalization were the domain of new artistic concepts.

*Index*

## List of Names

- Abruzzese, Alberto 26n  
 Adorno, Theodor W. 201  
 Agamben, Giorgio 219, 219n  
 Agosti, Gianni 142  
 Albin, Franco 180, 200  
 Allen, Stan 21, 31n, 118, 124n, 131n, 133, 230  
 Alpers, Svetlana 106  
 Anceschi, Luciano 27, 27n  
 Anderson, Lawrence 80, 80n  
 Anderson, Stanford 76, 76n  
 Andreani, Aldo 177  
 Anthony, Kathryn H. 81n  
 APAO 164  
 Appadurai, Arjun 198  
 Aravena, Alejandro 25  
 Arbasino, Alberto 158  
 Aristotle 43  
 Asnago, Mario 174  
 Atelier Vago 237  
 Aulenti, Gae 141-3  
 Baird, George 121, 123, 126, 129  
 Baldessari, Luciano 180  
 Ballo, Aldo 142  
 Banham, Reyner 57-8, 203, 241, 243-44, 243-44n  
 Bannister, Turpin 79, 79n, 81, 81n  
 Barbarewicz, Piotr 215  
 Bardi, Pietro Maria 16, 164  
 Barilli, Renato 177  
 Barsanti, Elisa 36, 226, 237  
 Barthes, Roland 33, 34n  
 Bassoli, Nina 24n, 136, 147, 234  
 Baudelaire, Charles 26, 55, 168, 179  
 Baudrillard, Jean 220  
 Baxandall, Michael 106  
 Becker, Howard 106  
 Bedford, Joseph 64, 88, 229  
 Benevolo, Leonardo 171  
 Benjamin, Andrew 215, 215n  
 Benjamin, Walter 55, 61-2, 111-13, 111-12n, 116, 219, 228, 229n  
 Bhatia, Manas 57-8  
 Biraghi, Marco 14, 28n, 36, 40, 46, 113n, 145, 216, 228, 228n, 243n  
 Bloch, Marc 170  
 Bocchi, Renato 215  
 Bonfanti, Ezio 165  
 Bontempelli, Massimo 156, 160, 164  
 Borasi, Giovanna 24, 148, 153, 235  
 Borden, Iain 90n, 92n, 103n  
 Borges, Luis 220  
 Bos, Caroline 121  
 Bourdieu, Pierre 91n, 93  
 Bourriaud, Nicolas 21, 30, 106, 232  
 Brandi, Cesare 157  
 Branzi, Andrea 191, 216  
 Brecht, Bertold 112  
 Brizzi, Marco 186  
 Caccia Dominioni, Luigi 176  
 Caccia Gherardini, Susanna 211, 213  
 Cacciari, Massimo 46, 155  
 Cahoon, Lawrence 85n  
 Calder, Barnabas 116n  
 Callon, Michel 249n  
 Calvino, Italo 196  
 Canova, Gianni 26n  
 Carmassi, Massimo 237  
 Carpo, Mario 24n  
 Cattelan, Maurizio 48  
 Ciccarelli, Lorenzo 21, 111, 229, 232n  
 Ciorra, Pippo 21, 154, 166, 234  
 Clark, Peter 210  
 Clément, Gilles 197  
 Cohen, Jean-Louis 14, 36, 164, 183, 204  
 Cole, Teju 55  
 Collins, Peter 77-8, 78n, 186-7  
 Colomina, Beatriz 173  
 Colquhoun, Alan 94n  
 Conrads, Ulrich 183  
 Costa Santos, Sandra  
 Cousins, Mark 215, 219  
 Crimson Architects 120  
 Cuff, Dana 103n  
 Danesi, Silvia 176n  
 Davidson, Cynthia 21, 52, 63, 231, 231n  
 De Albertis, Claudio 26n, 49, 251n  
 De Angelis, Valentina 27n  
 De Carlo, Giancarlo 192  
 De Feo, Vittorio 155  
 De Fusco, Renato 177, 247n  
 De Seta, Cesare 177  
 De Vico Fallani, Irene 36  
 Deleuze, Gilles 96, 105-6, 105-6n, 173  
 Derrida, Jacques 22, 93, 173  
 Dewey, John 205  
 Diener and Diener 129  
 Diller Scofidio + Renfro 35  
 Diller/Scofidio 127-28  
 Dolce & Gabbana 172  
 Douglas, Mary 91  
 Dunlop, Beth 69  
 Eco, Umberto 157, 161  
 Eiland, Howard 111n, 229n  
 Eisenman, Peter 118, 120-1, 123, 127-29, 155, 166  
 Eliot, Thomas S. 31n  
 Ferlenga, Alberto 14, 36  
 Filippini, Enrico 157  
 Fortier, Bruno 183  
 Foster + Partners 100  
 Foster, Hal 27n, 121, 128  
 Foster, Norman 97  
 Foucault, Michel 30, 85n, 93  
 Frampton, Kenneth 53, 128  
 Freud, Sigmund 192  
 Gabetti, Roberto 213  
 Garofalo, Luca 21  
 Gehry, Frank O. 48, 71, 103, 172, 247n

- Giedion, Sigfried 177, 179, 238, 240, 243n  
 Ginzburg, Carlo 23, 169-70, 210-12  
 Giorgetti, Lucia 36, 238, 252  
 Giuli, Alessandro 21  
 Gobbo, Simone 161  
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang 55  
 Graafland, Arie 121  
 Grassi, Giorgio 155  
 Grasso Cannizzo, Maria G. 195  
 Gregotti, Vittorio 117, 191-92, 196-97, 200, 205-06, 216  
 Gropius, Walter 239, 240n  
 Gruppo 63 157  
 Guccione, Margherita 12, 36  
 Gusevich, Miriam 54, 56, 66  
 Guyer, Paul 66n  
 Hadid, Zaha 71  
 Haraway, Donna 108n  
 Harbeson, John 76, 76n  
 Hardt, Michael 113n, 130  
 Hartung, Martin 54  
 Hays, K. Michael 125, 127-9  
 Heatherwick, Thomas 72  
 Hegel, Georg W. Friedrich 43  
 Heidegger, Martin 199  
 Hermant, Emilie 98n  
 Herzog & de Meuron 129, 174  
 Hitchcock, Henry-Russell 211  
 Hobsbawm, Eric 203-04  
 Holm, Lorens 218  
 Houdart, Sophie 100n, 103n  
 Huet, Bernard 183  
 Huxtable, Ada Louise 68, 73, 73n, 172, 184  
 Imperiale, Alicia 21  
 Ingels, Bjarke 71  
 Ingersoll, Richard 22  
 Irace, Fulvio 167, 180, 233  
 Jacobs, Jane 184, 197  
 James, William 119, 119n  
 Jameson, Frederick 114n  
 Jannièr, Hélène 181, 190, 234  
 Jencks, Charles 246n  
 Jennings, Michael W. 111n, 229n  
 Johnson, Paul-Alan 94n  
 Johnson, Philip 73, 247n  
 Kahn, Andrea 67n  
 Kahn, Nathaniel 161  
 Kant, Immanuel 66, 66n  
 Ketchum, Diana 69  
 King, Anthony D. 91n  
 Kipnis, Jeffrey 124, 155  
 Klee, Paul 61-2  
 Koetter, Fred 82  
 Koolhaas, Rem 24, 34, 46, 82, 97, 118, 121, 161-62, 193, 196, 248  
 Koselleck, Reinhart 65, 66n  
 Kubler, George 173, 175  
 Kuhn, Thomas 83, 83n  
 Kuklick, Bruce 119n  
 Kwinter, Sanford 124  
 Lanier, Jaron 71n  
 Lanini, Luca 16, 237  
 Latour, Bruno 23n, 30, 30n, 95, 95n, 98, 98n, 110, 232, 249, 249n  
 Latour, Carolina 36  
 Law, John 249n  
 Le Corbusier 211  
 Leach, Neil 58, 90n  
 Lee, Mark 14, 36  
 Lepetit, Bernard 204  
 Levi, Giovanni 210, 212  
 Lewis, Penny 218n  
 Libeskind, Daniel 125, 155  
 Lokko, Leslie 25  
 Luther, Martin 62  
 Lynn, Greg 121, 124  
 Lyotard, Jean- François 192, 230  
 Magistretti, Vico 176  
 Mahler, Gustav 139  
 Malfona, Lina 12, 15-7, 26n, 28n, 37, 49-50, 136, 148, 154, 167, 181, 191, 201, 214, 227, 231n, 237  
 Marcheschi, Cecilia 36, 226, 237  
 Marini, Sara 28n  
 Martin, Reinhold 121-22, 126  
 Marx, Karl 130  
 Meier, Richard 133  
 Mendes da Rocha, Paulo 43  
 Merkel, Jayne 69  
 Michelangelo 187  
 Millar Howard Workshop 99-100  
 Millon, Henry 76, 76n  
 Minato, Chihiro 100n, 103n  
 Moneo, Rafael 133  
 Monestiroli, Antonio 155  
 Morris, William 239-40  
 Moschini, Francesco 26, 49, 151n  
 Moss, Eric Owen 60-1  
 Müller, Jan-Werner 85-6, 85n  
 Muschamp, Herbert 68  
 Muthesius, Stefan 91n  
 Muzio, Giovanni 180  
 MVRDV 120  
 Nash, John 202  
 Nastasi, Michele 114n  
 Negri, Antonio 113n, 130  
 Neutelings Riedijk Architects 120  
 Ngai, Sianne 29, 29n  
 Nicolini, Pierluigi 14, 36, 147, 191, 200, 234  
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 85n, 178  
 NL Architects 120  
 Norberg-Schulz, Christian 199  
 Novoselov, Kostya S. 110  
 Ockman, Joan 91n  
 OFFICE KGDVS 152  
 Ojetto, Ugo 16  
 Olmo, Carlo 23, 201, 211, 213, 234-35  
 OMA 99-100, 103, 110, 120  
 One Architecture 120  
 Pagano, Giuseppe 16, 167  
 Panerai, Philippe 183

Pariser, Eli 71n  
 Patetta, Luciano 176  
 Persico, Edoardo 16  
 Pesante, Luisella 210  
 Peters, Richard C. 80n  
 Pevsner, Nikolaus 201-203, 239-40, 240n, 243n  
 Piano, Renzo 180  
 Picard, Raymond 22n  
 Pierce, Charles S. 119  
 Piero della Francesca 211  
 Piranesi, Giovanni Battista 221n, 222  
 Polesello, Gianugo 155, 215  
 Ponte, Alessandra 21, 232  
 Ponti, Gio 13, 177, 180  
 Ponzini, Davide 114n  
 Popper, Karl 83  
 Portoghesi, Paolo 16, 26, 35, 50, 191-92, 199, 205, 216,  
 Prestinzenza Puglisi, Luigi 186  
 Purini, Franco 14, 26, 26n, 35-7, 47, 51, 191, 251n  
 Quaytman, Rebecca 62  
 Rabinow, Paul 85n  
 Ragon, Michel 189  
 Rajchman, John 124  
 Ratti, Carlo 151, 208  
 Reiser, Jesse 121, 124  
 Rella, Franco 26n  
 Rendell, Jane 59, 90n, 92n, 103n  
 Riva, Umberto 195  
 Rogers, Ernesto Nathan 192  
 Rorty, Richard 118  
 Rossi, Aldo 155, 165, 196, 219  
 Rowe, Colin 82, 120, 178  
 Russo, Luigi 26  
 Said, Edward 130  
 Sambonet, Roberto 143  
 Sample, Hilary 21  
 SANAA 55  
 Saunders, William S. 118n  
 Savi, Vittorio 165, 168, 170  
 Scrivano, Paolo 190  
 Scully, Vincent 245n  
 Semerani, Luciano 155  
 Sen, Amartya 198  
 Sennett, Richard 179, 195  
 Settis, Salvatore 21, 175  
 Seymour, Richard 71  
 Simeoforidis, Yorgos 188  
 Siza, Alvaro 97, 143  
 Sklair, Leslie 113n  
 Smith, Gary 111n, 229n  
 Somol, Robert E. 21, 29n, 56, 120, 120n, 123-24, 231n  
 Sorkin, Michael 69, 73, 184  
 Sornin, Alexis 190  
 Speaks, Michael 120, 120n, 125  
 Spencer, Douglas 21, 232  
 Spinoza, Baruch 43  
 Stead, Naomi 188

Stephens, Suzanne 68-9, 68-9n, 72, 72n, 184  
 Sterling, Bruce 60  
 Stone, Lawrence 203-204  
 Stoppani, Teresa 214, 216n, 218n, 220n, 223, 235  
 Stylos 121  
 Summerson, John 201-202  
 Sundell, Margaret 55  
 Superstudio 179  
 Tafuri, Manfredo 16, 21-2, 22n, 24, 27, 27n, 31, 31n, 35, 35n, 46, 49, 91n, 120, 127, 145-46, 155-58, 164, 168-69, 183, 192, 198, 219-22, 221n, 232n, 241-43  
 Tagliabue, Franco 147  
 Tentori, Francesco 155, 164  
 Terragni, Giuseppe 180  
 Thermes, Laura 51  
 Thoreau, Henry David 196-97  
 Tinacci, Elena 21  
 Trione, Vincenzo 26n  
 Tschumi, Bernard 128-29  
 Umemoto, Nanako 121  
 Van Berkel, Ben 121  
 Van Gerrewey, Christophe 55  
 Van Toorn Roemer 121  
 Vanlaethem, France 190  
 Vattimo, Gianni 193  
 Vender, Claudio 174  
 Venturi, Robert 34, 82, 245, 245-46n  
 Verde Zein, Ruth 53  
 Vettese, Angela 26n

Vezzoli, Francesco 21  
 Vitruvius 206  
 Vittoria, Eduardo 156  
 Vittorini, Elio 158  
 Wagner, Kate 54, 69, 70, 70n, 72-3, 72-5n  
 Wagner, Richard 59  
 Wainwright, Oliver 59-61, 68-9, 69-71n  
 Wang, Wilfried 53-4, 60  
 Warburg, Aby 164, 202  
 Watkin, David 203  
 Weiwei, Ai 48  
 West, Cornell 118  
 Whiting, Sarah 120, 123  
 Wigley, Mark 30, 31n, 132, 132n  
 Wilde, Oscar 32, 32n, 34, 34n  
 Wittkower, Rudolph 164  
 Wood, Allen W. 66n  
 Wurster, William 80, 80n  
 Yaneva, Albena 21, 23n, 89, 99n, 101n, 103n, 110, 231-32, 249n  
 Yarrow, Thomas 100n  
 Yeats, William Butler 59  
 Zardini, Mirko 21  
 Zevi, Bruno 16, 23, 23n, 157, 164, 166, 171, 180, 186, 192, 198, 220, 226-27, 240-41, 241n  
 Zuboff, Shoshana 71n  
 Zucchi, Cino 137, 147  
 Zuliani, Guido 215  
 Zumthor, Peter 35

## **Future or Eclipse of Criticism**

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