Hypnerotomachia Polyphili: the Five Senses and Aristotle’s Philosophy of Phantasia

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This paper will look at the architectural treatise Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (The Strife of Love in a Dream) of 1499 by Francesco Colonna as an elucidation of the Aristotelian philosophy of sense and in particular the combinatory role of phantasia in the rational imagination (Phantasia Logistike).

The Treatise

Hypnerotomachia Poliphili is commonly read as an extensive collection and recombination of ideas present in the quattrocento, and is structured as an allegorical architectural love novel describing a dream of the protagonist, Poliphilio. His journey begins as he falls asleep and he searches for his true love Polia. The title of the treatise is a combination of words, as it joins hypnos, eros and mache (from the Greek sleep, eros/yearning and fight) and polloi/polis/Polia (from the Greek: many things/city/Polia, his beloved) and philos (love of) to describe the search for multiplicity of knowledge. The format of the narrative follows the tradition of the imago mundi (the imagined world) of the late 13th century that combines several dimensions and fragments of reality into a physical journey of real and imagined buildings and ideas that presents a cohesive single landscape.1

Liane Lefaivre’s analysis of the Hypnerotomachia Polyphili describes the treatise as an account of the concept of innovation or creativity in the quattrocento using the literary techniques of precedent, metaphor and analogy via what she terms as recombinant design. Almost all aspects of the treatise are in fact combinations of existing material, whether it is the built architecture, the gardens, the languages used in the text, the literary structure, the narrative episodes or theories presented. The many levels of combinations in the book are aptly described by Pozzi and Ciapponi as “lexicographical centaurs and mermaids”, which, in their combined form, serve as very effective descriptors.2 This “assembly” aspect of the text in fact was a part of why it has been disregarded as a serious work, as most saw it as an endless “quotation” of previous narratives and theories.

Rather than seeing this assemblage of theories, architecture and languages as a negative aspect of the treatise, Lefaivre endorses this as the main idea of the treatise, namely as a description of how innovation occurred in the early Renaissance. She tells us that the text assesses existing precedents, uses them when they are judged as valid, and uses them as raw material for recombinant design when they are not good ideas. The ordering rule for how these parts come together is “concinnitas” which Lefaivre defines as being based on the metaphor of the body, finding and aiming for pleasure in the material world and ultimately becoming the aesthetic value for designers. Alternate interpretations of the term “concinnitas” define it more precisely as congruence, which applies to and gives meaning to the act

2 Liane Lefaivre, Leon Battista Alberti’s Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, p 84.
of joining. Concin nas in this case is brought into existence by the wisdom of the hand or craftsmanship in its fullest sense in the act of joining parts.

The traditional role of the architectural treatise is to illuminate the meaning of built work, but Alberto Pérez-Gómez notes that the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili goes further than this by outlining the role of the imagination at this critical juncture in history. He places the understanding of imagination in the treatise as "between the Aristotelian-medieval passive function of mimesis, and not-yet the imagination of the Romantic genius, deluded by the possibility of creation ex-nihilo." Pérez-Gómez places desire as the origin of architectural meaning, manifest in a pre-reflective physical living world. Desire is seen as the erotic gap between two parts not-yet-joined which nicely aligns with the idea of concinnitas.

The psychological diagram of Aristotle's concept of the senses is mapped out as three ventricles in the head which each oversaw receiving, processing and storing of sensory information. The five senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch) were received by their respective organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue and skin) via a medium and were brought through the "common sense" that determined figure, size, number, movement and rest. The common sense was positioned like a filter at the forehead and acted like a vestibule for these multi-sensory images before entering the front ventricle, imagination (phantasia), passed on to the second ventricle, estimation (recognition) and finally stored in the third ventricle at the rear of the head, memory.

The role of Aristotle's rational imagination (phantasia logistike) was to unite and combine empirical sensations that are being sensed and filtered through the "common sense" or retrieved from memory. This 'synthetic practice' of uniting and combining is active, and is therefore constructive in nature.

In Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, the list of examples of concinnitas are endless, such as the use of new combinations of languages including vernacular Italian, Tuscan, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, cryptic Arabic, imaginary Chaldean and hieroglyphs. Architectural combinations abound throughout the text including the first building that Poliphilo encounters a structure which combines a temple, triumphal arch, pyramid, obelisk, sphere, labyrinth, propylaeum (a gateway), part cave, part mountain, and part unidentified. Each building thereafter in the journey is also a combination of fragments which would have not been normally seen together, yet are freely joined to create the erotic environment that Poliphilo journeys through.

The plot of the allegory is also considered to have copied existing narratives in the romanzo d'amore tradition including Roman de la Rose, Filocolo, Divina commedia and Trionfi with borrowed passages from Boccaccio, Ovid, Jena de Meung, Petrarch, Dante, Diodorus Siculus, Horace, Catullus, Columella, Martial, Homer, Varro, Cicero, Gellius, Virgil, Festus, Apuleius and Pliny.

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3 From Marco Frascari’s discussions on the interpretation of the term from Vitruvius and later Alberti in his PhD seminar course at Carleton University, October 2011.
4 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Polyphilo or the Dark Forest Revisited – An Erotic Epiphany of Architecture, p xiii.
5 Francois Quiviger, The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art. p 15.
6 Quiviger, p 18.
7 Aristotle defines this practice as eidôlopoiountes (De Memoria 441b) in Kearney, p 111.
8 Lefaivre, p 80.
9 This last part is identified as possibly a Roman palaestra (part of a Roma gymnasi um), an ambulation and peridromos (colonnaded promenades) a hupaethron (temple open to the sky), a xystus (a roofed colonnade for exercise in bad weather) and a euripus (a ditch around the arena of an amphitheatre to keep animals from leaving). Lefaivre, p 48.
10 Lefaivre, p 59.
As Lefaivre points out, the collecting and uniting of disparate ideas, architectural fragments and languages in the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili is an example of the recombinant design\textsuperscript{11} led by concinnitas, but I would like to propose that rather than leading to aesthetic value as she states, the treatise is an example of the constructive aspect of Aristotelian phantasia logistike in its craft of uniting and combining. That the whole treatise is a dreamwork, taking place in a dream within a dream only exaggerates its emphasis on the imagination, since no new sensory information is entering the mind of Poliphilo in his dormant state\textsuperscript{12}.

Pérez-Gómez sees the treatise as an exemplar of the emerging individual imagination (poiesis) sitting comfortably with a given order of experience, a threshold between the ancient world of knowledge as given, and the emerging world of the active individual creative mind.\textsuperscript{13} As we see with other late quattrocento works such as Alberti’s de re Aedificatoria there is a new understanding, beginning with Alberti, that ancient precedents can be improved upon, rather than acting as absolute authority.\textsuperscript{14} Although Aristotle insisted that the imagination did not create new ideas\textsuperscript{15}, within his definition of the imagination, and in particular his phantasia logistike, we find the wiggle-room for an emerging creative act: re-making via uniting and combining. Concinnitas then defines the space of the emancipated individual imagination.

The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili is a critical text in the understanding of the imagination. Its defining feature is concinnitas, the excellence of uniting and combining fragments, which is the modus operandi of the Aristotelian phantasia logistike. The depth that these joined fragments are buried in the cryptic text is described by Crasso as being “devised his work so that only the wise may penetrate the sanctuary”, for “these things are not for the populace, not to be recited on the street-corners; they are drawn from the storehouses of philosophy and from the sources of the Muses, with the novelty of a language full of embellishments”\textsuperscript{16} The erotic tension of the space between parts and their joining, the fundamental act of architecture, serves as the foundation of imagination as described by Aristotle is nowhere better illuminated than in the quattrocento allegory of love, the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili.

\textsuperscript{11} Lefaivre, p 46.  
\textsuperscript{12} The five senses do make an appearance in the treatise as five nymphs in a segment of Poliphilo’s journey after a disorienting encounter. They console him and lead him through a series of sensual encounters onwards towards his true love Polia, who can be read as the missing sixth sense. See Pérez-Gómez, p xvi  
\textsuperscript{13} Alberto Pérez-Gómez, p xvii.  
\textsuperscript{14} de re Aedificatoria was a text meant to improve upon Vitruvius’ Ten Books of Architecture.  
\textsuperscript{15} Kearney, p 112.  
\textsuperscript{16} Lefaivre, p 80.
Bibliography

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