

From Blank Media to Tactical Transparency

Thomas Mical, ADAPT-r Brussels, 2014

This paper interrogates the construct of modern architectural transparency with special reference to the role of optical media within media-philosophy, to understand a progressive shift in the mode of mediation created through glass and other see-through materials. The paper posits a claim of optical negation, the formative myth of modern architecture (from Laugier to Mies) whereby a contagious model of architectural transparency as a writing degree zero, or neutral optical de-materialization of load-bearing opacity, serves as the uniform ideal surfacing for a homogenous plenum of equally ideal universal space. This transparency is an opening into the semiotics of volume, whereby transparency appears without content but the glass surface appears with subtle optical noise and reflectivity, as materiality mediates between concept and space, between senders and receivers.

The paper then swerves its analysis from this uniform model of the open-ness of modern transparency to a new reading of transparency as incomplete and anticipating future content, as a type of blank media format for architectural surfaces. This option of mediated surfacing differentiates the omni-transparency of expansive modernity, as transparency itself expands beyond a perceptual model of experience into multiple modes of cultural and symbolic and mediated encounters and appearances. The surface plays of reflections, after-images, glare, ghosts, and indeterminate content in new transparent surfaces (beyond glass) point to new disruptive technologies of vision – technologies that overwrite the uniform optic of modern transparency. Today many designers abandon omni-transparency for tactical uses of a variety of micro-transparency manoeuvres, though multiple materials, to create mixtures of surface codes animating suspense, recall, and displacement as the new media-optics of architecture. This paper traces this movement between these different kinds of visible knowledge as an important mediator in architectural design and design theory, using multiple international examples.