

3

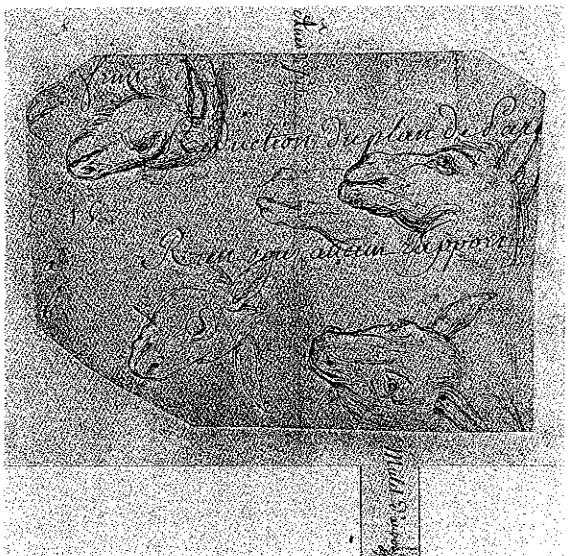
From  
Architecture and  
the Burdens of  
Linearity by  
Catherine Ingraham  
Yale University Press  
New Haven  
© 1998

## The Burdens of Linearity Donkey Urbanism

I am a donkey, but a donkey with an eye: the eye of a donkey capable of sensations I am a donkey with an instinct for proportion. I am and always will be an unrepentant visualist. When it's beautiful, it's beautiful—but that's the Moduler! . . . The Moduler lengthens donkeys' ears (here I refer to another donkey than my aforementioned self). —LE CORBUSIER

To explain this book's title, or part of its title: the phrase "burdens of linearity" came from an early version of this chapter, which I wrote while a fellow at the Chicago Institute for Architecture and Urbanism and subsequently published in *Strategies in Architectural Thinking*.<sup>1</sup> The phrase came from a connection between beasts of burden and (non)linear practices, a connection that initially caught my eye in *The City of Tomorrow*, where Le Corbusier talks about the pack-donkey

62



J. J. Lequeux, *Reduction of the Plan of Paris: Fritian donkeys. Mille of Auvergne. Nothing from whatever angle.* By permission of Cabinet des Estampes, cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

and the right angle. Beasts of burden are harnessed to lines—reins, paths, roads—in the most literal sense, and this condition may allow us to feel, momentarily, the weight of the usually weightless line. In this chapter, the animal part of the equation—the particular character of donkeys and the particular kinds of lines they might make (which is loaded with everything one suspects and more)—is only a sketch, even a caricature, of the “otherness” that the animal usually stands for. Almost all of the animal stuff that was in the earlier version of this chapter has been excised and put into another manuscript because it kept swerving this text.<sup>2</sup> But I wanted to keep the word *burden* because the residue of this animal presence is important to my discussion here.

I refer in this chapter to three critically belabored and, for me, strangely intertwined pieces of writing: the first is Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “Writing Lesson,”<sup>3</sup> the second, Jacques Derrida’s commentary on that essay, “The Violence of the Letter,”<sup>4</sup> and the third, the first chapter of Le Corbusier’s *City of Tomorrow*.<sup>5</sup>

Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss’s writing lesson is an exemplary critical commentary on the problem of writing and the limitations of structuralist analysis.<sup>6</sup> And Le Corbusier’s writings are, in their own way, exemplary modernist polemics. However, none of these texts are exemplary in any sense that would allow me to connect them to each other in the way I have in mind. In other words, even though I am playing, in a less than exemplary way, Derrida’s own (exemplary) game of moving between texts, the result is somewhat ancillary to the range of Derrida’s concerns. The result involves only certain internal debates in architecture: that is, Le Corbusier’s and Derrida’s (and, implicitly, Lévi-Strauss’s) interest in lines and linearity; and Le Corbusier’s and Lévi-Strauss’s (and, implicitly, Derrida’s) curious encounters with “beasts of burden,” specifically mules and donkeys.

Lines and beasts occupy fundamentally different orders—the

inanimate versus the animate is only the most obvious distinction. Yet Lévi-Strauss, Le Corbusier, and, in a different way, Derrida use the inscription (or failed inscription) of lines on one hand and the antics of beasts on the other to speak of, among other things, nature, culture, rationality, ethnology, and metaphysics. Just as the donkey in *The City of Tomorrow* is a recurrent figure of resistance to modernity, of ornamental froufrou and dilatory historicism, so the mule in “A Writing Lesson” introduces a certain confusion and humiliation, a waywardness, that opens into a meditation on the origins of writing, empire, and architecture. Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss’s essay remarks, in turn, on the curious paraphernalia of Lévi-Strauss’s ethnographic journey into the Brazilian jungle, the (im)possibility of a “path” (whether made by oxen, mules, or men), ruined lines of communication (fallen telegraph lines), and inscriptionality and violence.

I am reminded here of at least two other taxonomies whereby things radically different become things alike (a contamination through proximity): Ralph Waldo Emerson’s obsession in his famous essay “Nature” with the phenomena of “haunage, sleep, madness, dreams, beasts, and sex,”<sup>7</sup> and Jorge Luis Borges’s “Chinese encyclopedia” which is cited by Foucault at the beginning of *The Order of Things* and in which animals “drawn with a very fine camelhair brush” are listed next to animals “innumerable,” animals “belonging to the Emperor,” “stray dogs,” “et cetera.”<sup>8</sup> These lists (series) are provocative because they suggest—indeed, remark exquisitely upon—the possibility/inexorability of everything being brought into relation with everything else, although this is, of course, both a wonderful and a terrible dream. Taxonomies are neither endless nor unfixed: an infinite number of relations are hypothetically possible, but only a few specific connections are ever actually made. Taxonomies are only as persuasive as the institutional, cultural, and linguistic conventions that frame them, although here, especially in

Borges, there is a kind of fragile interplay going on between the taxonomic conventions themselves (alphabetic, numeric). In other words, the persuasiveness of "Chinese encyclopedia" is based purely on the automatic exchange between (apparently unrelated) things ordered according to a numbered or lettered list.

So what is the framework here? What permits a connection between lines and beasts in Derida's, Lévi-Strauss's, and Le Corbusier's texts? Neither a strictly historical nor a scientific tradition would put lines and beasts on the same list. A certain license granted by poststructural critical theory might permit one to construct generally homologous worlds where the lines made on the landscape by certain beasts (in this case, mules and donkeys)—the paths they make or follow and the marks or spoor they leave behind as they navigate the terrain—are intimately related to the lines (the marks) that one might draw, write, or otherwise inscribe on paper or to the lines and paths inscribed on a landscape by a building or, more precisely, by architecture.<sup>9</sup> But it takes neither a special critical license nor a revisionist history to trace the layout of cities back to the paths of beasts. It is easy to forget that the track of the car, another kind of beast, is only about one hundred years old, whereas the track of the beast is, well, extremely old. The connection between this bestial urbanism and "modern urbanism" and, in turn, the connection between urbanism and architectural lines are, of course, what directly concern and are thereby authorized by Le Corbusier himself.

Le Corbusier argues that orthogonality, the "orthogonal state of mind," best expresses the spirit of the modern age. And he opposes the "regulating line" of human beings—orthogonal, geometric, measured (architectural, urbanistic)—to the path of the pack-donkey: "Man walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going; he has made up his mind to reach some particular place and he goes straight to it. The pack-donkey meanders along, muddles a little in his scatter-brained and distracted fashion, he zigzags in

order to avoid the larger stones, or to ease the climb, or to gain a little shade; he takes the line of least resistance."<sup>10</sup> Man thinks only of his goal. The pack-donkey thinks only of what will save him trouble. "The Pack-Donkey's Way," Le Corbusier goes on, "is responsible for the plan of every continental city."<sup>11</sup>

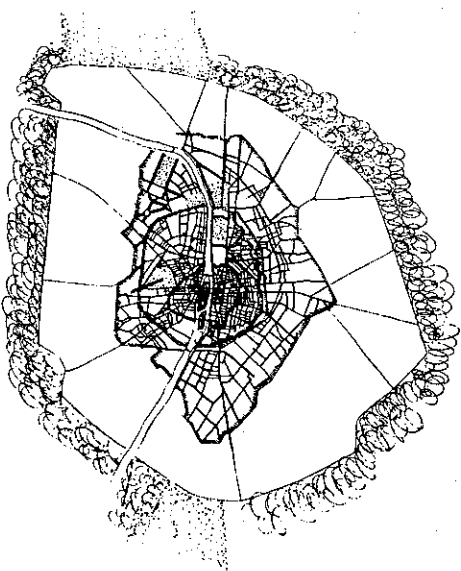
According to Le Corbusier's mythopoetical account of the history of the city, the covered wagons of an unwinding population "numbered along at the mercy of bumps and hollows, of rocks or mire [and] in this way were born roads and tracks." These early tracks are made according to a "donkey's idea" of how to move from one point to another. Along these tracks, houses are "planted," and eventually these houses are enclosed by city walls and gates. "Five centuries later another larger enclosure is built, and five centuries later still a third yet greater." The great cities, built according to this first track heedlessly traced out on an inhospitable landscape, have a multitude of small connective capillaries. For cities clogged by these intersecting capillaries, Le Corbusier recommends "surgery": cutting out central corridors (arteries) so that the "bodily fluids" of the cities can flow. The straight line that cuts through the congestion of the pack-donkey's way is, according to Le Corbusier, "a positive deed, the result of self-mastery. It is sane and noble."<sup>12</sup>

The pack-donkey recurs as a motif throughout *The City of Tomorrow*: in a later section on nature, whose material body is described as chaotic (the beast) but whose spirit is described as orderly (human rationality); in an account of the human body as a "fragmentary and arbitrary shape" but a pure and orderly idea; in an account of nations "overcoming their animal existence"; in an account of the supremacy of orthogonality; and so on.<sup>13</sup> The pack-donkey also frequents *Towards a New Architecture*,<sup>14</sup> although it remains unnamed, subsumed under the order of the bestial. The pack-donkey is the figure—in these (and other) fables—of a disorderly nature, of the chaotic and diseased body of a barbaric architectural and urban past.

The donkey makes the "rumous, difficult and dangerous curve of animality" and typifies the "looseness and lack of concentration" of human beings in distraction—that is, the primitive or nonmodern human being. The donkey in all of these guises threatens the triumph of geometry—an urbanism and an architecture of geometry, of positive action, of overcoming and ascending to power (rationalhood), of sanity, nobility, and self-mastery.

The orthogonality that Le Corbusier polemicalizes in these parts of *The City of Tomorrow and Tomorrow's New Architecture*<sup>15</sup> does not refer simply to the rectilinearity that one finds (almost) in Le Corbusier's "Unité d'habitation," although Le Corbusier remarks extensively on the "rightness" of the right angle. According to Le Corbusier, the orthogonal state of mind, which defines modern urbanism and architecture,<sup>16</sup> governs urbanistic/architectural thought and action that are devoted to self-mastery and the "rational" line (which is not necessarily straight in a literal or graphic sense but is always straight in an ideological sense). Le Corbusier puts it even more dramatically: "When man begins to draw straight lines he bears witness that he has gained control of himself and that he has reached a condition of order. Culture is an orthogonal state of mind. Straight lines are not deliberately created. They are arrived at when man is strong enough, determined enough, sufficiently equipped and sufficiently enlightened to desire and to be able to trace straight lines. In the history of forms, the moment which sees the straight line is a climax: behind it and within it he all the arduous effort which has made possible this manifestation of liberty."<sup>17</sup>

Orthogonality is Le Corbusier's theory about how to win architecture and the city away from the irrational forces arrayed within them.<sup>18</sup> It extends beyond the (merely) rectilinear to any form that is erected against the monstrous, speechless, wandering, gaitless incoherence of the genealogical "line" itself—the (chaotic) history of the city and architecture.<sup>19</sup> Orthogonality keeps culture hegemonically

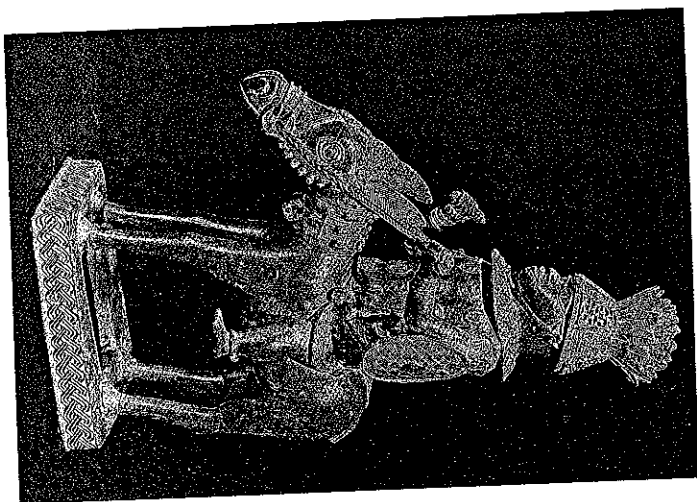


On the periphery there is the straight-hold of the nearer suburbs, except that to right and left there are open spaces; the Bois de Vincennes and the Bois de Boulogne.

Reprinted by permission from Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow*, trans. Frederick Eichells, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1982, 94, and courtesy of Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

superior to nature and attempts to obliterate the trace of nature in culture. The orthogonal/nonorthogonal opposition is at work everywhere in Le Corbusier's urbanistic and architectural projects—in-deed, one might say that it is operative in all urbanism and architecture. The Modulor, in particular, in spite of its contrahumanist posture, is Le Corbusier's figure of resistance to the collapse of this opposition, and it stands against the misbehaving donkey.<sup>20</sup>

The beast of burden, of course, must oppose orthogonality in order to give orthogonality its force, at least in this cartoon version of the pack-donkey and the founding of urban culture. But the cartoon makes sense only if one can first imagine a proper path from which the donkey has deviated, and not just a proper path but an economy and organization of labor, a human economy within which the beast is structured as a cultural rather than a natural (or wild) entity. The covert manner in which the beast of burden also stands as an oblique measure of human work,<sup>21</sup> transgression, and laziness, while retaining all the faults of an animal of "nature" ("instinctive" rather than "rational" motivations, indirection, enigmatic behavior, apparent mindlessness, and so on), complicates the opposition between the orthogonal and the nonorthogonal in interesting ways. The allegorical collapse of the donkey into the transgressive (human) body and, simultaneously, Le Corbusier's repeated surges, by which the animal body is separated from the mind and spirit in the modern city, reiterate an ancient drama that sets nature in opposition to culture. Whether this drama is between two urbanisms, the orthogonal (proper) and the nonorthogonal (improper), or between a "natural" production (beast or donkey) and a "cultural" production (line or architecture), its power is to forestall the collapse of the division between the proper and the improper, the cultural and the natural.<sup>22</sup> Initially, the distinction between the ideology of orthogonality in urbanism and this ideology in architecture—a distinction articulated by Le Corbusier first in *The City of Tomorrow* and later in



Yoruba sculpture from Benin: a bronze figure on a donkey. Le Corbusier's proposal that the straight line produces the modern city is the same as the twelfth-century Yoruba proposal that lines open the face and civilize the land. But Le Corbusier famously used "primitive art," such as African tribal masks, as hidden (non-Euclidean) figures in his building plans. He mistook, in colonial ways, the lineage of his lines. Photograph courtesy of Ursula Held, Ecublens, Switzerland.

*Towards a New Architecture*—did not seem particularly significant. The same words, particularly *mastery* and *uprightness*, are applied to both urbanism and architecture, and Le Corbusier easily passes from town (urbanism) to house (architecture). But now the issue seems more difficult. The “dangerous curve” of the animal does not seem to be a problem in the numerous architectural examples offered by Le Corbusier (nor is it a problem in his own work); indeed, the curve is offered as evidence of the “mathematical” and the “rhythmic.”<sup>25</sup> And, of course, geometry itself contains more than just right angles. But at the same time, modern architecture and modern urbanism privilege the geometry of the right angle, and, without question, the ethos of geometry is the ethos of the right angle. Further, modern urbanism and architecture meet each other—as geometric, right-angled, linear-practices—inside the projective drawing system that connects the plan and the elevation.<sup>24</sup> In projective drawing systems, the co-representation, the equalization, of the urban and the architectural (as well as the garden and the landscape—but that is a different story) is not merely representational but also a coalescence of geometry and philosophy into what Derrida calls Cartesian intellectualism, which I discuss in more detail later. Donkey urbanism, or donkey architecture, is not merely curved. It is also swerved; that is, it deviates (and suffers the consequences of deviance) from a system of production that allows houses (architecture) and towns (urbanism) to be jointly conceived and represented. It is neither wholly urbanistic nor wholly architectural in the traditional sense. One of the felt powers of this donkeyism is the power to introduce the confusing force of distraction into the generation and the inscription of either an urbanistic or architectural scheme or body of thought. Certainly distraction, considered urbanistically, would be different from architectural distraction,<sup>25</sup> but I want to bring the donkey to a kind of pause here at this idea of the “distracted.”

Because donkey urbanism or donkey architecture depends on

72

the (prior) possibility of representing the city graphically (as gridded, for example)—and the possibility of bringing the urban and the architectural together by means of the graphic system of projection—what Le Corbusier notices in the pack-donkey “state” of the ancient city is not a pure history of the city as an entity that evolved, say, through an “animal state.” Instead, he sees the history of the city through a mass of lines already crisscrossing his vision, because he is, after all, an architect. But in order to explain this kind of “seeing,” I need to branch off from the linear *graphics* of projection to another *graphics*: writing. To put it bluntly, Le Corbusier’s writing about urbanism and architecture is a paragon of heedlessness, lack of self-mastery, lack of direction. This is true generally: all writing twists out of the straight line that is its graphic expression into the nonstraight line of interpretation and signification.<sup>26</sup> And it is true specifically: *The City of Tomorrow* and *Towards a New Architecture* thematize the opposition between the straight and the crooked, so their failure, as writing, to pretend to “act rationally” is particularly significant. This is a tricky point because it relies on a “reading” of Le Corbusier that emanates from the donkey side of the equation—a donkey reading.<sup>27</sup> We wouldn’t have to play this potentially too linguistically torqued game for long in order to see that Le Corbusier’s “seeing” is already laden with preconceptions, which can be summarized by all the usual problematic oppositions: ornament/structure, straight/crooked, proper/improper, donkey line/straight line. We could ask, for example, what it means for Le Corbusier to talk about straight lines since no lines, except “ideal” ones, are absolutely straight. Does Le Corbusier really mean “relatively straight lines”? And exactly how far off the true does a straight line need to be before it becomes a donkey line? Two degrees? Ten degrees? And this is not to mention the standard stuff about mastery, master planning, self-mastery—all of which are discredited but still amazingly operative terms of totalization.

But the line and the donkey of Le Corbusier’s text are only half

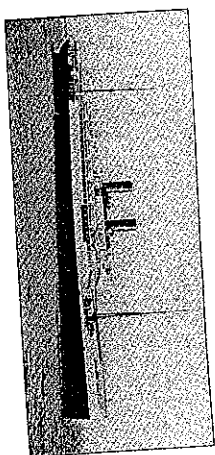
73

and see  
elevation  
of the  
Cornell  
plan



the story. The other half is the anthropologist and the mule. Genetically speaking, mules are the cross (point of intersection) of a horse and a donkey. Horses, through the discipline of dressage as well as lesser disciplines, are capable of being ridden by human beings and accurately directed by handheld reins. Mules, although often and bred for their strength as pack animals (which are frequently driven rather than ridden). Further, mules cannot reproduce their own kind; each mule must be produced by a pairing between the two original species. The move from the donkey of Le Corbusier's text to the mule of Lévi-Strauss's text may seem slight (in generic terms); indeed, it is very slight on one level. Both Le Corbusier and Lévi-Strauss use the movements of these animals as a counterpoint to another discourse about lines. As we have seen in Le Corbusier's text, this discourse on lines had to do with the "straightness" of modernity versus the "crookedness" of the past; a straight urbanism versus a bent urbanism. And yet, on another level, the move from the donkey to the mule is as drastic and as absolute as the move from the animal as a piece of nature to the animal as a piece of culture. Donkeys and mules, in this sense, are as different from each other as horses and cars. One reproduces. The other is produced. As allegorical figures opposing the line, a mule opposes a line in the way an arc opposes a line, as one construction opposing another, whereas a donkey opposes a line in the way a plant, say, opposes a line, as something "natural" opposes something "artificial." But we must double back again, because these words, these symmetries, are misleading. What would it mean, for example, to talk about the difference between things that reproduce, such as donkeys and humans, and things that are produced, such as mules and lines?<sup>28</sup>

Claude Lévi-Strauss, like Le Corbusier, is concerned with reflecting on (and upsetting) a genealogy—specifically, the origin of writing, empires, and architecture. The line of descent that Lévi-Strauss claims for writing in "A Writing Lesson" ignores, according to



THE "TABLEAU" (CITE. TRANSLATION: RICHARD)

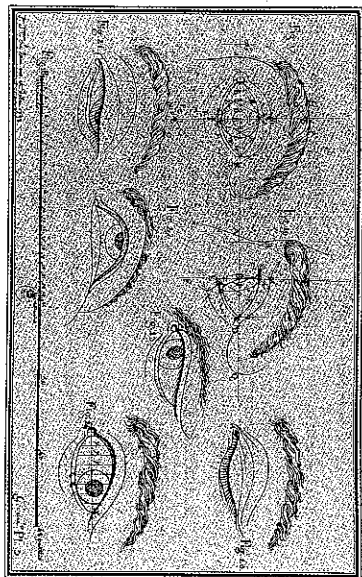
EYES WHICH DO NOT SEE  
I  
LINERS

Facsimile of first page of chapter 1, "Eyes Which Do Not See," reprinted by permission from Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, Dover Publications, New York, 1986.

Derrida's subsequent critique, the "writing" (colloquial writing, em-pires, and architecture) that begins at the moment when culture begins. Derrida does not correct Lévi-Strauss in favor of another point of origin, another history, for writing. Instead, as we know, Derrida characterizes "writing" and, in related but different ways, "history" as *origines*, as *multihorizondal*. Derrida's argument focuses on Lévi-Strauss's belief that there are cultures with writing and cultures without writing, and that cultures without writing are somehow "innocent," uncorrupted by the exploitation and violence that he (Lévi-Strauss) thinks writing inaugurates. Writing, cities, and architecture are re-situated in Derrida's critique as multiple genealogies and grammatologies that bend around and nest within each other, producing horizon lines here and there that provisionally shape the adventure-some path of knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

I want to consider Lévi-Strauss's essay only briefly. At the beginning of this short piece, "A Writing Lesson," it appears that Lévi-Strauss and his fellow anthropologists cannot take the usual *picada*, the path in the forest, because the oxen carrying gifts for the natives cannot get through the heavy underbrush. The expedition is thus forced to take a route over the plateau, a route unfamiliar even to Lévi-Strauss's native guides, with the result that the whole expedition gets lost in the bush somewhere around the fifth paragraph of the account. After a crisis of authority having to do with the chief's inability to provide his people with direction and food, the Indians reorient themselves, and the expedition pushes on to their rendezvous. Lévi-Strauss and his men effect their exchanges, count about seventy-five Indians gathered (since the purpose of his expedition in the first place was to take a census of the Indian population), and leave as quickly as possible.

The situation immediately after the exchange of goods, as Lévi-Strauss remarks, is always fraught with danger. It turns out, however, that the danger for Lévi-Strauss lies not in the latent violence of



The opening of the eye through geometry. From J. J. Lequeur, *Nouvelle méthode: Les études géométriques d'oeil*, 1792. By permission of Cabinet des Estampes, cliché Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.



the natives but in the recalcitrance of his mule. Shortly after leaving the gathering, Lévi-Strauss somehow finds himself alone and lost in the jungle, with only his mule for a companion. He stops and gets off the mule in order to fire a shot for help, which causes the mule to bolt. Lévi-Strauss spends the next several hours trying to catch the mule, but by the time he does, he has become more thoroughly lost. "Demoralized by this episode," Lévi-Strauss writes, "Neither my mule nor I his mule to get him out of this predicament." "Neither my mule nor I knew where they [the band] had gone," he goes on. "Sometimes I would head him in a direction that he refused to take; sometimes I would let him lead, only to find that he was simply turning in a circle. . . . I was not, admittedly, the first white man to penetrate that hostile zone. But none of my predecessors had come back alive and, quite apart from myself, my mule was a tempting prey for people who rarely have anything very much to get their teeth into."<sup>50</sup> Fortunately, however, it seems that several of Lévi-Strauss's Indian guides had turned back as soon as they noticed his absence and had been following him all day (presumably because they found his wanderings amusing or instructive). They now rescue him, leading him back to where he had left his belongings at the foot of a tree, and together they rejoin the main party.

This episode is the central trauma of "A Writing Lesson." And it is a kind of precondition for Lévi-Strauss's reflections on something that happened earlier in the expedition. During a sleepless night caused by the "torment" of the mule incident, Lévi-Strauss thinks back on an episode with the chief of the tribe. During the transfer of gifts from whites to Indians, the chief pulled forth a piece of paper upon which he began to draw wavy lines. (Both paper and pencil were routinely given as gifts by the anthropologists.) The chief pretends in front of his people to be the one who is authorizing the exchanges, referring to his "false" list as he confers with Lévi-Strauss about each gift. Lévi-Strauss in a sense gets lost in this "false discourse," which

does not correspond with anything that, for him, counts as writing, and he has to be rescued by the chief's commentary, "which was prompt in coming." For Lévi-Strauss, the wavy lines count as neither writing nor drawing.<sup>51</sup> Reflecting on this episode the evening after his fiasco with the mule in the jungle, he concludes that the chief understood how writing works as a controlling mechanism without actually understanding *how* to write. He then makes some amazing observations:

If we want to correlate the appearance of *writing* with certain other characteristics of civilization, we must look elsewhere. The one phenomenon which has invariably accompanied it is the *formation of cities and empires*; the integration into political systems . . . of a considerable number of individuals, and their distribution into a hierarchy of castes and classes. Such as, at any rate, the type of development which we find, from Egypt right across to China, at the moment when writing makes its debut; it seems to favor rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind. This exploitation made it possible to assemble workpeople by the thousand and set them tasks that taxed them to the limits of their strength; to this, surely, we must attribute the *beginnings of architecture* as we know it.<sup>52</sup>

Now it is precisely the link between writing, the formation of cities, and the beginnings of architecture that interests me—embedded, as it is, in this reflection about the origins of writing, which itself occurs as a kind of nightmare or perturbation as a result of Lévi-Strauss's episode with his mule. For one thing, when Derrida critiques Lévi-Strauss's perceptions of the relations among writing, exploration, violence, and cultural origins, he seems to leave the triadic "arrival" of writing, cities, and architecture untouched. For another thing, in some obvious way writing, urbanism, and architecture rely on the making of lines, and Lévi-Strauss's text is a continuous lament about how lines (paths, marks, inscriptions, writing, communication) are in the process of disintegration or loss. I want to suggest that the surreptitious figure of connection among writing, cities, and architec-

# Architect Burdens

CATHERINE

## THE BURDENS OF LINEARITY

ture in Lévi-Strauss's, Derrida's, and Le Corbusier's texts is the recalcitrant mule. The mule—a cross between two poorly urbanized creatures (the donkey and the horse, which will become "horse-power")—is the crossroads, the chiasmus, for urbanism, architecture, and now, writing.

One may wonder whether I am speaking (merely) allegorically, telling an animal story in order to smuggle in a story about architecture, urbanism, and writing. But I think it is not coincidental that Le Corbusier chooses to level his accusations against classical and nineteenth-century architecture by refusing an urbanism and architecture built according to the "Pack-Donkey's Way." Nor is it coincidental that Lévi-Strauss is forced to his musings about writing, cities, and architecture while riding a mule. It is not surprising that in the presence of animals in general (metaphorical mythical, or otherwise), we are forced to consider mechanisms of control and simultaneously, waywardness and thus to consider morality, rationality, order, civilization, cities, and architecture. At the same time, the banality of these particular animals, donkeys and mules, constrains Le Corbusier's and Lévi-Strauss's larger commentaries, reducing them to the local problems of how to find one's way through the jungle or how to lay out a city street. These more local issues become, in both accounts, issues of how to follow, draw, interpret, and account for lines. But whereas the donkey still falls (genetically) on the side of nature, the mule is entirely cultural. So the mule, according to the anthropologist, is an "improvement" on the donkey; in the midst of linear practices, the mule produces a subtler confusion than does the donkey because the mule, having been bred to the line, already belongs to the order of the line.<sup>32</sup> But what is "the order of the line"? One might say, loosely, that the line is simultaneously of and against these beasts since, on one hand, like the mythical beast, lines simply start in the middle of things—they have aimless beginnings—and, on the other, lines are hyper-directed according to the forces of the ideal.

80

## THE BURDENS OF LINEARITY

The "ideal model" for lines in both urbanism and architecture is Euclidean geometry. Euclid defines the line as "breadthless length." A straight line is a "line which lies evenly with the points on itself." And a point is "that which has no part."<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to look at these definitions—and to note that they are definitions rather than proofs—because the problem of the ideal, in architecture and elsewhere, is partially constructed by means of these definitions. The two ideal points in projective drawing systems, for example—the vanishing point and viewer position—are Euclidean in their ideality. The two oxymorons—"breadthless length" and "that which has no part"—take the form of a priori propositions from which the rest of the geometric system develops, because Euclidean definitions and postulates (and what Euclid calls "Common Notions") are the occasion for controlling, in advance, contradictions in the system. This is an oversimplification, of course, because the economy of the definitions is crucial to the economy of the whole system. It matters that there are almost one hundred definitions, all of them a priori reductions and therefore repositories of conflict, rather than, say, one thousand definitions or only two definitions. From these definitions, postulates, and a few other elements, the thirteen books of Euclid's *Elements*, which together provide the basics of solid geometry, are derived. I discuss Euclid's *Elements* at greater length in the next chapter; here I want to look, not at the specifics of a geometric system, but at the notion of the "geometric ideal."

Derrida's seminal introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry* is pertinent in this regard. Derrida draws out a necessary failure in Husserl's search for an "origin" in geometry. Husserl claims that geometry was a "quantum leap" in understanding, a "genesis" that belonged not to the "adventure of humanity" but to a "higher reason." Derrida begins by saying that *The Origin of Geometry* "concerns the status of the ideal objects of science (of which geometry is one example), their production, by identifying acts, as 'the same,' and

81

THE BURDENS OF LINEARITY

the constitution of exactitude through idealization and passage to the limit—a process which starts with the life-world's sensible, finite, and presentific materials.<sup>35</sup> For Husserl, the question of pure geometry—the pure geometric tradition—lies outside this sensible life-world of multiple variations of forms and culture. Geometry cannot be treated historically, as Derrida writes: "The question of origin will not be a philological-historical . . . search in the investigation of particular propositions" (*Origin*, 158) that the first geometers discovered or formulated [according to Husserl, *Origin*, 158]. There, it would only be a matter for the history of science in the classical sense . . . to take stock of the already constituted contents of geometrical cognitions, in particular of the first postulates, axioms, theorems, and so forth, contents that must be explored and determined as precisely and as completely as possible from archeological documents. Despite its incompleteness as possible from archeological documents, "The history of the geometrical sense of the first geometrical acts."<sup>36</sup> The history of the origin of geometry, Derrida continues, is the "history of an operation, and not of a founding."<sup>37</sup> In Derridean terms, ideal geometry is always already in place by the time the geometers first wield their instruments. The origin of geometry prelates the moment when Euclid and other geometers (Thales, for example) consolidate their propositions. The geometry *per se* always arrives too late at the scene of the birth. The "always-already" construction will become, in subsequent works, a kind of Derridean technique for passing through the boundary layer that classical theories of origin put in place as absolute points.<sup>38</sup> Derrida's argument here is the same as it will be later in his critique of "A Writing Lesson."

Before the exactitude of forms appeared in history, before the origin of geometry, Husserl argues, "an essential form becomes recognizable through a method of variation" (*Origin*, 178). As Derrida summarizes the sense of this remark: "By imaginary variation we can

obtain inexact but pure morphological types: roundness, for example, *under* which is constructed the geometrical ideality of the circle." In a pregeometrical world, the ideal shapes we attain are not the geometrically pure shapes which can be inscribed in ideal space—pure bodies, pure straight lines, pure planes, other pure figures, and the movements and deformations which occur in pure figures.<sup>39</sup>

Continuing, Derrida argues that the "institution of geometry could only be a *philosophical act*." The "physical thing, the body, the vague morphological and phoronomic types, the art of measure, the possibility of imaginary variation, and preexact spatiotemporality already had to be located in the cultural field that was offered to the philosopher who did not yet know geometry but who should be conceivable as its inventor. . . . The philosopher is a man who inaugurates the theoretical attitude [that . . . makes idealization's decisive passage to the limit possible]."<sup>40</sup>

Thus does Derrida arrive at "infinization," the "going beyond every sensible and factual limit" that must take place for the constitution, or institution, of the geometric ideal. And, simultaneous with this "radical freedom" of the philosophical spirit, is the need to limit in advance the system of "infinite production."<sup>41</sup> "Here we are, then," Derrida writes, "as a last recourse, before an idealizing operation whose activity has never been studied for itself and whose conditions are never to be so studied, since we are dealing with a radically institutive operation. This idealization is that which, on the basis of sensible ideality (the morphological type of 'roundness,' for example), makes a higher, absolutely objecting exact, and nonsensible ideality occur—the circle, a similarly named [but] new formation [the pure geometric circle]."<sup>42</sup> Pure geometry, according to Derrida, becomes possible through "Cartesian intellectualism," which I mentioned earlier with respect to the meeting of architecture and urbanism, and

which necessarily suppresses certain questions and structures—questions about imagination and sensibility, for example, and the "origin of the ability to idealize."<sup>45</sup>

Derrida's point, his drive here, is toward a theory of "multiple births" of geometry rather than one "origin." "Does not geometry have an infinite number of births (or birth certificates) in which, each time, another birth is announced, while still being concealed? Must we not say that geometry is on the way towards its origin, instead of proceeding from it?"<sup>44</sup> The disruption of a secure sense of origin for geometry has to do with what has been left out of the game. In this case, what has been left out is the act of "reduction itself. . . . the origin of philosophy and history themselves."<sup>45</sup> That is the origin of the "theoretical attitude" itself.

To ask the question of the line within the question of the geometric ideal, then, is to instantly invoke and become entangled in these problems.<sup>46</sup> The origin that Lévi-Strauss claims for writing will receive the same scrutiny, the same treatment, as Husserl's origin of geometry. But it is important that it is writing—the origin of language and Derrida's paradigmatic discussions of the origin of language—that ultimately dismantles the possibility of a pure geometry or a pure science of any kind, and for this reason the word *writing* in Lévi-Strauss's passage receives privileged attention from Derrida. But the "large tasks" of cities and empires, and the "beginnings of architecture," have already crossed the path of (the origin of) writing, and vice versa, by the time we get to Derrida's account. This "reflection" on writing happens as a result of Lévi-Strauss's observations about the Indian chief's wavy drawings, but the observations are made in the shadow of the trauma produced by the wayward path of his mule.

One of my working assumptions earlier in this chapter was that at least one of the consequences of mixing up geometric lines (straight lines) with urbanistic or architectural lines (paths, plans, elevations),

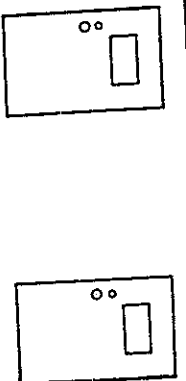
with mule and donkey lines (paths, lines of descent) and with the lines of writing was that this mix-up (the chiasmus represented by the genetic mix-up of the mule) offered a certain resistance to the various tactics of ideality. The mule (which can have no single origin, cannot be classified as a species) and the donkey, insofar as they both advance perturbed technologies for representing the line in space (as city or architecture), participate in the anexact measure of the everyday.<sup>47</sup> In this scheme, linearly—an ideal system based on the same "passage to the limit" that pure geometry is based on—must be perpetually won away, through philosophical means (Cartesian intellectualism, for example), from animality, irrationality, impropriety, disease, and death.

But this winning away cannot be understood in simple or heroic terms. The geometric or philosophical attitude of urbanism or architecture cannot be heroic in the sense that the protogeometer perhaps is or was. Urbanism and architecture, as we have already seen through the strange narratives of La Corbusier and Lévi-Strauss, come (in a state of considerable hegemony) to the geometric (straight) line in the immediate presence of the animal (swerving, making a path), which irrevocably perturbs the hegemonic and the straight. And, lest we forget, the animal is not "the Animal"—not something natural and unto itself—but is the principle of animality that belongs entirely to human culture.

Returning, at last, to Derrida's discussion of Lévi-Strauss's "Writing Lesson," we find that Derrida remarks, "One should meditate on all of the following together: writing as the possibility of the road and of difference, the history of writing and the history of the road, of the rupture, of the *via rupta*, of the path that is broken, beaten, *fracta*, of the space of reversibility and of repetition traced by the opening, the divergence from, and the violent spacing, of nature, of the natural, savage forest. The *sicca* is savage, the *via rupta* is written, discerned, and inscribed violently as difference, as form imposed on

the *tylle*, in the forest, in wood as matter.<sup>48</sup> The path thus made produces a crisis of origin: a crisis of spontaneous arrival (of certain forms of consciousness, such as pure geometry or history or architecture); a crisis of the line as outline (Alberti), wall (Alberti), path (Le Corbusier), crossroads (Lévi-Strauss). It substitutes for the singularity of these moments the plural complication of difference, divergence, repetition, crossroads, and violent spacing.<sup>49</sup>

The *line*, as Derrida writes in another place, is the very thing that philosophy could not see "when it had its eyes open on the interior of its own history". "The end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book, even if . . . it is within the form of the book that new writings . . . allow themselves to be . . . encased."<sup>50</sup> What is not so clear—what is here in a state of suspension and suggestion—is how architecture and cities are built at the crossroads of their own lines (urban and architectural) and the lines of writing. This is intimately related to the question of how the violence of spacing (urbanism and architecture) occurs before or at the same time as the violence of writing.



4

The Outline of the (Dead) Body

According to Freud, the familiar homeliness of feminine logic is a sign of the woman's structural difficulty in giving up the Oedipal bond with the father. Because the father cannot threaten her with the loss of what she knows she does not have, he remains the object of her love. She continues to demand his love in return (this is a simple, household account) and to believe that some other person—her father or a substitute—can give her what she too concretely wants. As she presses her inhuman demands, the truly sublime demands of the superego go unheard by her. For she does not—or does not easily—develop a superego, having already located the source of significant power outside herself. The feminine woman, then, experiences neither the morbid pain of ethical accusation, nor the joy of ethical exaltation. The sublime field of the ethical is, in general, closed to her. By this account it would appear that feminism is foredoomed to fail as an ethical project.—JOAN COPPICK, "m/f, or Not Reconnected"

It is perhaps amazing that I have been able to defer until now the explicit question of gender with respect to the proper in architecture. Mens, domesticity, the house, matters of propriety—all these have