

WHY BABYLON?

Ömür Harmanşah – Recently I've been thinking about how our archeological imaginations of Antiquity resemble in its logic so closely to the utopias of the future. I've been interested in how these utopian visions often adopt fragments of an exotic distance past from the ancient world and projected into the future as an avant-garde, a utopian vision, transporting what is familiar to a territory of the unfamiliar. Archaeology in a way does the same in the opposite direction and constructs the ancient world as an exotic unfamiliar landscape, alien to our modernity. So the city of Babylon with its Tower of Babel is perhaps one of the most captivating fragments of Antiquity that's continuously surfacing in the course of history. The many will tell that in the famous episode from the Book of Genesis, in the Old Testament, humanity is punished by God, for building a tower that reached the Heavens. And the punishment is the confusion of their tongues, so that they don't, they may not understand each other. The story is famously depicted in Peter Bruegel's painting *Tower of Babel* where a dreamy ziggurat-like structure is depicted both rising with the work of stone-masons, while at the same time falling into ruins.

But I wanna to ask, how accurate is this image of Babylon? What we know is that at the time of famous Babylonian rulers such as Nabuchodonosor II, in the 6th B.C., Babylon witnessed an extraordinary urban reconstruction project, with its architectural accomplishment such as the Ishtar Gate and the temple complex of Marduk, which included a ziggurat that inspired the Tower of Babel story.

According to standard narratives like the one we know from the design of the tympanum to the entrance of the Oriental Institute, Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations simply vanish and they give way to the rise of Western civilization. In this utopic vision of the past, actors of the East hand over the symbols of civilized life to the actors of western culture. And civilization exists in the past tense for the East only... So Babylon appears in the utopian vision from the late Fifties and Sixties, during the earliest years of Situationist International. The Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys initiated a futurist architectural project, a utopian city called *New Babylon*. In a variety of representations in the form of drawings, collages, architectural models, paintings, maps and manifestos, Constant presented a critique of industrial modernism in *New Babylon*. Just as we fabricate archeological past through our politically charged imaginations and impositions of the present, futurist visions enhance exotic places of the deep past, and mobilize them in order to animate the unchartered territories of the future.

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