

Paul Preciado: Notre Dame of Ruins

Text: Paul Preciado

“It’s a spaceship,” the artist Alejandro Jodorowsky told me long ago. “An astronomical technology designed to measure the power of light and of darkness. An architectural machine made to take off, destined to fly and to take our souls and our dreams beyond the Earth.” He was speaking about Notre Dame. Looking at the cathedral from its rear, Jodorowsky compared the stone buttresses to the arms that attach to a shuttle on its launchpad, meant to open one day to let the ship rise into the sky. I had a hard time understanding his theory then. But suddenly we were there, together with hundreds of others perched speechless on Pont de l’Archevêque, as if the Île St.-Louis had become Cape Canaveral, watching the Notre Dame spacecraft take off using its own wooden beams as a combustion engine: La flèche (the arrow) dematerialized, becoming a propulsion tube through which the last vestiges of the human soul were thrown into the outer atmosphere. And shortly after launch the arrow collapsed like the Challenger, which fell back to Earth just seventy-three seconds after takeoff.

Quickly, 1,001 images proliferated across the screens, as the cathedral mutated under the fusion of lead and wood. The two towers of Notre Dame morphed into medieval versions of the Twin Towers, the cathedral itself a new, Marian World Trade Center. It was said that European civilization was being devoured by fire, that the Crusades had reached the heart of the Kingdom. The Christian masses knelt in the Parisian streets and watched the red radiation growing in front of them, a transfiguration of the Virgin’s body. The mother of Christ was burning as the bushes had burned before Moses in the desert to restore Europe’s lost faith. The blessed tweeted with one hand and prayed the rosary with the other. The spark that ignited the fire, they said, came from May 1968. Some knelt and sang “Bring Flowers of the Rarest”. Others said, on the contrary, that the fire was a divine punishment that had fallen on the Church for covering up hundreds of thousands of sexual assaults over the

years. It was said that it was the Virgin herself, hot as a wick and fed up with being raped by the Church, who was fucking Satan in the form of a flame, and that she was enjoying it. Others took the fall of the arrow as a criticism of ecclesiastical phallocentrism. They asserted that the arrow was a red-hot dildo entering into the Church's anus. They saw the Virgin in flames and the firemen ejaculating on her body. The blessed crossed themselves and took selfies with the cathedral in the background. Some, when photographing the image of the burning cathedral, saw in it a dense glow identical to that of a black hole. Others said it was the Eye of Sauron. The most utopian claimed that Notre Dame had wanted to wear an incandescent yellow vest in front of the world.

At dawn, the cathedral, still smoking, was more beautiful than ever

While the fire still burned, and under a boiling rain of tweets, ecclesiastical and political powers ran to comment on the barbecue. The archbishop of Paris proclaimed that everyone's house was burning. We hadn't known until then that Notre Dame was everyone's house, since every night there are thousands of homeless people sleeping on the streets and refugees are constantly expelled from the city. We thought it was the home of Opus Dei and of tourism. The political representatives agreed that the cathedral was the most visited place in Paris. The jewel in the crown of the European tourist industry was being transformed into slag. And then, as if stepping into a real-life opera, the head of government appeared, relieved of the burden of discussing the insignificant results of his "Great Debate". It is a pity that the chief of the state can't sing as well as the devotees do, since his words sounded like a national Catholic song. There, in front of a cathedral still in flames, he said: "We will rebuild."

The fire behind his head was so intense that his hairs could have been carbonized. Before it was extinguished, the president had already made an international appeal for aid and offered a tax exemption to the wealthy who donated. The rebuilding of Notre Dame was the best of the political measures announced by the young king, his first truly convergent and patriotic achievement. It wasn't long before the euros flowed in, as slaves of Christ and partisan soldiers to remake the body of the mother: They had not yet extinguished the last of the fire when the state's coffers counted nearly 850 million euros. Just one of these donations would have been enough to build a safe roof for the homeless of Paris or a city to receive refugees in the Jungle of Calais. A single one of these donations would stop the massacre in the Mediterranean or end the bloodletting of the working classes. But no, it is better, says the president, to rebuild Notre Dame, if possible within five years,

at Olympic speed; better that local artisans should not do it, that an international appeal be made, that the architectural corporations come and that they make of those euros a brilliant financial pyre.

At dawn, the cathedral, still smoking, was more beautiful than ever. The open nave, full of ashes, was an iconoclastic monument to the cultural history of the West. A work of art is not a work of art if it cannot be destroyed, and therefore be fantasized and imagined—if it can't exist in the immaterial museum of longing and desire, if its loss doesn't justify intense grief. Why couldn't those who clamor for reconstruction wait not even one second to mourn?

Destroyers of the planet and annihilators of life, we prefer to build on our own ecological ruins. That's why we're afraid to look at Notre Dame ravaged. Against this Front of Builders it is necessary to create a Front to Defend the Notre Dame of Ruins.

Let us not rebuild Notre Dame. Let us honor the burnt forest and the blackened stones. Let us make of its ruins a punk monument, the last of a world that ends and the first of another world that begins.

Notre Dame of the Rich, pray for us. Notre Dame of Rape, pray for us. Notre Dame of the Anthropocene, pray for us. Notre Dame of Capitalism, pray for us. Notre Dame of Patriarchy, pray for us. Notre Dame of Tourism, pray for us. Notre Dame of Tax Fraud, pray for us. Notre Dame of Political Corruption, pray for us. Notre Dame of Ecological Extinction, pray for us...

Paul B. Preciado (*1970), un philosophe, curateur et activiste transgenre. Libération, 19. 4. 2019; https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2019/04/19/notre-dame-des-ruines_1722432.

