



NOTRE D(R)AME DE PARIS



Foto: ARD

**THE CATHEDRAL IS WHAT STANDS THE TEST OF TIME, IT
REMAINS THROUGH THE CHANGES IN HUMAN HISTORY**

Liberation



THE DISASTER OF NOTRE DAME DE PARIS

MARC GUIOT

THE CATHEDRAL IS WHAT STANDS THE TEST OF TIME, IT REMAINS THROUGH THE CHANGES IN HUMAN HISTORY (Libération)

"850 years, the French Revolution, the two world wars... nothing has destroyed this monument, nothing at all!"

"It was only in the 21st century and all our technology and the extreme competence of our technicians to accomplish what time has so far failed to accomplish: the destruction of Notre Dame de Paris!" (a reader from Le Figaro)

The fire at Reims Cathedral in 1914 had been experienced as a nightmare and a trauma by the people of France. This national drama was then seen as a symbol of German barbarism. Today, a century later, although we have to wait for the results of the investigation, it seems that human negligence, in other words the blunder of an ignorant fool, is at the root of the tragedy ...

I remember Germain Bazin's emotion evoking the tears in his eyes about the arson attack on Reims Cathedral. Bazin, a great art historian and chief curator of the Louvre, came to the University of Brussels every Saturday morning in the late sixties to give his lecture course on the history of the arts to students who had just woken up from the guindaille of the previous day. In his eyes, the Gothic cathedral was an expression of the French genius beyond the Christian spirit.

In the Gothic cathedral, he said, the interior prevails over the exterior: the spectacular façade is opposed to the introspection of the interior, a sacred space where the daylight only reaches through the stained glass windows. And to quote Hegel: *"The essence of the Gothic cathedral lies in its bursting out of the ground and slinging towards the sky"*.

As for the exterior of the cathedral, it is largely determined by the interior: the three portals correspond to the nave and its two sides, *"the buttress arches*



reproduce the intervals and the number of interior pillars the orientation towards the height is expressed in the pointed shape of the roof".

The 19th century inclined to consider the spire as the culminating feature of the gothic cathedral, and many spires, such as that of Notre-Dame de Paris rebuilt by Viollet-le-Duc and completed in 1858, are 19th century creations. It is precisely this sublime arrow spire that burned yesterday like a common match and crashed into the burning attic. A Dantesque show, a vision of the coming apocalypse?

It is the momentum towards height that determines the character of the Gothic cathedral. What is the force that causes such sublime outbursts? In 1833, Michelet, in his History of the Middle Ages, took up the Hegelian thesis of a spiritual architecture: "*There is something stronger than the arm of the Titans... What is it? The breath of the spirit.* "

In the first half of the 19th century, and even well beyond, the rediscovery of gothic architecture was closely linked to the assertion of national identities: the cathedral was thus enlisted in the service of a willingly aggressive nationalism, and became the incarnation of the *Volksgeist*, or spirit of the peoples, in which, according to Hegel, the history of the Absolute is embodied. In Germany, national pride, exacerbated by the Napoleonic Wars, settled on the famous Cologne Cathedral.

In France, Victor Hugo's powerful novel, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) made the Parisian cathedral the cathedral par excellence of French genius.

Germain Bazin - he was born in 1905 - insisted on demonstrating that *German Gothic, incapable of invention, owes everything to France*. In other words gothic art is , in its essence, European: it will flourish across the continent even in England.

It is always the people who appear, he thought, as the true author of the cathedral. The cathedral will therefore be a collective cultural creation, a utopian work that brings all people together, without distinction of conditions, in the enthusiasm of edification.



Wouldn't it be better to consider that the Gothic style (known as the German and French inspired style) is a singular and original expression of the European spirit?

The cathedral is the work of an obscure spirituality, which figures the infinite in a space where multiple voices resonate. The huge stone forest cathedral is part of a plant architecture; in the last quarter of the 18th century, Goethe already compared it to a "*divine tree that was rushing towards the sky.*"

Therefore the fire of *Notre Dame de Paris* ; *notre drame de Paris* is likely to strike the collective unconscious of the French people who were waiting that evening with excitement and impatience for the presidential speech after weeks of intensive debate on the future of France and probably also of Europe. The president kept silent and meditated on the smoking debris of Notre Dame under a rain of fine ashes. The Paris drama will be written in letters of fire in the collective European memory, a little like Valéry's terrible sentence that haunts us a hundred years after it was spoken.

"And we civilizations now know that we are mortal." Paul Valéry

La Crise de l' Esprit, première lettre (1919)

It is reported that the splendid 13th century timber frame roof was called *the forest*. It was necessary to cut down a huge forest to build this absolutely irreplaceable inverted nave. It will eventually be rebuilt tomorrow in other more sustainable materials or are we going to resign ourselves to sacrificing our last oak forests to its identical reconstruction?

What a sublime metaphor of the faith in European spirituality, this powerful breath that has animated the soul of Europe across national States for centuries, from the pax romana and the Greek agora, the Jewish heavenly Jerusalem until now.

Notre Dame de Paris, the cathedrals of Cologne, Milan, the English Parliament in its neo-gothic version and so many other cathedrals both architectural, musical (think of the sound cathedrals and Monteverdi, Vivaldi, Bach, Mozart,



Beethoven, Berlioz) and other literary masterpieces (think of the word cathedrals built by Homer, Aeschylus, Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Montaigne, Spinoza, Goethe, Tolstoy, Hugo, Proust, Joyce to name just a few ... participate in the great European culture. This metaphorical temple/cathedral is home to one of the most beautiful expressions of the human spirit.

These many masterpieces are in danger, Eyes of Europe, *a virtual Erasmus* for all European teenagers (and all people, which are interested in structuring the future) intends to preserve them by transmitting them to the entire European youth. Current EoE high technology makes this now possible.

Technology like Aesop's tongue (read language) can be the best and, at the same time, the worst of things. In this case, as the British Open University has proven, it can fully serve the European cultural heritage. Therefore our total commitment to the Eyes of Europe Program. It is meant to preserve and to transmit Europe's cultural message to the world and, last but not least, to make Europe world-compatible and cosmopolitan.

KEN FOLLETT: "CATHEDRALS ARE THE HEART OF OUR EUROPEAN HERITAGE"

"Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament".

"Our heritage is not preceded by any will."

Let us come back once again to this magical verse by René Char. Isn't the poet always the messenger of the un-transmissible?

Hannah Arendt twice cites this same intriguing aphorism. For her, René Char speaks here as a man of European resistance, against totalitarianism, heir to a policy begun among the Greeks, renewed among the Romans who rediscovered - before it was buried again for how long in what is supposed to unite generations and transmits "*values*" and is called "*culture*".

The cultural link par excellence seems now to be becoming a non-transferable heritage. Oddly enough despite technological wonders to convey it, it doesn't seem, or no longer seems, to be able to connect generations, the past to the present.



For Arendt the new world has dumped the old one. An abyss has been dug from one to the other.

"The past no longer illuminates the future," wrote Tocqueville, "the spirit walks in darkness.

"This darkness defines the crisis of the modern world. The culture crisis appears to lie in the impossibility of transmission. Hannah Arendt:"

The transmission provided by modern technology is absolutely contemporary with the collapse of the traditional transmission that shaped the Western world until a few years ago.

No man was probably ever abandoned in desolation like man in totalitarian societies. It also threatens the individual in our mass societies. Once again, mass society absorbs and dissolves, transforming all places of authority. The technical transmission, the information itself, threatens to be a dehumanizing transmission. 75 years after the collapse of Nazism it threatens again in its new populist and nationalist clothes.

Martin Heidegger: *Our time is that of devastation, which is not only that of wars, genocides and visible disasters, the collapse of the bond of authority, religion, tradition, the generation gap, but also of unnoticed exhaustion, invisible desertification, the petrification of the source itself.*" But is the source really as dry as all that?

Our treasure and heritage are unprecedented, without a legacy or will.

It is not just a matter of finding, restoring, repeating and perpetuating what the elders have bequeathed to us. Not to start over again, but to start differently in order to remain faithful to them.

Should we rebuild the monuments destroyed, ransacked, burned, destroyed? In other words, what will we do with this cultural heritage that burns before our eyes like Notre Dame de Paris and before her, the books on the loggers built by Hitler in Berlin and in the main German cities?

The German Students' Association of the Berlin universities assembled at the Hegelplatz, taking along several truckloads of 25,000 books and writings" undermining the spirit of the German people", marched to the Opernplatz where they, in a symbolic action, threw these Un-German writings into the flames of a pyre. Thousands upon thousands of onlookers wanted to witness



this spectacle. Upon the arrival of the students marching in formation, they were greeted by the crowd with a thunder of "heil" and cheers.

Then Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels spoke: *You are doing the right thing as you, at this midnight hour, surrender to the flames the evil spirit of the past. "The old past lies in flames; the new times will arise from the flame that burns in our hearts. Wherever we stand together, wherever we march together, we want to dedicate ourselves to the Reich and its future. "*

We join together in the vow that we previously so often promised to the nightly sky: 'Illuminated by many flames let it be an oath! The Reich and, the nation and our Führer Adolf Hitler - Heil.'"

After the fire that devastated Notre-Dame de Paris, Emmanuel Macron announced that the cathedral would be rebuilt. A commitment that revives the question of the authenticity of ancient monuments. To rebuild them, is it to respect their history or to flout it? (Asia Balluffier, Le Monde)

"We will rebuild this cathedral," said Emmanuel Macron when he arrived on the scene in the night, announcing the opening of a "national subscription".

And now the issue is raised in the most beautiful way, i. d. a metaphorical way. Who will rebuild, who will transmit in the future the immense European cultural heritage that, like Notre dame de Paris threatens to go up in smoke? Does the return of the extreme right across Europe herald new pogroms of books, paintings or music seen as denaturing (*Entartete Kunst*)?

What does Eyes of Europe want to do and what can it do to prevent this from happening again?

Eyes of Europe has a potential of becoming the auto-active platform of the future i.e., a kind of a virtual cathedral of the world that comes.

The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters." Gramsci

MARC GUIOT

Brussels, March/16 th