

Abstract [Quō](#)

In 1499, the editio princeps of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, or, *Poliphilo’s Strife for Love in a Dream*, made its enigmatic appearance in the renowned press of Aldus Manutius in Venice. Poliphilo was a lover of architecture and, above all, a heartbroken man who fell asleep and dreamed. He dreamed of a magic world made up of dense forests, heavenly islands, and countless outlandish monuments populated by promiscuous nymphs and sinister dragons. Perhaps the most curious, and as a consequence, the most scrutinised objects produced by Poliphilo’s prolific imagination are the marvelous architectural projects that populate this dreamworld; monuments impossible in both conception and execution that forge fragments of classical architecture into excessive (in scale), obsessive (in detail), and unlikely (licentious) combinations. Amplified by its enigmatic authorship, the elaborate continuum of architecture and dreams staged by *Hypnerotomachia* put significant pressure on the status quo of architecture, right at the moment of its definition as a reborn, rational discipline.

[Quō](#)

Nel 1499, l’editio princeps dell’*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, o *Lotta d’amore di Polifilo in sogno*, fece la sua enigmatica comparsa nella rinomata stamperia di Aldo Manuzio a Venezia. Polifilo era un amante dell’architettura e, soprattutto, un uomo dal cuore spezzato che si addormentava e sognava. Sognava un mondo magico fatto di fitte foreste, isole paradisiache e innumerevoli monumenti stravaganti popolati da ninfe promiscue e draghi sinistri. Forse gli oggetti più curiosi e, di conseguenza, più studiati prodotti dalla prolifica immaginazione di Poliphilo sono i meravigliosi progetti architettonici che popolano questo mondo onirico; monumenti impossibili sia nella concezione che nell’esecuzione che forgiavano frammenti di architettura classica in combinazioni eccessive (in scala), ossessive (nei dettagli) e improbabili (licenziose). Amplificato dalla sua enigmatica autorialità, l’elaborato continuum di architettura e sogno messo in scena dall’*Hypnerotomachia* esercita una notevole pressione sullo *status quo* dell’architettura, proprio nel momento della sua definizione come disciplina rinata e razionale.

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VESPER No. 6

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MAGIC

MAGIC

VESPER No. 6

MAGIC

Letizia Battaglia, *Ospedale Psichiatrico, Via Pindemonte, Palermo*,
1983 (ristampa | reprint 2016). Courtesy MAXXI Museo nazionale
delle arti del XXI secolo, Roma. Collezione Fotografie del MAXXI

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Vesper è una rivista scientifica semestrale, multidisciplinare e bilingue, si occupa delle relazioni tra forme e processi del progetto e del pensiero. Ponendo lo sguardo al crepuscolo, quando la luce si confonde con il buio e l'oggetto illuminante non è più visibile, *Vesper* intende leggere l'atto progettuale seguendo e rendendo evidente il moto della trasformazione. Pitagora identificò nel pianeta Venere sia la stella della sera (*Hesperos*) che quella del mattino (*Phosphoros*), i due nomi si riferiscono allo stesso astro ma posto in condizioni temporali differenti. *Vesper* dichiara quindi una posizione più che un oggetto e privilegia il situarsi che ne profila lo statuto. Non è qui accesa la luce tagliente dell'alba, che promette giorni completamente nuovi e alti sol dell'avvenire, ma quella che fa intravedere nella penombra una possibilità nell'esistente.

Richiamando e rinnovando la tradizione delle riviste cartacee italiane, *Vesper* ospita un paesaggio articolato di modalità narrative, accoglie forme di scrittura e stili differenti, privilegia l'intelligenza visiva del progetto, dell'espressione grafica, dell'immagine e delle contaminazioni tra linguaggi. La rivista è pensata nella sua successione di numeri tematici come discorso sulla contemporaneità, nello spazio di ogni singolo numero è articolata in un insieme di rubriche che gettano luci differenti sul tema. Nel procedere delle diverse sezioni – editoriale, citazione, progetto, racconto, lezione, saggio, inserto, traduzione, archivio, viaggio, ring, tutorial, dizionario – mutano i riverberi tra idee e realtà, si accende l'intreccio tra evidenze concrete e loro potenzialità, potenziali trasformativi, immaginari. Le rubriche sono pensate non per aggiornare istantaneamente ma per indagare condizioni progettuali e per fornire strumenti e materiali dall'*ombra lunga*.

Vesper is a six-monthly, multidisciplinary and bilingual scientific journal which deals with the relationships between forms and processes of thought and of design. Gazing into the dusk, when light slowly merges with darkness and the illuminating object is no longer visible, *Vesper* aims to interpret the act of designing through tracing and revealing the movement of transformation. Pythagoras identified in the planet Venus both the evening star (*Hesperos*) and the morning star (*Phosphoros*), assigning the two names to the same star observed in different temporal conditions. *Vesper* thus states a perspective rather than an object, privileging the condition that defines its status. Rather than the sharp light of dawn, heralding a brand-new day and promising a brighter future, it is the twilight that allows you to have a glimpse at the potential of what is already there.

Following the tradition of Italian paper journals, *Vesper* revives it by hosting a wide spectrum of narratives, welcoming different writings and styles, privileging the visual intelligence of design, of graphic expression, of images and contaminations between different languages. The journal is conceived as a series of thematic issues that build a discourse on the contemporary. Each issue is divided into sections that offer a range of diverse perspectives on the theme analysed: editorial, quote, project, tale, lecture, essay, extra, translation, archive, journey, ring, tutorial, dictionary. Throughout the different sections, reverberations between ideas and reality change, connections emerge between tangible facts and their potentials, transformative prospects, collective perception. The principal aim of these sections is not to provide instant news, but to offer an in-depth investigation of different instances of design and to provide tools and materials that have a long-lasting effect.

VESPER No. 6

MAGIC



Letizia Battaglia, *Discarica sulla costa di Acqua dei Corsari (tema: Costa est di Palermo)*, 2003. Stampa b/n ai sali d'argento su carta baritata | B/W gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 40 × 50 centimetri | centimetres. Courtesy MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Roma. Collezione Fotografie del MAXXI.

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rubrica sono a discrezione dell’autore. |
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Poliphilo was a literary hero of the fifteenth century, a lover of architecture and, above all, a heartbroken man who fell asleep and dreamed. He dreamed of a magic world made up of dense forests, heavenly islands, and countless outlandish monuments populated by promiscuous nymphs and sinister dragons. At once scared and excited by this swarming universe, Poliphilo wandered – in his own words – ‘pointlessly, and almost hopelessly’ through its unfolding dreamscapes. ‘Like an animal distracted by a sweetmeat’ (Colonna 1999, p. 18), he was often carried away by the beauty of his accidental discoveries, surrendering himself indiscriminately to architectural and carnal pleasures alike, until he encountered Polia: the personified ideal of both. Exhausted by the strenuous effort to win her heart, Poliphilo woke up alone, and still heartbroken. It was the first day of May, 1467.

A few decades later, the *editio princeps* of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, or, ‘Poliphilo’s Strife for Love in a Dream’, made its enigmatic appearance in the renowned press of Aldus Manutius in Venice. Spreading over 234 super-chancery folios adorned with 172 exquisite woodcuts that intercepted the text with unparalleled mastery for their era, the narrative describing Poliphilo’s dream was relayed in a deliberate way that seemingly ran counter to the ambivalent *quō*, the seemingly aimless wanderings of its protagonist. Yet, even though its opulent production, as well as the prominent status of its publisher placed the book squarely at the heart of a blossoming Venetian humanism, little became known regarding its authorship, its meaning, or its purpose. In all its pomp and lascivious circumstance, *Hypnerotomachia* has stubbornly mirrored the mysterious character of Poliphilo’s dream for almost five hundred years, raising questions on its origins and ends.

Perhaps the most curious, and as a consequence, the most scrutinised objects produced by Poliphilo’s prolific imagination are the *marvelous* architectural projects that populate his dreamworld; monuments impossible in both conception and execution that forge fragments of classical architecture into excessive (in scale), obsessive (in detail), and unlikely (licentious) combinations. The descriptive attention given by the author to these monuments, as well as the way in which the operative device of the dream infiltrates their architectural design established *Hypnerotomachia* as a ‘landmark in the history of architectural writing’ (*ibid.*, p. xii); a unique literary landscape where a man’s fervent ‘dream of architecture’ converged seamlessly with a veritable ‘architecture of dreams’ (Villemur 2006). Amplified by its enigmatic authorship, the elaborate continuum of architecture and dreams staged by *Hypnerotomachia* put significant pressure on the status quo of architecture, right at the moment of its definition as a reborn, rational discipline.

It is little surprise then, that from the sixteenth century onwards, a number of reprints, commentaries, translations and transcriptions of *Hypnerotomachia* exerted significant influence in architectural theory and practice well outside Venice where the book first appeared. Donato Bramante (Gombrich 1951), Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Baldassare Longhena (Wittkower 1999) in Italy, as well as Jules Hardouin-Mansart (Blunt 1937) and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (Turner 1998) in France, were among the numerous architects who attempted to recast Poliphilo’s meandering thoughts into the blueprint of an innovative, creative practice. At the same time, scholars such as Jean-François Félibien (1658-1733), secretary of the Académie Royale d’Architecture, compared the book to Vitruvius, arguing that, while the latter ‘supplied the mechanics of the art, the author of *Hypnerotomachia* managed to revive the spirit of antiquity’ (Blunt 1937, p. 126).

This understanding of *Hypnerotomachia* as a valid textbook for the formation of architects in the ‘spirit’ (if not, the paradoxical mechanics) of an ideal, but lost world has re-emerged in contemporary interpretations of the book. The recombinant monuments of the book have been considered to mirror the formal irregularities of the Freudian dream-work (Lefaivre 1997) while also providing ‘a utopic vector’ for the repressed, creative imagination of the architect. Put another way, in this view, the misshapen appearance of the objects Poliphilo encountered in his dream reveals that architectural meaning is not exhausted in the rigid aestheticism of the modern era; it is rather grounded in a ‘pre-reflective condition of existence’, with which humanity can only be reconciled in an oneiric ‘realm of poiesis’ (Pérez-Gómez 1998, pp. 90, 93).

Bridging *Quattrocento* expression with 20th-century psychoanalytical and phenomenological postulates, these revelatory approaches inscribe Poliphilo’s coiled itinerary within a broader teleological scheme that attempts to justify the hermeneutic impenetrability of his dream as both the progenitor and the fulfilment of repressed architectural desire. In the 15th century, however, the comprehension of oneiric experiences lacked the productive directionality of an intimately subjective expression. At the time *Hypnerotomachia* appeared, dreams were still explained through

a sophisticated theological system that diffused subjectivity into a reflective constellation of mechanical and metaphysical forces. Elaborated in neoplatonic and patristic *summas* of the 4th century, this system broadly classified dreams within a spectrum bracketed by a ‘monstrous’ and a ‘miraculous’ end (Kruger 1992). The first category, accrued incoherent, licentious nightmares linked to corporeal and spiritual troubles, while the second consisted of prophetic visions that rewarded the purity of the soul with perceptual clarity. Common night imaginings occupied a central ground, usually represented by the *somnium*; an enigmatic dream that oscillated between the two extremes, covering its natural, or supernatural meaning under bizarre shapes and sensual ambiguities.

The variety of these dream types depended on the vagaries of *phantasia*, a Janus-faced power responsible for the communication of body and soul that resulted in the creation, or better, the *impression* of mental images in the brain (Brann 1991). Interestingly, due to its mediating powers, *phantasia* was central both in the metaphysical generation of dreams and in the process of architectural innovation. It is little surprise, then, that much like the dream theory of the time, the architecture of the *Quattrocento* was also a fluid balancing act between two models of compositional creativity: the provocative and licentious *mescolare* and the tempered and harmonious *composto* (Payne 1998).

In the course of the 16th century these two compositional models gradually gave way to the intellectual, overarching method of a rationally guided *disegno*, while *phantasia* itself was also being displaced by the comprehensive and increasingly secularised concept of imagination. Published in 1499, *Hypnerotomachia* appears right on the verge of these transformations. Therefore, less than the intentionality of a ‘subversive’ architectural praxis, its marvelous composites can be considered to reflect the fictive negotiation of the uncertainties, mixtures and dualities on which aesthetic and dream theories resided at the time. At the crossroads of East and West, 15th-century Venice was further rooted in the material and intellectual integration of contradictory, religious and geographical lineages. The imaginative recreation of a ‘sensuous Arcadian antiquity’ in *Hypnerotomachia*, for example, seems to echo the paradisaical travel reports from the Cycladic archipelago, to which Venice had privileged maritime access at the time (Brown 1996), while the shattered landscape in which Poliphilo wanders approximates the intentional fragmentation of the pictorial space in imported Eastern Orthodox Icons and their promise of a transcendental, intact world (Belting 1994).

Dominated by an unabashedly erotic fascination with encountered objects, Poliphilo’s obsessiveness, his repetitive *ekphrasis* and universal expertise, are in line with the staging of the world into which he is thrown. Suspended between the mourning of the past and its boisterous restructuring into a designed civic future, *Hypnerotomachia* untethers in a moment of hypnotic stillness a constellation of architectural formulations whose existence is at once mundane and transcendental. Much like Michel Foucault’s description of a world in which ‘the same remains the same, riveted onto itself’ (Foucault 1994, p. 25), the pleats of Polia’s dress unfold into the structural pillars of a magical universe, whose *quō* will remain forever obscure.

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Poliphilo finds himself somewhere else in a dream. Plate from F. Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Aldo Manuzio, Venice 1499, [234] leaves: ill.; 32 centimetres (fol), held at Houghton Library, Harvard University (Typ Inc 5574).

quō, adv. prop. dat. or abl. of qui. I. Where (rare but class.) B. Trop. 1 For which reason, wherefore, whence 2 For the reason that, because II. To or in which place, whither, where (rel. and interrog) – With gen.: “quo gentium,” where in the world B. Trop., to what end, for what purpose, wherefore, why 2. Transf., to the end that, in order that, so that, that III. Indef., with si, etc., to any place, anywhere. C.T. Lewis, C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1879.

