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The Anti-star System of Postmodernism; or, the Transatlantic Media Problem of Critical Regionalism

This paper discusses how the power of architectural criticism is conditioned by the media ecology that contextualises it. It focuses on the transatlantic history of critical regionalism, a discourse that attempted to provincialise the US/Italian nexus of postmodernism that was established after the first Venice Architecture Biennale of 1980.

Originally published in an inaccessible annual review of architecture in Greece, it was only after Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre's theorisation of critical regionalism was recapitulated and disseminated by Kenneth Frampton in New York that it had a worldwide impact. The fact that Frampton's voice was heard louder than Tzonis and Lefaivre's and other proponents' of critical regionalism in the 1980s was owing to his specific positioning in a powerful node within this networked media structure. But this transatlantic structure was mainly functioning to promote the new wave of star architects after the Biennale. Since Frampton tapped into the same channels, the critical regionalist architects that he supported became another kind of, however 'alternative', stars within the same media ecology. Over the decades that followed, many of them found themselves in similar US/EU institutional positions of power, or were commissioned to build large-scale projects across the globe. As such, one of the main victims of this media problem of critical regionalism was the originally intended focus on cultural specificity.

Because Frampton was involved in editorial projects from the outset, his view of critical regionalism also encompassed the way that it should be supported by architectural media. Frampton mainly intended to dissociate critical regionalism from the postmodernism of the Biennale. But architectural publishers of the period also sought to establish their standing in the market by investing in opposing aspects of the wider postmodern debates. This was their way to defend their former establishment position which was shaken by their main competitors. Hence, when Papadakis's *AD* adopted the agenda of postmodern classicism, the *AR* responded by siding with critical regionalism. As diverging agendas of different publishing venues distorted the reception of Frampton's work, his fundamental disagreement with Robert Stern was misconstrued as an inconsequential hair-splitting debate on regionalism. Despite having stepped down from the Biennale for this reason in 1980, Frampton did not practically escape being the 'critic from within' a transatlantic set of overlapping networks which were self-appointed to define architectural culture in Western Europe and North America. With his one foot in the establishment, he wanted to be able to unsettle it with the other. This ambiguous position proved successful because other media outlets that were left out of these novel favoured circles, such as *The Architectural Review (AR)*, embraced the discourse on regionalism.

As such, my paper shows how the self-perpetuating propaganda of the postmodernist architectural avant-gardes was reinforced by a vicious circle of risk-averse publishing practices. This would not break, unless a whole network of related practices was also modified. But this proved difficult even for Frampton, a scholar with an exceptionally influential position at the western 'centre' of architectural production. Despite its adversarial stance towards the star system of architectural media, Frampton's critical regionalism is itself a media construct that reflects his own ambivalent position as 'the critic from within' the transatlantic network of postmodern culture production in the 1980s.