

# Portrait of Eisenman as a Young Chinese Father

Max Kuo

Along with formal innovation, each new age in architecture invents subjectivities who discern, design, and inhabit those forms. This history has included an eclectic cast of both human and non-human characters ranging from Da Vinci's Vitruvian man, Superstudio's unshaven hippies, and even parametricism's emergent slime molds all personas that project ideological contexts for architecture to exist within. The search for today's subject poses an unusual historical predicament--one of endedness, a man<sup>1</sup> without a future. In his landmark book *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of times, a tautological story of mankind overcoming war, enslavement, and disease, arriving upon the greatest and best solution for self-government and self-regulation in the form of Western liberal democracy. If modernism set forth great problems so that architects could design great solutions, then Fukuyama's political thesis inevitably poses an existential question in an era of endedness where political perfection comes at great cost: without perpetual struggle, man no longer needs great art or philosophy, forever resigned to their new and last role as caretakers of human history.

In 1984, just prior to Fukuyama's manifesto, Pe-

ter Eisenman had articulated an architectural corollary to this end of historical time. In his essay "The End of the Classical: the End of the Beginning, the End of the End," Eisenman declared the end architecture's dependence upon classicism's three fictions of representation, truth, and history. Dispelling architecture's mythology of origins and endings, he constructs a non-classical alternative "structured on absences" where design is founded upon timeless modulations, independent of external reference and meaning.<sup>2</sup> For Eisenman, the end of classicism marks the beginning of "timelessness that is no longer universal" whereby architectural design proceeds according to its own internal disciplinary authority manifesting as notational acts of reading and writing.<sup>3</sup> In spite of both Fukuyama and Eisenman's states of endedness, new global technologies and forces have since arisen in the three intervening decades. These developments have fundamentally undermined the stasis and status of this last humanist subject.

Today's news headlines reveal how subjectivity is both under threat while undergoing radical reconstruction. Whether it be urban wildfires, lab-grown meat, or social media surveillance, our knowledge of the world coincides with our loss of control over it. The effects

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1 The author deliberately uses "man" only to underscore the fact that these historical projects are typically hostile to the existence of women

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2 Peter Eisenman, "The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, The End of the End," in *Re: Working Eisenman*, Academy Editions (London: Ernst & Sohn, 1993), 24-33.

3 *Ibid.*

of climate change, automation, the internet, global finance, and resource depletion combine to short-circuit Fukuyama's claims of a final self-regulating political system whereby Hegel's master-slave dialectic is finally overturned. Our millenium offers new predicaments beyond the struggles framed by Fukuyama--that of men who strive to govern as equals (isothymia) versus those who reign by aristocratic meritocracy (megalothymia). Instead, the stakes now lay upon our ability to design a world which emanates through the uncontrollable feedback of eco-technological systems that we've set into motion. In her book *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayle points to the internal contradiction of Fukuyama's self-regulating man:

“By the mid-twentieth century, liberal humanism, self-regulating machinery, and possessive individualism had come together in an uneasy alliance that at once helped to create the cyborg and also undermined the foundations of liberal subjectivity. Philip K. Dick tapped into this potential instability when he used his fiction to pose a disturbing question: should a cybernetic machine, sufficiently powerful in its self-regulating processes to become fully conscious and rational, be allowed to own itself?”<sup>4</sup>

This critical sleight of hand introduces the cyborg as the perfect post-human avatar for the Last Man. For Hayle, post-structuralist models of meaning founded upon absence and presence is less relevant in a world replete with computer-enabled simulation. Experiences as esoteric as jet flight simulation or as quotidian as writing emails are now governed by pattern and randomness and how these processes distribute subjectivity across both biological and virtual networks. In this scenario, Eisenman's textuality is less relevant than the entanglement of multiple cognitive systems. Though his aforementioned essay marks a point of abandonment to make way for a new architecture after endedness, Ei-

senman continues to point the way forward. Combing through a series of anecdotal references scattered across his work, one discovers that he indirectly hints at who today's architectural subject might be.

Beginning with a 1993 lecture at the Architectural Association, Eisenman presents his 22 month-old son as an anthropological case study—an exemplar of the Western subject born in the electronic age. He describes propping his son in front of the TV when *Sesame Street* is suddenly interrupted by commercials. The child is blasted by “the density of light and sound...[as] his head snaps up and he is absolutely riveted to the commercial event though he doesn't know he is getting a commercial message... in fact what is bombarding his sensibility... having his spatiality and his capacity to understand narration taken away.”<sup>5</sup>

Eisenman the Younger's comprehension of narrative is overwhelmed by this density of light and sound. For Eisenman the Elder, this oversaturated media environment triggers a new affective state that architecture must now contend with. The classical embodiment of an architectural space-time continuum becomes ineffectual. To address this problem, the Elder proposes his Columbus Convention Center as the antidote to this shortcoming, where its architectonic instability competes with media, inducing vertigo and nausea in the occupant. The Elder delights in the trauma reported by visitors to the building and the subsequent consternation of his clients.<sup>6</sup> But this countervailing mechanism comes with a half-life as architectural novelty wears thin, similar to the disappearance of widespread air sickness as commercial air travel became more accessible. Thresholds of resistance build up once new initiates have assimilated these aggressions as routine operations. For Eisenman The Younger's generation, this new affective world is their native habitat--a new generic, even placid, mise-en-scene primed for their own subsequent inventions.

Long after that primal scene in front of the electro-

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5. Peter Eisenman, “Architecture in the Age of Electronic Media,” accessed October 6, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkdO8CR\\_Udw&t=1596s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkdO8CR_Udw&t=1596s).

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4. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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6. *Ibid.*

7. Peter Eisenman, "Strong Form, Weak Form," in *Re: Working Eisenman*, Academy Editions (London: Ernst & Sohn, 1993), 50–54.

9. Peter Eisenman, Qing, Chang, and Gonzalez, Placido, "Built-Heritage | Peter Eisenman," *built-heritage*, accessed October 22, 2018, <https://www.built-heritage.net/peter-eisenman-interview>.

8. Claude Elwood Shannon, *Claude Elwood Shannon: Collected Papers* (New York: IEEE Press, 1993).

10. *Ibid.*

nic tube, we meet Eisenman the Younger as a twenty-something adult in his father's essay "Strong Form, Weak Form." He has since become a New York disc-jockey of exotic nightclubs flexing his wily abilities of turntable scratching, erasing the "structures of rock or pop music...that is, the rhythm, the harmonics, the melody, the narrative sound."<sup>7</sup> Whereas the "strong form" of pop songs exhibit one-to-one correlations between meaning and its structure, the "weak form" of turntablist scratching and mixing distorts those correlations, where noise, hesitation, and collage instill delight. The strong form of Elmo's alphabet songs or any Swedish pop anthem relies on the elimination of uncertainty in order to communicate and connect with its audience. As Claude Shannon described:

"For the purposes of communication theory, the "meaning" of the message is generally irrelevant; what is significant is the difficulty in transmitting the message from one point to another...Information is closely associated with uncertainty. The information I obtain when you say something to me corresponds to the amount of uncertainty I had, previous to your speaking, of what you were going to say."<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, communication depends on the reciprocal feedback between certainty and uncertainty. But this proportion does not maintain the same coefficient over time. Expanding commercialization continues to subdivide our subjective states into finer micro-attentive states until we are reduced to perpetual states of uncertainty. Just try to get anything done while email and app notifications constantly ping you. Having grown up in this uncertain state, DJ Eisenman's choice of musician-ship exemplifies this collapse of subject-object relations: platform becomes content, noise becomes signal, and audience becomes the performer.

In Eisenman's third act, the son is all grown up, working for hospitality developers, and ensconced in

his own world, uninterested in his father's architecture. Acknowledging how far they've drifted from one another, the father eulogizes the waning of his own architectural relevance: "I'm living in a very different world than my son. I love my son, he is a great guy. And he is doing very well. But he doesn't need to hire me because I would be a problem for him."<sup>9</sup> Upon this irreconcilable rift in the parable of father and son, Eisenman the Elder abandons the West traveling to the far Orient in search of an unknowable future. In 2017 and at the age of 86, he arrives in Shanghai for the first time in his life, well after the iconic architectural boom at the turn of the millennium. He is flummoxed by the city's lack of classical form, civic discourse, and human rights. In an interview at Tongji University, his instinct is to dash his critical mind against the perceived obstinacy of Chinese non-democratic society. But as the crisis dissipates, we find the Elder wistfully speculating on an alternative future:

"I think that right now China to me seems to be why I am here, seems to be the most important idea for the 21st century. It is not Europe, it is not the Middle East, it is not the USA, nor South America – it's China. It is certainly going to be the place where possibilities exist better than any other place. I think, if I were being born today, I would like to be born in Shanghai. I think I would have more chances in the world than anybody else, it seems to me. And no one seems to care...I would rather get a better chance here, have a baby here, and bring it up here than New York City. I just have that feeling."<sup>10</sup>

This epilogue doubles as a moment of inflection, whereupon the Elder metamorphosizes into the Younger in a reverse Oedipal plot twist. Ruminating on an atonal future, Eisenman slips into a prolepsis of his own reincarnation as a young Chinese father. Xenophobic clichés aside, the specter of the inscrutable Chinese has often instrumentalized the undoing (or comple-

tion) of the Occidental dialectic. Whether it be Leibniz' pursuit of universalism, Foucault's Chinese encyclopedia, or most recently Nick Land's post-human singularity, Chinese tropes offer an intellectual sleight of hand, whereby in one fell swoop, declares the death of the Enlightenment project while also sublimating it into a new imaginary. In Eisenman's case, the catastrophic decline of Western metaphysics is simultaneously salvaged by the relinquishing of civic responsibility and all the burdens of an all-knowing moralism. The relief of "no one seem[ing] to care" allows Eisenman to carry on into the future as a new avatar where Father becomes the Son, albeit a Chinese one this time around.<sup>11</sup> Adopting this new avatar of a Young Chinese Father, Eisenman is able to lay claim upon this unknown future that would otherwise slip beyond his grasp.

Eisenman's avatar, described as a Shanghainese family, exemplifies the arrival of a new post-human architectural subject, no longer underwritten by Western metaphysics. This subject, similar to virtual avatars and lab-grown meat, are synthetic and scripted: their presence, sometimes real and sometimes unborn, is detached from ontology and nourished by the interaction of multiple platforms, commands, and codes. Russian agents posed as Black Lives Matter activists during the 2016 American presidential campaign, and soon, your vegan cousin will be able to eat beef without a guilty conscience. These are examples of a non-representational world that has begun to replace the linguistic models of Eisenman the Elder. Reimagined as a Young Chinese Father, Eisenman's new avatar embodies Hayles' "flickering signifier"<sup>12</sup> --an interdigitated reality of both the body and its multiple transcriptions onto the everyday. Like the refresh of a webpage, each flicker holds the potential for wild transformations of the typical and expected. While this unpredictability may induce anxiety for us, the new subject has moved on to better and more plural things. The failures depicted in science fiction's

doomsday scenarios and the trauma of Germanic fairy tales work only on those who still cling to master narratives. Avatars are contingent, with moral commitments only required by any particular task at any given time while remaining open to the cacophonous spontaneity of a complex and messy world.

To design this brave new world, the new architectural subject must cultivate a distributed design methodology, and from this distance, encourage unexpected results. This unpredictable ad hocism is already at work throughout the urbanized world. China constructs fake islands in order to nationalize the ocean wilderness, while the most undisturbed wilding of nature occurs in post-industrial sites like Chernobyl. Following Eisenman The Elder's prescient longing, we should engage in the immanence of the algorithmic uncanny native to this turbulent world. If we still have the audacity to speculate on the sustainability of liberal values, we must adopt the avatar as a means to cloak and transform our voices, speaking and designing in pluralistic tongues of sincerity and subterfuge. Like Eisenman's post-ethnic Chinese children, we already live in a non-universal and plural world where architecture is no longer persistent but mutable and endlessly possible.

Max Kuo designs with ALLTHATISSOLID and teaches with Harvard GSD Department of Architecture.

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11. Ibid.

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12. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 30-31