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# Poetic Critique in Architecture: Rethinking Theory, Design, and Criticism

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**Abstract**

In response to ongoing debates on architectural criticism, this paper reevaluates the relationship between theory and design practice within contemporary architectural discourse shaped by digital culture. It conducts a comparative textual analysis of two influential narratives that address changing conditions of architectural thinking and making in relation to digital culture: *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* by Mario Carpo (2011) and *The Materiality of Architecture* by Antoine Picon (2020). Employing the notion of "poetic critique" as a methodological framework adapted to the architectural context, the study examines these texts through three analytical axes: the destabilization of the relationship between criticism and judgment, the dialectical relation between artwork and critique, and the interdependence of form and criticism. The results demonstrate that Carpo's interpretation of the digital turn, centered on the changing relationship between representation and production, reveals epistemological tensions that open up a space for poetic critique, while Picon's discussion of materiality and subjectivity strengthens its ontological basis. Accordingly, the paper positions poetic critique as a framework for reconsidering the relations between theory, design, and criticism under the contemporary conditions of digital culture.

**Keywords:** theory, design, and criticism; poetic critique; digital culture; representation and production; materiality and subjectivity

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## 1. Introduction

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the status of architectural criticism has remained a persistent concern within contemporary architectural culture, generating recurring debates about its future, legitimacy, and continuing relevance. Central to these debates was the perception that existing theoretical and intellectual frameworks were no longer adequate to address the challenges of the new century [1]. Such concerns cannot be understood independently of the rise of digital culture, which fundamentally transformed the epistemological and ontological conditions of architecture. More than a technological shift, the digital turn reshaped the social, cultural, and political horizons of architectural practice, while altering the ways architecture was conceived, represented, and produced [2,3].[1]

These transformations did not simply alter architectural practice; they also generated influential narratives through which the digital turn became intelligible within architectural discourse. Rather than constituting a singular technological rupture, the digital turn has also been understood as "a shift characterized by heterogeneous approaches that addressed the interdependencies between technology, architecture, and culture" [8] (p. 4). Among

the figures who have most significantly contributed to this historiographic reframing are Mario Carpo and Antoine Picon, both of whom examine digital culture in relation to longue durée transformations in architectural thinking and making, thereby situating the digital turn within a broader historical context. Their importance for this study therefore lies in both their influence on debates surrounding digital culture in architecture and their role in shaping the historiographic frameworks through which the digital turn has been narrated, interpreted, and historically understood.

Yet if these narratives have played a formative role in defining the terms through which the digital turn has been discussed in architecture, they also raise a broader question concerning the contemporary status of criticism itself. Rather than treating them as neutral accounts, this study approaches them as interpretive constructions of contemporary architecture shaped by digital culture. The issue, therefore, is not merely how the digital turn is narrated, but how criticism might respond to a condition in which the terms of architectural thought and practice have themselves been transformed.[2]

To address this question, the paper draws on the notion of poetic critique. First articulated by Friedrich Schlegel within Early German Romanticism and recently revisited by Michel Chaouli et al. (2021) in relation to art and literature, poetic critique seeks to move beyond the opposition between suspicious critique and affirmative reading that has shaped contemporary debates on criticism and post-criticism [13]. Rather than choosing between these positions, it conceives critique as a relational practice that brings literature and art into closer relation with research and critique. Translated into an architectural context, this relational understanding of critique may offer a way of rethinking the relationship between theory and design.

In methodological terms, this study adopts poetic critique as a framework for examining Mario Carpo's *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (2011) and Antoine Picon's *The Materiality of Architecture* (2020), which address digital culture in architecture from different but complementary historical perspectives within the broader trajectory of architectural history and engage with how architecture is mediated, particularly through notational systems and language [14,15].[3] Through a reconstruction of these interpretations and a critical examination of the tensions and ambiguities they leave unresolved, the study investigates the historiographic assumptions informing these narratives and their implications for architectural critique.

Following this introduction, the paper proceeds in four sections. The methodology section outlines the concept of poetic critique and its translation into an architectural context. The results section reconstructs Carpo's and Picon's interpretations of the digital turn through three axes of poetic critique. Building on these reconstructions, the discussion examines how these narratives condition the possibilities and limits of architectural critique under digital culture and considers their historiographic implications. Finally, the conclusion argues that digital culture does not simply challenge architectural criticism but also opens new possibilities for rethinking poetic critique as a productive mode of engagement between theory and design.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts poetic critique as a methodological framework for a comparative reading of two historiographic narratives of digital culture in architecture. In poetic critique, criticism is conceived not as an external judgment imposed upon a work but as a practice that reconstructs and extends its object through interpretation. The selected narratives are approached as intellectual constructions whose meanings unfold through interpretation and commentary, while their comparison enables critical reconstruction.

As a methodological framework, poetic critique offers a productive basis for interpreting architectural narratives of digital culture while also providing a means of reconsidering the conditions of critique in the contemporary architectural context. By attending to the ways in which different narratives construct the historical significance of digital culture, it enables a critical examination of the assumptions through which the possibilities and limits of architectural critique are understood. In this sense, the comparison of Carpo's and Picon's narratives serves less as an end in itself than as a means of reflecting on how architectural critique might be reconceived in response to digital culture.

To operationalize poetic critique within this study, three analytical axes are derived from the formulation proposed by Chaouli et al. Rather than offering a comprehensive definition of poetic critique, their discussion foregrounds three particularly significant aspects of the concept [13]. The present study adapts these aspects into analytical axes for interpreting and commenting on the selected narratives.

The first analytical axis is derived from Chaouli et al.'s argument that poetic critique loosens the link between critique and judgment. Instead of reducing critique to the application of predetermined aesthetic, ethical, or political criteria, poetic critique suspends the primacy of judgment. Yet this does not entail abandoning judgment altogether. As Schlegel suggests, one should "judge it, and at the same time refrain from judging it" [13] (pp. 3–4). Poetic critique therefore does not prescribe a particular mode of reading but promotes a form of critical attentiveness to the singularity of the work at hand.

The second analytical axis concerns the realignment of the relationship between the work of art and the work of criticism. In poetic critique, criticism is not understood as a secondary or supplementary activity that follows a completed work. Instead, works of art are conceived as exceeding authorial intention and as essentially incomplete. Following Adorno, critique is understood as an agent of a work's historical becoming, while the truth of a work unfolds through interpretation, commentary, and critique. Poetic critique therefore entails a distinctive temporality in which reading engages the past and the present, while critique addresses the future [13].

The third analytical axis examines the role of form in critique. Drawing on Adorno's conception of criticism, poetic critique rejects the opposition between formal properties and critical content. The truth of a work is inseparable from its singular form, since it is only through form that art both differentiates itself from empirical life and stands in relation to the social world. In this view, form and critique converge, making form itself a source of critical significance [13].

These three analytical axes structure the comparative reading undertaken in this study. They do not function as evaluative criteria but as interpretive lenses for examining Carpo's narrative of the digital turn and Picon's broader engagement with digital culture and its implications for architecture. Each axis first explores the architectural conditions narrated in the texts through the corresponding aspect of poetic critique, then investigates either the tensions generated by these conditions or the limits of the critical possibilities they open, and finally interrogates the historiographic framework underlying each narrative's theoretical position.[4]

In this regard, the analysis examines how each narrative configures the relationship between critique and judgment, criticism and its object, and form and critique. Through interpretation and commentary, the study identifies the historiographic assumptions embedded within these narratives and examines the tensions they leave unresolved. Comparative reconstruction then extends this analysis toward a critical reflection on the possibilities and limits of architectural critique in digital culture.[5]

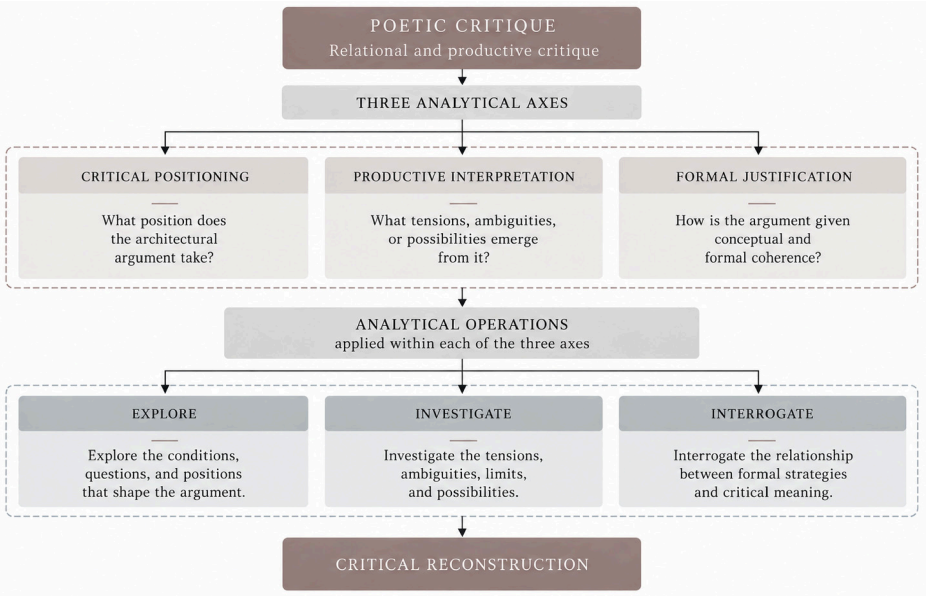



**Figure 1.** The Analytical Framework of Poetic Critique.

## 3. Results

This section examines two distinct historical narratives that address transformations in architectural thinking and making in relation to digital culture. First, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* by Mario Carpo (2011) is analyzed to reveal the epistemological reconfiguration of representation and production prompted by the digital turn; second, *The Materiality of Architecture* by Antoine Picon (2020) is examined to articulate the ontological transformation of this paradigm shift through the concepts of materiality and subjectivity. The analysis is structured around three analytical axes of poetic critique introduced in the methodology section.

### *3.1. Representation and Production*

In examining the digital paradigm within the context of architectural history, *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* establishes a historiographic framework centered on the Albertian paradigm, which is predicated on the distinction between representation and production. Within this paradigm, architectural design operates as a notational system that precedes construction and enables the identical reproduction of the architect's design. Carpo situates this model of "building by notation" within the broader technical and cultural transformations initiated by print culture and argues that it has structured the theory and practice of Western architecture for the last five centuries [14] (p. 51). In this historical and conceptual context, a major argument is that the digital turn in architecture represents a reversal of the Albertian paradigm.

For Carpo, digital technologies collapse the distinction between representation and production, as "digital architects today are increasingly designing and making at the same time" [14] (p. 45). Rather than functioning as fixed notational models intended for identical reproduction, projects are conceived as open-ended scripts capable of producing multiple and differential outcomes. In this transition from identical to differential reproduction, the notion of authorship is also reconfigured from the "authorial way of building by design" [14] (p. x) toward "shared technical lore and collaborative making" [14] (p. 105), which, in some respects, aligns with the pre-Albertian technocultural environment.

The following subheadings represent the major themes in the narrative related to the reversal of the Albertian paradigm within the three axes of poetic critique. Accordingly, the

first axis examines the transition from identical copies to differential variations; the second focuses on the reconfiguration of authorship; and the third explores the transformation from object to objectile.

#### 3.1.1. From Identical Copies to Differential Variations

The first axis of poetic critique, defined by the paradoxical tension between judgment and the withholding of judgment, can be examined through the transition "from mechanically made identical copies to digitally generated differential variations" [14] (p. 11). This transition does not simply establish a new set of norms; instead, the logic of differential variation itself destabilizes the very notion of fixed norms and standards. Within this new paradigm, identicality loses its authority; the boundaries between original and copy, and between standard and deviation, become blurred; form is conceived through the dynamics of variation rather than as a final resolution; and critical evaluation shifts from the object itself to the processes that generate it. It is precisely this destabilization of judgment that renders the first axis of poetic critique particularly relevant.

Carpo, who argues that the rise of digital technologies brought the modern ideal of identicality to an end, describes a nonstandard paradigm in which "digital variability goes counter to all the postulates of identicality" [14] (p. x). This paradigm entails "the reversal of some technical, economic, social, and visual principles that have characterized the mechanical age" [14] (p. 105). At the architectural level, such a reversal marks a departure from notational limitations, industrial standardization, and the Albertian model of authorial design. In particular, within this new visual environment shaped by invisible algorithms, the notion of visual sameness is replaced by similarity, which is difficult to assess and measure scientifically [14]. This disruption of the basic principles of architecture inevitably complicates judgment itself and redefines the conditions of criticism.

Within this paradigm, variability is no longer regarded as a deviation from an ideal model of identicality; instead, it becomes a productive and valuable design capacity. This reconfiguration of variability involves the proliferation of interpretive possibilities. However, the statement that "variability ... has been turned into an asset in the new digital environment—indeed, into one of its most profitable assets" [14] (p. 8) also highlights its integration into the logic of capitalist production. In this respect, digital variability exemplifies the paradox at the core of poetic critique: it loosens the authority of predetermined criteria and expands the space of interpretation, yet it does not eliminate judgment altogether.

This paradox becomes even more apparent in Carpo's claim that unlimited visual variability "may entail a loss of visual relevance ... and may in the end lose all meaning" [14] (p. 10). Although this observation acknowledges a possible limit to digital variability, it leaves largely unexplored the conditions under which visual variability retains or loses relevance. However, if unlimited variability may ultimately lead to the loss of all meaning, this possibility appears too significant to remain a minor qualification within an otherwise affirmative account of digital variability.

From a historiographic perspective, the association of digital variability with the premechanical variability of artisanal craftsmanship is particularly significant. Carpo argues that postindustrial digital craftsmanship shares important similarities with premodern artisanal practices and cultures of variation that preceded the rise of machine-made identicality. Accordingly, he frames his main argument concerning "the rise and fall of the paradigm of identicality" through a historical narrative "with a beginning, climax, and end" [14] (p. x). Yet this historiographic framing also raises questions concerning the extent to which identicality has actually been displaced by digital variability. The continued presence of mechanisms of identification, replication, and equivalence within digital environments

suggests a more complex relationship between variability and identicality than the notion of an "end" might imply.

#### 3.1.2. The Reconfiguration of Authorship

The second axis of poetic critique, which considers the artwork to be constitutively incomplete and argues that its historical becoming is realized only through the agency of critique, can be examined in relation to the reconfiguration of authorship. The narrative focuses on the transition from Alberti's intellectual authorship, grounded in the "architect's full authorial control and intellectual ownership of the end product" [14] (p. 117), to a digitally mediated form of authorship. This transition refers to a shift from a condition in which "all revisions stop and identical replication starts" [14] (p. 25) to one in which projects increasingly function as "open-ended, generative scripts" [14] (p. 45) that remain open to continual redesign, adaptation, and transformation by multiple human and technical agents. In this framework, authorship is no longer based on full control over a finalized product but on processes that remain open to continual transformation. As a result, incompleteness becomes a constitutive condition.

In digital culture, where "agency, interactivity and participation" become the defining conditions of architectural production [14] (p. 114), projects are increasingly developed through open-ended generative processes. Under these conditions, architectural work surpasses its author's intentions and remains open to continual reinterpretation. In this sense, digital culture gives rise to a new mode of authorship. Carpo describes this condition as a form of "split agency" that "entails two levels of authorship" [14] (p. 126): the primary author designs the "generic object" or "generative notation," while the secondary author (or interactor) interprets, specifies, and transforms this generative system into individual end products. Consequently, the architectural work can no longer be understood as the fixed expression of a singular authorial intention. As the authority to determine the meaning of the work is no longer vested in a single author, the work becomes increasingly dependent on acts of interpretation, thereby creating greater scope for the critical engagement foregrounded by poetic critique.

Nevertheless, this shift in authorship also raises questions that remain comparatively underexplored in Carpo's account. While he acknowledges that digitally integrated design processes may entail a "loss of design control and of authorial recognition, and even, in the most extreme cases, collective or anonymous results" [14] (p. 118), the implications of this loss are not examined in detail. The loss of design control may be understood as both a transformation of authorship and a fragmentation of responsibility. As design processes become participatory and collaborative, it becomes more difficult to identify who can be held responsible for the meanings and consequences produced through architectural work. From this perspective, the celebration of participatory authorship may risk functioning as a conceptual screen that foregrounds openness and collaboration while obscuring the technological and institutional power relations that shape architectural production.

This affirmative view of participatory authorship becomes particularly evident in Carpo's broader historiographic interpretation of digital culture. He argues that the participatory nature of digitally integrated design processes is not entirely unprecedented, given that construction practices in pre-Albertian architectural culture were largely collective and frequently anonymous [14]. In this respect, he once again underlines that contemporary digital culture shares important affinities with pre-mechanical modes of cultural production. However, this comparison may reduce the visibility of the novel forms of mediation introduced by computational systems, thereby limiting the critical examination of the conditions under which participation becomes possible. The question is therefore not simply whether

authorship has become participatory, but how "agency, interactivity, and participation" are configured within digitally mediated design processes.

#### 3.1.3. From Object to Objectile

The third axis of poetic critique, which frames critique not as an external interpretation imposed upon the artwork, but as a constitutive activity immanent to the form of the work itself, becomes evident in the reconceptualization of the object. In his narrative, Carpo delineates a shift in focus from the material object to the generative processes through which objects are variably produced. This shift is embodied in the concept of the objectile, which reconceptualizes the object as an algorithmically driven process of continuous variation, replacing the notion of a finalized and self-identical entity: "the objectile is not an object but an algorithm" [14] (p. 40). Such a reconceptualization reconfigures the relationship between the object and its form, as Carpo exemplifies in Eisenman's design approach.

Eisenman's reading of Deleuze's fold emphasizes "the notion of forms that can change, morph, and move, and of a new category of objects defined not by what they are, but by the way they change and by the laws that describe their continuous variations" [14] (p. 87). For Eisenman, who formulated his architectural critique through formal operations, form is "no longer the fixed representation of a univocal narrative," but "a field of possibilities" in which stable hierarchies of meaning and conventional oppositions—such as active/passive, inside/outside, and figure/ground—are dissolved [17] (p. 2). Accordingly, form operates as an ordering process through which internal dialectical forces are organized [17]. This reinterpretation of form and its pivotal role in his architecture marks a convergence of form and critique. In this revised framework, form no longer serves as the object of critique; rather, critique becomes immanent in the generative operations of form itself. From the perspective of poetic critique, however, the objectile raises the possibility of critique becoming immanent to form while also prompting questions concerning the conditions under which such a convergence can be sustained.

As Carpo notes, the fundamentally static nature of architecture limits the direct manifestation of generative processes in built form. This results in a disjunction between the digital age's logic of continuous formal becoming and the physical object of architecture, which can at most represent, symbolize, or evoke a sense of continuity [14]. The resulting disjunction thus raises a broader question concerning the limits of Carpo's narrative itself. If architectural form can only symbolize continuous becoming, then the transformative potential of the digital paradigm appears to remain confined to the level of representation rather than being fully realized in architectural form itself. This, in turn, calls into question whether this shift can be regarded as a paradigmatic transformation in architecture.

A related tension concerns formal language. The digital avant-gardes of the 1990s frequently equated the logic of digital generation with smooth, seamless, and continuously curvilinear forms. Carpo critically interrogates the adoption of this formal language as a sign of a new technical age and contends that "only a dialectic relationship between technology and society can bring about enduring technosocial transformations—and with them, meaningful changes in architectural form" [14] (p. 85). While this perspective reinforces the critical capacity of form by relating it to broader social and technological contexts, it also reveals another tension within the narrative. If enduring transformations depend on a dialectical relationship between technology and society, the extent to which the digital turn constitutes a paradigmatic transformation in architecture remains an open question.

Within discussions of form and criticality, the tensions discussed above complicate Carpo's historiographic account of the digital turn as a reversal of the Albertian paradigm. While the shift from object to objectile privileges generative processes over stable objects, the material conditions of architecture reveal limits to this reversal. The fundamentally static

nature of architecture, the disjunction between generative becoming and the built object, and the persistent tendency to reduce digitality to a specific formal aesthetic all suggest that the Albertian paradigm has not been fully overcome.

Examined through the three axes of poetic critique, Carpo's narrative reveals not only a series of tensions and limits but also delineates the conditions for a renewed mode of critique. In *The Alphabet and the Algorithm*, these conditions are articulated primarily in epistemological terms, while their ontological implications remain only partially explored. It is this ontological dimension that becomes central in the following section, which examines Antoine Picon's *The Materiality of Architecture*.

### *3.2. Materiality and Subjectivity*

By reinterpreting architectural history through the concept of materiality, Antoine Picon constructs an alternative narrative that challenges conventional historical interpretations without proposing a new periodization of Western architecture. This historiographic approach is grounded in the argument that "architecture is concerned with materiality because it engages the question of what it means to be human" [15] (p. 10). In this sense, Picon frames materiality as extending beyond a question of matter and materials to a mode through which humans understand and situate themselves within the material world.

Building on this argument, *The Materiality of Architecture* further examines how the digital era has transformed prevailing conceptions of materiality and reshaped human self-understanding through changing relations to the material world. In this context, the following subheadings outline the major themes related to the transformation of materiality in the digital era across the three axes of poetic critique. Accordingly, the first axis, "An Incomplete Encounter," discusses the relationship between architecture and language; the second, "Regimes of Materiality," examines the historical changes in architectural materiality; and the third, "Situations and Décors," addresses its political dimension.

#### 3.2.1. An Incomplete Encounter

The first axis of poetic critique, defined by the paradoxical tension between judgment and the withholding of judgment, can be traced in the complex relationship between architecture and language. Described as "an incomplete encounter," this relationship foregrounds the fundamental tension between the material resistance of architectural realization and its expressive will. For Picon, architecture constantly seeks to express itself, yet its material reality resists being fully translated into language—a state of "simultaneous convergence and distancing" [15] (p. 39) that mirrors the paradoxical tension characterizing this axis.

This relationship is further complicated by the argument that architecture operates simultaneously within the realms of reason and affect. In this sense, while the architectural work can be interpreted through language within the conceptual realm, it also produces an embodied and sensory experience that operates prior to language. This oscillation between the "language of reason" and the "domain of affect" [15] (p. 32) resonates with Schlegel's conceptualization of poetic critique, which requires both giving oneself over to the influence of the artwork and moving beyond that influence to reflect upon it critically. In this sense, architecture's relation to language inherently creates a tension between engagement and critique.

As Picon points out, although language has long been a temptation within architectural discourse, the tension between architecture's linguistic and material dimensions continues to generate contradictory positions in contemporary architectural theory. In particular, with the rise of digital culture and new materialist approaches, conceptions of architecture as a linguistic and symbolic system gave way to perspectives emphasizing architecture's material, affective, and performative capacities—a shift exemplified by Jesse Reiser and

Nanako Umemoto's notion of "asignifying signs," which rejects the necessity of discursive explanation in favor of the immediate presence of architectural qualities [15]. Although Picon argues that the linguistic dimension of architecture cannot be entirely superseded by materialist approaches, a close reading of the notion of "asignifying signs" reveals a more nuanced position.

The appeal of asignifying signs for Reiser and Umemoto lies in their resistance to meaning-based approaches, which they regard as inherently judgmental and inclined toward stability at the expense of process. As they argue, "a meaning-based practice actually stops process because it is judgmental, concerned with stability rather than unfolding, and relies on outside semantic criteria that are generally separate from material processes" [18] (p. 173). Their critique is therefore directed not simply against signification itself, but against forms of signification that stabilize meaning and interrupt processes of becoming. Interestingly, this perspective converges with poetic critique in its resistance to definitive judgment. By refusing attempts to define and stabilize architectural processes, asignifying signs sustain the openness of architectural becoming.

Yet the resistance to definitive judgment does not eliminate the tensions surrounding architecture's relation to language. One of the clearest manifestations of this tension can be found in the relationship between architectural writing and built form. While architectural writing—from Renaissance treatises to contemporary manifestos—enables the discipline to articulate ideas beyond material construction, architecture itself continually resists complete textual representation. Buildings cannot fully embody the theories written about them, just as writing cannot entirely capture the sensory and material reality of architecture. This dual gap between text and building produces a condition in which architecture constantly oscillates between presence and absence, material realization and discursive abstraction [15].

Indeed, Picon argues that the changing material conditions of digital culture did not diminish the role of writing; instead, the rise of asignifying signs has been accompanied by an increasing proliferation of texts and symbols. This proliferation reinforces his claim that language and meaning continue to play a significant role in architecture. However, their function is no longer confined to representing what is already known. As explored in the previous paragraph, the use of asignifying signs "promotes the production of the unforeseen rather than representing the known" [18] (p. 173). In this sense, language is not displaced but reconfigured, continuing to operate in tension with the material conditions it seeks to articulate.

Finally, the incomplete encounter outlined here is also reflected in Picon's narrative, which traces changing understandings of materiality alongside the tensions, controversies, and contradictions that accompany them. From the perspective of poetic critique, this narrative leaves ambiguity unresolved, thereby sustaining the indeterminacy through which architectural meaning remains open to reinterpretation. The historiographic logic underlying this position becomes more apparent in the following section through Picon's notion of regimes of materiality.

#### 3.2.2. Regimes of Materiality

The second axis of poetic critique, which views the artwork as constitutively incomplete and argues that its historical becoming is realized only through the agency of critique, becomes particularly evident in the conceptualization of regimes of materiality. This conceptualization suggests that the meaning and material experience of architecture remain open to reinterpretation amid changing cultural and material conditions, as "materiality is in constant evolution" [15] (p. 19). The focus here, however, is specifically on the regime of digital materiality and its implications for contemporary architecture.

In contemporary digital culture, the understanding of materiality has undergone a profound transformation. Instead of referring to "stable substances," materiality is increasingly associated with "happenings, situations, and events," as digital technologies reshape both "the perception of the physical world" and "the interpretation of what constitutes the human" [15] (p. 114). In this context, as material conditions continually reshape architectural experience, the meaning of architecture cannot stabilize into a final or complete form. For Picon, however, this transformation should not be interpreted as a dematerialization of architecture; rather, "architecture is in fact realigning with the strong material dimension that is evident to anyone who has studied or practiced it" [15] (p. 18). This "realignment" of materiality within digital culture thus suggests that architectural meaning remains historically open, contingent, and subject to continual reinterpretation.

Such an interpretive strategy becomes even more evident in the adaptation of François Hartog's notion of regimes of historicity to the context of materiality. In response to "presentism," defined as "the sense that only the present exists" [19] (p. xv), the notion of regimes of materiality situates architecture within historically contingent relations to the material world. In this respect, these regimes emerge as interpretive constructs, recalling Hartog's assertion that a regime of historicity "is not a factual given" but rather "constructed by the historian" [19] (p. xvi). Architectural materiality thus appears as a historically mediated field of meaning that remains open to continual reinterpretation.

Yet this historiographic move also raises an important question. If regimes of materiality are interpretive constructs, then the "realignment" of materiality described by Picon appears less as an objective transformation than as a particular interpretation of contemporary architectural culture. Moreover, if materiality itself was never abandoned but merely understood in different terms, it becomes difficult to determine where the historical specificity of the digital era actually resides. In this sense, "materiality in the digital era" remains historiographically open and requires critical reassessment.

The historiographic openness identified above is consistent with Hartog's definition of a regime of historicity as a way of "linking together past, present, and future" [19] (p. xv). Such a temporal configuration also aligns with the peculiar temporality of poetic critique, in which "reading is a creative engagement with the past and the present, whereas criticism is conceived as poetic activity that addresses itself to the future" [13] (p. 4). However, while both Hartog's model and poetic critique assign a constitutive role to the future, the future possibilities of materiality in the digital era are not fully articulated. This question is partially addressed in his subsequent discussion of situations and décors, where such possibilities are explored through architecture's political capacity.

#### 3.2.3. Situations and Décors

The third axis of poetic critique, which frames critique not as an external interpretation imposed upon the artwork, but as a constitutive activity immanent to the form of the work itself, becomes evident in Picon's discussion of the politics of architectural materiality, particularly through his conceptualization of situations and décors. Here, form is conceived as the spatial organization of architecture, expressed through sensory and symbolic dimensions. Within this framework, the political agency of architecture emerges through two interrelated aspects: the generation of "situations that constitute incentives to orient action in certain directions" and the creation of immersive "décors" that "reinforce the feeling that human action can be meaningful" [15] (p. 143).

Picon conceptualizes situations as shared sensory and affective conditions produced through the material organization of architectural space, arguing that such architectural effects are culturally and socially mediated formations rather than merely physiological phenomena. Situations become political through architecture's capacity to organize

shared sensory experiences, shape the temporal rhythms of collective life, and produce socially constructed regimes of visibility through what Jacques Rancière terms an "aesthetic regime" [15].

The political effect of architecture is also manifested in ornament and décor. The symbolic character of architectural ornaments, historically associated with the display of status, authority, and wealth, renders them politically significant [15]. While ornaments serve as dynamic elements that make architectural order visible, décor represents the immersive symbolic whole created through the coordination of these ornaments. Within this conceptualization, the meaning of décor unfolds through an open-ended and dynamic process, so the symbolic power of ornamented architecture is never fully disclosed.

At this point, Picon's use of Rancière's notion of the aesthetic regime raises a further question concerning architecture's political agency. While situations and décors undoubtedly organize shared sensory experience, it remains unclear whether they merely structure collective perception or actively reconfigure existing distributions of the sensible. From a Rancièrian perspective, political significance emerges through the production of shared experience and, more fundamentally, through the interruption and reconfiguration of the existing distribution of the sensible, making visible and audible what had previously remained excluded from it [20]. Consequently, the extent to which situations and décors generate such dissensual reconfigurations of the sensible remains open to question.

This question becomes particularly relevant in the contemporary context presented in the narrative. While the return of ornament reasserts the complementarity between situation and décor, many contemporary designers deny the inevitably symbolic character of their work, presenting architecture instead as a neutral and objective reflection of existing social conditions. For Picon, such denial functions as a concealed affirmation of the neoliberal order, characterized by ruthless competition and increasing social inequality. In this sense, the refusal to recognize architecture's symbolic dimension suppresses the possibility of critical thought by foreclosing alternative perspectives to boundless capitalism [15]. Whether or not one accepts the extent of this political diagnosis, the significance of Picon's argument lies less in its critique of neoliberalism than in its broader attempt to locate critique within the formal operations of architecture itself.

This political positioning extends beyond the analysis of architectural objects to inform the historiographical method itself. Picon's narrative is structured around the tensions and contradictions that characterize architectural materiality, tracing their shifting configurations across different historical contexts. In this context, architectural materiality emerges as a distinctive approach both to the relationship between architecture and politics and, more broadly, to the construction of historical meaning. Such a position closely aligns with the framework of poetic critique, insofar as the historical narrative itself becomes a critical operation.

Through an examination of the three axes of poetic critique, Picon's narrative of materiality reveals the ontological conditions of contemporary architecture within a critical historiographic framework. The first axis demonstrates how digital culture and new materialist approaches further complicate the relationship between architecture and language by shifting attention from symbolic representation toward architecture's material, sensory, and performative dimensions. The second axis reconfigures architectural materiality within the changing conditions of digital culture as an increasingly relational field open to historical reinterpretation and critique. Finally, the third axis redefines critique as a constitutive dimension of architectural form, articulated through its material organization. Together, these arguments open up the possibility of an alternative critical model for contemporary architecture: poetic critique.

## 4. Discussion

### *4.1. Poetic Critique in Digital Culture*

In the context of digital culture, poetic critique offers a productive framework for reconsidering the relation between architecture and criticism. Such a reconsideration requires an examination of the transformation of architecture's material conditions in digital culture, which cannot be understood independently of the regime of presentism that characterizes contemporary culture. Whereas the modern regime of historicity was structured around the future-oriented idea of progress, presentism describes a temporal condition in which the present becomes the dominant temporal category, characterized by immediacy and a perpetual present [19]. This condition becomes particularly visible in the digital realm, which, as Picon argues, "has helped to reveal the transformations that affect our contemporary moment" [15] (p. 12). Within this temporal context, critique gains particular relevance as a means of orienting oneself within rapidly transforming cultural and material realities. Yet such instability challenges conventional models of critique grounded in stabilized meanings and historical distance.

Poetic critique, as revisited by Chaouli et al. in relation to art and literature, offers a way of rethinking critique as a creative and interpretive engagement that moves beyond purely negative or judgmental modes of criticism. In this view, the poetic dimension of critique profoundly transforms both the concept and the practice of critique, thereby allowing literature and art, as well as research and critique, to enter into closer relation [13]. With a similar motivation, the unstable material conditions of digital culture in architecture open a space for a mode of critique capable of bringing theoretical inquiry and design practice into closer relation. These conditions are particularly evident in the historical narratives of Carpo and Picon, which examine digital culture in relation to transformations in architectural thinking and making.

### *4.2. Epistemological and Ontological Transformations in Architecture*

The digital turn in architecture entails both epistemological and ontological transformations. While Carpo primarily frames this shift in epistemological terms through the transformation of representation and production, Picon interprets it in ontological terms with a focus on materiality and subjectivity. Read together, these narratives reveal that digital culture has transformed the technical means of architectural production as well as the conditions through which architecture is understood, experienced, and historically situated.

In Carpo's narrative, the digital turn destabilizes the conceptual foundations of the Albertian paradigm, particularly the distinction between representation and production. Within this new condition, architecture no longer operates according to the logic of identical reproduction; instead, it increasingly functions through processes of differential variation. Furthermore, the architect's position as the singular author and intellectual owner of the work becomes unstable, as projects are reconfigured as open-ended generative systems shaped through distributed forms of agency, interactivity, and participation. As a result, the architectural object itself loses its status as a finalized and self-identical entity, becoming an objectile instead: a variable object shaped by algorithms.

Picon's narrative reframes this instability as an ontological problem. Architecture is no longer understood primarily as a linguistic or symbolic system, but increasingly as a material and sensory phenomenon that cannot be fully reduced to discursive representation. Similarly, materiality is reconceptualized as a field of happenings, situations, and events shaped by digital technologies, challenging its conception as a stable substance. Under these conditions, claims of architectural neutrality and objectivity become untenable, as architecture actively shapes collective experience and political sensibilities through situations and décor.

### *4.3. The Reconfiguration of Architectural Criticism*

These epistemological and ontological transformations also reconfigure the conditions of architectural criticism itself. If criticism depended on relatively stable forms, authorial intentionality, and the possibility of external judgment, the conditions described by Carpo and Picon complicate these assumptions through variability, open-endedness, relational materiality, and distributed forms of agency.

Carpo's emphasis on the transition from identical copies to differential variations destabilizes fixed criteria of judgment while simultaneously opening architecture to broader interpretive possibilities. At the same time, Picon's analysis of the increasing attention to architecture's material, affective, and performative dimensions complicates attempts to reduce architectural meaning to stable frameworks of interpretation.

This interpretive openness also transforms the relation between architecture and criticism by problematizing the conventional distinction between the artwork and critique. The shift from the modern notion of authorship toward distributed forms of agency transforms openness and incompleteness into constitutive conditions of architecture by foregrounding interactivity and participation. On the ontological level, such incompleteness aligns with the contemporary regime of materiality, in which architecture is understood less as a stable object than as a field of happenings, situations, and events.

Beyond questions of judgment and interpretation, the digital turn also reconfigures the relation between form and criticism. The reconceptualization of the object as an objectile transforms form from a fixed narrative into a field of possibilities. The renewed relevance of ornament, understood beyond its decorative function as a performative and affective dimension of architectural form, further blurs the distinction between form and criticism.

This comparative analysis demonstrates that digital culture creates the conditions for poetic critique. Yet these same conditions also raise questions about the possibility of critical knowledge and the forms of subjectivity upon which criticism has historically depended. In this context, the nature of the knowledge produced by algorithms, together with its cultural, political, and social implications, problematizes whether algorithmic knowledge can genuinely be regarded as critical [21].

Conceptualized as "a whole socio-technical assemblage of people, technologies, practices, sites, and knowledges", algorithms fundamentally undermine the Enlightenment ideal of self-reflection and the subjectivity rooted in critical knowledge by bypassing the participation of the self in the production of knowledge about itself [21] (pp. 9–11). Algorithmic knowledge sidesteps the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of critical knowledge, reducing individuals to objects of prediction and behavioral analysis [22]. Thus, algorithms that emerge with the promise of liberation ultimately render subjectivity increasingly redundant. However, within these same conditions, the erosion of subjectivity does not necessarily entail its complete disappearance; it may instead reveal subjectivity itself as a potential site of resistance and critique [21].

In this regard, Schlegel's conception of criticism as a form of "criticizing by creating" offers a useful point of reference. Rather than positioning criticism as an external act of judgment, it understands critique as an interactive and productive practice in which the roles of creator and critic continuously shift and reshape one another [23]. Meaning emerges through this process of interaction, preserving the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of critical knowledge that algorithmic forms of prediction and classification tend to bypass.

From this perspective, poetic critique becomes significant insofar as it reopens a space for subjectivity within the conditions of digital culture. Against the predictive and instrumental logic of algorithmic knowledge, poetic critique sustains the interpretive, affective, and open-ended dimensions of architectural experience through which critical reflection and resistance can still emerge. However, following Felski's argument that critique is "lim-

ited, not limitless" and "finite and fallible" [24], poetic critique should not be understood as a comprehensive solution to the challenges posed by digital culture. Instead, its value lies in sustaining a reflective engagement with the tensions that digital culture generates.

### *4.4. The Historiographical Implications*

In historiographical terms, the narratives advanced by Carpo and Picon do not merely address digital culture but actively construct the interpretive frameworks through which contemporary architecture becomes intelligible. However, their proximity to the digital conditions they seek to historicize complicates the maintenance of the critical distance associated with Tafuri's conception of criticism as history itself. Writing from within the very conditions they analyze, Carpo and Picon bring into view certain tensions surrounding digital culture. A poetic-critical reading extends this line of inquiry by interrogating the historiographical tensions underlying their accounts of contemporary architecture shaped by digital culture.

One of the key paradoxes in both narratives lies in their attempt to explain the novelty of the digital condition through forms of historical recurrence. By drawing analogies between premodern artisanal production and contemporary digital variability, Carpo offers an alternative to conventional narratives of technological determinism based on linear models of progress. Yet, this historiographic strategy of interpreting contemporary digital culture through historical precedents risks reproducing aspects of techno-optimistic discourse. While concepts such as variability, openness, and distributed authorship may appear as emancipatory alternatives to industrial standardization, they are embedded within forms of algorithmic governmentality oriented toward the prediction and modulation of behavior and within new data relations through which human life becomes a direct source of economic value [25,26]. What appears as a return to collective making may simultaneously constitute new forms of control, surveillance, and economic valorization.

A similar historiographic logic can be observed in Picon's account of materiality. His notion of the "realignment" of architecture with its enduring material dimension suggests that digital materiality does not constitute a complete break with the past but rearticulates longstanding relationships between architecture, matter, and experience. By interpreting digital materiality through narratives of historical persistence, Picon adopts a historiographic position that privileges continuity over rupture. Within this framework, his emphasis on affective and sensory experience may not sufficiently address the infrastructural and economic conditions through which digital culture organizes contemporary life, despite his attention to the political dimensions of materiality. As a result, a mode of critique centered on perception and experience risks obscuring questions of ideology and power by shifting attention away from the relations through which digital environments are produced and governed.

Both authors offer alternatives to technologically deterministic accounts of digital culture: Carpo through the shift from identicality to variability, and Picon through an expanded understanding of materiality. Yet both frame digital culture as a defining horizon for understanding contemporary architecture. Recent discussions of historical temporalities, however, suggest that historical change is shaped by the coexistence of multiple and often conflicting temporal frameworks rather than by a single, unified historical logic [27]. Contemporary architecture has also been historicized through a range of intersecting processes, including transformations in political economy, infrastructures, media cultures, and ecological conditions, each offering a different account of contemporary change. Within this broader context, the digital turn may be better understood as a field of competing temporalities and overlapping historical logics, characterized by neither a singular historical rupture nor an inevitable transition from one regime to another.

From the perspective of poetic critique, examining these historiographic narratives entails exploring the conditions of visibility and invisibility through which the digital turn becomes historically intelligible. The analysis highlights how historiographic strategies may simultaneously illuminate certain dimensions of digital culture while obscuring the infrastructural, economic, and political conditions through which it is organized. This suggests that historiography is never merely descriptive: the ways in which architecture is narrated have important implications for architectural critique. As Carpo's claim that understanding historical processes may help us "shape better things" [14] (p. 128) indicates, historiographic narratives also participate in the projection of architectural futures. The question, therefore, is not only how these narratives make contemporary architectural conditions intelligible, but also how they condition the possibilities and limits of architectural critique today.

## 5. Conclusions

Within the ongoing debates concerning the future of architectural criticism, this study examined how poetic critique can provide a framework for rethinking the relationship between theory, design, and criticism under the conditions of digital culture. Through a comparative reading of Mario Carpo's and Antoine Picon's historiographic interpretations, the analysis demonstrated that digital culture in architecture is narrated through complementary epistemological and ontological shifts: Carpo foregrounds the reconfiguration of representation and production, while Picon emphasizes shifting understandings of materiality and subjectivity. It also revealed important affinities between the transformations associated with the digital paradigm and the critical concerns articulated through poetic critique. These affinities suggest that the digital paradigm does not simply challenge established modes of criticism but also opens new possibilities for rethinking criticism as a productive mode of engagement between theory and design.

A central implication of this argument is that poetic critique provides a framework through which critical and projective orientations may be understood as coexisting responses to contemporary conditions, rather than mutually exclusive alternatives. In this respect, poetic critique suggests that the tensions revealed by digital culture need not be resolved through a choice between competing critical positions, but may instead be understood as productive conditions for architectural thought and practice. By loosening the link between critique and judgment, poetic critique foregrounds reflective engagement with the conditions through which architecture is produced, experienced, and interpreted, while remaining attentive to the tensions, ambiguities, and unresolved possibilities that emerge through them. From this perspective, it enables criticism to function not merely as a practice of interpretation, but as a productive mode of engagement with the possibilities opened by contemporary conditions.

Beyond its theoretical implications, the analysis also demonstrates the methodological potential of poetic critique by providing a basis for critically reconstructing the assumptions, tensions, and blind spots embedded in the narratives of Carpo and Picon. In this sense, poetic critique functions not only as a theoretical framework but also as a mode of inquiry capable of revealing both the possibilities and the limits of architectural narratives. While employed here to critically analyze two historiographic narratives, this approach may also serve as a means of producing critical and theoretical writing in architecture.

The possibilities opened by poetic critique are nevertheless not without limits. Like any critical framework, poetic critique foregrounds certain dimensions of architectural thinking and making while leaving others less visible. Its emphasis on ambiguity, openness, and productive tensions may illuminate important aspects of contemporary digital culture;

however, it also risks functioning as a conceptual screen through which the technological, institutional, and economic conditions shaping architectural production become less visible.

Yet the significance of poetic critique lies not in the extent of its explanatory reach, but in the unique mode of engagement it fosters. Contemporary digital culture raises questions about forms of critical knowledge that increasingly sidestep the role of subjectivity. In this context, what distinguishes poetic critique is its acknowledgment of subjectivity in the formation of critical knowledge and its commitment to the imaginative capacities through which alternative possibilities may be conceived. Ultimately, what is at stake is not just the future of architectural criticism as a productive practice between theory and design, but also the role of subjectivity in sustaining the capacities for imagination and judgment through which critical knowledge is formed under conditions of digital mediation.

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## Notes

[1] In the conceptual framework of this study, digital culture is understood as a broader epistemological and cultural condition whose roots extend into the historical development of modern capitalism and whose formation was significantly shaped by the intellectual and technological transformations of the postwar period, including developments in cybernetics, information theory, systems theory, artificial intelligence, and structuralism [4,5]. Digital technologies are therefore considered one component of a wider transformation in ways of thinking, producing, communicating, and constructing knowledge.
The emergence of late modern society introduces a further differentiation of these conditions, particularly from the 1990s onward, as digitalization increasingly intersects with broader economic and sociocultural transformations. Reckwitz characterizes late modern society as a new social formation emerging from the transformation of classical industrial modernity. According to his account, this transformation took shape during the 1970s and 1980s and became more pronounced from the 1990s onward. The resulting "social logic of singularities" is associated with three structural dynamics: economically, the transition from industrial capitalism to cognitive-cultural capitalism; technologically, digitalization; and socioculturally, the rise of a highly educated new urban middle class oriented toward self-development and individual prestige [6,7].
In this regard, the study is concerned not primarily with digital architecture as a distinct object of study, but with contemporary architectural conditions shaped by digital culture and their implications for architectural criticism.

[2] Within the changing conditions of contemporary architecture shaped by digital culture—as part of the broader transformation of late modern society—the nature and function of architectural criticism have remained continuously contested. From the 1980s onward, as dominant doctrines weakened, architectural positions became increasingly individualized, and ideologies crumbled, architectural criticism shifted from judgment and evaluation toward mapping and description. Since the beginning of the 1990s, attention has also turned to criticism itself as an object of research, bringing its boundaries and epistemological status into question. By the 2000s, debates on criticality and post-criticality further challenged the critical and theoretical role of architecture. At the same time, the dominance of critical architecture and the belief in the critical potentiality of reflexive or auto-reflexive architecture over the previous three decades were said to have pushed written criticism into the background [9].
In contemporary architectural culture, these questions concerning the position, function, and legitimacy of criticism have intensified [10]. In this context, architectural criticism has been reconsidered through more reflexive and productive approaches.

In this broader understanding, criticism is being reconceptualized as a "way of making" that contains an "imaginative, productive, or creative core" and contributes to the development of the discipline, that is, as a productive practice [11]. Related critiques of contemporary architecture have also emphasized the importance of historical consciousness and critical subjectivity in responding to the conditions of the present [12].

Yet while these approaches reconsider the position and function of criticism, they do not fully specify how criticism itself might be actively constructed within a theoretical and methodological framework under changing contemporary conditions.

[3] This study considers architectural historiography itself as a form of architectural criticism. Following Attoe's understanding of criticism as an interpretive practice that reveals the historical and subjective position of the critic, the architectural historian is understood not merely as a recorder of past events, but as an active interpreter through whom architectural knowledge is constructed and reinterpreted [16]. On this basis, the corpus focuses selectively on the work of architectural historians, specifically Carpo's *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* and Picon's *The Materiality of Architecture*. One criterion for selecting these two works is their historical scope, which enables contemporary architectural conditions shaped by digital culture to be contextualized within the longue durée of architectural history. The second criterion is their engagement with how architecture is represented, articulated, and interpreted, particularly in relation to notational systems and language.

[4] The following diagram (see Figure 1) clarifies the analytical structure of the framework: *poetic critique* is translated into architectural criticism through three main analytical axes—Critical Positioning, Productive Interpretation, and Formal Justification. These terms refer, respectively, to reconsidering the relation between criticism and judgment; realigning the relationship between the work of art and the work of criticism through interpretation as a productive engagement in the work's historical becoming; and grounding critical meaning in the formal organization of the object. The diagram also makes explicit that Explore, Investigate, and Interrogate are analytical operations applied within each of the three axes. These operations lead to Critical Reconstruction, which constitutes the outcome of the analytical process.

[5] Beyond the two case studies examined here, poetic critique may operate within architectural criticism not merely as a method of reading, but as a methodological approach to producing critical and theoretical writings in architecture. Its methodological potential lies in reconceiving criticism not as an external act of judgment or explanation, but as a reflexive and productive practice that simultaneously reconsiders the critic's position (by reconsidering the relation between criticism and judgment), participates in the production of meaning (by treating interpretation as a productive engagement with the object), and grounds critical meaning in the formal organization of its object. These three dimensions are brought together as an interrelated analytical model, allowing criticism to move beyond judgmental interpretation toward a mode of inquiry in which interpretation itself becomes a productive act of critical reconstruction.

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