

# Vitruvius' Spiritual Perception of Matter

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## Introduction

Our historical situation resembles those famous lines by the poet Holderlin:

“ *Near is  
And difficult to grasp, the God.  
But where danger threatens  
That which saves from it also grows.*”<sup>1</sup>

In the covid context, we see many of the dangers of a materialist worldview manifesting, while simultaneously a new mode of consciousness—not limited to the mute material—continues to emerge.

As many scholars have noticed, the evolution of consciousness has tended towards greater degrees of objective particularization.<sup>2</sup> This has led to what Charles Taylor calls the buffered self. The buffered self is a state seemingly closed off from the transcendent, and enveloped in a sense of finite materiality.<sup>3</sup> Evidence for this historical development has been seen, for example, in the evolution of language<sup>4</sup> and our modes of visual representation.<sup>5</sup> The result of this development has been that communion, understood as a connection with the universal transcendent ground of being,<sup>6</sup> has become increasingly challenging for people to attune to.

The Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan noticed, however, many of the perceptual patterns associated with this buffering tendency had begun to change around the beginning of the 20th century with the advent of electronic media.<sup>7</sup> He argued that this media reintroduced a focus upon the auditive dimension, as opposed to the merely visual. This had begun to break down habitually materialist modes of perception as it reintroduced connection and intelligibility to the domain of the separate and the objective.

The covid era exhibits a dual situation where we experience simultaneously the height of materialism, with its desire to control and account for the whole, and the opening of the auditive, conditioned, for example, by the rise of podcasts and meme culture, which have re-attuned a sense of immersive intelligibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Hölderlin Friedrich and Jeremy D. Adler, *Selected Poems and Fragments* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 231.

<sup>2</sup> Of particular note are the “Spheres Trilogy” by Peter Sloterdijk and “Saving the Appearances” by Owen Barfield.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Walter J. Ong and John Hartley, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Jean Paris, *Painting and Linguistics* (Pittsburgh: College of Fine Arts, Carnegie-Mellon U., 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich and Harvey Cox, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> “We begin again to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3000 years of literacy divorced us. We begin again to live a myth.” Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 17.

This situation presents an opportunity for architects to grasp the new mode of perception and what it reveals about establishing communion. To understand this, it is useful to look to the past, to a time when the grip of materialism was not so tight. We can find such an example in the writings of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, and in particular his chapters VII and IX of Book II.

One could easily pass over these passages without too much notice. They describe various natural materials and their applicability for uses in construction. Today, they might be read like an outdated study in building science that we have far surpassed with our technological advancements in synthetic materials, anti-combustibility tests, and heat-transfer calculations. Nevertheless, there is a hidden gem to be found here.

Vitruvius describes, for example, stone and timber as being composed of varying ratios of the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth.<sup>8</sup> From these perceptions, he then assigns appropriate uses for them. In my presentation, I will unpack the structure of these perceptions, taking particular note of the imaginations' participation in the gestalt of each. I will not only provide an analysis of the structures involved in this type of gaze, but I will also use visual examples and guided observation to make the understanding visceral.

The ability to see the composition of elements within objects, we will see, is not something strange nor esoteric. It only requires a subtle rearrangement of our perceptual forming faculties. Nevertheless, an overcoming of our materialistic buffering is necessary. Therefore, a comparative contrast between the patterns of materialistic perception and Vitruvius' perception of the elements will be illuminative. For example, materialistic vision has the form of gazing upon and in, as we see in the evolution of paintings of the Virgin Mary during the Renaissance.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the mode of vision we see in the icon is more similar to Vitruvius's perception as it looks back and indicates an inaccessible depth beyond.

Next, I examine these passages in light of growing modes of perception in the electronic and covid age. For example, I will show how the meaningful look or expressive stance, prevalent in memes, is structurally similar to the elemental vision of Vitruvius. I will then show how these patterns relate to the reintroduction of the auditive mode.

Finally, I will show how this mode of perception is important for re-establishing communion. In particular, this will involve showing how these elemental qualities lead to the transcendent Being at the heart of communion. To accomplish this, I will look at how the elements have historically been related with the oneness of God, and the union of the finite and infinite. To accomplish this I will look at, in particular, Pythagorean number theory, and the place of the elements in the bible (ex. the wind over the water in Genesis,<sup>10</sup> and the fire in the earthiness of the bush<sup>11</sup>). I hope to show how the fourness of the elements' perceptual gestalt leads towards the twoness and threeness of the embodied spirit and the oneness of God.

This study will be important for architects developing a post-materialist practice who want to perceive and create meaning in the built environment. Breaking out of the buffered self's way of seeing is critical for accomplishing architecture's goal to support us in our journey towards communion in ever deepening levels of finitude and eternity.

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<sup>8</sup> Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *Vitruvius: The Ten Books of Architecture*, trans. M. H. Morgan (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 49-64.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Paris, *Painting and Linguistics* (Pittsburgh: College of Fine Arts, Carnegie-Mellon U., 1975).

<sup>10</sup> GN. 1:2 (NJB)

<sup>11</sup> EX. 3:1-3 (NJB)