

Laudatio Antoine Picon

D. De Meyer

Antoine Picon received engineering degrees from the Ecole Polytechnique and from the Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées, an architecture degree from the Ecole d'Architecture de Paris-Villemin, and a doctorate in history from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

Professionnellement, il vit une sorte de double vie: de ce côté de l'Atlantique, il est *ingénieur général* auprès des Ponts et Chaussées, on the other side of the ocean he is a Professor of the History of Architecture and Technology at Harvard's GSD (Graduate School of Design), where he is also Director of Doctoral Programs. At Harvard he teaches courses in the history of architecture and technology.

Trained as an engineer, an architect, and an historian of science and art, Picon is best known for his work in the history of architectural technologies from the eighteenth century to the present. His *French Architects and Engineers in the Age of Enlightenment* (1988; English translation 1992) is a synthetic study of the disciplinary "deep structures" of architecture, garden design, and engineering in the eighteenth century, and their transformations following new issues of territorial management and infrastructure-systems planning. *L'ingénieur artiste* (1989) nous montre l'apprentissage de l'ingénieur, qui, jusqu'au milieu du XIXe Siècle, se forme au dessin et au lavis — comme un architecte. Cet apprentissage lui permet de concevoir des ouvrages d'une grande qualité expressive qui s'intègrent harmonieusement au paysage. Picon nous montre là que l'ingénieur est encore un artiste qui sait concilier l'imitation des modèles reçus et la recherche de solutions techniques inédites. Il poursuit son travail dans

L'Invention de L'ingénieur moderne, L'Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées 1747-1851 (1992).

Cette lignée de travail aboutit dans l'ouvrage encyclopédique qui accompagne l'exposition à Beaubourg: *L'art de l'ingénieur* (1997).

Parmi ses autres ouvrages je vous mentionne: en 1988, une monographie de *Claude Perrault (1613-1688) ou la curiosité d'un classique* (1988) — le chercheur de l'anatomie, de la physiologie, le physicien et la mécanique qui devient architecte de l'Observatoire, mais aussi de la façade du palais du Roi, Le Louvre.

Picon s'intéresse aussi à la plus grande échelle: il publie *La ville territoire des cyborgs* (1998), une étude sur la grande ville contemporaine, qu'il décrit comme une nappe d'infrastructures et d'équipements qui s'étend à perte de vue, mais aussi qui échappe aux grilles de lecture traditionnelles de l'urbanité. Dans cette lignée il va diriger le volume *La Ville et La Guerre* (1996). Il nous montre l'évolution du rôle de la ville, depuis l'époque de dissuasion nucléaire, où elle se réduisait à la fonction d'otage passif, jusqu'à nos jours où Beyrouth, Sarajevo et Grosny marquent le retour des sièges et des combats de rue, des bombardements et de la résistance urbaine.

A book that for me opened a complete new view on the early nineteenth century was *Les Saint-Simoniens: Raison, Imaginaire et Utopie* (2002), dealing with one of the most influential utopian movements in France, joined by hundreds of engineers, physicians, and lawyers. By paying a special attention to the Saint-Simonian approach to territories, cities, and architecture Picon proposes a reexamination of the relations between space and utopia in the 19th century. In today's lecture, he will draw upon this extensive knowledge — ranging from Saint-Simoniens to cyborgs — in order to examine what can

be learnt from the utopian tradition in order for architecture to regain political and social relevance. I think it is difficult to consider a more urgent, more relevant question today.

More recently, in 2003, he edited, with Alessandra Ponte, *Architecture and the Sciences: Exchanging Metaphors*. The book shows how architects, in recent years, again are looking at science (as opposed to technology proper) as a source of inspiration in the production of their designs and constructions. *Tra utopia e ruggine, Paesaggi dell'ingegneria dal Settecento a oggi (2006)* (Between utopia and rust) is a collection of essays dealing with the topics I have already mentioned. Picon has also published numerous **articles** and he received a number of **awards** for his writings, including the *Medaille de la Ville de Paris*.

While thinking about someone to propose to the Sarton committee to receive the medal named in Sarton's honour, I could not think of a better choice than you, cher Antoine. Sarton, as you know, studied philosophy and mathematics at our University. He left Belgium at the beginning of the war and moved with his family, via England, to the US. He started lecturing at Harvard in 1920 and became professor in the History of Sciences, a study he actually helped forging into an own, new discipline. In honouring you, Antoine, it seems as if a son of Sarton is returning to Sarton's alma mater.