A “miracle” of the “Times”

In her famous “Notes on ‘Camp’” from 1964, Susan Sontag observed that “many examples of Camp are things which, from a ‘serious’ point of view, are either bad art or kitsch.” (A “‘serious’ point of view”? As Sontag notes, the camp sensibility “sees everything in quotation marks,” i.e., regards nothing as serious.) We had occasion to think back to that grim and prescient essay when the September 7 issue of The New York Times Magazine brought us “The Miracle in Bilbao,” a stunningly unctuous paean to Frank Gehry’s new building for the Guggenheim Museum in northeastern Spain.

Not having seen Mr. Gehry’s latest creation, we hesitate to say much about it. Photographs of the sprawling, titanium-clad agglomeration of irregular shapes, clashing wildly with the low-rise, nineteenth-century buildings around it, lead us to suspect that it is a shinier, more grandiose version of the work that has made Frank Gehry a star for the inveterately trendy. Born Frank Goldberg in 1929, Mr. Gehry is actually a Harvard-trained architect who spent nearly two decades designing shopping centers and an off-the-rack modernist headquarters for the Rouse Company. But the Frank Gehry that matters is a taciturn, aw-shucks, denim-wearing, low-tech, man-of-the-people Californian who was reborn in the late 1970s. It was then that he enveloped his pink, two-story Dutch colonial house in Santa Monica with corrugated aluminum topped with chainlink fencing. A series of asymmetrical windows and revealed-wood framing completed the effect of radical incompleteness. It was this Frank Gehry—whom Philip Johnson anointed a few years ago as one of the founding members of the so-called “deconstructivist” school of architecture—that the Guggenheim engaged to design its hundred million dollar outpost in Bilbao.

And of course it is this Frank Gehry who is shamelessly praised, flattered, extolled, and all but deified in The New York Times Magazine by the paper’s chief architectural critic, Herbert Muschamp. Readers of the Times will remember Mr. Muschamp. He is the man who not so long ago compared a Calvin Klein advertisement for men’s underwear in Times Square to Michelangelo’s David. Now he is back, telling us that a twisted mass of titanium-clad steel plopped incongruously in the Basque foothills is an architectural and existential revelation, a “masterpiece,” a “miracle,” “a Lourdes for a crippled culture.” Reaching for his most exalted terms of praise, he even tells us that the building is “the reincarnation of Marilyn Monroe.” (“Camp,” Sontag observed, “is the triumph of the epicene style.”)
Considered simply as a work of prose, Mr. Muschamp’s panting encomium to Frank Gehry’s latest joke is probably the most egregious bit of writing we have yet encountered in the Times. To say that it is overwritten is like saying the Mir space station is a bit cranky. It is smarmy, mendacious, and self-indulgent, with a sugar content that will make diabetics tremble. Anyone attempting to wade through it is advised to stock up on Dramamine and air-sickness bags. But what makes “The Miracle in Bilbao” significant as well as repulsive is the way that Mr. Muschamp blithely employs the most exalted critical vocabulary—a vocabulary once reserved for the greatest works of art—to describe, and to praise, what is clearly a post-postmodern exercise in architectural cynicism.

What if American art has not, after all, played itself out to its last entropic wheeze? What if standards of cultural achievement have not irretrievably dissolved in the vast, tepid bath of relativity, telemarketing and manipulated public opinion? Has it even become possible, once again, to think about beauty as a form of truth?

Ring-a-ding-ding.

In composing this love letter to Frank Gehry, Mr. Muschamp is paying homage more to a sensibility than a particular building. The “miracle” of the Bilbao Guggenheim, he tells us, is not the building itself but “the extravagant optimism that enters into the outlook of those who have made the pilgrimage” to see it. What can this mean? That Spain is a nice place to visit this time of year? No, for Mr. Muschamp Frank Gehry’s latest concoction is an embodiment of the campy nihilism that likens underwear advertisements to sculptures by Michelangelo, that pretends that moral anarchy is really a form of enlightenment, and that views culture as an equal-opportunity playground in which everything is “a hoot and a holler” and “superficiality can be wonderful.”

“What is a community?,” Mr. Muschamp asks:

A focus group, a concentration camp, a chat room on the Internet, an address book, a dance club, all those afflicted with a particular incurable disease, a gender, an age bracket, a waiting room, owners of silver BMWs, organized crime, everyone who swears by a particular brand of painkiller and a two-block stretch of Manhattan on any weekday at lunch hour.

Unpacking the moral, social, and political assumptions embedded in this inventory would take a good many words. For his part, Mr. Muschamp, believing that he has made a daring point about the amorphousness of contemporary life, tells us that “social fragmentation” is “one of the truths Frank Gehry has sought to explore in his work.” What he does not see is that there is a big difference between exploring a pathology—which implies some measure of critical distance—and merely exhibiting it.

Mr. Muschamp’s essay is littered with contradictions, non sequiturs, and portentous mannerisms. Describing the trip to Bilbao, he writes:
Oh, and by the way, you might get blown up. Basque country is not Bosnia. But it’s not Disney World, either. History here has not been sanitized into a colorful spectacle for your viewing enjoyment. People are actually living history here, punctuated by periodic violence. Those who visit Bilbao, however, may come away thinking that art is not entirely remote from matters of life and death.

Meaning … what? That people living in the United States are not “actually living history”? That Basque terrorism has something to do with one’s view of art? That Frank Gehry’s building has some special social or political significance because it happens to be in Bilbao?

In fact, Mr. Muschamp does seem to believe something of the sort. “Like the Basque region,” he writes, “this building is a place of contested borders”—which is akin to saying, Like the Napa Valley region, this is a building of many grapes. In the end, however, for Mr. Muschamp everything seems to come back to a woman he glimpsed in Bilbao who reminded him of Marilyn Monroe:

An art form that has long depended upon appeals to external authority—history, science, context, tradition, religion, philosophy or style—has at last come to the realization that nobody cares about that sort of thing anymore. Architecture has stepped off her pedestal. She’s waiting for her date outside a bar on a rainy early evening in Bilbao, Spain.

Right. And what is architecture without an allegiance to “history, science, context, tradition, religion, philosophy or style”? (What, for that matter, is a “non-external” authority?) The work of Frank Gehry gives us a pretty good clue about what fully emancipated architecture looks like, but perhaps Mr. Muschamp comes even closer to the essential spirit of the thing when he observes that “what was once the radical outlook of Surrealism has become part of the logic of everyday life.” No doubt this is true of everyday life at the Times these days. The problem, alas, is that both he and the once-great newspaper he writes for believe that this is cause for celebration.