The Ultimate Artifice for the Perfect Architectural Dream

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Abstract

The subject posed in this paper revolves around the possibility and acceptance of film as a critical platform for the production of an architectural discourse within the cultural institution as well as practice. Architecture, as we know it, is the conceptual framework of any given urban environment, that is the metropolis. Nevertheless, it is more than building design. It is a critical discourse that embraces many facets whose main concern is spatial critique, analysis and dissemination. In this perspective, the language and production of film incorporates all those characteristics. Being a medium of representation, film is definitely an interpretative act whose scope ranges from writing the script, which is to say the narrative; set design, which includes model making (scale dependable); human interaction (emotional relationships); creative vision (from visionary paintings to technical drawings); optical apparatus (cameras, view points and travelling sequences), location and site surveying; and the list goes on. What seems relevant in this argument then, is the way in which architecture is critically addressed and accepted by the channels of cultural diffusion: newspapers, periodical publications, professional magazines, exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues, radio and television, advertising and, adding on to this, the film industry.

The promotion of film in the institution of architecture defended here is less an argument and more of an attempt to draw attention to this disregarded sign. It seems that the architectural discourse nowadays has taken for granted this relationship, probably due to the commercial weight of the entertainment industry and market demands, which might have helped to dislodge its invaluable assessment to the discursive critical thought.

Fiction may be regarded as the ultimate genre that is capable of combining all knowledge (science, technology and imagination) towards one specific goal, which is to anticipate the future for the betterment of humankind. It is by means of this fantasy that possible worlds–real and imaginary–may intentionally collide to erupt a different one, not entirely new, but with different motivations. When this happens, it revolutionizes past dogmas and can permanently alter the way we perceive and understand the surrounding present and, therefore, opening the expectations for the coming community.

The spectatorial engagement is the veritable assessment of the filmic experience. By imagining oneself to reside in a space other than the one presented in reality is to activate a haptic experience, which ultimately resembles a dream state. It is within this dream state that all spatial narratives may be combined to forge a possible direction for the spectatorial mobilization. In this sense, the medium of film formulates a fictional narrative where truth, artifice and memory are all intertwined, suggestive of the way in which reality and fiction are shaping our experience of contemporary art, life, architecture, and after all, history. As a result, one might assert Giuliana Bruno's singular and passionate voice in this regard when she posits that the perfect architectural dream is a filmic dream: pictures become an environment, architecture becomes film.

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1. Buildings are not Enough: Towards a Cinematic Architecture

This paper begins by acknowledging the work developed by Diploma 3 Unit of the Architectural Association in London, whose mentor was Pascal Schöning, which, unfortunately, came to a definite closure after seventeen years of existence (from 1991 to 2008). This unit addressed the medium of film to derive critical thinking while engaging with unconventional architectonic models. It rendered explorations of space in films and texts over the years and constructed a body of work embedded in history with a contemporary approach. Michael Weinstock, director of Emergent Technologies and Design Masters Programme at the school at the time, observed the unit's development during the last five years which evolved from the understanding of the space of architecture to the manipulation of the qualities of light on material boundaries and surfaces. Film in this experimental context, he remarks, "was the mode of thought, a genre production and critique that offered continuity with remote histories of architecture and a means of generating new spatial experiences of contemporary life."[1]

Relying on the Unit's published book, titled *Cinematic Architecture*[2], besides the description of some of the students best works and essays by a few tutors, at some point it alludes to the controversy with other professors during the final presentations in its early years. Due to the fact that student's work was mostly presented in filmic format – which even nowadays may be considered an unconventional format at some progressive schools – professors from other units and invited juries would claim their lack of architectural proposals and their incapacity to bring forward objective solutions, models, design concepts, etc. What they wanted and were used to seeing was the common format of the institutionalized architectural education. On the other hand, what Schöning alongside a team of co-tutors were aiming at was to create a teaching programme based on critical alternatives (film) that deviated from the overwhelming mediation of formal aesthetics and, ultimately, envisioned the recovery of architecture's former capacity as a genuine site of cultural memory,

identity and continuity. Currently, as unfortunate as it may sound, it is an extinct critical platform, i.e. film and architectural theory could not be accepted by those who teach, disseminate, produce and constitute the institution of the latter.

Given this past situation, the question posed here, today, then revolves around the possibility and acceptance of film as a critical platform for the production of an architectural discourse within the cultural institution as well as practice.

To start this argument, it should be noted that architecture is more than building design. It is a critical discourse that embraces many facets whose main concern is spatial critique, analysis and dissemination. In this respect, Beatriz Colomina asserts the following:

> [...] architecture, as distinct from building, is an interpretative, critical act. It has a linguistic condition different from the practical one of building. A building is interpreted when its rhetorical mechanism and principles are revealed. This analysis may be performed in a number of different ways, according to the forms of different types of discourse; among these are theory, criticism, history and manifesto. An act of interpretation is also present in the different modes of representational discourse: drawing, writing, model making and so on. Interpretation is also integral to the act of projecting.[3]

According to this definition, the language and production of film incorporates all those characteristics. Being a medium of representation, film is definitely an interpretative act whose scope ranges from writing the script, which is to say the narrative; set design, which includes model making (scale dependable); human interaction (emotional relationships); creative vision (from visionary paintings to technical drawings); optical apparatus (cameras, view points and travelling sequences), location and site surveying; and the list goes on. What seems relevant in this argument then, is the way in which architecture is critically addressed and accepted by the channels of cultural diffusion: newspapers, periodical publications, professional magazines, exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues, radio and television, advertising and, adding on to this, the film industry. As Jonathan Hill claims, critical architecture is "associated with words not drawings or buildings, and the writer not the designer, architectural criticism is widely known and understood. But it is assumed that few architects are critical. This assumption is itself open to criticism, however. First, because it relies on a limited understanding of what is architectural. Second, because it caricatures who and what is critical." [4] Since the profession of architecture doesn't necessarily have to be critical due to market demands and client requirements, criticism in the profession is solely dependent on the architect's own critical stance regarding to the practice of the profession; this leads to the definition of criticism expressed by Roland Barthes:

> All criticism must include in its discourse an implicit reflection on itself; every criticism is a criticism of the work and a criticism of itself. In other words, criticism is not at all a table of results or a body of judgments, it is essentially an activity [...] Can an activity be "true"? It answers quite different requirements.[5]

Interestingly, criticism in film featuring architecture had a starting point in cinematic debates as early as 1920s and 30s in Weimar, during which the German "Expressionist Cinema" found its inception and established the new medium as an autonomous work of art. Bruno Taut, a central figure in the German architectural avant-garde before and after the World War I, immediately acknowledged its instructive qualities and published his theoretical observations in the article *Artistic Film Program* in 1920, proclaiming film's contribution to art in three categories: "(1) the generally stimulating film, which kindles the artistic imagination; (2) the instructive film, produced as an aid to the teaching of art, craft, or architecture; (3) the film as an autonomous work of art." [6] Moreover, regarding the second category he asserts that "the student of architecture, like the layman, will thus acquire a lively notion of the true essence of architecture. He will free himself of the pictorial notions fostered hitherto by perspectival renderings and will learn to comprehend the building as a unified organism that grows inevitably out of the determinant factors of function, location, and the rest. The significance of details and fittings, right down to the furniture, is made evident within their total context." [7] The result of the recognition of film as a spatial medium by some of the most prominent German architects yields to the undeniable similarities and interwoven spatial relationships between both fields. It is a strong indication of their mutual influence and critical stance in the cultural production of the twentieth century.

In short, the promotion of film in the institution of architecture defended here is less an argument and more of an attempt to draw attention to this disregarded sign. It seems that the architectural discourse nowadays has taken for granted this relationship, probably due to the commercial weight of the entertainment industry and market demands, which might have helped to dislodge its invaluable assessment to the discursive critical thought.

2. Capturing Modern Anxiety

The 1920s was a time when the burgeoning of the industrial city bursting with speed, light and mechanicalism found in film an equivalent medium capable of capturing its frantic development, mass movements and extreme urban vistas. In the essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel had already anticipated the diagnosis of this particular symptom: an urban anxiety provoked by the "intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli." [8] The form of life in the metropolis created a psychological condition which caused the loss

of the subject's individuality. Simmel claimed the mental tendencies of the modern mind to become more and more calculating one:

> The technique of metropolitan life in general is not conceivable without all of its activities and reciprocal relationships being organized and coordinated in the most punctual way into a firmly fixed framework of time which transcends all subjective elements. [...] Punctuality, calculability and exactness, which are required by the complications and extensiveness of metropolitan life, are not only intimately connected with its capitalistic and intellectualistic character but also color the content of life and are conducive to the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits and impulses which originally seek to determine the form of life from within instead of receiving it from the outside in a general, schematically precise form.[9]

The outcome of this overwhelming nervous stimulation was, according to Simmel, the *blasé* attitude–a defense mechanism which resulted in the rejection of reactivity, i.e. a profound indifference towards the distinction between things by concealing spontaneous emotions. The result is a *mental dullness*, or apathy, in which the experience of all things become meaningless and therefore the blasé person appears to be a "homogeneous, flat grey color with no one of them worthy of being preferred to another." [10]

Given this discouraging urban symptom, the problem posed before the artistic realm was to find the means to reenact the subjective sensibility in revealing the suppressed desires and evoking new ways of perceiving the urban milieu. In other words, metropolitan life should be a form of consciousness, inspiration and individual aspiration as opposed to what was really happening. In this sense, as Kenneth Michael Hays observes in his critical analysis of architecture and urban culture, the filmic art provided the exact "cognitive mechanisms with which to register the intense changes continually experienced in the modern city."[11] A new eye was born! A non-human one, a cyborg eye constructed specifically to enhance our perception of the new machine world. Vertov's cine-eye is the definition of objectivity: it penetrates directly to the core of space and time without subjectivities, ceasing the moment and capturing the raw and naked reality. In this regard, Gilles Deleuze points out in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, that "it is pure vision of a non-human eye, of an eye which would be in things [...] it is the eye of matter, the eye in matter, not subject to time, which has conquered time [...] and which knows no other whole than the material universe and its extension [...] it is, first, a machine assemblage of movement-image." [12] Thereafter, static and contemplative images of romantic landscape from the countryside were superseded by the notion of duration solicited through rhythm and speed as fundamental characteristics of urban space.

The unique quality of the moving picture brought about by technological advancements established the new medium for artistic experimentation that

could at once capture the mass attention–with the emergence of movie houses– and yield a collective experience while delivering a certain degree of social life, enabling individuals to temporarily escape from their own isolation. The following are only a few examples of mainstream cinema produced in the early twentieth century:

Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, *Manhatta*, 1921
René Clair, *Paris qui dort*, 1923
Sergei Einsentein, The Battleship Potemkin, 1925
Fritz Lang, *Metropolis*, 1926
Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Berliner Stilleben*, 1926
Walter Ruttmann, Berlin, *Symphony of the Big City*, 1927
King Vidor, *The Crowd*, 1928
Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou*, 1929
Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929
Jean Vigo, *A Propos de Nice*, 1930

The city became the "natural" environment for the modern artist who was inspired by the chaos and abstraction of the mechanical, reproducible world. Piet Mondrian, one of the key figures of the De Stijl group who saw the city as the ultimate abstract form, stated that "the genuinely Modern artist sees the metropolis as Abstract living converted into form; it is nearer to him than nature." [13] In the same spirit of the epoch, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy formulated the *minimum definition* of modernist space, stating that "space is the relation between the position of bodies" [14] and manifesting his theories in the form of experimental films with *Dynamics of the Metropolis* (1921-2, proposed but never realized), *Berliner Stilleben* (1926) and *Marseille Vieux Port* (1929).

Under this premise, film becomes the most adequate medium to convey the veritable message of the urban setting. The representation of the age of the mechanical reproduction is carried out best by a medium in which reproducibility is embedded in its very apparatus.

> Here, metropolis and film interface as a distinctly modern production in which a correspondence between the city space and the film space, between the motion of the city and the moving image, exists. The machine of modernity that fabricated the city is also the "fabric" of film. [...] As a new type of artwork and a new scientific invention, film was manufactured reproducibly. Such reproducibility having become a cultural dream of the modern age, the ultimate dream now became reproduction itself. [15]

The close affinity between film and architecture has a mutual classical inspiration and is made manifest by their modernist representatives. First, Le Corbusier alludes to the notion of *promenade architecturale* in his most acclaimed theoretical work entitled *Towards a New Architecture* by emphasizing the importance of the plan to generate the spatial impression, stating: "Mass and surface are the elements by which architecture manifests itself. Mass and

surface are determined by the plan. The plan is the generator. [...] The plan carries in itself the very essence of sensation." [16] Next, following Auguste Choisy's perspective views of the Acropolis, Le Corbusier establishes the spatial arrangement of the several architectural volumes (Temple of Nike, Propylea, Parthenon, Erectheion and Athen Promakhos) in relation to an axis whose destination, or line of direction, is "assigned by the walls, light and space for a sensorial sensation." [17]

Then, Sergei Eisentein exposes his phenomenological analysis in the article "Montage and Architecture," claiming that architecture embodies the principles of montage , i.e. the sequential juxtaposition of the perspective view as in a film-shot. [18] Relying on a rigourous study from a walking path around the Acropolis–appropriating Le Corbusier's analysis of Choisy's drawings–, Eisenstein suggests that the filmic origins derives from the mobilization of the observer's gaze in relation to the sequence of architectural objects; their spatial arrangement is in such a manner that creates a favorable first impression, resulting in a cinematic path, which he calls the "perfect example of one the most ancient films."[18] He is thus suggesting that architecture is the predecessor of film.

3. History Follows Fiction

Science-fiction cinematography and World's Fairs have in common the use of technological and science achievements to speculate about life in the future, which habitually promotes certain ideologies that are biased to political, economical and social issues of a particular time. These collective fantasies made their early manifestations through literary novels whose capacity to envision possible worlds forged our imaginary freedom to go beyond the physical constraints of actuality while serving at the same time as critical models to the tendencies of controversial realities (for example, Jules Verne, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, 1864; Lewis Caroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865; George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949, just to name a few). Later on, with the technological advancements, came the cinematic experiments of urban schizophrenia and unconscious as mentioned, delivering a completely different set of social entertainment and visual stimulation which corresponded to the burgeoning of the urban milieu. In the same perspective, as observed by Stephen Van Dyk in the richly illustrated survey book of the golden era of world's fairs, entitled *Exit to Tomorrow: World's Fair Architecture, Design, Fashion 1933-2005*, the inception of the World's Fair in the mid nineteenth century "[has] served in many roles as arenas of world commerce, as forums promoting advances in sciences and building construction showing the latest inventions, and displays of raw materials and industry" [19] devoted to three aspects of technological progress: industry, sports and art. Then, he continues with the following insight:

> World's fairs were also opportunities for expressions of nationalism, to see and learn about exotic people and cultures, for showcases of architectural design, and for county fair-like amusement parks. At the same time, world's fairs were the forerunners of modern museums, international trade shows, and global organizations concerned with world peace, economics, health, ecology, and the betterment of humankind.[20]

Udo Kultermann points out the appeal, and also the anxiety, of the concept behind the world's fairs being its ephemeral nature while, on the other hand, "the short international exposition gave architects, designers, composers, and artists an extraordinary amount of freedom to experiment, and it introduced the public to revolutionary art and design." [21]

An interesting participation which encapsulated the discrepancy of fictional vision with the utter reality mentioned before was the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959. It was comprised of a multi-screen projection system (seven 9 x 6 meters screens) as the center piece of the exhibition produced by Charles and Ray Eames titled, *Glimpses of the U.S.A.*, which illustrated the daily life of the United States with more than 2,200 changing images of people, buildings, technology, and automobiles. [22] The purpose of this visual exploitation was to engage the first cultural exchange between the two countries since the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) by portraying the American values of capitalism (egalitarian and consumerist) as opposed to Soviet Union's communist regime (authoritarian governments and centrally planned economies). This vision of the so called "American dream" played in huge screens, would probably have had a certain fictional sense of impact for the Russian spectators due to their extreme polarities in terms of cultural values and economic developments. Nonetheless, this dream seemed credible because of its inherent cinematographic qualities, which is to be based on real-time recordings, depicting the exact phenomena of pure raw data of reality itself. In other words, the filmic episode turned reality into fiction because it transposed cultures with a totally different set of values.

Eventually, it is this capacity to fictionalize known realities by colliding different worlds and projecting unseen concepts that history becomes alive, an unpredictable future is erupted contrasting knowledges, a story yet to be unravelled, surprising, non-linear, where in the end fiction can become reality. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Ranciére posits the following:

> The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought.[...] The notion of "narrative" locks us into oppositions between the real and the artifice where both the positivists and the deconstructionists are lost. It is not a matter of claiming that everything is fiction. It is a matter of stating that the fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction.[23]

In this line of thought, history once again is linked to a model for the fabrication of stories, where "politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct fictions, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done." [24]

4. Cinematic Unconscious

> Distraction and immersion constitute opposites, enabling us to say this: The person who stands in contemplation before a work of art immerses himself in it; he enters that work[...] The distracted mass, on the other hand, absorbs the work of art into itself. Buildings, most obviously. Architecture has always provided the prototype of a work of art that is received in a state of distraction and by the collective.[25]

By understanding the effect on how architecture and the city's dynamic imagery was being utterly changed and, therefore, perceived by the modern man in his hectic life, Walter Benjamin posited film as the new medium for a critical aesthetic in his acclaimed book *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Anthony Vidler, corroborating Benjamin's postulation, observes that "film is the modernist art par excellence, it has also served as a point of departure for the redefinition of other arts, as paradigm by which the different practices of theater, photography, literature, and painting might be distinguished from each other. [Film is] an obvious role model for spatial experimentation." [26] He asserts the close yet turbulent relationship between film and architecture since the late nineteenth century, which had been a laboratory for the definition of modernism in theory and technique.

In the modern age the traditional way of perceiving a work of art – i.e., visual contemplation – would not suffice to capture the public's state of diverted attention. More was in demand for the human perceptual apparatus to perform the instructions of a haptic experience. If modern man is essentially distracted (e.g., tourists starring at famous buildings), it would become the task of art to mobilize this unconscious mass. For it is the film's *shock effect* that meets the audience's distracted form of reception, persuading them to "adopt an appraising stance but also by ensuring that this appraising stance in the cinema does not include attentiveness. The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one." [27] Therefore, it is through this modern unconscious gaze manifested by the filmic art – a different kind of sensory perception brought about by technology – that the public regains its critical posture, the *appraising stance*.

> Then film came along and exploded all these dungeons with the dynamite of its tenths of a second, leaving us free, now, to undertake adventurous journeys amid their widely scattered ruins. The close-up expands space as

> the slow-motion sequence dilates movement. [It] brings out wholly new structural formations in matter, [and] reveals in them others that are quite unfamiliar and that bear no resemblance to decelerations of rapid movements but are like strangely gliding, floating, supernatural ones. Palpably, then, this is a different nature that addresses the camera than the one that speaks to the eye. Different above all in that the space permeated by human consciousness is replaced by the one that is unconsciously permeated.[28]

Benjamin's meticulous analysis regarding the cinematic framework is comparable to Freud's psychoanalysis work in *The Psychopathology of the Everyday Life* (1901), inasmuch as "only the camera can show the optical unconscious, as it is only through psychoanalysis that we learn of the compulsive unconscious." [29] The technological apparatus focused, deepened and enriched our perceptual world, which would otherwise pass unnoticed. In this sense, cinema could be regarded as the twenty-first century psychiatrist's couch, i.e. by projecting our innermost thoughts onto the silver screen, the audience is put in a vulnerable position that may be *unconsciously permeated*. As a result, the film's inherent qualities of spectatorship allows the audience to recognize it, learn from it and benefit from its suggestiveness, which solicits a soft yet direct passage to their visceral states. The cinematic medium would seem to be an effective mechanism for mass control or collective therapy, were it not for the audience's voluntariness or free will to engage it. Notwithstanding, the spectatorial engagement is the veritable assessment of the filmic experience. According to Giuliana Bruno, who developed a singular and passionate voice in *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, the act of occupying the filmic space is where the "authorial dream meets spectatorial pratice." [30] By imagining oneself to reside in a space other than the one presented in reality is to activate a haptic experience, which ultimately resembles a dream state. It is within this dream state that all spatial narratives may be combined to forge a possible direction for the spectatorial mobilization. In this sense, the medium of film formulates a fictional narrative where truth, artifice and memory are all intertwined, suggestive of the way in which reality and fiction are shaping our experience of contemporary art, life, architecture, and after all, history. As a result, one might assert Giuliana Bruno's singular and passionate voice in this regard when she posits that the perfect architectural dream is a filmic dream: pictures become an environment, architecture becomes film. [31]

Notes

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17. Ibid., "The Illusion of Plans", p. 187.

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