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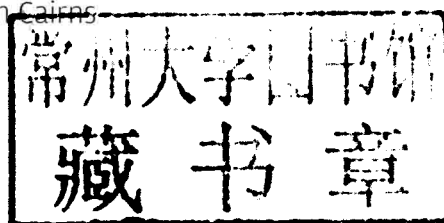
**THE ARCHITECTURE
OF THE SCREEN**

ESSAYS IN
CINEMATOGRAPHIC SPACE

The Architecture of the Screen
Essays in Cinematographic Space

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The Architecture of the Screen

Foreword

Graham Cairns' book is an innovative and welcome addition to the dialogue between cinema and architecture. Recently established as a field of research, this interdisciplinary terrain is relevant to other disciplines beyond architecture and film. Its influence is already evident in established fields such as history, geography and cultural and language studies, but it is also gaining ground in other areas. This book is an opportunity to explore the alternative and complementary 'intelligence' this field opens up, and which can be injected at various stages of creative design processes.

Particularly relevant to architects, this form of 'cinematic intelligence' operates at many different levels corresponding to two principal ways of exploiting the richness of the long history of cinema: through its content and its form. Indeed cinema as an agent, product and source of history (after Marc Ferro), is a formidable resource from which to draw. Although this book is primarily focused on 'form', its exploitation of the film's 'content' is most evident in Part 1 where we are invited to visit or revisit some of the classics.

No serious study of the rise of modernism in France could avoid studying *Playtime* (1967) to understand both the urban fabric of the modern city and their accompanying societal changes. Jacques Tati's filmic oeuvre is not only a humorous and gentle critique of the modern movement but also constitutes a formidable chronicle of urban transformations undergone in post-war France. Similarly, with Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) Cairns reminds us to revisit the film while re-reading Robert Venturi and Kevin Lynch, to which one could add the West coast urban theorists. As this book does, these theorists would no doubt have hailed the astonishing driving sequences in *Zabriskie Point* as cinema inventing new forms of perception to grasp a world – Los Angeles – for which 'we do not yet posses the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace' (after Jameson).

In other words, the 'content' of films is often a wonderful companion to elucidate, elicit and complement writings on urban and architectural theories at any given time. Cinema's holistic approach provides an unrivalled form of spatial and urban modeling of the real world, encompassing weather, comfort, aspirations, dreams, nightmares, social, spatial and cultural conditions. As underlined by this book, architects and urban designers can also draw from films for site analysis and design brief elaboration. And ultimately, as often remarked by Patrick Keiller, 'In films, one can explore the spaces of the past, in order to better anticipate the spaces of the future'.

As for an understanding of 'form', we need to turn to Part 2 of the book. By form, I mean the components of the filmic image that entail learning through examples. In this case Cairns elicits the mechanisms by which Orson Welles and Sergei Eisenstein constructed *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), respectively. As Cairns reinforces, through a process of deconstruction of the screen image, one can gather an understanding of the cinematography, lighting, editing, sound and music as well as spatial strategies employed by filmmakers.

Crucially, it is possible for architects to gather an understanding of screen language, which can be injected into the design process in at least two ways: by making direct analogies between screen language and design concepts - thinking of an architectural sequence as a series of cuts, edits, framings, dissolves, for example.

This book explores these ideas, that Cairns refers to as 'cinematographic space', through video installations as well as by making movies. On the latter, to learn from the near 120 years of audio-visual rhetoric, can only be an improvement on the current trends of architectural animations, in the form of 'fly-throughs' and 'walk-throughs', which have become the standard means for architects and urban designers to use the moving image.

As aptly remarked by McGrath and Gardner, the current offerings of digitally animated building projects neither 'refer to the robust history of architectural language representation techniques, or the power of moving cinematic images, the most universal of contemporary communicative languages'. I construe the introduction of cinema and architecture studies in the architectural curriculum as an essential and necessary antidote to the ubiquitous fly-throughs, and there is no doubt that Cairns's book contributes to this effort.

In Part 3, form and content are reconciled to a certain extent. Of course, in cinema both are constantly at play and can be hard to disentangle. For example the car scene in *Zabriskie Point,* mentioned previously, straddles both form and content; the form – how it is made, the visual collage, the sound design etc. convey the meaning – the content. Similarly, as Cairns examines, the architectural promenade in the ramp scene of the Villa Savoye in *Architectures d'Aujourd'hui* (1931) is a question of both form and content – it is a narrative device that expresses cinematically a spatial concept – the form – but is also a central concept in Le Corbusier's architecture as expressed in his writing - the content.

In this final part of the book Cairns also tackles a key issue: comparing two films from two very different cultural traditions – Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953). This raises issues of spatial translatability in cinema by exploring how films have translated Western concepts of screen language to an East Asian context, with special reference to the treatment of space. This is a complex issue, explored by Cairns, worthy of further investigation. The cultures of East and West are extremely different, reflected in the naturalism-based architectural and visual languages – and realist cinema – of Europe, and the analogism-based languages of China and Japan (after Descola). This is a reminder that in a globalised world, to gather an understanding between cultures through cinematic mechanisms, may also facilitate a broader comprehension of East and West.

Paraphrasing Mark Hellinger's final words in his voice-over of *Naked City* (1948), I conclude by saying that there have been many books exploring the topic of cinema and architecture, and may there be many more to explore this complex and yet most rewarding relationship! This book is one of them.

François Penz
Cambridge, 27 February 2013

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Introduction

The moment the still image was imbued with life through film, a new visual language had been born. Radical in its forms and profound in its consequences, this language represented what may now be called an "optical revolution". Louis and Auguste Lumière astonished the first cinematic audiences in *Le Salon Indien du Grand Café* in 1895; and the following year Georges Méliès fragmented space and time through the optical trickery of the cut. Our view of the world had changed forever. Art now had at its disposal a new visual language. It had a new and a radical formal vocabulary. From now on, the modern eye would filter momentary and multiple stimuli. It would process a new optical experience. It would navigate a strange and complex visual world. It would learn to read – anew. The human eye was now faced with the phenomenon of movement – constantly.

This new scenario did not take long to influence architecture. Film would be fundamental to the vanguard of the early twentieth century. It would lead to a questioning of how we perceive the space around us. It offered new possibilities in our understanding and representation of buildings. It presented architects with a platform for experimentation – at the scale of the interior and of the city. Indeed, film gave rise to theories that considered the practice of cinema as analogous to that of architecture; Dziga Vertov would call himself Kino Eye – and define it as "an eye that constructs"; Sergei Eisenstein would correlate cinematic montage with architectural experience; and Soviet architects such as Vladimir Tatlin and the Vesnin brothers would propose a cinematic typology for both set design and architecture: spaces of real and perceptual movement. Architecture could now be seen, imagined and perceived not only as space but also as time and motion. Film was a kindred spirit.

Such was the influence of the cinematic medium in its incipient years – when its forms were still unfamiliar, its techniques still shocking and its effects surprising. However, once consolidated in the contemporary psyche, the formal experimentation of the medium gave way to convention. By the end of the 1930s, a system of filming had been standardised and exported across the globe. The visual language of the cut, the fade, the dissolve, and the image in movement had all been assimilated – by both the eye and the mind. Barely noticed, ignored and imperceptible behind the power of aesthetic and narrative interests, the once radical language of film now simply supported the telling of stories.

In this condition, the architect's engagement with cinema and film became both narrative and aesthetic. Film was no longer a radical melting pot for spatial theories. Cinema became a site of spectacular sets. Worse still, the architecture of those sets was often mundane. It had to be discreet. Its role had changed. It foregrounded action. In the field of architecture, film lost its power to influence our conceptual understanding of space. It became a mere

vehicle for visual representation. Its theoretical vibrancy had gone – replaced by aesthetic concerns.

Inspired by a return to a "pre-narrative" vision of cinema, the essays collected in this work represent contemporary engagements with the disciplines of film and architecture. We define their approach as "non-aesthetic". It is based on an interest in cinematography, or rather, the "way of filming" over "what is filmed". Their perspectives are intended to draw the reader's attention to a malleable concept. We call it "cinematographic space". It is definable as the on-screen perception of space constructed by the director and cinematographer. It demonstrates how the medium of film can alter our perception of the architecture we see, and how architecture, in its turn, can influence the way the camera "looks" at space. Our hope, in a sense, is to recapture the energy and interest of the pioneers of film and those architects inspired by it. The aim is to re-energise our engagement with the medium's once radical visual vocabulary.

To this end, the essays in this book do not examine mise-en-scène in any great depth, nor do they dwell on films renowned for their spectacular architectural sets. Furthermore, they do not consider the role of iconic buildings or cities in the work of certain famous directors. They are a diverse range of texts written over a number of years. They probe the way film's visual language interacts with the formal properties of architectural space, in multiple and diverse ways. They are written for readers from both disciplines, and assume a certain level of cross-disciplinary knowledge. Given their disciplined focus however, some of the terms used may be new to readers from only one of our fields. They are therefore clarified in endnotes; signposts across conflicting terrains.

Although seen as independent essays, the book is organised in a tripartite structure that categorises each essay by format rather than theme. Part 1, for example, is a collection of film reviews. Part 2 is a series of texts that cover "practical" experimentations in film, video installation and architecture. By contrast, Part 3 is composed of a number of extended academic texts that deal with disparate subjects. In one way or another, each section engages with the theme of "cinematographic space". In each essay, the way in which this theme is dealt with varies. It may be indirect, at times tangential and, at others, even imperceptible. It is however, just beneath the surface of everything presented.

Thus, the common thread that links all the film reviews in Part 1 is not their storyline, or the architecture they present on screen, or any particular characteristic of their directors. It is an attempt to understand the "cinematic style" chosen by the director, and identify its relationship with the architecture presented. This perspective reveals a number of issues. In some cases, we discuss similarities between an editing style and the "spatial effects" created by particular architects. Our commentaries on the architecture of Jean Nouvel and Carlo Scarpa focus on this. Examined through the prism of films like *Hiroshima mon Amour* and *Kyonosqatssi*, by Alain Resnais and Godfrey Reggio respectively, their work will be defined in cinematic terms.

In other reviews, we examine a particular way of filming, and how this responds to, and manipulates, our reading of the space it records. We find this in *Zabriske Point* and *Last Year in Marienbad*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni and, again, with Alain Resnais. In some

instances, we also discuss the formal characteristics of a given director's "filming style", as a reflection of debates concurrent in architecture. In these cases, there is an acceptance of the role played by set design and mise-en-scène, an inevitable concession evident in a strand of secondary commentaries. It is most evident in the work of Jacques Tati and his architectural set designer, Jacques Lagrange. Furthermore, it emerges in discussions on films by directors including Lewis Gilbert and Peter Greenaway, amongst others.

Through the cinematography of directors such as Tom Twyker and Oliver Hirschbiegel, we also discuss the writings and projects of some of today's leading architects, Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio and Rem Koolhaas. In these instances, the visual aesthetic created by them on screen, through filming and editing, interacts with the aesthetic of the architects concerned. More importantly, however, it also raises broader sociocultural questions of relevance in the architectural sphere. Despite their shared interest in how film's visual tropes inform and enrich architectural perception, practice and theory, the essays collected in Part 1 offer diverse perspectives. Through these viewing points, we find multiple ways with which to engage with both film and architecture.

Part 2 brings together works of very different types realised in the worlds of architectural education, performance art and video installation. It centres on a diverse range of educators, practitioners and artists. It examines a range of "practical" ways in which the mechanics of film as a medium have been used in the field of architecture. It begins by very briefly discussing the semi-spatial, semi-filmic nature of video installation, through some iconic figures of the field, such as Dan Graham, Gary Hill, Bruce Nauman and Jane and Louise Wilson. These artists have all engaged with the creation of what we may call "filmic spaces" for over three decades.

More specifically, however, Part 2 examines this fused realm of space and film through the work of a UK-based collaborative group, Hybrid Artworks; a consortium headed, in the late 1990s, by the author of this book. The spatial, filmic and performance pieces produced by Hybrid Artworks give way to an overview of the work of Diller and Scofidio. As with others mentioned here, Diller and Scofidio have operated in the terrain of performance, film and architecture over a number of decades. The difference in their case is the simple but significant fact that their performance and installation work engages directly, and literally, with their work as architects. These artists and groups are covered in this section so as to draw out a myriad of "real" ways in which film, moving image and video projection can be used to manipulate, and indeed create, a perception of physically inhabited space.

In a related vein, this section of the book also discusses the use of film in architectural education, through the experimental teaching methods of tutors at some of the United Kingdom's and Spain's leading schools. Amongst those mentioned are François Penz, Lorcan O'Herily and Aurora Herrera Gómez, practitioners and teachers who have again been treading this terrain for a number of years. Special emphasis, however, is placed on the work of Pascal Schöning at the Architectural Association and his notion of "filmic architecture"; a conceptual idea that re-works the avant-garde challenge to the convention of architecture as physical construction.

This overview sits alongside a more detailed examination of the teaching methodologies developed by the author of this book in the context of architecture; teaching practices that apply the ideas underlying each of the essays in this work. Central to this pedagogical practice is a theoretical definition of "cinematographic space". This clear definition is offered in the context of a teaching programme designed to introduce architectural students to the "visual vocabulary of film". Moreover, it is intended to initiate a process through which that vocabulary is applied to spatial design projects. Characterised again by a diversity of approaches, but also a common set of interests, these essays once more offer very different perspectives. They examine how lessons, concepts and visual effects from the realm of film are, and can be, integrated into the mindset of the spatial designer.

Part 3 presents five more extensive theoretical essays. Some of these are similar to the film reviews outlined at the beginning of the book in that they offer relatively detailed examinations of films. They differ, however, in depth, complexity and theme. By contrast, others are considerably different to what we offer in Part 1. They engage more directly with architecture as a discipline and a practice; a practice seen to be informed, and influenced by, the phenomenon of the moving image. The first of these texts deals with a particular building type: the sports stadium. It suggests that this typology has been significantly influenced by the development of television and, as a result, represents a site for some potentially important shifts in the nature of human vision itself.

Arguing that globalised television has turned sport into an international media event, it suggests that the architecture of sports stadia has mutated into a semi-real, semi-virtual construct. In this context, the difference between the physical structure and its mediated image has definitively blurred. Drawing upon the ideas of Paul Virilio, amongst others, it proposes that a concomitant blurring in terms of spectatorship is one of the results; the optical processing of the eye now threatens to morph and evolve as it merges with mediated visualisation.

In the essay that follows, the work of the architect Jean Nouvel, who is referenced throughout the book, is examined in more detail. In particular, this essay examines Nouvel's references to both cinema and phenomenology in the context of his Cartier Foundation building, Paris. Drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, André Bazin and Jean Nouvel himself, it is presented in a non-standard format that layers its arguments in a semi-narrative form. It identifies that the Cartier Foundation building is, in certain ways, one of Nouvel's most technically ambitious works. More significantly, we suggest that it also encapsulates his interest in the nature of perceptual experience and the optical tropes of film.

In the subsequent essay on the Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier, a related interest in the use of cinematic tropes is examined. This is done through analogies with the films and theories of Sergei Eisenstein. In this essay, the architectural promenade is analysed in terms of cinematic montage. Thus, it is an essay that examines one of the Modern Movement's iconic structures as an inherently "cinematic construct".

This more historical perspective is repeated in the essay on the works of Yasujiro Ozu and Jean Renoir. Here, we argue that two of their iconic films, *La Grande Illusion* and *Tokyo*

Story, reveal a deep cultural relationship between architecture and film. We suggest that these films are emblematic of their directors' oeuvre. However, we also argue that they reveal sociopolitical issues of prime importance in moments of great historic change; they both use film and architecture in ways that seek to keep their artistic cultures alive. We therefore argue that both films echo beyond the spheres of either film or architecture as isolated disciplines.

We end this section with an essay that links the work of the director Mike Figgis with the architecture of contemporary designers. Figures such as Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman and, albeit less directly, Gregg Lynn and Thom Mayne are all referenced. The essay suggests that the visual language created by Figgis in his film *Timecode* potentially offers a cinematic model for today's architectural avant-garde. It draws on the deconstructive theories of Jacques Derrida but, more significantly, focuses on Deleuzian notions such as "folding spaces". It argues that these may be more appropriate to explaining a potentially new relationship between architecture and film that emerges from an analysis of Figgis' work. This essay thus suggests that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and despite the emergence of ever newer visual technologies, the now ageing medium of film still has a new, radical and changing visual vocabulary to offer to architects and designers.