Cinematic space in-between reality and fiction

Nina Bačun
Faculty of Architecture, University of Zagreb

Follow this and additional works at: https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/nordes

Citation
ABSTRACT

Cinematic space, imagined or real, seen as counter-archive relies on its perceived potential as intangible heritage, its impact on narration in film, and its influence on memory of built space. The research looks into the instrumental role of filmic architectural space as an agent of collective memory. Cinematic space, with its conscious or unconscious intentions, and multiple views, is neither neutral nor passive. Film is more than a form of expression, its spatial manipulation is oftentimes contrary to the usual understanding of space. Therefore, the space assembled through cinematic techniques becomes a tool for critical research on architecture, permitting alternative interpretations of architectural spaces.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture and film have become especially interrelated since the 1940s (the era of early modernism) with help from the emergence of the modern metropolis that significantly influenced the modification of human perception. Reproducible technologies like film and photography greatly changed the relationship between history and materiality.

The abolition of the continuous Euclidean notion of space created a fertile ground for intertextuality - basic characteristic of modern space of the twentieth-century (Stierli, 2018).

Michel Foucault’s lecture ‘Of Other Spaces’ from 1967, first published in English in 1986, is still a subject of debate. It began with the claim that “the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. [...] the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed (Foucault and Miskowiec, 1987).” Foucault calls attention to Heterotopia(s) - the ‘counter-sites’ that stand “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality,” which are often seen in cinema.

SPATIALITY IN CINEMA

Cinematic space - the type of space in film - according to French director Éric Rohmer (Grosoli, 2018) is the primary unit of filmic spatial representation. It can be seen as the ensemble of landscape, buildings, objects and people. Cinematic space is often constructed by defragmented and partial elements, and by the use of film techniques, primary montage, continuous perception of place is created. According to architect Andreas Kretzer (2021): “Cinematic space comprises three types and reference values: the space that is represented in the individual shot, the assembled space of the montage and the spatial imagination stimulated by sound.” Kretzer argues that the cinematic conception of space is driven by the access of spaces that are only indicated or implied off screen.

Richard Martin proposes a method of analysing cinematic architecture - intersection of architecture and film - as an example that would allow greater perceptual range needed to understand how one experiences the space of the modern city. As Martin (2014) pointed out: “Through a variety of techniques, a film director generates space, immerses us in a sequence of scenarios, creates a narrative from rooms and corridors, focuses the traveling eye on specific features, commands our sensory experience - all of which requires an architectural imagination.” In other words, cinema functions spatially.

Cinematic spaces are neither neutral, nor passive; on the contrary, (re)assembled through cinematic techniques, they tell us stories with spatial manipulation oftentimes opposite of usual understanding of architecture. They
can embody, overwrite, or even modify our memories by using cut-ups, loops and slow motion. As British artist Mark Leckey indicated with the video essay ‘Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore’ - compilation of found footage from the British underground music and dance scene - where image is treated as found object. Presumably, our choice of preservation or demolition of one’s own memory is shaping our collective memory of the space.

CINEMATIC SPACE AS CONSTRUCTED MEMORY

The early outcome of the design-driven research “Spatial narratives in film” by Nina Bačun (2021) was transpired into the essay film Bonding Humanity (Perhaps Manifesto) - BH (PM). BH (PM) was created by deliberately rearranging, reorganising and juxtaposing fragments from New Yugoslav Film, and its segment known as ‘Black Wave film’ (Kim and Madžar, 2014) and its cinematic heritage related to the interaction between collective spaces and their use. In the film personal, social and political contexts intersect into a dialogic narrative form that advances possibilities for new interpretations. At the same time, the voiceover manifesto is manoeuvred to evoke personal trajectories as well as collective memories as fragments. Those fragments of memories are linked together by elliptic montage. Some images are based on associative values, while others are not. Within BH (PM) spaces, architecture and actions are used as triggers for inducing memory by ‘constructing’ it. The vocal part is shaped by the use of ‘linguistic montage’ made out of a network of ‘verb adjectives.’ Words are linked together to yield a new meaning, an open, closed or hyphenated compound. Altogether images, text, dramaturgy of text and sound are associated in a whole with the assumption of ‘ideal’ heterotopian environment(s), inhabited and activated with human and/or nonhuman in different ways (see Figure 1). The Manifesto subtly expresses mental and physical environments we inhabit, consciously or unconsciously, in our memories. It speaks of a specially constructed memory built of cinematic spaces. And even though we do not share the same language with our environments, somehow, we are constantly trying to give spaces a human voice. We could even speak about the poly-perspectivism of spaces, particularly cinematic spaces, because they carry their own story and the story, we imprint onto them. Additionally, different people imprint different meanings onto spaces. Film is using a portrait of the past to say something about the present, at the same time involving the form of the essay film as a tool for creative exploration. It questions if nostalgia can be used as a tool for retrieving our collective memory once architecture’s relationship with memory has been revealed.

THE WORLD AS OBJECT AND AS IMAGE

Intertwining disciplines such as visual art, architecture and the moving images create a poignant issue of not being able to firmly position any of those interdisciplinary works.

But to be reminded Walter Benjamin (1973) claimed: “Anything about which one knows that one soon will not have it around becomes an image.” Benjamin’s sense of materiality can be seen as enabling history to be presented in objects, yet he predicted the power of image and the decay of the physical.

In confronting modernism, filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl (2010), depicts our desire to transform ourselves and the world we inhabit into images. According to art critic, curator and writer Marit Paasche (2011) “Steyerl offers a refreshingly novel position - one that allows the subject to identify with the image as object” as she notices “the subject is no longer the centre of the universe but on equal terms with other objects: history’s pile of scrap (Bull & Paasche, 2011)” . Steyerl introduces a ‘shift in perspective,’ a concept of the object and objectivity and the way images alter the relation between subject and object in identification. Steyerl challenges Benjamin’s pessimistic outlook of a future with her optimistic objectification of the
reproducible image as something ‘valuable,’ that even gain value in being shared through social media.

Perceiving cinematic space as a potential alternative archive one needs to be aware that digital environments, same as built environments, show symptoms of decay; “The bruises of images are its glitches and artefacts, the traces of its rips and transfers (see Figure 2 and 3). Images are violated, ripped apart, subjected to interrogation and probing. They are stolen, cropped, edited, and re-appropriated. […] Manipulated and adulated” (Steyerl, 2010).

Figure 2, 3: Giunio, Andro (2016) Playback_issues, screenshots

The relationship between man and the world consists of both: the world as object and as image. If image operates as a mediator between humans and the world, one needs to acknowledge what digital image is, and how to approach it nowadays. By learning what we already know and how things matter to us, we can realize the history of what we see. As Marguerite Duras (1972) pointed out: “I shall not go to school any more. Because at school they teach me things I don't know.”

Should we perhaps unlearn how to look at images? As Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub (2021) did in their rebellious filmmaking by rethinking how to translate the grammar of an image to explore the space in between. The question is not only what images are and what they bring us, but also where they take us?

If image doesn’t represent reality, and is just a fragment of the real world, or a fabrication of it, as moving images are in their nature, then one should consider cinematic images as a challenge in building counter-archives with its counter-narratives that would eventually rebuild our social space.

If film is something that is saving our reality of the world, ‘cinematic spaces’ can be used to construct memory for the digital archives of our future. ‘Cinematic space’ - the space assembled through montage - becomes a tool for critical research on architecture and heritage, permitting new readings of architectural space, possibly contributing to a new method of spatial research.

If invisible memory is becoming visible within cinematic space or collective memory constructed through film, one could learn how to approach the past, the present, and the future.

If our relationship with images can (re)configure our perception of the past, how can it contribute to better understanding the present, or transforming the future?

What roles can legacies of virtual audio-visual data - moving images; more precisely ‘cinematic spaces’ have in our future(s)?

SUPERVISION

Dr. Sc. Professor Mia Roth- professor Mia Roth-Čerina and Dr. Sc. Associate Professor Tomislav Šakić

REFERENCES


[Accessed 10 September 2022]

Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore. 1999. [video essay]. 
Mark Leckey. dir. Tate, London.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dS2McPYzEE.

Foucault, Michel & Miskowiec, Jay (1986). 


https://eelfb.org/retrospectives/new-yugoslav-film/
[Accessed 10 December 2021]


