Intersecting frames: film + architecture

The end of the 20th century saw a sudden flurry of concern around the themes of film and architecture, or cinema and the city. It is difficult to ignore the coincidence of this surge of attention with the profound transformation that both film and architecture were experiencing, as each practice found itself being increasingly redefined by digital technologies. The much-celebrated centenary of cinema in 1995 also marked a growing uncertainty about what cinema would become in the looming post-celluloid era. Similarly, architecture found itself at a crossroads, as computer-assisted design systems, first mooted in the 1960s, were turbo-boosted by new visualization capabilities. As digitizing photographic and video images became commonplace, the static forms of elevation and plan ceded authority to animated 3D ‘fly-throughs’, leading Eleftheriades (1997: 143) to argue that ‘the world of architecture will merge imperceptibly with the world of cinema.’ But what would such a merging entail?

In trying to sketch an answer this question without appealing to a stable essence of either field, I propose to proceed here by juxtaposing three different moments over the course of the 20th century in which the relation between film and architecture became the subject of critical attention. My concern is the mutual implication of film and architecture in the production of a new sense of social space. I will argue that this new sense of space, born at the junction of increasingly ‘open’ architectural structures and mobile fields of vision, is the unstable ground that today supports architecture in the digital urban milieu.

Film as urban dynamite

In 1924, Hungarian-born artist László Moholy-Nagy completed the script-collage for a proposed film Dynamic of a Metropolis. Never shot, the non-fiction scenario sets out a complex interplay of abstract and documentary elements which not only demonstrates Moholy’s prodigious capacity to work across varied media, but showcases the extent to which he already saw the camera as the primary tool for the articulation of a new concept of space-time. ‘Space creation’ (Raumgestaltung) through the controlled use of light and movement remained the credo of Moholy’s work over the next decades, not only in his paintings, lithographs and woodcuts, but also in his pioneering work in the era’s ‘new media’ — photomontages, photograms, and films — as well as new forms such as the Lictrequisit or Light-Space Modulator (1930) that pointed towards kinetic art.

Moholy’s interest in rendering the dynamic qualities of the modern metropolis in film were widely shared in a decade that gave the birth to the ‘city symphony’ film genre. If the most famous products of this cycle were undoubtedly Walter Ruttmann’s Berlin, Symphony of a Great City, (Germany 1927) and Dziga Vertov’s Man with the Movie Camera (USSR, 1929) its influence stretched much further. In fact, from the very beginning
of cinema, it was evident that the *liveliness* of urban phenomena—the restless movement of crowds and vehicles, the shimmering appearance of the modern street under electric lights and reflected in glass structures, the complexity of social experience lived amidst heterogeneous strangers, mass commodities and new media technologies, all auspiced by the paradigmatic impact of machine production—were a major fascination for filmmakers. If film offered artists a new medium, the modern city presented a palette of sounds and visions never previously experienced. Novelist Virginia Woolf (1950: 170–71) advanced what was a widely shared view of the early avant-garde: that film could become a new art uniquely appropriate to modern urban experience, if only it stayed clear the nostalgic lure of ‘literary’ scenarios.

The most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain [...] We get intimations only in the chaos of the streets, perhaps when some momentary assembly of colour, sound, movement, suggests that here is a scene waiting a new art to be transfixed.

While numerous writers and filmmakers shared this perception of cinema’s distinctive relation to the modern city, the most developed theorization of this role emerged in the writings of Walter Benjamin. Beginning in the 1920s, Benjamin advanced a novel conception of film as a form of urban ‘dynamite’ capable of unlocking the experiential ‘prison-world’ of the industrial city. The beginnings of this thesis were first proposed in his 1927 defence of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*, written shortly after Benjamin had visited the Soviet Union.

To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment – the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure – are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful and passionate way. In themselves these offices, furnished rooms, salons, big-city streets, stations, and factories are ugly, incomprehensible, and hopelessly sad. Or rather, they were and seemed to be, until the advent of film. The cinema then exploded this entire prison-world with its dynamite of fractions of a second, so that now we can take the extended journeys of adventure between their widely scattered ruins. The vicinity of a house, a room, can include dozens of the most unexpected stations, and the most astonishing station names. It is not so much the constant stream of images as the sudden change of place that overcomes a milieu which has resisted every other attempt to unlock its secret, and succeeds in extracting from a petty-bourgeois dwelling the same beauty we admire in an Alfa Romeo. And so far, so good. (1999: 17)

Benjamin’s argument precociously joins several lines of thought, linking his analysis of the impact of camera technologies on perception to his reading of the impact of ‘big city life’ on the human sensorium. When his ‘film dynamite’ metaphor is reprised a decade later in his famous ‘Artwork’ essay, it has been ambitiously extended to include the tantalising concept of the
‘optical unconscious’ derived from his reading of Freud’s ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (published in 1920).

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split-second, so that we now can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly “in any case”, but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them [. . .] Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. “Other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space formed by the unconscious. [. . .] It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.’ (2002: 117; 2003: 265–66)

Benjamin’s argument here has several parts to it. The first, strongly influenced by Baudelaire and Simmel, is his assertion that the quintessential experience of modern city life is a form of shock. Complementing Simmel’s (1997: 178) thesis concerning the ‘blasé attitude’ adopted by overburdened city-dwellers in order to cope with routine overstimulation, Benjamin used his reading of Freud to argue that consciousness routinely functions as a ‘protective shield’. Habituation to shock enables consciousness to ‘screen’ external stimulation more efficiently, negating shock by locating the stimulus in a unilinear temporal chain. For Benjamin, this made the notionally private life of individual experience a highly political issue. Rather than entering the durée of ‘long experience’, in which individual memory could potentially be articulated with a collective past (and thereby a shared future), he argued that habituation to urban shock had reduced modern social life to isolated and incommunicable individual experiences.

The greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience (Erfahrung), and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience (Erlebnis). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defence is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the incident’s contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into isolated experience (Benjamin 2003: 319).

Film’s ‘other space’ presents a potential antidote to this isolation. Like architecture, popular reception of film was characterized by what Benjamin termed ‘distracted’ perception. But film is the ‘true training ground’ for this mode of perception (Benjamin 2003: 269). Instead of valorizing the kind
of focused attention routinely presumed as desirable for viewing art with a capital ‘A’, the radical value of film lay in its capacity to engender a mode of reception capable of eluding the habitual filters of consciousness.

This understanding situates the historical importance that Benjamin attributed to film as a means of responding to the distinctive historical challenges of ‘big city’ life. Slipping past the protective shield of consciousness, Benjamin argued that film was capable of detonating the powerful ‘memory traces’ that pertained to the sort of experiences which had never properly entered consciousness. It is from this perspective that the full weight of the concept of the ‘optical unconscious’ can be appreciated: the distracted perception characteristic of film is the key to unlocking the latent historical energy of the modern city, and thereby re-enlivening the utopian aspirations that were embedded in many of its forms and structures. With its capacity to address a collective audience, cinema offered the toolkit that could transform avant-garde aesthetics into a genuine political force. In Benjamin’s (2002: 116; 2003: 264) pithy terms: ‘The extremely backward attitude to a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film.’ Schooled by the ‘dynamite of the 1/10th of a second’, urban dwellers could perceive their surroundings and their social lives anew, and remake them according to their needs.

Of course, the problem for this new politics was how to convert the enervation of distracted perception into conscious awareness, a ‘profane illumination’ that might be collectively acted on. As Adorno (1984: 223) made clear in his critique of Benjamin and Kracauer, he thought the dynamite of montage could only get you so far. If judicious use of such a tool demanded a new type of revolutionary artist-architect, history suggests the fuse is still to be properly lit.

**The house as sight machine**

In 1954, Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Rear Window* famously dramatized the psycho-sexual tensions generated by the convergence of new forms of architecture and media. Glass windows and high-powered telephoto lenses combine to strip the veil of privacy from home-bound bourgeois life. Hitchcock’s film is transgressive, but in a deliberate, stylized way that suggests its transgression is fast becoming normalized. From the film’s beginning, it is made clear that the injured photojournalist Jeff (played by James Stewart and purportedly based on famed photographer and Magnum photo-agency founder Robert Capa) is indulging in ‘improper’ activities. His nurse Stella comments: ‘Oh dear, we’ve become a race of Peeping Toms’. However, by the end of the film, she has become an avid watcher herself. The same is true of Jeff’s girl friend Lisa (played by Grace Kelly) who is initially disturbed by Jeff’s voyeurism, but is soon drawn into watching his neighbor, the suspected murderer Therbold. More significantly, Hitchcock’s film deliberately implicates the film viewer in this uncertain scene, highlighting the extent to which the growing ‘openness’ of modern
architecture and the increasing ‘reach’ of modern media, had converged to produce a new social milieu of urban visibility.\(^6\)

Advocacy of glass architecture was emblematic of modern architectural style and attitude. However, there is a vast difference between the lingering expressionism of a Bruno Taut (member of the Crystal Chain group formed immediately after the First World War) and the enthusiastic adoption of ‘window-walls’ by arch-rationalist Le Corbusier. History suggests Corbusier’s aesthetic won the day, but perhaps not with the effects he anticipated. His argument in favour of the horizontal window, first proposed for his Geneva Villa in 1923, is couched entirely in terms of transparency rather than the more diffuse, refracted and colourful light that those such as Taut and Paul Scheerbart (1972) had envisioned. Because horizontal windows provide more light than vertical ones (an argument Corbusier (1991: 56) ‘proves’ with reference to data on film exposure) they are better able to bring ‘the immensity of the outer world into the room’ (Corbusier quoted in Reichlin 1984: 72). This novel form of transport provided by transparency, which is predicated on the availability of modern building materials, ushers in a new definition of the house. By 1930 Le Corbusier (1991: 38–40) was proclaiming: ‘With reinforced concrete you get rid of the walls completely. [...] If I want to, I can have windows on the entire surface of façade’. Elsewhere he adds: ‘From this emerges the true definition of the house: stages of floors [...] all around them walls of light’ (quoted in Colomina 1994: 7).

As glass takes over the walls of the house, the camera becomes a key point of reference for the new spatial dynamic that is being enacted. In Corbusier’s (1991: 136, 139) words:

The house is a box raised above ground, perforated all around, without interruption, by a long horizontal window. [...] It is in its right place in the rural landscape of Poissy. But in Biarritz, it would be magnificent. [...] .

If, as Corbusier argues, his new window system is akin to a camera aperture designed to regulate the entry of light, the house (as Colomina (1994: 312) concludes) has become ‘a system for taking pictures’. The window-wall makes the house a sight machine that can be pointed anywhere, ‘a camera pointed at nature’ (Colomina 1994: 312), converting landscape into image.

However, as Hitchcock’s film suggests, the directionality of the camera lens is always variable. The drama of Rear Window turns entirely on the reversible nature of the social visibility that glass architecture enacts. At the very moment that conclusive evidence of a murder having taken place is revealed to both the film’s characters and its spectators, via a close-up shot putatively seen through photojournalist Jeff’s camera lens, the murderer Therbold turns to look directly towards the window of Jeff’s
apartment. This inspires a panicked reaction in Jeff and Lisa (‘Turn out the light, he’s seen us’). This reaction functions simultaneously on narrative and meta-narrative levels: while it forms part of the fictional story, signaling the moment in which the watchers are seen and thus brought into danger, it also performs a commentary on the way that film watching has helped to normalize voyeurism in an increasingly media-driven society. As a visual apparatus, film created a distinctive social situation that authorized viewers to stare at others with an intensity and persistence that would otherwise be considered improper (something that was particularly radical in the early 20th century, especially for female viewers). Rear Window dramatizes the way that the conjunction of glass architecture and photomedia technologies effectively transformed the private sphere into what Habermas (1989: 158) termed ‘floodlit privacy’.

Is the modern house a machine for taking pictures, or the studio in which they are taken? As much as modern architecture restructured the house into a light-filled space from which its sovereign inhabitants might survey the world outside, transparency also functioned to render this notionally private space increasingly open to the gaze of others. William Whyte’s (1969: 324) influential description of the new living spaces in the post-war suburbs of the United States pinpointed what still remains a staple theme of film and television production in the present: ‘The picture in the picture window... is what is going on inside —or what is going on inside other people’s picture windows’. By the 1990s, the spectacle of family life in the home as a source of popular melodrama had escalated into fantasies of ‘realtime’ omniscience, and the fictional conceit of The Truman Show (1998)—in which the god-like ‘director’ an entire town become a studio-set—found itself outstripped by the global popularity of ‘reality television’ formats such as Big Brother. Here the explosion engineered by the meshing of film and architecture produces what Paul Virilio (2000: 60-61) calls a condition of perpetual overexposure.

**City as cinematic event**

In 1982, Godfrey Reggio’s remarkable first feature Koyaanisqatsi was released in cinemas, largely thanks to backing from Francis Ford Coppola. Koyaanisqatsi reprised the city-symphony genre, particularly as practiced by Vertov, combining a fundamentally musical structure developed in collaboration with composer Phillip Glass with an ambitious non-verbal conception of modern society that spans the underlying processes as well as the sites of urban life. However, where Vertov’s Man with the Movie Camera presented an optimistic picture of urban-industrial life, Reggio depicts the city-machine in a far more ominous light. Inspired by Ellul’s analysis of technological society, Koyaanisqatsi shows a city in which human lives are being reduced to mere cogs in a fundamentally non-human system. Reggio (in MacDonald 1992: 390) acknowledges his focus on systems and structures was a deliberate stylistic choice:
I try to eradicate all the foreground of traditional film and make the background... or what's called ‘second unit’, the foreground... I was trying to look at buildings, masses of people, transportation, industrialization, as entities in and of themselves, having an autonomous nature.

Perhaps the most striking outcome of this approach is the remarkable section of the film sub-titled ‘The Grid’. Director of photography Ron Fricke makes memorable use of time-lapse cinematography to depict urban life on the move. The result is an extended sequence in which urban life flies by at high-speed, but which, paradoxically, enables news sets of rhythms to be apprehended: the frenzied atomistic motion of pedestrians and commuters is revealed as regular staccato bursts of activity metred by the guillotine of traffic signals; the slow pulse snaking up a line of cars on a freeway forms a standing wave in response to a momentary hold-up that occurred far away in space and time; the night city under conditions of acceleration dissolves structure and mass into the uncanny beauty of streaks of pure light. Reggio’s film confirms Benjamin’s hypothesis of film as ‘urban dynamite’. It reveals previously unperceived patterns of urban life, and helps to crystallises a different understanding of architecture, in which the primary concern is neither the formal appearances or spatial envelope of static structures, but processes and flows occurring in space-time.

At least since Futurism, modern architecture has evinced an interest in the dynamic and ephemeral aspects of urban life, a tendency that undoubtedly strengthened its perceived affinity with cinema. But arguably the most significant statement of the importance of flow emerged in the work of Siegfried Giedion, who was strongly influenced by his close friend Moholy-Nagy’s concept of ‘space creation’. In his influential book *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941), which became a staple of architectural education for decades, Giedion contrasts the aesthetics of previous eras with the ‘space-time’ of the modern city. One prominent sign for Giedion was the blurring of interior and exterior space enabled by glass architecture. In his optimistic reading of Walter Gropius’ landmark Bauhaus building erected in Dessau in 1925, Giedion argues that Gropius’ startling use of glass curtain walls presaged ‘an epochal move away from Renaissance spatiality’ (quoted in Mertins 1997: 234). The perspectival ambiguity entrained by glass structures lessened the dominion of a stable, centred perspective in favour of a more dynamic and relational point of view. While Giedion’s account draws on examples from modern art (such as Picasso), it also—and more tellingly for my argument—draws on the impact of modern transport infrastructure. Seizing the new ‘parkway’ outside New York as an exemplar, Giedion (1967: 826, 831) argued:

> As with many of the creations born out of the spirit of this age, the meaning and beauty of the parkway cannot be grasped from a single point of observation, as was possible from a window of the château at Versailles. It can be revealed only by movement, by going along in a...
steady flow, as the rules of traffic prescribe. The space-time feeling of our period can seldom be felt so keenly as when driving.

As Paul Virilio (1989) has noted, driving and cinema share a common perceptual frame. Giedion’s (cited in Janser 1997: 34) observation about the challenge of representing modern design indicates a similar convergence between moving vehicle and cinema’s mobile vision: “Still photography does not capture them clearly. One would have to accompany the eye as it moves: only film can make the new architecture intelligible”.

Such a standpoint situates a paradigmatic change in thinking about architecture. Filmmaker and theorist Hollis Frampton (1983: 189) has argued: ‘Painting “assumes” architecture: walls, floors, ceilings. The illusionist painting itself may be seen as a window or doorway’. By contrast, cinema’s dynamic perception — ‘perception in the form of shocks’ as Benjamin put it — ‘assumes’ not the stable site of a solid building but the variable vector described by a moving vehicle. If Frampton’s evocation of ‘architecture’ remains classical, Virilio’s postulation of the unity of travel and tracking shot concentrates the essential ambiguity conditioning both modern perception and modern architecture: the endless fluctuation of borders and contexts (inside/outside, public/private, local/global), and the displacement of the human body as authoritative centre of meaning and reference.

The attempt to render architecture more ‘dynamic’ has assumed numerous forms in modernity. The architectural promenades made famous by Le Corbusier in projects such as Villa Savoye—which Beatriz Colomina aptly describes as ‘cinematographic’ in its choreography of inhabitant movement — gave way to new schemes for producing entire ‘cities on the move’. While those such as Constant and Yona Friedman advocated a radical form of urban nomadism based on designing mutable structures that could be reconfigured by inhabitants according to their needs, others such as Archigram and Cedric Price looked to the new potential for computer control to enable new levels of personalization and customization in architecture. A common point of reference for many of these utopian schemes was their appeal to cinema, less as an existing institutional form of mass entertainment than in its potential for generating large-scale spatial ambiances capable of rapid switches and differentiated intensities.

Beginning in the 1970s Bernard Tschumi adopts cinema as the key reference point for asserting a new relation between architecture and event. In his 1983 essay ‘Space and event’, Tschumi (1990: 89) argues that where architectural photography tends to reduce architecture to ‘a passive “object” of contemplation instead of the place that confronts spaces and actions’, and contends that any new attitude to architecture needed to question its mode of ‘representation’. In some respects Tschumi repeats Giedion’s problematic, while replacing its overweening formalism with a sharper political critique, calling for ‘cinematic devices’ to replace
‘conventional description’ (1990: 90, 95). However, his description of the Manhattan Transcripts as embodying a broadly filmic conception of architecture is based less on the disruption of the dominant visual regime than the re-insertion of time into architecture:

The temporality of the Transcripts inevitably suggests the analogy of film. In both, spaces are not only composed but also developed from shot to shot so that the final meaning of each shot depends on its context'. (1990: 107)

Tschumi’s recourse to the metaphor of film supports the overarching argument that remains on the web archive of the Manhattan Transcripts: ‘Architecture is not simply about space and form, but also about event, action, and what happens in space’. While this broad understanding has clearly gained ground in the present, the status of the filmic analogy has become more uncertain. Is ‘film’ a tool to be wielded by a creative practitioner in the service of their distinctive vision? Or is it indicative of a new, more fluid set of social relations of space and time? Where Corbusier and Giedion imagine the architect controlling perspective and sequence with the plastic facility of a film director, following what might be called a traditional authorial perspective, it is notable that Benjamin compares film and architecture largely in terms of reception. Tschumi’s problematic remains striking inasmuch as it is an uneasy mixture of both: grounded in production (the architect as author using filmic tools or notations) its logic points towards reception in which architecture becomes ‘event’.

Architecture + film after cinema
When the relation between film and architecture resurfaced as a problematic in the context of the surging development of digital imaging in the 1990s, it was notable that it was not Benjamin’s problematic of distracted collective reception which came to the fore, but the problematic of the architect as author—or filmmaker. Once digital imaging, including CAD systems, became more sophisticated as computers gained in storage capacity and processing speed, a number of displacements occurred. Architects were increasingly able to build proto-filmic ‘virtual’ environments using control of perspective, sequence and duration to construct time-based visual presentations in the mode of film directors. (This was the context of Michael Eleftheriades speculation about a pending convergence between film and architecture with which I began this essay). The dominance of this orientation created a paradox. Architects seemed fascinated by the computer as a toolbox for generating sophisticated digital imagery, but remained largely uninterested in its potential for supporting distributed communications. This stance completely reversed the earlier, rather precocious, ambitions articulated by those including Archigram and Nicholas Negroponte in relation to architecture and computing (McQuire 2008).
At the same time that architecture sought to appropriate a certain ideal of cinematic representation, the authority of such a model was diminishing elsewhere. While moves towards forms of audience-directed cinema in the 1990s largely proved to be dead-ends, participatory practices gained ground in other areas, notably in contemporary art, as well as new areas such as online gaming. In place of the traditional focus on discrete and finished objects or images came an emphasis on what Umberto Eco (1989) aptly called ‘open works’, describing forms of creative practice that deliberately left room for the audience or for chance.

One of the challenges facing modern architects — and arguably one that underpinned the attractions of film as a model — is the problem of spatial order, particularly the ordering of reception. How do you ensure that the public understand — and utilize — a building as you intended? In the past, architects might have been able to rely on a shared and relatively stable symbolic order that replicated existing and longstanding social functions and hierarchies. However, as Lefebvre (1991: 25) has argued, that shared sense of space and social order was ‘shattered’ in modernity. In place of a common set of reference points sits the absence of a unified and unifying narrative. This is simultaneously a mark of new freedom — the possibility of reinventing the city and its social life that tantalises so many utopic architectural programs — and coercion: the fact that we have no choice but to participate in this vast and uncertain social experiment.

The response of many modern architects to the new conditions was often a similar mixture in which broad aspirations for ‘freedom’ were interspersed with coercive elements and programs. Here we might recall Mies’ demand that tenants in his Lake Shore Drive in Chicago apartments only be permitted to install neutral grey curtains lest they mar the external appearances of the building. While such a demand is, in some respects, minor, it is emblematic of the extent to which many architects sought to use design to prescribe the ways in which people could inhabit a building or precinct. It would be simplistic to argue that these attempts either succeeded or failed. If inhabitants often adapted their surroundings to remake the everyday environment and frustrate architectural ‘direction’, they did not do so in circumstances of their own choosing and usually lacked control over key features.

Despite the appeal of film to architects as a means of ordering the sequence of reception, most filmmakers have experienced similar limits in their capacity to orchestrate meaning and reception. Reggio designed *Koyaanisqatsi* in order to critique contemporary urban-industrial culture as exemplifying ‘life out of balance’. However the techniques he used, particularly the timelapse photography of the cityscape, has subsequently become one of the most common tropes for depicting the contemporary city for all kinds of purposes, and have been widely used in news promos, contemporary dramas, and advertising. While arguing that he wanted to
demonstrate ‘the beauty of the beast’, Reggio (in MacDonald 1992: 389) also acknowledges that working in a visual medium like film brings an inevitable loss of ‘authorial’ control compared to writing:

What you give up is the specificity of one thought, one idea, unmistakably getting your point across, which people can agree or disagree with. But what you do get is the richness of an experience that can stay in the conscious and unconscious mind and can be continually revisited.

The digital milieu brings a further change to consider in developing a new conception of both film and architecture. Historically, while a filmmaker could capture and display unexpected phenomena, each shot and its final order was pre-selected. Even in Vertov’s self-reflexive cinema, which imagines the audience watching as the footage is shot, edited and, finally, viewed, the film’s order is fixed in advance. However, the advent of digital databases mean this is no longer the only model. Perry Bard’s reworking of Vertov’s film demonstrates the potential for a film to be reconstituted as an ‘open work’ in which different manifestations or variations do not exhaust the conception. Today we need to ask: can digital infrastructure play a similar role in rendering the ambiance and social life of built structures similarly mutable and reconfigurable according to user-input and inhabitant desire

This question situates the persistence and pertinence of the film metaphor for architecture. Divorced from a narrow definition tied to a specific technical apparatus, ‘film’ is better recognized as naming the historic threshold in which time and movement become integral to the image. Defined in this way, in terms of the orchestration of mobile and dynamic fields of vision, film remains not only useful but essential to understanding the new conditions of transparency and opacity, of seeing and being seen, that plays out in the contemporary city. If the fusion or confusion of the boundary between interior and exterior enacted by the glass window-wall speaks to a cinematic disturbance at the heart of modern architecture, this encompasses the need to rethink the concept of space to incorporate practices and processes — all those temporal phenomena that define the city as what Tschumi called event-space.

However, this cannot be a simple recapitulation of earlier programs. Benjamin’s conception of film as urban dynamite, like Reggio’s Koyaanisqatsi, point to what Marshall McLuhan — drawing on gestalt psychology as much as cybernetics—long ago placed at the centre of his own analysis: pattern recognition. If the modern city is an event in which the authority of centred perception gives way to perception in motion, how do we gain access to it and develop an understanding of its dynamics? The kind of cinematic response that Koyaanisqatsi offered to the complexity of the modern city is fast being overtaken by new forms of data visualization irrigated by fast-flowing streams of sensor-based information subject to
high-speed algorithmic analysis. Is the ‘smart city’ the new version of the authorial or directorial control that film once seemed to offer to architecture? Where, in these data-rich scenarios with their emphasis on control of the future, is the space for the eruptive and interruptive nature of the ‘event’, naming the as yet unassimilated and unassimilable happening — which might also be a name for the action and activity of the city’s inhabitants, the unthought or after-thought in so many heroic architectural scenarios?

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References


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2 The text later was translated into German and published in 1925 as an appendix to Painting Photography Film, the eighth volume in the Bauhaus book series that Moholy-Nagy directed.

3 I began with Moholy’s script because he started writing it in 1921, the same year Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler made their Whitmanesque short film Manhatta in New York. Other films in the ‘city symphony’ cycle in the 1920s include René Clair’s Paris qui dort (1923) and Entr’acte (1924), Alberto Cavalcanti’s Rien que les heures (France, 1926), Joris Iven’s De Brug (Holland, 1928) and Regan (Holland, 1929) and Jean Vigo’s A propos de Nice (France, 1930). The genre continues to reappear periodically: for example Arne Sucksdorff’s Människor i stad (Symphony of a city, USA/Sweden, 1948), Francis Thompson’s N.Y, N.Y (USA, 1958), Godfrey Reggio’s Koyaanisqatsi (1982) and Hubertus Siegert’s Berlin Babylon (Germany 1996–2001).

4 Here he follows Siegfried Kracauer’s 1926 essay ‘Cult of Distraction’.

5 Here Benjamin was strongly influenced by Surrealism. In his essay on Surrealism, Benjamin (1999: 210) argued that André Breton was: ‘...the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the ‘outmoded’ – in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photo, objects that have begun to be extinct [...] No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects – can suddenly be transformed into revolutionary nihilism. [...] They bring the immense forces of ‘atmosphere’ concealed in things to the point of explosion’.
Jacques Tati’s *Playtime* (1967) replays this scenario, but this time as farce.

[Bard’s *Man with a Movie Camera: Global Remake* project, begun in 2005, enables people to contribute image sequences ‘interpreting’ Vertov’s original film. It uses specially developed software to archive, sequence and stream the different contributions as a ‘participatory film’. See [http://dziga.perrybard.net/](http://dziga.perrybard.net/)]

9 Recall the famous statement in *Understanding media* (1974: 8) that: ‘The “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.’, while in *Counterblast* (1970: 132) he argues: ‘Faced with information overload, we have no alternative but pattern-recognition.’ Elsewhere McLuhan declared: ‘I am a pattern watcher. (2011, p. 311)
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MCQUIRE, S

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