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FILMING THE CITY

Urban Documents, Design Practices and Social Criticism Through the Lens

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Series Editor: Graham Cairns

Chapter 10

The grey area between reality and representation: The practices of architects and film-makers

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Introduction

> Movies, music, plays – it's all time-based art. There's a beginning, middle and an end. And you have to see it from beginning to end. You're restrained to that time line, that way of experiencing it. But then there's paintings, no beginning, no middle, no end. You see what you want to see when you want to see it. No restrictions. It's just there.
>
> Sam Esmail, *Comet*

> Although cinema and architecture are distant arts, dynamic and static respectively; their complex relationship gives life to each other. Sharing a mutual respect for the parallel processes involved in producing their works, the creators behind these two expressions have an understanding that one will always benefit the other.
>
> Murray Grigor, *Space in Time: Filming Architecture*

There is a well-documented relationship between cinema and the city. Schonfield, in her book *Walls Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City* (2003), educates us on the use of film as a means of decoding architecture and the built environment; Bruno, in her *Atlas of Emotion* (2002), examines the geography of the moving image through spatial constructs and film theory; and Penz (1994) describes the counterpoints and overlaps between the film industry and architecture student experiments in his 1994 contribution to *Architectural Design* (vol. 64). This chapter does not seek to reproduce this territory but rather to add to it by focusing on the space shared by the creators behind the worlds of cinema and the city, the architects and the film-makers. It is a well-known fact that both architects and film-makers imagine future realities for inhabitation; compose spatial sequences; and communicate multiple narratives through the use of representation, inspired by the past and present condition – but what insights can they share about operating in the 'grey area' between reality and representation?

Act 1 of this chapter looks to set the scene – establishing the characteristics, presence and parameters of the grey area occupied by architects and film-makers. Act 2 investigates this shared territory through the frames of 'the city' and 'the narrative' – chosen for exploration as these are the exchange points, the positions of interaction, and the methods

by which each can be recognized and explained. Here, the nature of practising in the third space is explored through interviews with those currently producing work in this territory. Through practice as an academic, editor and writer, the skills and knowledge of this author lie in communication, thus the methodology employed derives directly from experience of the dissemination of conversation, and by association considers the role of the architect and the film-maker as 'temporal commentators'.

Act 1: The grey area: Presence and parameters

Everything that exists was once imagined. In seeing all things, you are exposed to the thoughts, dreams, decisions and visions of others who have gone before you. Yet events take place, are (re)imagined and remembered all in one moment. The philosophical dualisms discussed in this chapter: body/mind; real/imaginary, are extensions of the thinking of Durkheim, who asserts that the mind is a set of representations; and Kant, who believes representations to be produced by a faculty of the mind. For the purposes of this chapter, the term representation is considered to be both metaphysical (the idea and the vision) and physical (tangible communicative product). 'One of the problems of the dualism, reality/representation, is that representation may be mistaken for the reality' (Pickering 2002) – the grey area.

Deciphering where creating, thinking and communicating begin and end is challenging and makes the discourse between reality and representation a deep and perplexing one. Separating representative imagery from the actualities that inspire them would be a difficult task. However, this does not mean that representation does not have the ability to be an extension or manipulation of existent realities. Both films and spatial constructions are complex entities, each one being delicate and different from the next. There are architectures that fall outside of this narrative foothold, such as digital form-finding techniques and auto-authorship, yet in order to understand the core themes behind the creative process we must begin to formalize the structure. Architectural and film-making processes take place across the reality/representation spectrum, and as they do so, the output they produce can also exist across this threshold. In its simplest format the different phases of architectural design and film-making production swing between reality and representation. The first exists in the mind, the vision or idea. The second exists on paper/models/screen as drawings, scripts, storyboards and mock-ups. The third exists as the stage or the building site, for rehearsals and development, live exploration and realization. The fourth exists as documentation projected onto surfaces as images and/or prints. Buildings, once complete, exist in real time and space; however, photographs of them, in journals and the press, are continually developing representations of the fact.

> To paraphrase Roland Barthes – the reality of an object is not exhausted by its phenomenal existence, but extends into each and every representation of it. In other words, we have works, and we have photographs, and it is not that the photograph is

> simply a poor substitute for the work, but rather that it is another facet of the world's being, and one that can be thought about in its own right; as a result of course, the work is never 'finished' – as long as images of it continue to go on being produced, it will, so to speak, always still be in development. (Forty 2014)

Robin Evans famously asserted, 'Architects do not make buildings; they make drawings of buildings' (Evans 1989) and fourteen years later Neil Spiller added

> Architects do not make buildings; they make a range of different types of representations that may be used in the construction of buildings or they may be used in a number of ways to create a wide array of spatial possibilities. (Spiller 2013)

In addition to this composite conversation, it can be argued that, in a similar way to film-makers, architects do not make buildings: they envision future life in a space/place, which is translated through architectural convention, without which the building could/would not become a reality, thus extracting that the value of architecture is not only found in the reality of the built form but equally in its representational components. Communicating vision effectively is as important as the vision itself. Along with other prestigious names (Alexander Brodsky, Lebbeus Woods, Neil Denari) Perry Kulper works in this field of 'visionary architecture' or 'paper architecture' where representations, through technique and content, incite critical debate and also communicate a message without the need for construction (Pohl 2012). As Brodsky says,

> From the moment a structure is built it becomes a real thing and it stops being paper architecture. Before the realization of the building is the border between what I am drawing and what I am building. I am always trying to destroy this border. (Brodsky 2013: 14)

The border Brodsky describes here is the grey area, the expanding threshold challenged by those architects, artists and film-makers who believe boundaries to be flexible, fluid and ripe for manipulation. This ability to cross borders and blur boundaries signifies the implication of a playful emancipation, a freedom to prod, challenge and speculate outside of traditional and professional margins – an outreach that enables greater communication and haptic discovery.

Film-making projects exist as representation in construct and in process – both the planning and realization of film exists across multiple media: storyboards, scripts, stills, moving images. Outside of props, sets and locations there is no primary tangible output/product – further drawing attention to the greying area. Film-makers therefore find themselves alongside architects and directors 'caught' in the realm between things that exist physically and things that do not. Figure 1 describes these relations between traditionalist definitions of the products of architects and film-makers and their position on the reality/representation spectrum. Pallasmaa once described the physical space

created within film as 'architecture without architect' and the film-maker as the 'architect without client' (Pallasmaa, quoted in Khorshidifard 2009). The idea of the 'architect without client' lends somewhat to the romantic notion of ideology in film-making, the freedom of the artist outside of the realities of industry restriction, a notion shared only with visionary or paper architects and not the experience of those operating within commercial landscapes.

Visionary architecture performs as a hybrid, in that the critical image is the output itself. In film-making, the screening of the product is pure (re)presentation but the constituent parts can be a combination of real-life locations, fictional characters and inspired-by-a-true-story plotlines. In exploring the extents of this territory, it becomes clear that it could be considered less of a 'grey area' and more of a 'grey scale', as the edge definition between reality and representation appears both perforated and fluid. The architect makes proposals for a (biographic/prosthetic) narrative that might come into existence. The film-maker constructs worlds to make sense of narratives that will exist only in the film and not (yet) in reality. In film-making, a real space (the site, the location) featuring in an artificial narrative becomes imagined by association, a differing yet real representation

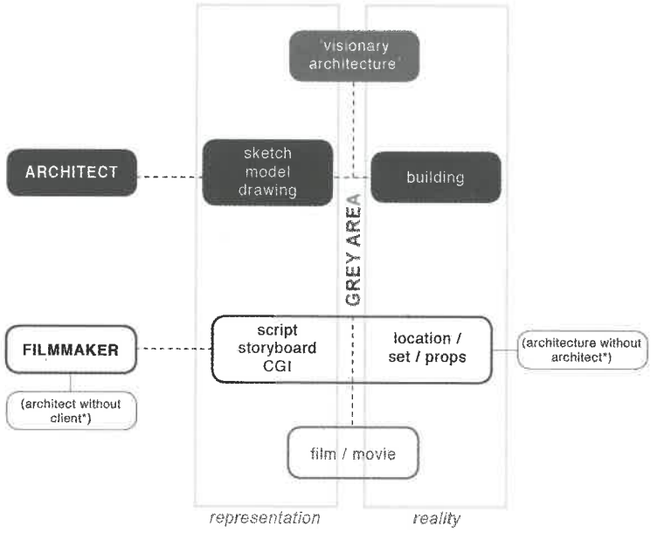

Figure 1. Reality + Representation, G. Barton, 2013.

for each audience member. In an interview, Perry Kulper says 'I think of architecture as having multiple levels, or families of representation, all real; the plan, a story told about a building, data collected from it, photographs. The levels of representation play different roles in structuring the "whole"' (Kulper 2014). Both architect and film-maker dwell side by side in this transience between reality and representation – where buildings are facilitative, vehicles by which stories are orchestrated and/or where lives are lived. In essence, fiction can be grounded by reality and conversely a reality can be displaced by fiction.

Act 2: The city and the narrative: Authenticity, articulation and ideology

Act 2 draws on the affective qualities of both narrative and space as an articulated process/focus and begins with a filmic analysis of the city. 'The city is big, the image is small' (*Los Angeles Plays Itself* [Andersen, 2003]). As a collective, the material presence of the city exists in reality without question; however, it also appears among fictional characters, both human (actors) and as augmented reality (CGI creations). By changing this built landscape, the meaning and the representation of the city becomes altered, even prosthetic in part. Narrative appears in different manifestations throughout architecture and cinema. Narrative offers architects a way of engaging with the way a city feels and works, as well as with its people. It does not dilute the discipline to aesthetic, material or technical specialism and instead champions the experiential dimension of architecture. Broadly speaking, in architecture, the narrative is the organization of story-based components, the defining and inspirational thread, be it derived from a historical site context, a political manifesto or a childhood memory; this concept drives decision-making and allows a language to appear and a creation to be legible. An architectural programme can also be an imagining of narrative, the fiction of the imagined life. In film-making, the narrative could be the plotline, the tempo at which the story is unravelled and the way in which it does so. The narrative comes in the form of words, images, music and cinematography, something the entire film attends to. Film-making began as a method to communicate to the masses 'actualities' or scenes of things they had heard about on the radio or read about in newspapers, but never actually seen. The Lumière brothers' pioneering work in documentaries paved the way for experimentation with the more playful side of popular culture, developing the trend for narrative storytelling, which continues and thrives today.

'Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased' (Calvino 1997). Architectural narrative is present in the built environment and the medium in which this is visualized varies greatly from city to city. As identified by Massumi in his essay, 'The Autonomy of Affect' (1995), there is an interesting relationship between fact, emotion and narrative-intensity in film-making. The purpose and power of the narrative can become ineffective if not readily interpreted; therefore, at times the moving image and

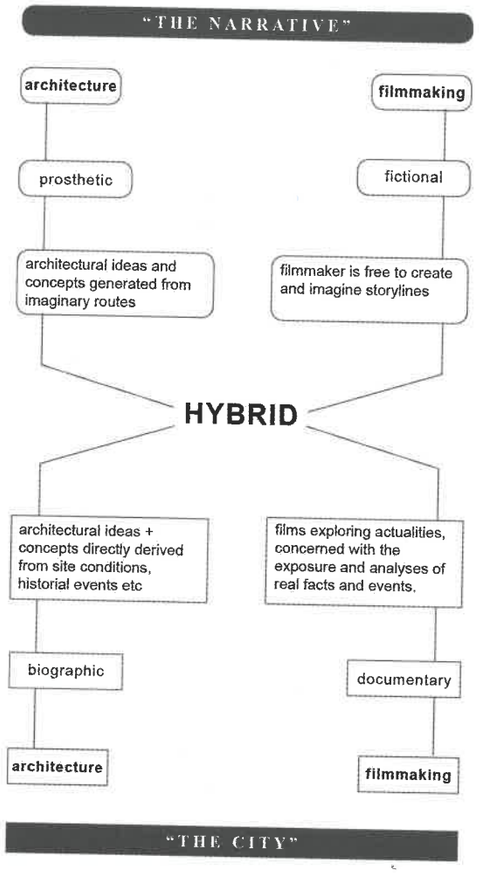

Figure 2. City + Narrative, G. Barton, 2013.

built form are stripped back to ensure a clear message can be communicated. In films such as *Koyaanisqatsi*, directed by Godfrey Reggio in 1982, there is no verbal narration to support the time-lapse footage of cities and natural landscapes. Dubbed a visual-tone-poem, Reggio states, 'It's not for lack of love of the language that these films have no words. It's because, from my point of view, our language is in a state of vast humiliation. It no longer describes the world in which we live' (Reggio 1982). This resonates clearly in the world of narrative and architectural representation, where words cannot sufficiently describe the intention, expression or feeling that a space and a story can generate. Kulper

asserts, 'The conventional use of language – words – for spatial design purposes is largely antiquated. Proactively, words can initiate, trigger, and thicken spatial possibilities. The use of language can be an active form of representation and design' (Kulper 2015). In *Koyaanisqatsi*, by removing verbal content (and with it auditory assertion) the narrative lays itself open for interpretation and participation. The 'scenery' and footage is real, but the speed at which it is displayed has been manipulated: slowed down, or sped up into a time-lapse. This manipulation of tempo and order of delivery alongside a Philip Glass score leaves the content open for personal analysis. This approach tends to be reserved for the artist rather than the director, who by virtue of his/her title aims to direct the thoughts and feelings of the audience using both dialogue and moving image.

Architectural narratives too hold a sense of ideological power. WAI Architecture Think Tank, who focus on the understanding and execution of architecture from a panoramic approach (from theoretical texts to architectural artefacts, narrative architectures, buildings and urban and cultural conditions) published *Narrative Architecture: A Manifesto (WAI Architecture Think Tank)*. This investigatory work bases the characteristics of its existence upon non-existence. Existing as pure representation ensures the criticality of the image, and allows for genuine conjecture of composition and meaning. This has a direct impact on our understanding of architectural principles that are holistically connected. 'There is a form of architecture that aims at not getting built [...] Narrative Architecture, as we call this form of critical architectural project that relies on narrative to construct a critique of architectural ideology, exists beyond the realm of the mind' (Frankowski and Garcia 2013). Many architects working in commercial and industry-led practices reportedly struggle to see the value attributed to these purely unbuilt speculations; however, architects such as Lebbeus Woods have made progress in communicating the potential worth in such hybridity. In 1999, Woods created the image 'Lower Manhattan' – an example of this fantastical and propositional ideology that illustrates the composition of both real and representative content within a single image. Authenticity of place here makes the vision more critically plausible and allows for an in-depth analysis of social and architectural possibility. Woods explains

> I wanted to suggest that maybe lower Manhattan – not lower downtown, but lower in the sense of below the city – could form a new relationship with the planet. So, in the drawing you see that the East River and the Hudson are both dammed. They're purposefully drained, as it were. The underground – or lower Manhattan – is revealed, and, in the drawing, there are suggestions of inhabitation in that lower region. (Woods 2007)

Woods uses certain recognizable elements such as the New York plan formation and high-rise density to communicate the reality in the image. This familiarity allows space for the representation in the image; in this case, the proposition of the underground and the 'what if' consequences of spatial and social decisions. Film-makers regularly adopt this approach to hybridity; they use certain spaces, places, landmarks and skylines to literally

set the scene and generate emotion, familiarity and understanding in their audience. This is a key tactic which architectural teams are beginning to deploy more regularly in short films created to convey spatial narratives to clients and funding bodies when pitching for competition work. This type of film-making is often outsourced to specialists with an understanding and background in architectural communication; however, a move towards more traditionally cinematic approaches here would indicate the progression of a common voice.

The role and presence of buildings within cinematic space has been widely written about, from the architecture of Alfred Hitchcock in Jacobs's book *The Wrong House* (2007) to Lamster's book *Architecture and Film* (2001) , but this relationship is also analysed using moving image. *Los Angeles Plays Itself* is a seminal video-essay by CalArts professor of film composition Thom Andersen, in which he discusses the representation of the city of Los Angeles in movies: 'Of course I know movies aren't about places, they're about stories. If we notice the location, we're not really watching the movie' (Andersen 2003). Conversely, Robert Mallet-Stevens suggested some seventy years earlier in the 1925 article 'Le Cinema et les arts: Architecture'/'Cinema and the arts: Architecture' (Becherer 1996) that architecture in film, should not simply frame but become a part of the narrative action, become an actor. It is no surprise here that the architect places a greater significance on the role of the city than the film-maker, but could this also suggest a decline in the importance and/or impact of the representation of the city between the 1920s and 2003? I contacted Andersen to discuss my thoughts with him, this was his response:

> *Los Angeles Plays Itself* is, of course, primarily about places, and only incidentally about stories. The line you quote is an acknowledgment that its analysis goes against the grain, which it is not a conventional film that it appeals to the viewer's voluntary attention, as I say later. I think it shows that architecture is an actor. [...] The unexpected success of my modest movie demonstrates that the representation of the city on film is more a concern now than ever before. (Andersen 2014)

And of course he is right: in our digital age, the medium cannot be questioned, our cities are exposed daily in films, documentaries, TV shows and commercials; the question remains, however, whether or not the audience is indeed seeing. Andersen talks of voluntary attention, the content that the mind permits oneself to focus on. Our cities are also 'represented' daily in sequences of fiction, imagination, dreams, hallucinations and mythical projections. This curating of our vision requires participation – in these 'prosthetic' representations we are no longer spectators, we become stars in our very own screenplays (actors, directors and cinematographers). Beatriz Colomina says of this, 'Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subjects. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames the occupant' (Colomina 1992). Thus suggesting that the human in this relationship forever cycles between observer and participant.

For architects and film-makers, existing on the same creative spectrum offers up many advantages brought about by shared skillsets, allowing one to move freely between the vocations. Many trained architects and designers transition into film-making, such as Anshuman Prasad, Tino Schaedler and Joseph Kosinski, indicating that the movement is somewhat mono-directional. Recognized as a valid and experiential offshoot from architecture, it is not to be considered abandonment but rather specialization. Attracted by the diversity, magic and freedom that being involved in the creation of cinematic space can offer, these 'transistors' recognize the benefits that their architectural training provides; skills which they now showcase and exercise in an (ideal) world not hampered by the limits of construction, but expanded by the openness of imagination.

Joseph Kosinksi, director of *Tron Legacy* (2010), studied at Columbus University where he is now an adjunct professor of architecture. Kosinski created an entirely new city for the 2010 *Tron* remake, 'I saw the opportunity to build a universe from scratch, not only with the architecture, but also with the character and vehicle design' (Kosinski 2010), utilizing his architectural training and a great deal of imagination. This new 'city' may only ever be a representation of Kosinski's imagined reality. The elements: the sets, the digital and physical models, have a synergy with the stage at which an architectural project would be presented to an investor or client, the very moment before it gets the go-ahead to be built, to become a reality. In this scenario, *Tron*'s 'realization' takes place on-screen, rendering it 'screen architecture'. Similarly, cities can be adapted in film, changed for the better or worse, on the screen or in the mind.

Three architecture graduates from The Bartlett, UCL, formed Film Company Factory Fifteen. Their 'brand' of animated films or 'synthetic architecture', which includes *Robots of Brixton* (2011) and *Jonah* (2013), has received high acclaim from both the architecture and film industries. Jonathan Gales of Factory Fifteen says, 'We work to create projects that engage in narrative and envisage space. [...] All projects engage in some way with the built environment, posing "what if" scenarios, or using the visualized environment to aid the narrative of the story' (Gales 2013). Their films play out with an intentional focus on utilizing and/or reimagining the existing city. In both *Jonah* and *Robots of Brixton*, the city and the narrative are intertwined perfectly; for example, in *Robots of Brixton* 'biographic' happenings such as the 1981 riots in Brixton are said to have inspired the prosthetic narrative and augmented locality of the film. Incidentally, the release of *Robots of Brixton* in June 2011 came just months before the London Riots, placing their architectural/social insight on the cusp of actualism. Art imitates life imitates art, the boundaries and definitions blur further. Engaging with architecture to generate these more temporal and ephemeral outputs rather than traditional buildings, allows creation and critique without the imposition of responsibility and/or longevity.

As Kosinski and Factory Fifteen evidence, architecture training provides numerous transferable skills, which opens the doors between the two fields, and arguably lays the ground for the conception of the grey area. Yet, there is an extremely unique exchange that takes place when architects and film-makers work together. An example of this

Figure 3. *Robots of Brixton* © Factory Fifteen, 2011.

collaboration was released in October 2013 when French film-maker Benjamin Seroussi and French architect David Tajchman made *Kaplinski*, a film showing different structures, made from the same repetitive wooden element, gathered around the human body. It is aimed at communicating the ideas of construction, repetition, mobility, articulation and demolition. In interviews, Seroussi (2013) and Tajchman (2013) can offer varying textures in their answers. When asked how they would describe their roles within the collaboration, Seroussi, for example, talks of his ability as a director to reinvent and reimagine the existing, manipulating time and space to alter the perception of reality in his films. Tajchman considers his role as an architect to envision the future, with a lesser focus on the manipulation of the existing and a greater emphasis on creating a vision of the unknown, through the illusionary power of digital media. As representatives of their vocations, both individuals have the ability to deal creatively (yet differently) with unseen reality. 'I'm always searching for a way to extract things and people from reality. Film lets me do this by stopping time and stretching space' (Seroussi 2013). Both Seroussi and Tajchman believe their roles have a magical strength. When talking of the power of digital technologies used to create his imagery, Tajchman says, 'I can achieve an illusion of reality. I am a sort of "illusionist"'.

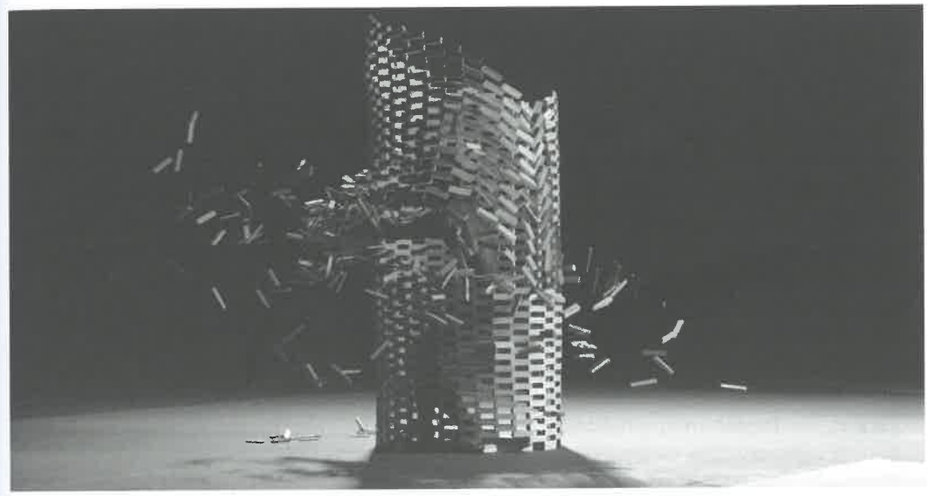

Figure 4. *Kaplinski* © Tajchman and Seroussi, 2013.

Act 3: Final statements

From the research undertaken and documented here, it could be said that the key difference between architects and film-makers is that film-makers use their 'art' to create imaginary worlds by manipulating space and time with the aim of changing others' perceptions of reality through cognitive interaction – akin to a mass call to action – either as a delicate instigator or an explosive catalyst. Architects, on the other hand, use their drive and imagination to envision and then build a future, taking control of the pathway, creating a new reality for others to inhabit – an inward call to action. When these powers meet in a creative capacity, the output has the potential not just to transcend the limits of each discipline but to create a new one, where medium and creation are both one and the same. One film-maker who has successfully turned their hand to architecture and design is the stylistically and symmetrically driven Wes Andersen who, alongside Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) has recreated familiar scenes from his seminal films into Café Luce, a Milanese cafe, for Prada. Wes Andersen uses a magical mix of narrative, imagination and real-life elements to generate the plots and scenes for his films. The films themselves then inspire real architectural projects – reality > representation > reality goes full circle – closing this loop however, opens up even more dialogue and possibility. This poses an interesting cyclical relationship and highlights the blurring of

the boundaries between reality and representation even further, becoming greyer and ever more diluted – the possibility for future collaboration between architects and film-makers, for generations of new genres, becomes possible.

The nature of the film preproduction process (scripts, storyboards, casting) is to formulate and ensure the successful execution of the preordained outcome. In (most) films, eventualities are tested and explored in advance, and deviation from the agreed path is avoided at all costs. Film-makers rely upon architectural conventions to instil familiarity, authenticity and empathy into a film. They rely upon the visual conditioning of the built environment as a mode of entry into their imagined world. Where the two disciplines really differ is in their intention: architects imagine life, and plan for the realization of their designs, but they cannot preordain its end use; families' split, plots are divided, rivers flood and developers swoop. Planning for the final outcome is thus not an easy task for an architect. In many cases, longevity and flexibility are considered preferable, but often the outcome of this approach can lack the desired narrative or personality. People are unpredictable; they use space differently and will interpret films in their own way. This variety is powerful – stairs are designed to aid movement between floors, yet they become reappropriated in many ways: as a place to sit and talk on the phone or a place to make love (in Hollywood movies). These alternate functions are rarely considered when choosing materials and following building regulations, yet these are the 'realities' or the 'subplots' of spatial occupation. These 'subplots' are occurrences or memories generated by historic or filmic events, and they have the power to make a place 'significant'. This sense of place can be both made and destroyed through portrayal on the screen or in the hands of an architect's decision. The spectacle of an on-location movie shoot can make a street or a cafe a landmark. Architects and film-makers could learn from each other about the role that narrative plays in curating reputations, place-making and their joint duty to continue to be innovative.

> The representational mediums, techniques and design methods architects conjure are approximate, indirect, and sometimes downright mischievous. Trading in tropes, metaphors, half-truths, and distortions, we pick the pockets of truth, acting like con artists leveraging sleight of hand tactics, poking around for possible worlds in the act of the design. Using languages and visual accomplices of all manner, architects are metaphorical Houdini's escape artists, fictitious and duplicitous writers on spatial dreams, invoking imagined worlds riddled with a politics of communication on the lookout for architecture that advocates for real cultural agency. (Kulper 2015)

Kulper here describes the methods of the architect in the same fantastic way one imagines the daily chores of the film-maker: choosing locations, cutting seamlessly between cities, changing actors' characteristics and voices with the press of a button. But what Kulper is suggesting here is that the two approaches are very similar – it is all about perception and visibility; the architect often makes serious his role, he plays down the elements of emotion

and gut instinct in favour of justification and value engineering. The more architects that recognize their inner Houdini, the more cinematic life might be. Film-makers place their focus on the people in their creations and their ability to communicate a storyline or narrative, putting the spotlight on life, humanity and experience. Too often architecture is centred on the built form or the ego as the lead, focusing on the container of an experience rather than the creation of the experience itself. Architects might place an equal amount of attention on the end user, their 'leading lady', in order to connect more with the community.

Anything is possible, the imagined future is endless, and architects and film-makers are at the heart of the production > communication network. The responsibility is heavy but the true advantage of representation is its ability to be consumed and interpreted by many. As the 'city' demands more information (activities, typologies, people and cultures) the production of imagery, representation and conversations is increasing to generate a new backdrop and story. Perhaps the future will hold more cross-disciplinary collaborations, interchangeable professionals exploring the joint responsibilities and the new possibilities that shared skills can afford. The role of the architect and the film-maker is to provide platforms for further critical insight into the world we believe we know and the city we believe can become reality. Architecture and the city are a dependable constant, irrespective of quality, which collide with stories daily, both real and imaginary. At the fore, architecture can deflect and affect the trajectory of the storyline, as well as frame and incubate narrative processing. Films get edited, cut and mediated. Buildings weather, get re-purposed and amended. Reality is not a fixed condition, it is continually analysed in relation to time, distance, and its vital representational counterpart. This temporal nature of the reality of the built environment places it evermore on the spinning spectrum of cinema and the moving image. Architecture is so much more than a backdrop for cinema. Film is so much more than an outlet for unrealizable scenarios. When explored wholly by New Wave pioneers, the architecture/film dualism will conceive of temporal, kinaesthetic, emotive and experiential opportunity. The medium of analysis will continue to change and we may never be able to extract the black and white from the grey; in turn, this welcome ambiguity will ensure a future of profound consideration, and critique of what is 'real' and 'possible'.

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ISBN 978-1-78320-554-7