

Filming architecture: architecture on film - Andres Janser

Specialized festivals dedicated to films on architecture have a vast range of production from which to choose. Recently, a cinema catalogue dealing with themes, works, and representatives from the domain of architecture, collected more than nine hundred titles produced in the United States in the course of the last fifteen years. What draws together cinema and architecture so strongly? And what do they make of one another?

Cinema can transmit the impression of motion and liberate one from a fixed perspective. The image it offers to the gaze, in so far as it is set in motion, permits one to experience, more than to explain this fundamental category of space in its entirety as well as in its details. Beyond that, it gives a credible idea of the daily use people make of concrete spaces. In this sense, cinema, a temporal art, has since its origins been close to architecture, a spatial art. The tracking shot nearly replaces the guided tour of a building, recognized architect Bruno Taut already in 1914. The stationary, nearly photographic camera turned out in practice to be more fruitful than a process that exaggerated dynamic effects.

Meanwhile, the analogy with real perception has been joined by specifically filmic processes, the camera eye thus becoming capable - even before Vertov - of transmitting ways of seeing, inaccessible to the human eye: translating architecture, and not simply representing it. For example, by condensing time by editing shots together in rapid succession, showing the changes in light in the course of a day or in the course of the seasons, or the progress of a construction site, the moving image offers profound insight into the movements and processes of building. Elliptical montage reduces years to a few minutes, with this benefit: one may concentrate one's gaze on the essential, all the while following the continual growth of a building under construction.

The perception of the particular atmosphere of a building can also be made complete by the comments of the architect. A large proportion of current films utilize this means in order to introduce the spectator to the world of builders; they present architecture as a conceptual art - which is not always the case - that can only be understood through the aid of clarifications made by those who practice it.

The collaboration between director and architect, which such an approach implies, sometimes ends in a result lacking in critical distance: these empathetic views from the inside are often advanced as arguments for specific positions as well. This aspect of the matter has some importance, above all when the works of an architect are not always of equal quality. It is in precisely those films addressed to a large, non-specialist audience that one would sometimes like to see more distinctive visions, with more openness and independence in their lines of argument. This is possible when those who commission them allow directors to work freely, or when the filmmakers themselves initiate their own essays on architecture and deal freely with themes they have chosen. And even in the opposite case, when individual creative processes highlighted as the source of successful buildings, this can demonstrate, in passing, just how necessary it is that such buildings be realized.

In addition, cinema is a motor for architecture, according to the formulation of Bernard Tschumi. It is not so much in the method of the project that the filmic

element may be seen, but rather in the attitude that recognizes the seventh art as an instrument of reflection on its own efforts. This is the case with architects as diverse as Herzog & de Meuron, Coop Himmelblau, Hani Rashid & Anne-Lise Couture, Marcel Meili or Hans Kollhoff. In typical fashion, Jean Nouvel, drawing largely on his conception of his own profession, accords to the medium an importance both fundamental and limited: "Filmmakers opened my eyes to certain things." All the same, the analogy between the perception of interior space and a succession of long static shots in a film can in fact illuminate a central formal aspect of his work.

The possibilities of metonymic displacements of architecture by cinema are too numerous and varied to make it possible to deduce a dominant principle. No doubt this is because architects each have a different cultural notion of the cinema.

Ever since architecture has begun to enjoy a resurgence of public interest, it is in particular the need for material by television networks that has stimulated production. What was dreamed of already in the first decade of the XXth century, that audiences might pour into cinemas to see architecture, has thus become concrete in another form of media, so that one might risk provisionally refuting the parentage of architecture and cinema established by Walter Benjamin, according to which the reception of the two art forms takes place as distraction. In the opposite case, seeing and discerning may go hand in hand, or by way of allusion to something said by Jean-Luc Godard in "Berlin-Cinéma, titre provisoire": the cinema is not an instrument of vision alone, but also of reflection.

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