Anthony Vidler
The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary

I am kino-eye. I am a builder. I have placed you, whom I’ve created today, in an extraordinary room which did not exist until just now when I also created it. In this room there are twelve walls shot by me in various parts of the world. In bringing together shots of walls and details, I’ve managed to arrange them in an order that is pleasing and to construct with intervals, correctly, a film-phrase which is the room.

Dziga Vertov, 1923

Since the late nineteenth century, film has provided a laboratory for the definition of modernism in theory and technique. As the modernist art par excellence, it has also served as a point of departure for the redefinition of the other arts, a paradigm by which the different practices of theater, photography, literature, and painting might be distinguished from each other. Of all the arts, however, it is architecture that has had the most privileged and difficult relationship to film. An obvious role model for spatial experimentation, film has also been criticized for its deleterious effects on the architectural image.

At a moment when interest in film has reemerged in much avant-garde architectural work, from the literal evocations of Bernard Tschumi in his Manhattan Transcripts and projects for La Villette to more theoretical work on the relations of space to visual representation, the complex question of film’s architectural role is again on the agenda. And the more so, because in the search for ways to represent movement and temporal succession in architecture, “deconstructivist” designers have turned naturally to the images forged by the first, constructivist, avant-garde — images themselves deeply marked by the impact of the new filmic techniques. In their new incarnation, such constructivist and expressionist images

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seem to reframe many earlier questions about the proper place for images of space and time in architecture: questions that resonate for contemporary critiques of the “image” and the “spectacle” in architecture and society.

When, in 1933, Le Corbusier called for a film aesthetics that embodied the “spirit of truth,” he was only asserting what many architects in the 1920s (like those more recently in the 1980s) saw to be the mutually informative but properly separate realms of architecture and film. While admitting that “everything is Architecture” in its architectonic dimensions of proportion and order, Le Corbusier nevertheless insisted on the specificity of film, which “from now on is positioning itself on its own terrain . . . becoming a form of art in and of itself, a kind of genre, just as painting, sculpture, literature, music, and theater are genres.” In the present context, debates about the nature of “architecture in film,” “filmic architecture,” or filmic theory in architectural theory are interesting less as guiding the writing of some new Laocoön that would rigidly redraw the boundaries of the technological arts than as establishing the possibilities of interpretation for projects that increasingly seem caught in the hallucinatory realm of a filmic or screened imaginary, somewhere, that is, in the problematic realm of hyperspace.

Cineplastics

The obvious role of architecture in the construction of sets (and the eager participation of architects themselves in this enterprise), and the equally obvious ability of film to “construct” its own architecture in light and shade, scale and movement, from the outset allowed for a mutual intersection of these two “spatial arts.” Certainly, many modernist filmmakers had little doubt of the cinema’s architectonic properties. From Georges Méliès’s careful description of the proper spatial organization of the studio in 1907 to Eric Rohmer’s reassertion of film as “the spatial art” some forty years later, the architectural metaphor, if not its material reality, was deemed essential to the filmic imagination. Equally, architects like Hans Poelzig (who, together with his wife, the sculptor Marlene Poelzig, sketched and modeled the sets for Paul Wegener’s Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam of 1920) and Andrei Andrejev (who designed the sets for Robert Weine’s Raskolnikoff of 1923) did not hesitate to collaborate with filmmakers just as they had previously served theater producers. As the architect Robert Mallet-Stevens observed in 1925, “it is undeniable that the cinema has a marked influence on modern architecture; in turn, modern architecture brings its artistic side to the cinema. . . . Modern architecture not only serves the cinematographic set [décor], but imprints its stamp on the staging [mise-en-scène], it breaks out of its frame; architecture ‘plays.’” And, of course, for filmmakers originally trained as architects (like Sergei Eisenstein), the filmic art offered the potential to develop a new architecture of time and space unfettered by the material constraints of gravity and daily life.

Out of this intersection of the two arts a theoretical apparatus was developed that at once held architecture as the fundamental site of film practice, the indispensable real and ideal matrix of the filmic imaginary, and, at the same time, posited film as the modernist art of space par excellence—a vision of the fusion of space and time. The potential of film to explore this new realm (seen by Sigfried Giedion as the basis of modernist architectural aesthetics) was recognized early on. Abel Gance, writing in 1912, was already hoping for a new “sixth art” that would provide “that admirable synthesis of the movement of space and time.” But it was the art historian Elie Faure, influenced by Fernand Léger, who first coined a term for the cinematic aesthetic that brought together the two dimensions: cineplastics. “The cinema,” he wrote in 1922, “is first of all plastic. It represents, in some way, an architecture in movement that should be in constant accord, in dynamically pursued equilibrium, with the setting and the landscapes within which it rises and falls.” In Faure’s terms, “plastic” art was that which “expresses form at rest and in movement,” a mode common to the arts of sculpture, bas-relief, drawing, painting, fresco, and especially dance, but that perhaps achieved its highest expression in the cinema. For “the cinema incorporates time to space. Better, time, through this, really becomes a dimension of space.” By means of the cinema, Faure claimed, time becomes a veritable instrument of space, “unrolling under our eyes its successive volumes ceaselessly returned to us in dimensions that allow us to grasp their extent in surface and depth.” The “hitherto unknown plastic pleasures” thereby discovered would, finally, create a new kind of architectural space, akin to that imaginary space “within the walls of the brain.”
The notion of duration entering as a constitutive element into the notion of space, we will easily imagine an art of cineplastics blossoming that would be no more than an ideal architecture, and where the ‘cinemimic’ will . . . disappear, because only a great artist could build edifices that constitute themselves, collapse, and reconstitute themselves again ceaselessly by imperceptible passages of tones and modeling that will themselves be architecture at every instant, without our being able to grasp the thousandth part of a second in which the transition takes place.\(^\text{11}\)

Such an art, Faure predicted, would propel the world into a new stage of civilization, whose principle form of expression would be an architecture based on the appearance of mobile industrial constructions, ships, trains, cars, and airplanes, together with their stable ports and harbors. Cinema would operate, he concluded, as a kind of privileged “spiritual ornament” to this machine civilization: “the most useful social play for the development of confidence, harmony, and cohesion in the masses.”\(^\text{12}\)

### Spaces of Horror

Critics of the first generation of German expressionist films had already experienced such a “cineplastic” revolution in practice. The spate of immediate postwar productions in 1919 and 1920 (including Paul Wegener’s *Der Golem*, Karl Heinz Martin’s *Von Morgens bis Mitternacht*, and, of course, Robert Weine’s *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari*) demonstrated that, in the words of the German art critic and New York Times correspondent Herman G. Scheffauer, a new “stereoscopic universe” was in the making. In a brilliant analysis published at the end of 1920, Scheffauer hailed the end of the “crude phantasmagoria” of earlier films and the birth of a new space.\(^\text{13}\)

Space — hitherto considered and treated as something dead and static, a mere inert screen or frame, often of no more significance than the painted balustrade-background at the village photographer’s — has been smitten into life, into movement and conscious expression. A fourth dimension has begun to evolve out of this photographic cosmos.\(^\text{14}\)

Thus film began to extend what Scheffauer called “the sixth sense of man, his feeling for space or room — his Raumgefühl,” in such a way as to transform reality itself. No longer an inert background, architecture now participated in the very emotions of the film; the surroundings no longer surrounded but entered the experience as presence: “The frown of a tower, the scowl of a sinister alley, the pride and serenity of a white peak, the hypnotic draught of a straight road vanishing to point — these exert their influences and express their natures; their essences flow over the scene and blend with the action.”\(^\text{15}\) An advance on the two-dimensional world of the picture, the “scenic architect” of films such as *Caligari* could, he wrote, dominate “furniture, room, house, street, city, landscape, universe!” The “fourth dimension” of time extended space in depth: “the plastic is amalgamated with the painted, bulk and form with the simulacra of bulk and form, false perspective and violent foreshadowing are introduced, real light and shadow combat or reinforce painted shadow and light. Einstein’s invasion of the law of gravity is made visible in the treatment of walls and supports.”\(^\text{16}\)

Scheffauer provided a veritable phenomenology of the spaces of *Caligari*. A corridor in an office building: Wall veering outward from the floor, traversed by sharply defined parallel strips, emphasizing the perspective and broken violently by pyramidal openings, streaming with light, marking the doors; the shadows between them vibrating as dark cones of contrast, the further end of the corridor murky, giving vast distance. In the foreground a section of wall violently tilted over the heads of the audience, as it were. The floor cryptically painted with errant lines of direction, the floor in front of the doors shows cross lines, indicating a going to and fro, in and out. The impression is one of formal coldness, of bureaucratic regularity, of semipublic traffic.

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A street at night: Yawning blackness in the background — empty, starless, abstract space, against it a square, lopsided lantern hung between lurching walls. Doors and windows constructed or painted in wrenched perspective. Dark segments on the pavement accentuate the diminishing effect. The slinking of a brutal figure...
pressed against the walls and evil spots and shadings on the pavement give a sinister expression to the street. Adroit diagonals lead and rivet the eye.

An attic: It speaks of sordidness, want and crime. The whole composition a vivid intersection of cones of light and dark, of roof-lines, shafts of light and slanting walls. A projection of white and black patterns on the floor, the whole geometrically felt, cubistically conceived. This attic is out of time, but in space. The roof chimneys of another world arise and scowl through the splintered window-pane.

A room; or rather a room that has precipitated itself in cavern-like lines, in inverted hollows of frozen waves. Here space becomes cloistral and encompasses the human — a man reads at a desk. A triangular window glares and permits the living day a voice in this composition.

A prison-cell: A criminal, ironed to a huge chain attached to an immense trapezoidal ‘ball.’ The posture of the prisoner sitting on his folded legs is almost Buddha-like. Here space turns upon itself, encloses and focuses a human destiny. A small window, high up and crazily barred, is like an eye. The walls, sloping like a tent’s to an invisible point, are blazoned with black and white wedge-shaped rays. These blend when they reach the floor and unite in a kind of huge cross, in the center of which the prisoner sits, scowling, unshaven. The tragedy of the repression of the human in space — in a trinity of space, fate, and man.

A white and spectral bridge yawning and rushing out of the foreground: It is an erratic, irregular causeway, such as blind ghouls might have built. It climbs and struggles upward almost out of the picture. In the middle distance it rises into a hump and reveals arches staggering over nothingness. The perspective pierces into vacuity. This bridge is the scene of a wild pursuit . . .

Several aspects of the marketplace of a small town: . . . the town cries out its will through its mouth, this marketplace.17

Caligari, then, has produced an entirely new space, one that is both all-embracing and all-absorbing in depth and movement.16 But the filmic medium allowed the exploration of other kinds of space than the totalizing plasticity modeled by Walter Röhrig, Walter Reimann, and Hermann Warm for Weine’s film. Scheffauer also identified the “flat space” of Martin’s Von Morgens bis Mitternacht. Rather than artificially constructed in the round like Caligari, the space was suggested by its designer, Robert Neppach, in tones of black and white as “a background, vague, inchoate, nebulous.”19 Above and around this inactive space that makes the universe into a
flat plane there is only “primeval darkness”; all perspective is rendered in contrasts of white planes against blackness. In Reimann’s 1920 film fantasy of Paul Scheerbart’s Algol, Scheffauer found a “geometrical space.” In this meditation on the space of the stars, “the forms are broken up expressionistically, but space acts and speaks geometrically, in great vistas, in grandiose architectural culminations. Space or room is divided into formal diapers, patterns, squares, spots, and circles, of cube imposed upon cube, of apartment opening into apartment.”20 Finally, Scheffauer noted what he termed “sculptural” or “solid” space, as modeled by the Poelzigs for Wegener’s Der Golem.

Professor Poelzig conceives of space in plastic terms, in solid concretions congealing under the artist’s hand to expressive and organic forms. He works, therefore, in the solid masses of the sculptor and not with the planes of the painter. Under his caressing hands a weird but spontaneous internal architecture, shell-like, cavernous, somber, has been evolved in simple, flowing lines, instinct with the bizarre spirit of the tale. . . . The gray soul of medieval Prague has been molded into these eccentric and errant crypts. . . . Poelzig seeks to give an eerie and grotesque suggestiveness to the flights of houses and streets that are to furnish the external setting of this film-play. The will of this master architect animating façades into faces, insists that these houses are to speak in jargon — and gesticulate!21

Pan-Geometries

In assimilating filmic space to the theoretical types of Raum adumbrated in German philosophy and psychology since Theodor Vischer, and in proposing the relativity of spatial forms in the face of continuous optical movement in a way reminiscent of the historical relativity of optical forms demonstrated by Alois Riegl, Scheffauer seems also to have anticipated the more scholarly account of perspectival history developed between 1923 and 1925 by Erwin Panofsky. Panofsky’s essay “Perspective as Symbolic Form” set out to show that the various perspective systems from Roman times to the present were not simply “incorrect” instances of representing reality, but rather, were endowed with distinct and symbolic meaning of their own, as powerful and as open to reading as iconographical types and genres. Panofsky even took note of the modernist will to break with the conventions of perspective, seeing it as yet another stage of perspective vision itself. He cited expressionism’s resistance to perspective as the last remnant of the will to capture “real, three-dimensional space,” in particular, El Lissitzky’s desire to overcome the bounds of finite space:

Older perspective is supposed to have ‘limited space, made it finite, closed it off,’ conceived of space ‘according to Euclidian geometry as rigid three-dimensionality,’ and it is these very bonds which the most recent art has attempted to break. Either it has in a sense exploded the entire space by ‘dispersing the center of vision’ (Futurism), or it has sought no longer to represent depth intervals ‘extensively’ by means of foreshortenings, but rather, in accord with the most modern insights of psychology, only to create an illusion ‘intensively’ by playing color surfaces off against each other, each differently placed, differently shaded, and only in this way furnished with different spatial values (Mondrian and in particular Malevich’s ‘Suprematism’). The author [El Lissitzky] believes he can suggest a third solution: the conquest of ‘imaginary space’ by means of mechanically motivated bodies, which by this very movement, by their rotation or oscillation, produce precise figures (for example, a rotating stick produces an apparent circle, or in another position, an apparent cylinder, and so forth). In this way, in the opinion of El Lissitzky, art is elevated to the standpoint of a non-Euclidian pan-geometry (whereas in fact the space of those ‘imaginary’ rotating bodies is no less ‘Euclidian’ than any other empirical space.)22

Despite Panofsky’s skepticism, it was, of course, such a “pan-geometric” space that architecture hoped to construct through abstraction and technologically induced movement. Architects from El Lissitzky to Bruno Taut were to experiment with this new pan-geometry as if it would enable them finally, in Ernst Bloch’s words, “to depict empirically an imaginary space.” For Bloch, the underlying Euclidian nature of all space offered the potential for architecture to approach pan-geometry in reality. Basing his argument on Panofsky’s essay, he commended expressionists for having generated rotating and turning bodies that produced “stereometric figures . . . which at least have nothing in common with the perspective visual space (Sehraum); out of this procedure emerged “an architecture of the abstract, which wants to be quasi-meta-cubic.”23 For Bloch, this potential allowed modern architecture to achieve its own “symbolic allusions,” even if these were founded on the “so-called un-Euclidian pan-geometry” criticized by Panofsky.24 In this illusion, the architects were encouraged by the cinematographers themselves,
who, at least in the 1920s led by Fritz Lang and F. W. Murnau, accepted the practical rulings of the Universum Film A.G., or UFA, whose proscription against exterior filming supported the extraordinary experimentation in set design of the Weimar period.

Psycho-Spaces

But the attempt to construct these imaginary new worlds was, as Panofsky had noted, not simply formalistic and decorative; its premise was from the outset psychological, based on what Rudolf Kurz defined as the “simple law of psychological aesthetics that when we feel our way into certain forms exact psychic correspondences are set up.” Hugo Münsterberg, in his 1916 work Film: A Psychological Study, had already set out the terms of the equation, film equals psychological form. For Münsterberg, film differed from drama by its appeal to the “inner movements of the mind.”

To be sure, the events in the photoplay happen in the real space with its depth. But the spectator feels that they are not presented in the three dimensions of the outer world, that they are flat pictures which only the mind molds into plastic things. Again the events are seen in continuous movement; and yet the pictures break up the movement into a rapid succession of instantaneous impressions. . . . The photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion.

Only two years later, in one of his first critical essays, Louis Aragon was to note this property of the film to focus attention and reformulate the real into the imaginary, the ability to fuse the physical and the mental, later to become a surrealist obsession. Seemingly anticipating the mental states of André Breton’s Nadja or of his own Paysan de Paris, but revealed in film, Aragon meditated on the “the door of a bar that swings and on the window the capital letters of unreadable and marvelous words, or the vertiginous, thousand-eyed façade of the thirty-story house.” The possibility of disclosing the inner “menacing or enigmatic meanings” of everyday objects by simple close-up techniques and camera angles, light, shade, and space established, for Aragon, the poetic potential of the art: “To endow with a poetic value that which does not yet possess it, to willfully restrict the field of vision so as to intensify expression: these are two properties that help make cinematic décor the adequate setting of modern beauty.”

For this, however, film had no need of an artificially constructed décor that simulated the foreshortening of perspective or the phobic characteristics of space; the framings and movements of the camera itself would serve to construct reality far more freely. In his later 1934 essay “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,” Panofsky himself argued against any attempt to subject the world to “artistic prestylization, as in the expressionist settings of The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,” as “no more than an exciting experiment.” “To prestylize reality prior to tackling it amounts to dodging the problem,” he concluded: “The problem is to manipulate and shoot unstylized reality in such a way that the result has style.”

The Lure of the Street

In such terms, from the mid-1920s on, critics increasingly denounced what they saw as the purely decorative and staged characteristics of the expressionist film in favor of a more direct confrontation with the “real.” If, as Panofsky asserted, “these unique and specific possibilities” of film could be “defined as dynamization of space and, accordingly, spatialization of time,” then it was the lens of the camera, and not any distorted set, that inculcated a sense of motion in the static spectator, and thence a mobilization of space itself: “Not only bodies move in space, but space itself does, approaching, receding, turning, dissolving and recrystallizing as it appears through the controlled locomotion and focusing of the camera and through the cutting and editing of the various shots.” And this led to the inevitable conclusion that the proper medium of the movies was not the idealization of reality, as in the other arts, but “physical reality as such.”

Marcel Céan’s frustrated question, “When Will the Cinema Go Down into the Street?” calling for an end to artifice and the studio set and a confrontation of the “real,” as opposed to the “constructed” Paris, was only one of a number of increasingly critical attacks on the architectural set in the early 1930s.

Among the most rigorous of the new realists, Siegfried Kracauer, himself a former architect, was consistent in his
arguments against the “decorative” and artificial and in favor of the critical vision of the real that film allowed. From his first experience of film as a pre–World War I child to his last theoretical work on film published in 1960, Kracauer found the street to be both site and vehicle for his social criticism. Recalling the first film he saw as a boy — entitled, significantly enough, *Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life* — Kracauer remembered being thrilled by the sight of “an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house façades and a piece of sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the façades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle — this image has never left me.” For Kracauer, film was first and foremost a material rather than purely formal aesthetics that was essentially suited to the recording of the fleeting, the temporally transient, the momentary impression — that is, the modern — and a quality that made the “street” in all its manifestations an especially favored subject matter. If the snapshot stressed the random and the fortuitous, then its natural development in the motion-picture camera was “partial to the least permanent components of our environment,” rendering “the street in the broadest sense of the word” the place for chance encounters and social observation. But for this to work as a truly critical method of observation and recording, the street would first have to be offered up as an “unstaged reality”; what Kracauer considered film’s “declared preference for nature in the raw” was easily defeated by artificiality and “stagniness,” whether the staged “drawing brought to life” of *Caligari* or the more filmic staging of montage, panning, and camera movement. Lang’s *Metropolis* of 1926 was an example of this latter kind of staging, where “a film of unsurpassable staginess” was partially redeemed by the way in which crowds were treated “and rendered through a combination of long shots and close shots which provide exactly the kind of random impressions we would receive were we to witness this spectacle in reality.” Yet, for Kracauer, the impact of the crowd images was obviated by the architectural settings that remained entirely stylized and imaginary. A similar case was represented by Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Die Sinfonie einer Grosstadt* of 1927, where in a Vertov-like manipulation of shot and montage the director tried to
capture “simultaneous phenomena which, owing to certain analogies and contrasts between them, form comprehensible patterns. . . . He cuts from human legs walking the street to the legs of a cow and juxtaposes the luscious dishes in a deluxe restaurant with the appalling food of the very poor.”37 Such formalism, however, tended to concentrate attention not on things themselves and their meaning, but on their formal characteristics. As Kracauer noted with respect to the capturing of the city’s movement in rhythmic shots, “tempo is also a formal conception if it is not defined with reference to the qualities of the objects through which it materializes.”38

For Kracauer, the street, properly recorded, offered a virtually inexhaustible subject for the comprehension of modernity; its special characteristics fostered not only the chance and the random, but more importantly, the necessary distance, if not alienation, of the observer for whom the camera eye was a precise surrogate. If in the photographs of Charles Marville or Eugène Atget we might detect a certain melancholy, this was because the photographic medium intersecting with the street as subject fostered a kind of self-estrangement, allowing for a closer identification with the objects being observed. “The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his previous preferences. His is a kind of receptivity which resembles that of Proust’s photographer cast in the role of a stranger.”39 Hence, for Kracauer and his friend Walter Benjamin, the close identification of the photographer with the flâneur, and the potential of flânerie and its techniques to furnish models for the modernist filmmaker:

The melancholy character is seen strolling about aimlessly: as he proceeds, his changing surroundings take shape in the form of numerous juxtaposed shots of house façades, neon lights, stray passers-by, and the like. It is inevitable that the audience should trace their seemingly unmotivated emergence to his dejection and the alienation in its wake.40

In this respect, what Kracauer saw as Eisenstein’s “identification of life with the street” took on new meaning as the flâneur-photographer moved to capture the flow of fleeting impressions that Kracauer’s teacher Georg Simmel had characterized as “snapshots of reality.” “When history is made in the streets, the streets tend to move onto the screen,” concluded Kracauer.
Filming the City

Other critics were more optimistic about the potential of filmic techniques to render a version of reality that might otherwise go unrecorded, or better, to reconstrue reality in such a way that it might be critically apprehended. Thus Benjamin’s celebrated eulogy of film as liberty of perception in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” was a first step in the constitution of the filmic as the modern critical aesthetic:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended.... An unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.... The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.41

Unconscious optics — the filmic unconscious — was, for Benjamin, itself a kind of analysis, the closest aesthetic equivalent to Freud’s own *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in its ability to focus and deepen perception.

In this characteristic, film obviously outdistanced architecture; Benjamin’s remark that “architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by the collectivity in a state of distraction” was made in this very context: the assertion of the “shock effect” of the film as that which allows the public, no longer distracted, to be once more put in the position of the critic. Thus the only way to render architecture critical again was to wrest it out of its uncritically observed context, its distracted state, and offer it to a now attentive public — that is, to make a film of the building.

Or of the city. In an evocative remark inserted apparently at random among the unwieldy collection of citations and aphorisms that make up the unfinished *Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin opened the possibility of yet another way of reading his unfinished work: was it not perhaps the sketch of a screenplay for a movie of Paris?

Could one not shoot a passionate film of the city plan of Paris? Of the development of its different forms [Gestalten] in temporal succession? Of the condensation of a century-long movement of streets, boulevards, passages, squares, in the space of half an hour? And what else does the flâneur do?42

In this context, might not the endless quotations and aphoristic observations of the *Passagen-Werk*, carefully written out on hundreds of single index cards, each one letter-, number-, and color-coded to cross-reference them to all the rest, be construed as so many shots, ready to be montaged into the epic movie *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* — a prehistory of modernity, finally realized by modernity’s own special form of mechanical reproduction?

While obviously no “film” of this kind was ever made, an attempt to answer the hypothetical question, what would Benjamin’s film of Paris have looked like? would clarify what we might call his “filmic imaginary.” Such an imaginary, overt in the *Passagen-Werk* and the contemporary essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and covert in many earlier writings from those on German baroque allegory to those on German historical form, might, in turn, reveal important aspects of the theoretical problems inherent in the filmic representation of the metropolis. For in the light of Benjamin’s theories of the political and social powers of mechanical reproduction as outlined in his “Conversations with Bertolt Brecht,” it is clear from the outset that any project for a film of Paris would in no way have resembled other urban films of the interwar period, whether idealist, expressionist, or realist. Rather, it would have involved Benjamin in an act of theoretical elaboration that, based on previous film theory and criticism, would have constructed new kinds of optical relations between the camera and the city, film and architecture. These would no doubt have been established on the complex notion of “the optical unconscious,” an intercalation of Freud and Riegl, that appears in Benjamin’s writings on photography and film in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

On one level, Benjamin’s fragmentary remark is easily decipherable: what he had in mind was evidently an image of the
combined results of the flâneur’s peripatetic vision montaged onto the history of the nineteenth century and put in motion by the movie camera. No longer would the implied movement of Bergsonian mental processes or the turns of allegorical text have to make do as pale imitations of metropolitan movement; now the real movement of the film would, finally, merge technique and content as a proof, so to speak, of the manifest destiny of modernity. In this sense, Benjamin’s metaphor of a Parisian film remains just that: a figure of modernist technique as the fullest expression of modernist thought, as well as the explanation of its origins.

Certainly, it is not too difficult to imagine the figure of Benjamin’s flâneur, Vertov-like, carrying his camera as a third eye, framing and shooting the rapidly moving pictures of modern life. The etchings of Jacques Callot, the thumbnail sketches of Augustin Saint-Aubin, the tableaux of Sébastien Mercier, the rapid renderings of Constantin Guys, the prose poems of Charles Baudelaire, the snapshots of Atget are all readily transposed into the vocabulary of film, which then literally mimics the fleeting impressions of everyday life in the metropolis in its very techniques of representation. Indeed, almost every characteristic Benjamin associates with the flâneur might be associated with the film director with little or no distortion. An eye for detail, for the neglected and the chance; a penchant for joining reality and reverie; a distanced vision, apart from that distracted and unself-conscious existence of the crowd; a fondness for the marginal and the forgotten: these are traits of flâneur and filmmaker alike. Both share affinities with the detective and the peddler, the ragpicker and the vagabond; both aestheticize the roles and materials with which they work. Equally, the typical habitats of the flâneur lend themselves to filmic representation: the banlieue, the margins, the zones, and outskirts of the city; the deserted streets and squares at night; the crowded boulevards, the phantasmagoric passages, arcades, and department stores; the spatial apparatus, that is, of the consumer metropolis.

On another level, however, if we take the image literally rather than metaphorically, a number of puzzling questions emerge. A film of Paris is certainly conceivable, but what would a film of “the plan of Paris” look like? And if we were to succeed in filming this plan, how then might it depict the development of the city’s “forms” — its boulevards, streets,
squares, and passages — at the same time as “condensing” a century of their history into half an hour? How might such a film, if realized, be “passionate”? If, as Benjamin intimates, the model of the film director was to be found in the figure of the flâneur, how might this figure translate his essentially nineteenth-century habits of walking and seeing into cinematographic terms? It seems that, step by step, within the very movement of Benjamin’s own metaphor, the ostensible unity of the image is systematically undermined; as though the result of making a film of the plan of Paris were to replicate the very fragmentation of modernity that the metropolis poses, the flâneur sees, and the film concretizes. Benjamin’s image thus emerges as a complex rebus of method and form. Its very self-enclosed elegance, beginning with the film and ending with the flâneur as director (a perfect example of a romantic fragment turning in on itself according to Friedrich Schelling’s rules), seems consciously structured to provoke its own unraveling. It is as if Benjamin inserted his cinematographic conundrum into the formless accumulation of the citations and aphorisms of the Passagen-Werk to provoke, in its deciphering, a self-conscious ambiguity about the implied structure of his text, and, at the same time, a speculation on the theory of film that he never wrote.

For it was not simply that the flâneur and the filmmaker shared spaces and gazes; for Benjamin, these characteristics were transferred, as in analysis, to the spaces themselves, which became vagabonds in their own right. He spoke of the phenomenon of the “colportage, or peddling of space,” as the fundamental experience of the flâneur, where a kind of Bergsonian simultaneity allowed “the simultaneous perception of everything that potentially is happening in this single space. The space directs winks at the flâneur.” Thus the flâneur as ragpicker and peddlar participates in his surroundings, even as they cooperate with him in his unofficial archaeology of spatial settings. And, to paraphrase Benjamin, what else does the filmmaker do? for a viewer now opened up “in his susceptibility to the transient real-life phenomena that crowd the screen.”

Architectural Montage

Here we are returned to Eisenstein’s “street,” reminded, in Benjamin’s desire to have shot a “passionate” film, of Eisenstein’s own long analyses of the notion of filmic “ecstasy,” the simultaneous cause and effect of movement in the movie. For Eisenstein, the “ecstatic” was in fact the fundamental shared characteristic of architecture and film. Even as architectural styles, one by one, “exploded” into each other in a kind of inevitable historical process, so the filmmaker might force the shot to decompose and recompose in successive explosions. Thus the principles of the Gothic . . . seem to explode the balance of the Romanesque style. And, within the Gothic itself, we could trace the stirring picture of movement of its lancet world from the first almost indistinct steps toward the ardent models of the mature and postmature, ‘flamboyant’ late Gothic. We could, like Wölflin, contrast the Renaissance and Baroque and interpret the excited spirit of the second, winding like a spiral, as an ecstatically bursting temperament of a new epoch, exploding preceding forms of art in the enthusiasms for a new quality, responding to a new social phase of a single historical process.

But Eisenstein goes further. In an essay on two Piranesi engravings for the early and late states of the Carceri series, he compares architectural composition itself to cinematic montage, an implicit “flux of form” that holds within itself the potential to explode into successive states. Building on his experience as architect and set designer, Eisenstein developed a comprehensive theory of what he called “space constructions” that found new meaning in the romantic formulation of architecture as “frozen music”:

At the basis of the composition of its ensemble, at the basis of the harmony of its conglomerating masses, in the establishment of the melody of the future overflow of its forms, and in the execution of its rhythmic parts, giving harmony to the relief of its ensemble, lies that same ‘dance’ that is also at the basis of the creation of music, painting, and cinematic montage.

For Eisenstein, a kind of relentless vertigo is set up by the play of architectural forms in space, a vertigo that is easily assimilable to Thomas De Quincey’s celebrated account of Samuel Coleridge’s reaction to Piranesi’s Carceri, or better, to Nikolai Gogol’s reading of the Gothic as a style of endless movement and internal explosions.

And if Eisenstein can “force,” to use Manfredo Tafuri’s term, these representations of architectural space to “explode” into the successive stages of their “montage” decomposition and
recomposition, as if they were so many “shots,” then it is because, for Eisenstein, architecture itself embodies the principles of montage. Indeed, its special characteristics of a spatial art experienced in time render it the predecessor of film in more than simple analogy.

In the article “Montage and Architecture,” written in the late 1930s as a part of the uncompleted work on montage, Eisenstein sets out this position, contrasting two “paths” of the spatial eye: the cinematic, where a spectator follows an imaginary line among a series of objects, through the sight as well as in the mind — “diverse impressions passing in front of an immobile spectator” — and the architectural, where “the spectator moved through a series of carefully disposed phenomena which he absorbed in order with his visual sense.”49 In this transition from real to imaginary movement, architecture is film’s predecessor. Where painting “remained incapable of fixing the total representation of a phenomenon in its full multi-dimensionality” and “only the film camera has solved the problem of doing this on a flat surface,” “its undeniable ancestor in this capability is . . . architecture.”50 Eisenstein, as is well known, used Auguste Choisy’s perspective views of the Acropolis to demonstrate his theory of movement and montage in space, following Le Corbusier’s own reproduction of these images in Vers une architecture to exemplify the notion of the promenade architecturale.51

But in their use of a common source to demonstrate architecture’s potential for a staging of movement, neither Eisenstein nor Le Corbusier were admitting any lesser autonomy for their respective spatial disciplines. For Eisenstein, the Acropolis simply proved that architecture was a fitting “ancestor” to film; for Le Corbusier, it permitted a return to the “original” bodily and sensational sources of the plan.52 Both would have agreed with Robert Mallet-Stevens, who was troubled by the invasion of the decorative into filmic architecture, the potential to create “imaginary” forms that illustrated rather than provided settings for human psychological emotions. Mallet-Stevens warned against the tendency to view architecture as a photogenic aid to film, thereby creating a “foreseen” dynamic that in real space would be provided by the human figure: “the ornament, the arabesque, is the mobile personage who creates them.”53 Rather than expressionist buildings imitating their cinematic counterparts, he called for a radical simplification of architecture that would, in this way, offer itself up naturally to the filmic action, always preserving the distance between the real and the imaginary. “Real life is entirely different, the house is made to live, it should first respond to our needs.”54 Properly handled, however, architecture and film might be entirely complementary. He cited a screenplay by Ricciotto Canudo that would perhaps realize this ideal:

It concerned the representation of a solitary woman, frighteningly alone in life, surrounded by the void, and nothingness. The décor: composed of inarticulate lines, immovable, repeated, without ornament: no window, no door, no furniture in the “field” and at the center of these rigid parallels a woman who advanced slowly. Subtitles become useless, architecture situates the person and defines her better than any text.55

In this vision of a cinematic architecture that would through its own laws of perspective return to the essential characteristics of building, Mallet-Stevens echoed Le Corbusier and anticipated Eisenstein. In his depiction of a décor framed as the very image of isolation, agoraphobic or claustrophobic, he also answered those in Germany who were attempting to “express” in spatial distortion what a simple manipulation of the camera in space might accomplish.

Such arguments over the potentialities of a “filmic architecture” have hardly ceased with the gradual demise of cinema and the rise of its own “natural” successors — video and digital hyperspatial imaging. That the influence of these new forms of spatial representation on architecture might be as disturbing as those observed by Le Corbusier and Mallet-Stevens is at least possible to hazard, as buildings and their spatial sequences are designed more as illustrations of implied movement, or worse, as literal fabrications of the computer’s-eye view.

7. Rebecca Horn, Der Eintänzer, 1978, film still

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ceptibility to the 'street' — a term demonstrated by its unwavering susceptibility to the 'street' — a term designed to cover not only the street, particularly the city street, in the literal sense, but also its various extensions, such as railway stations, dance and assembly halls, bars, hotel lobbies, airports, etc. Within the present context the street, which has already been characterized as a center of fleeting impressions, is of interest as a region where the accidental prevails over the providential, and happenings in the nature of unexpected incidents are all but the rule. . . . There have been only few cinematic films that would not include glimpses of a street, not to mention the many films in which some street figures among the protagonists" (p. 62).

36. Ibid., 61-62.
37. Ibid., 65.
38. Ibid., 207.
39. Ibid., 17.
40. Ibid.
41. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935); trans. in Mast and Cohen, Film Theory and Criticism, 689-90.
44. Kracauer, Nature of Film, 170.
47. Eisenstein, Nonindifferent Nature, 140.
50. Ibid., 600.
51. See Auguste Choisy, Histoire de l’architecture, 2 vols. (Paris: Gauthiers-Villars, 1899), 1-143, and Bois, "Introduction," 114. Bois elegantly solves the apparent paradox that Choisy, who relied on the axonometric as the basic analytical tool of his history, in the case of the Acropolis turned to the sequential, perspectival view. For Choisy, the "single image" of the axonometric condensed a view that was mouvementée and thereby potentially cinematic. Eisenstein, for his part, cited Choisy’s analysis at length with little commentary, asking his reader simply “to look at it with the eye of a filmmaker”: “it is hard to imagine a montage sequence for an architectural ensemble more subtly composed, shot by shot, than the one which our legs create by walking among the buildings of the Acropolis” ("Montage and Architecture," 60).
54. Ibid., 290.
55. Ibid., 288.

Figure Credits
1. Interview with Babette Mangolte, Camera Obscura 3-4 (Summer 1979).
7. Rebecca Horn, exhibition catalogue (Zürich: Kunsthalle Zürich, 1985).