



# Architectural representation and experiencing space in film

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## **Abstract**

Representation plays a major role in the way architects produce their designs. From the first ambiguous lines to the technical constructive drawings, memory and personal experiences of space provide designers with insight. Remembered places are meaningfully and emotionally embedded architectural spaces. Design studios in architecture face difficulties when dealing with methods of representing subjectivity and emotion. The representation of space in film is sculpted from the narrative, a meaningful construction of emotional space within the context of the story. Similar to experiencing a real space, a film's sophisticated language has the ability to transport the audience to the time and place of the story. However, representation of filmic space is highly arbitrary, and oftentimes contrary to what we assume from commonsense perceptions of real spaces. This paper first reviews how film commonly introduces the experiencing of space through audience identification and narrative. Later, the paper analyzes previous approaches to film in architecture education focusing on the importance of film viewing. Finally, it analyzes the representation of domestic life in two scenes in order to illustrate how audience identification and narrative together communicate the experiencing of space in film.

Keywords: Film, architectural representations, education, domestic space.

## **Introduction: Representing the Experience of Space**

Representation is central to the way architects design. From the very first ideas to the final drawings, architects engage recursively in “representing-thinking-representing,” refining the design at each cycle. Through representations, architects are able to establish dialogues. Sometimes these dialogues are intimate wanderings through one’s thoughts, and at other times they are a way of communicating design features to others such as team members and clients (De la Puerta, 1997). At each new cycle, the designer selects certain features to develop, and discards other features. Therefore, choosing one type of representation during this process significantly influences the outcome of the project, since the choice inevitably enhances one design solution over alternative options (De la Puerta, 1997). During the design process, representation develops from ambiguous and suggestive features into conventionalized and univocal representations. Sketches are most commonly developed at the beginning of the process, since they allow for fast, highly expressive, and open interpretations of the visualizations. Technical drawings are most commonly developed at the end of the process when the design needs to communicate univocal and monosemic information. Architectural education, therefore, should foster a student’s skill in articulating their ideas by using the widest range of representations possible.

Several authors, mainly viewed from a phenomenological lens, point out the limitations of architectural representations when it comes to expressing memorable and subjective impressions of space. Representations rooted in our educational and professional practices have become systematized into our discipline from the time of the Renaissance, when architecture settled its cannons on the Cartesian paradigm. The Cartesian paradigm presents objects in space, independent from one another, in an exterior world that can be observed and represented objectively. This perspective, with its monocular vision as the center of the perceptive world,

became the paradigm for revealing the “true external world” of objects. Vision became the way to acquire objective knowledge, predominant over the other senses. Nanda and Soloyova (2005) refer to how “[w]e have created a growing gap between the real world, with its rich, real experiences, deep understanding of matter, and complex translation of those experiences into new experiences, and the world of architectural education, with its mediated, mostly visual experiences and rearrangement of those experiences into new representations.” However, this synesthesia, or the innate capacity to interconnect our senses, along with the continuous movement, the binocular vision and tactile perceptions cannot not be concealed with the geometric reduction of world representation into the visual (Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier, 1997). The reduction of architectural representations to visual elements has deepened this sensorial gap. Whenever architecture is understood to be a visual trip that excludes multisensory experience, it alienates the individual from the possibility of living in meaningful spaces (Pallasmaa, 2006).

Merleau-Ponty (2000) claims we cannot consider space to be exterior and separated from our body. On the contrary, space and our body define each other, and are united together in the act of experiencing. The same way we cannot separate the perception of space from space itself, we cannot divide the experiencing of space into the independent senses. Our senses are interconnected. We do not translate into a solely visual language the information we get from our sense of touch or, inversely, we cannot gather, one by one, our body’s separate senses; the translation and accumulation of all our senses are made at once inside of us. They are what comprises our own body (Merleau-Ponty, 2000).

Even though it is evident that the experiencing of a space cannot be reproduced with conventional representations, developing designs and representational strategies that contemplate subjective experiencing is no easy proposition (Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier, 1997). Films share

with the traditional Cartesian representation a monocular vision, and the verisimilitude that accompanies the projective method. However, film introduces time into the notion of design. The illusion of movement created by an image sequence, the introduction of the montage, and the use of audio all open up a new horizon for architectural representation.

## **Film and Architecture: Identification, Filmic Space, and Education**

Have you ever felt after watching a good movie that you have been to another time and place? You have been seated in the movie theater in the quiet and in the dark. However, it feels as if you have been to the place the movie sought to take you, enduring the hero's misfortunes, and rejoicing in his victories. Obviously, remembering a filmic space is not the same as having experienced a space in real life. Deleuze (1984) points out the difference between the immobile and voyeuristic audience's attitude when watching a film and the attitude involved in moving and interacting with the world, actually embodied in a tangible space. Different from the experience of real space, audiences elaborate upon the meaning of space via the point of view of the narrator or the movie's key characters. Film sculpts space through narrative.

It is the intimate and dynamic processes of identification that draw audiences into the film narrative. Metz (2001), and later Aumont (1996), refers to a process of double identification. Primary film identification relates to the spectator conflating the camera with his/her own gaze. The spectator experiences the film as being the focus of the representation, positioned in a privileged place, at the center of the omnipresent vision. Secondary film identification originates from the spectator's predisposition to engage with the narration. Aumont (1996) identified a psychological and primordial desire in the audience to engage with the story. Similarly, Bordwell (1995) refers to how the audience engages with the narrative by actively building hypotheses about possible outcomes throughout the viewing of the film. Identification during the movie is

not monolithic, stable or permanent. On the contrary, during the film the audience can identify with the gaze of a variety of different characters or situations, from one scene to another. Therefore, a film's manipulation of the gaze, or gazes, is essential to triggering audience identification with the film.

Even though we can engage in film narrative without any effort, once we look at the film's planning of the scene, we realize how a film's representational codes are distinct from real life perceptions. The playing with gazes and audience identification is supported by nontrivial codes of manipulation of the image sequences. Aumont (1996) points to three important features that intervene decisively in the processes of identification with the film: (1) the manipulation of multiple points of view, (2) the variation of the scale of the plane, and (3) playing with the viewer's gazes. Having multiple points of view about the same situation allows for the manipulation of the image sequence, creating of a hierarchy of subjective relationships between the various characters. As an audience, we are used to the shot/reverse shot, where following a shot via a character's close up leads us to expect a shot of what s/he is seeing; following the shot of an event, we can expect a shot showing the reaction of a character as reflected in their face. But not all characters are on the same level of importance in the scene. We are lead to know their place in the hierarchy by frame scale, duration, and composition. Traditionally, main characters are positioned in the center and close up in the frame, and are on screen for longer periods than secondary characters. Moreover, multiple points of view are combined with different scales of frame to allow for a play of closeness or distancing, engaging or disengaging with the characters and their associated emotions. Therefore the camera movement, insinuated by the montage or a shot sequence, plays a role of major importance in the identification process of the audience.

Space as it appears in the film is subject to the narrative; it contributes to character definition, and to the particular situation or story. Even though we cannot understand filmic space in a sense that is separate from the film itself, we can analyze how that space is constructed. Vila (1997) mentions Eric Rohmer's delineation of space into three distinct types: (1) the architectural, (2) the pictorial, and (3) the filmic. As part of the *mise-en-scène*, architectural space is the physical location where the film is shot; it encompasses the set design and the decoration. Resembling how we traditionally work in the field of architecture, pictorial space is related to the film image in terms of its similarities with painting, compositionality, chromaticity, in paying attention to the type of camera lens used, the depth of field, height and tilt, etc. Filmic space includes both the audio and the off-screen space. Creating an imaginary place through a shot sequence or a montage suture, filmic space articulates both the pictorial and architectonic space within the given narrative.

Even though architects usually are not used to design spaces from a narrative, film and architecture often have been linked from several different perspectives. One approach has been the study of film set design and its inter-influences with architectural history and style (Ramírez, 1993 and Vila, 1997). Another approach has been an analysis of film as commentary or critic to architecture and the city. Ábalos (2000) studied the subjectivity embedded into the domestic space of the modern architecture featured in the film "Mon oncle" (Tati, 1958) through the film's characters' feelings.

The introduction of film into the architecture design studio is not novel. Cairns (2007) proposed a studio where his students would recursively go back and forth between film and architectural spaces. Filming a real space, the author described several exercises that would defamiliarize the student with real architectural spaces by allowing the student to discover new

space features through the film's representation. Mathew Knox (2007) proposed that his students look at the set of *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954). His students modeled the set in 3D in order to animate original scenes, and later redesigned the set for a 2006 remake of the film, thus creating an entirely new animated scene.

Most cases involving the introduction of film into architectural education use film screening and analysis in class as a foundation for triggering discussions regarding how architecture is used to support the ideas in the film, or how filmmaking techniques express the unique characteristics of the architecture. Film viewing can sensitize students to certain features of architectural design such that students can later develop them into their own architectural projects.

The following case studies center on two scenes of domestic life in order to contrast the various approaches of film representation, as described in the context of a class. The first case focuses on audience identification within the scene, and on how film constructs space through its representation of the gaze. The second case focuses on filmic space as analyzed through Rohmer's categories (Vila, 1997). Both scenes start by analyzing the film's enunciation, the concrete evidence of shot order and duration, in an effort to understand how meaningful space is constructed in the film.

## **Two cases: Representations of Domestic Life**

### **First Scene – “Elizabeth's Home”**

The scene analyzed was the opening sequence of *Pride and Prejudice* (Wright, 2005) which shows the main character, Elizabeth, arriving home after going for a walk<sup>1</sup>. The scene

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed description of the scene is presented - in Spanish - at SIGRADI 2006, page 416 and 417.

introduces the protagonist by presenting the context where she lives, her home and family – her sisters and parents. Through a shot sequence, the camera takes us into her house and allows us to share a moment of family intimacy.

Let's imagine the camera corresponding to our gaze:

“Let's suppose for a moment that our eyes are at the vertex of the camera's visual pyramid, as if the camera has moved, imitating what would be our way of moving. In the beginning, we closely follow the protagonist through her home (Figure 1). As she passes by an open door, we see at the end of a corridor a girl playing a pianoforte (Figure 2). Puzzled, we leave our protagonist and enter the corridor alone. Suddenly a young woman steps into the corridor and, as surprised as we are, looks up to see two young ladies noisily running down the stairs (Figure 3). We follow the ladies through to the end of the corridor, and into the room where the girl was playing the pianoforte. There we stop to contemplate her, and calmly look around the room (Figure 4). There is a disordered table covered with women's lace and bonnets, and as we turn we see through an open door (Figure 5), we witness our protagonist walking outside (Figure 6). She must have walked around the building while we were inside, looking around the house. We go on to see her at what seems to be the main entrance of the house, a porch with a colonnade accessed by a staircase. Our protagonist climbs up the steps, onto the porch (Figure 7), and stops to listen through a window to a couple having a conversation. As we approach her she smiles, reacting to the conversation she has overheard, and we see her entering the house” (Figure 8).

Carefully choreographed and accompanied by slow-paced piano music, the camera follows the movement of the actresses, pursuing them when they are running, hesitating when observing the girl playing the piano, and finally joining the protagonist. “Making believe” that the camera corresponds to our eye highlights what Metz and Aumont has defined as the primary



identification in the film. We connect with the camera as if it corresponds to our own gaze. However, this identification is not constant over the whole scene. At the beginning, we move like an invisible fly looking around freely throughout the house. But as we get closer to our protagonist, and even though the camera is not positioned at the *real* position of the character's eyes (but instead is slightly off, over her shoulder,) *we see what she sees*, and how she reacts to what she sees. We are directed to identify with her since we see closely her reactions, emotions and the direction of her gaze. The camera pictures are close enough and last for enough time that we can observe her up close.

We can infer much about this film, even if we have only seen one minute of this movie. The previously described sinuous camera movement, combined with the slow-paced, melodic piano music, impresses upon the audience that this is a romantic movie. The genre is reaffirmed in the elements of the *mise-en-scène* and their possible signification. For example, the ladies wardrobe offers the historical context for the action. The disordered objects placed on the table in the room, and the noisy running of the ladies through the house suggest that the women freely go about in their house – something unusual in the gender-segregated, pre-Victorian era. Aiming at the architectural features of the *mise-en-scène*, we can see the romantic abandonment of the building:

- the uneven brick walls are partially covered with twining plants (Figure 7)
- the decadent state and visibly missing column of the porch balcony (Figure 6).

Finally, if we draw the floor plan of the house according to the trajectory of the camera, we are able to understand the scene planning, by marking the position of the camera within the space. Drawing the floor plan and the camera path, we can observe also that at no point do we look backwards. Contrary to a real life perception of space where we are surrounded and can

observe the space from all directions, the path and camera always face one direction. This restriction does not interfere with a coherent and homogeneous perception of the space of Elizabeth's home. We assume that what is not seen (positioned off screen, behind the camera) is "much of the same" of what we see (on screen).

### **Second Scene – "Jacobó's Apartment"**

The scene analyzed here occurs in the first half of the Uruguayan film *Whisky* (Rebella and Stoll, 2004). The film tells the story of Jacobo, a Jewish, middle-aged male owner of a decadent sock factory, Martha, his factory supervisor, and Herman, Jacobo's brother. Jacobo's mother died a year ago and Herman, who lives in Brazil, is coming to the matzeiva – a Jewish ceremony. Jacobo and Martha have a formal co-worker relationship. In a previous scene, Jacobo had made a proposal to Martha, but the contents of the proposal remain unclear to the audience. In the scene studied in class, Jacobo shows his apartment to Martha, which is when the audience discovers what his proposal is about: to simulate being married during his brother's visit.

The visit to Jacobo's apartment happens at night. Different from the continuous shot of Elizabeth's home, the directors of *Whisky* use fixed camera shots and montage to show Jacobo's apartment. Entering through the kitchen, Jacobo proceeds to show Martha each room. Mechanically he turns on a light, Martha looks around, and before she leaves the room, Jacobo turns off the light and leaves her in the dark. A slowly paced sequence of fixed camera details presents what Martha observes in each room. Martha holds the audience's gaze. The directors constantly use the shot/reverse shot to give hierarchy to Martha gaze in the sequence. We can interpret this from her predominance within the shots: close up, central and for much of the duration of the sequence.

Observing carefully the *mise-en-scène*, we can infer how Jacobo's life in the apartment is. His apartment is messy and full of objects that belonged to his mother. He lives only in two rooms – his bedroom and the kitchen. His room is full of “stuff,” which covers the armoires and the bedside table, and his bed is unmade. He keeps his mother's bedroom door closed and uses the living room as storeroom. By carefully observing the objects spread over the apartment, we can imagine that his mother suffered a long illness before dying. Besides the regular implements used by a sick person – a bedpan and an infrared lamp - we see a wheel chair and an oxygen tank. In Uruguay, nobody buys such expensive equipment unless they are going to be used for a long time. Jacobo endured his mother's death alone, since his brother was in Brazil, and after one year of her death he still kept all of his mother's belongings.

The above analysis of Elizabeth's home was approached through the processes of audience identification (the gaze), and through an analysis of the *mise-en-scène*. Now I propose deconstructing analytically the space into architectural, pictorial and filmic spaces.

Architecturally, the scene presents a path, in a fashion similar to that of Elizabeth's home scene. First it shows the kitchen, then Jacobo's room, his mother's room, the living room, and finishes back in the kitchen. By the way the rooms are distributed - articulated by a corridor- the elevator, the good quality of the parquet floor, and the metal window frames, we can infer that the apartment is of a modern, early sixties construction. Probably, this apartment belonged to Jacobo's parents and he lived there all his life, remaining stuck in the past.

The pictorial space can be analyzed by studying significant photograms (keyframes) of the scene. It presents three features. First, there is a persistent distancing of the camera from the characters, showing them in medium to long shots and disengaging the audience from the characters' reactions and emotions. Second, there is a closeness to the objects, showing them in

detailed shots and imposing upon the audience an uncomfortable familiarity with otherwise vulgar objects. Third, through the pictorial space revealed through the framing, the audience witnesses the inadequacy of Jacob and Marta's relationship. They cannot not fit inside the frame harmoniously. Either they are compositionally unbalanced and constrained by vertical lines (Figure 9) or darkness (Figure 10), or one of them is cut off in the frame – decapitated (Figures 11 and 12). In the only sequence where they are harmonically placed within the frame, the last shot in the kitchen, they are absolutely uncomfortable with each other (Figure 13).

Finally, let's analyze how architectural and pictorial spaces are articulated in the filmic space. The scarce conversation and silence enhances what the fixed camera carefully shows. The slow pace and rhythm of the montage forces us to detain our gaze and observe carefully the details of Jacobo's apartment. Traditionally, films present a coherent space by starting shot sequences with a long establishing shot of the space, and later offering more detailed insets of the long shot. In that way, the audience can place the details spatially. In *Whisky*, however, the montage presents us with a variation of this rule that subtly destructures the comprehension of space. Every time Martha enters each room, we see a long establishing shot (Figure 14). However, the next shot sequence is not necessarily a detailed inset of the long shot. Instead, the montage presents a detailed shot of something that is in the room somewhere (Figures 15 and 16); we know it is the same room because it has the same wallpaper, but it is not spatially referenced by the long shot. Therefore, the directors very subtly destroy the coherent comprehension of the room. The montage creates an unsettling feeling of disorder, and contained emotion. We see how Martha feels about Jacobo's apartment. Reinforcing this confusion inside each room, the directors weaken also the connection between the rooms by creating a rhythm of lights turning on and off. They repeat the same cycle for each room sequence: lights on, show the

room, lights off, next room. The corridor disinherits its function of spatial connection and becomes an uncomfortable space of body closeness between Martha and Jacobo.

## **Future Questions**

This paper presents two film scenes which express daily life through different representational approaches: a shot sequence and a montage sequence. The first case focuses on understanding how filmic representation manipulates an audience's identification. The second case reviews analytically a filmic space into three categories: architectural, pictorial, and filmic. Both scene analyses depart from studying the filmic enunciation and move towards including an experience of the space. Each example begins by relating to the film's language codes as formalized into photograms, and develops towards an understanding of how representation is used to express the subjectivity of one's gaze.

A student's understanding of how subjectivity can be represented throughout a filmic space could potentially facilitate the expression of their own experiences. Elizabeth's home, as represented in the first scene, is perceived as one where she moves about freely and unconstrained. Martha's visit to Jacobo's home in the second scene shows rooms as cells and the corridor as a constrained des-articulator. Such scene contrasts are not meant to imply a connection between film enunciation and the experiencing of "shot sequence-fluidity" and "montage-constrained space." These cases are meant to illustrate how film expresses meaningful spaces through the subjective gaze of its characters, and an approach for analyzing filmic space. Future work should foster students' implementation of their own subjective experiencing of spaces into their designs. This paper aims at understanding the issues involved in representing emotive and meaningful spaces through narrative.

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## Anexo



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3





Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16