Visual Studies: Four Takes on Spatial Turns

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The art that is closest to cinema is architecture.  
René Clair

The intersection of urban culture, architecture, and film is a most fertile and productive field of research. After decades of literary domination, Cinema Studies has joined in the spatial turn that cultural history and theory have taken in recent years. Architectural practice and theory have, in turn, embraced a mobilized, cinematic perspective, interacting in different ways with the discourse of moving images. Here are four filmic “takes” on this vital intersection from my perspective.

Take One: History And Modernity

Film’s undoubted ancestor . . . is—architecture. 
Sergei M. Eisenstein

The relation of architecture to the moving image is, first and foremost, a product of history. The first useful direction of research is a re-vision of nineteenth-century history and modernity. Film is a product of modernity, the era of the metropolis, and has expressed an urban viewpoint from its very origin. On the eve of the invention of cinema, a network of architectural forms produced a new spatio-visuality. Sites of transit such as arcades, bridges, railways, the electric underground, powered flight, skyscrapers, department stores, the pavilions of exhibition halls, glass houses, and winter gardens incarnated the new geography of modernity. Mobility—a form of cinematics—was the essence of these new architectures. By changing the relation between spatial perception and bodily motion, the architectures of transit prepared the ground for the invention of the moving image. On this spatial map of modernity, the film spectator, a relative of the railway passenger and the urban stroller, became the new flâneur.

Take Two: Spatial Critical Theory

Couldn’t an exciting film be made from the map of Paris? . . .
From the compression of a century-long movement of streets, boulevards, arcades, and squares into the space of half an hour?
Walter Benjamin

The link between film and urban culture that has emerged in cultural history is also a function of the critical thinking on modernity. Recent innovative scholarship on modernity engages with the shifting perceptual arena of a moving urban culture. And cinema participates in this new traveling cultural geography for its constant haptic reinvention of space. Think of Siegfried Kracauer, who, long ago, recognized film’s moving, tangible attraction for the city: the street, the pavement, feet walking over stones. The affinity between cinema and the city street pertains to the transient, for the street—like the cinema—is the site of transient impressions. In new paths of research on space, the image of the city interacts very closely with filmic representations. Cinema joins architectural practice as an art form of the street, an agent in the building of city views. The streetscape becomes as much a filmic “construction” as it is an architectural one.

Take Three: Filmic And Architectural Promenades

Space . . . exists in a social sense only for activity—for (and by virtue of) walking . . . or traveling.
Henri Lefebvre

New historical and theoretical directions of research recognize the filmic path as the modern version of the architectural itinerary. This connection is furthermore textual, for it engages our ability to read space. An architectural ensemble is read as it is traversed. This is also the case for the cinematic spectacle, for film is read as it is traversed and is readable insofar as it is traversable. As we go through it, it goes through us. A “visitor” is the subject of this practice—a passage through spaces of light.

She who wanders through a building or a site acts precisely like a film spectator absorbing and connecting visual spaces. The changing position of a body in space creates both architectural and cinematic grounds. Architectural frames, like film frames, are transformed by an open relation of movement to events. These movements are practices of space, that is, tangible plots of everyday life. Ultimately, this is how urban experiences—dynamics of space, movement, and lived narrative—embody the effect of the cinema, and its intimate promenades.
Take Four: Haptic Design

Spatial design today means a weaving together of spatial elements, which are mostly achieved in invisible but clearly discernible relationships of multidimensional movement and in fluctuating energy relationships.

László Moholy-Nagy

This new research on space and motion ultimately touches on internally mobilized territories—inner landscapes. Like the city, motion pictures move both outward and inward: they journey through the space of the imagination, the site of memory, and the topography of affects. It is this mental itinerary that, finally, makes film the art that is closest to architecture. Just like architecture, cinema creates mental and emotional maps, acting as membrane for a multifold transport. Layers of cultural memory, densities of hybrid histories, and psychogeographic transport are housed by film's spatial practice of cognition. A vehicle for cultural voyages, cinema offers tracking shots to traveling cultures. Like the city itself, it is a moving inner landscape, a mobile map—a trace of inner differences as well as cross-cultural travel.

In conclusion, to adopt this mobile urban viewpoint for both architecture and film—two seemingly static and optical activities—we must transform our sense of these art forms. To join the paths of research on architecture and cinema, not optically but haptically, is to corrode oppositions such as immobility-mobility, inside-outside, private-public, dwelling-travel. Architecture and cinema are permeable spaces. In between housing and motion, these spaces question the very limits of the opposition. They force us to rethink cultural expression itself as a site of interior-exterior travel and dwelling—an interstitial space.