Probabilistic Space In Architecture And The Avant Garde Films Of Chris Marker And Stan Brakhage

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PROBABILISTIC OR IMMEMORIAL SPACE

If we ask how architecture should proceed today, it might be helpful to begin with a thought experiment. What would happen if by some unknowable force all architecture was removed from the planet? Certainly, we would have places to live, work and shop, but everything we held as valuable architecture would be gone. There might be traces of past architectural glory in the fragments clinging onto regular buildings, but otherwise architecture would be relegated to memory. The important question to ask is, "would we pick up from where we left off as if the collected knowledge concerning architecture, up to the day it disappeared, was the way to go?" In other words, were we on the right trajectory? On one hand we would like to claim that "yes;" we did the right things and that architecture was progressing nicely. In other words, the collective body of architectural knowledge is predicated upon universal architectural attributes that each generation expressed more accurately than the previous generation. Is this to say that innovation and transformation have been perfect and we have the best architecture? On the other hand, what if we were wrong by being mired in stasis and the answer is "no"? And for the sake of argument, we come to realize that many of the principles that constituted architecture, from its humble beginnings to the day it disappeared, were hiding more powerful possibilities, but these possibilities were inaccessible because our rhetoric disallowed radical discoveries. For example, Peter Eisenman, one of the most original and outspoken critics of architecture, proposes (in almost all of his writings) to rethink architecture in new and radical terms, such as Derrida's theory of deconstructionism. But for all of his bravado and inventiveness his true intention is typically revealed in moments of candidness, when he writes my work "merely proposes an end to the dominance of classical values in order to reveal other values."[1] This means that his epiphany discloses the architectural fiction called classicism that has dominated architecture and replaces it with new values. Similarly, Kenneth Frampton argues for place, which he sees as dismissing populist nostalgia for vernacular forms and advocating for the amalgamation of modern architecture's progressive aspects with a region's traditional context. Contrary, Frampton surmises that in doing so place will reveal the "bounded fragment against which the ceaseless inundation of a place-less, alienating consumerism will find itself momentarily checked."[2] In other words, place is mostly a blinder that blocks the chaotic reality that constitutes realty rather than a true transformation.

The kernel to answering the question: "are we doing it correctly?," lies within the basic attributes haunting all questions about architecture, which are space and time. Further, implicit in any analysis of space and time is movement. These basic attributes provide the catalyst for signification and meaning in architecture. Perhaps architecture suffers from an essentialist view of space, time, and movement; a view that has never changed. Thus, although not self-evident, film theory and film offers a great tool to investigate notions of movement and its relationship to space and time. I argue that architecture suffers from a traditional definition of movement and its expression in space and time. In a Benjaminian manner, one could call this no-

Figure 1

tion of space architecture's "aura." Under the traditional rubric of movement architecture is conceived of as a static immemorial object rather than as a transformative and critical event. In other words, movement is traditionally defined as a series of infinitesimally small sections of space that contain a fixed pose, or rather, an idealized pose. These poses are then linked through time to create our traditional definition of movement. The problem, according to Gilles Deleuze, is that the traditional notion of movement presents an artificial presentation of movement predicated on an idealized notion of something moving. This is problematic because movement of this kind prefers stasis over change, which is the preference preferred by the status quo.

This paper explores cinematic theories of movement under Gilles Deleuze's works that claims thinking spatially artificially fixes events and things via identity through linear time.[3] I begin with Walter Benjamin's theory of aura and its link to architecture, followed by an explication of Gilles Deleuze's notion of the movement-image and time-image from his books on cinema by examining the avant-garde films by Chris Marker and Stan Brakhage. Perhaps the probabilistic spaces expressed by Marker and Brakhage could inspire and free architecture of its dependence on static time and place.

A dramatic consequence of thinking spatially is evident in how we construct buildings, some of which are architecture. At first glance one encounters a cacophony of styles ranging from neo-Chinese restaurants, modern housing, to Renaissance stores, Colonial villages, Classical Greek banks, and French chateaus. Further, these buildings are disjointed, placed into slices of discreet spaces, and severed from any original existence in time and space [Figure 1]. This is to say they can exist anywhere while maintaining their authentic intention and farcically suggest continuity through their discordant physical presence. Yet any one of us easily negotiates these places without the least bit of concern. Certainly, as designers we recoil in horror to these regurgitated buildings, but nonetheless, when given the chance to actually make architecture we accept these de facto conditions. What allows us to use these disconnected spatial experiences? The most logical reason is that, although disjointed, they possess a cause and effect or rather a beginning and end. In other words, they are connected by our belief in a definitive world where space-and what occurs

within it- are logically bound. We believe space is continuous and easily subdivided. Additionally, we see our movements, or any movement, as discrete instances comprised of a body that at any moment- if we could freeze a body in motion-is a complete and total entity. We tend to criticize the awkward juxtaposition of styles and their spatial collisions on bad taste or inadequate appreciation of true architectural expression. But is there another reason? Film provides us with a useful model for comparison. D.N. Rodowick explains a similar phenomenon occurring in film. His example comes from Buster Keaton's film *Sherlock Jr.* which depicts Keaton hilariously moving from one dissonant space to another. Rodowick explains, at one moment "Keaton finds himself on a rock by an ocean, he dives, only to land headfirst in a snow bank." Certainly, this is funny. But why are we not frozen in bewilderment and unable to connect the irrational dots? The primary reason we are not frozen, Rodowick writes, is because "every division, no matter how unlikely and nonsensical, is mastered by this figure of rationality [here it is Keaton] where the identification of movement with action assures the continuous unfolding of adjacent spaces."[4] The absurdity of any spatial event is guaranteed by humans who visually and mentally stitch together the disparate causes and there effects to give the appearance of a logical relationship. This patching together of irrational events is the outcome of our traditional definition of movement and its expression through action. However, following Deleuze, Rodowick concludes that this is a consequence of the subordination of time to movement. Or more specifically, this is the consequence of thinking spatially.

AURA: A THING'S PRESENCE IN TIME AND SPACE

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin claims that throughout history humanity has suffered because of aura. Benjamin claims aura is the result of the artwork's unique existence, which makes it a one-of-a-kind thing encapsulated in tradition and marked by value. Art has a special presence because of its unequaled conception in time and space. A piece's aura commands reverence and acquiescence. Primarily, aura gives meaning to the concept of authenticity.[5] Authenticity, Benjamin writes, is the "essence of all that is transmissible from its [art's] beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to the history which it has experienced."[6] One could say that art is an uncanny object whose attributes require one to understand it being "embedded in the fabric of tradition."[7] In doing so one contemplates, or rather, actively immerses themselves into the art. Not surprisingly, Benjamin claims art and its aura historically unfolds within the social fabric in a cult-like manner: first it is magical (cave images), then religious (through rituals), and finally the modern ritual of beauty (aesthetics) and the notion of art for art's sake.[8] For Benjamin the cult of aura in art creates exclusivity and preconceptions through the evolution of patrons, critics, and rulers. Experts are required to interpret and present the important properties of a work of art so that its meaning is ascertained correctly. However, in the age of mechanical reproduction the ability to reproduce art removes its exclusive presence and replaces it with a myriad of spaces where art can be "seen." This, Benjamin claims, dissipates aura. Benjamin claims film is an example of mechanical reproduction par excellence. Further, film is "characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert."[9] In other words, everyone assumes the position of the critic or expert, which in turn liberates art and frees subjugated points of view. Benjamin explains the difference between having aura and not having aura is the distinction between viewing art via concentration or in a state of distraction. He defines the former as being in the state of being *absorbed* by the work, which means that its attributes, meaning, and importance are actively embraced and understood. The latter he defines as being in a state that *absorbs* the work, which means that its attributes, meaning, and importance remain in a state of indeterminacy while being viewed. For Benjamin this subtle difference is the difference between subjugated world and a free creative world..

In the same essay Benjamin makes an intriguing comparison between architecture and film, stating that architecture in-itself dissipates aura. He explains that architecture, although not mechanically reproducible, is not susceptible to aura because it "has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction."[10] I take this to mean that, for Benjamin, architecture

emulates the state *absorbing* the work by those who inhabit it (undertake its properties and evaluate them as they really are in the moment), rather than the state of being *absorbed* by it. Architecture has always been able to do this, Benjamin claims, because it requires both a tactile and visual appropriation via habit that cannot be induced by aura. In this sense, film is like architecture in that it too can instigate new habits independent from concentration and aura. He concludes that when a person is in a state of distraction a film [and architecture] makes the "cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention."[11] But is this not an invidious comparison? Does architecture not clearly demonstrate its embodiment of aura via its presence? Why does Benjamin insist that it is free from aura? I think that the confusion stems from the fact that although architecture is demonstratively bound to its presence in time and space (thus it has aura) this is hidden by its spatial complexity. Why does this paradox exist? One possible answer is that although architecture solicits a state of distraction it has yet to reach the point that film has reached. Could this be because architecture typically lacks reproducibility? Building methods have change little over the last hundred years: buildings are still "built by hand." But perhaps there is another reason and to locate it we should go further into the relationship between architecture and film by focusing on movement. One hypothesis is that this paradox emerges from the fact that architecture is still articulated in the present as an unchanging entity.

EXPERIENCING ARCHITECTURE ONE FRAME AT A TIME

We experience architecture exactly as we experience much of the world; which is as a series of images that appear to us while traversing space. These images are augmented by our other senses of sound and touch (and to some extent smell), but our primary mode of perspicacity are images. Our natural perception presents these images as disconnected embodiments of the world. In other words, the presentation of the world to our eyes can be described as an undifferentiated flux comprised of colors, shades, and motion. It is not until the images are processed in our minds through, what Kant calls our manifold of understanding, that the cacophony of images (and their content) are thematize. Here we organize the world into shapes, things, and object-like qualities of space whereby we discern meaning. In other words, we experience the world as phenomena.[12] Gilles Deleuze calls this kind of processed image a "perception-image," which is comprised of everything seen minus the stuff filtered by our vision. This is a very important distinction that must be fully appreciated. Although everything is available and "seen," when our mind thematizes the indeterminate flux it selects only those parts that are of interest or necessary. In other words, we are incapable of seeing what is actually all there. The primary attribute of the perception-image is movement, which Ronald Bogue describes as the "means whereby living images receive movements, and perception is always linked to action, for which reason all perception is sensori-motor, an instrument for translating an external movement via the senses into an ensuing motor action."[13] Although we are incapable of seeing the world as it really is, our process of selecting those bits of interest centers around the ability to discern movement.

We typically describe movement as a continuous action consisting of a series of poses at determined moments in time. A perfect example of this comes from Edweard Muybridge's photographic studies depicting common actions, such as a women walking and waving a scarf over her heard [Figure 2]. Deleuze describes this as immobile sections plus abstract time. The error of this theory is the fact that, although it depicts movement in a manner that appears realistic and matches our common notion of moving bodies it is, Deleuze claims, actually a presentation of a false movement because it artificially divides movements that are fluid and continuous. The point Deleuze is making is that space, where movements occur, is distinct and different from movement. This might sound odd but Lambert explains, "unlike space, movement cannot be segmented or divided into static sections,"[14] because movement is a continuous flow with its own unique duration. The importance of this distinction, according to Deleuze, is that movement and time have a unique relationship with perception that is endemically linked to signification, or rather, meaning. For Deleuze, the typical way of seeing movement and time reinforces a static logic or a way of thinking that prefers the status quo over crucial change. In this manner, the mode of experiencing architecture is uncannily similar to the mode of experiencing

film, with the primary differences being the state which the observer is in: moving or not moving and the way images are thematized. A major error in thinking about both film and architecture is our belief that they only exist in the present rather than in a state of continual change. This error severely limits the fully expressive qualities of both art forms. However, film has managed to find a way out of this deadlock as we will see in Marker's film *Sans Soleil*.

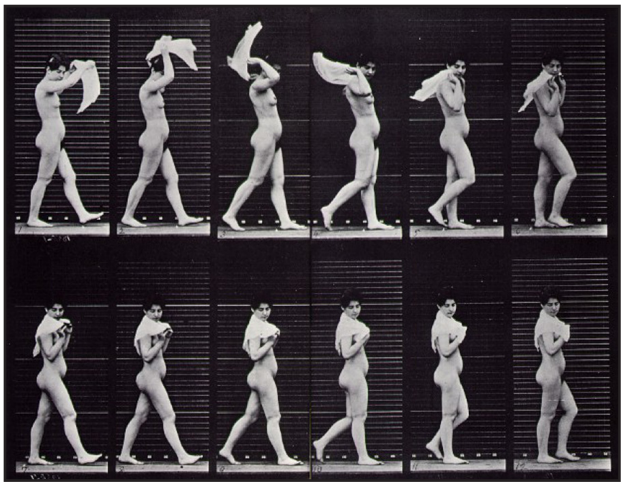

Figure 2

On the other hand, Deleuze explains "being is not made up of presents" and recounts the words of Henri Bergson, who wrote, "the present is useful; [but] being is the past."[15]This replaces the traditional model outlined above where we think of ourselves as always being in the present. Actually, what is present is a moving target that we never fully occupy but use quite heavily. Thus, there is no stable and singular present to occupy than there is no identity waiting for us at any moment of our lives. In other words, when we stop spatializing time into discreet instants we see the present as a continual becoming.[16] The question is this possible in architecture? The film *Sans Soleil* is comprised of present moments that are continually evolving, thus they resist being causally linked and catalogued.

The present is revealed to be a living present which, according to Deleuze, has a limited duration because at any given moment it is exposed to different forces that potentially change it.[17] Here a current moment is not a single inhabitable present or space that is also identical with time itself, because this would mean that we are frozen in time. This recognition breaks from the idea of an enduring present inhabiting spatialized time. It destroys the fetishized manner—using abstracted identities, such as banker or homeowner— in which we imagine ourselves as essentially unchanging beings. Now there are any number of presents that can be formed, exhausted, and pass away that vary according to circumstances and not rules.

Figure 3

Chris Marker's ground breaking film *Sans Soleil* is a remarkable example of Deleuze's idea of "becoming" or thinking non-spatially. The film uses documentary style footage to present the temporal event rather than a logical linear story. In the film a female narrator relates snippets from letters she received from a cameraman named Sandor Krasna recounting his experiences and thoughts. The primary issue is that the recounting lacks a formal narrative logic. Additionally, the accompanying film images are disconnected or at minimum tangential to her reading. Not surprisingly this disjunctive relationship compromises narrative unity and unified cohesive thoughts. The irrational changes in location and time shatter our expectations of spatial continuity and linear time, as if the foundation of spatial experience, cause and effect, were only a fiction. Mapped on top of Marker's film is an intense sonic attack comprised of music, voices, and sounds which further distances time from space. The ability to fracture the relationship between movement and space is the pure presentation of Deleuzeian time. The film opens with a preface, but it is not the beginning of the film [Figure 3]. This brief segment displaces filmic time (the present moment of watching the film) and the duration

of events within the film. This is experience as a shock to linear time. We see a black screen and a female voice over says,

The first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland, in 1965.

> [cut to a shot of three children walking]
> He said that for him it was the image of happiness
> [cut to black screen]
> And also that he had tried several times to link it to other images
> [cut to shot of fighter jet on an aircraft carrier]
> but it never worked.
> [cut to black screen]

He wrote me: one day I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader; if they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black (Marker)

This short preface exhibits the thematic ideas that comprise the film: subjectivity and memories. Additionally, the unique temporal shifts and the indeterminacy between the referent (the shot) and the description (voice over) are difficult to describe, yet paramount to the film. Then the film begins. Here the typical narrative patterns and the expected link between cause and effect erase the paramount importance of movement [Figure 4]. The point to extract from *Sans Soleil* is that happiness is a continual becoming, an event that can only be expressed as interlaced temporal durations or as blackness. We can begin to outline this through an understanding of our senses and the typical belief that we actually know objects, like architecture, it-itself. Which means that we have access to its true being and reality, but as mentioned above this is not the case. A minor detour into our finite experience of things via Kant might provide illumination.

Figure 4

WHAT WE SEE IS WHAT WE KNOW?

Kant claimed the world is represented to us through our senses and we react to it based on whether it triggers pleasure or displeasure. According to Žižek, Kant's concern was that any determinations made by "our will is [...] always empirical, [and] linked to contingent circumstances." Thus we must live with the fact that we are only finite beings limited by our "phenomenal, temporal-spatial experience." Our finite existence severely handicaps us because we lack access to the "thing-in-itself."[18] A resultant problem that plagues architecture is the fact the design process is filtered through an essentialist lens that represents both contained and container as having tangible properties other than what we can think. We proceed as if a design is a unique entity and its salient properties contribute, merge, or modify its environment in a positive manner. Of course, at first glance, this makes perfect sense. But let's reverse this belief. Because architecture is designed as an entity whose essence, it is believed, makes the world better through its ability to contribute, merge, or modify its environment, we become locked into a process that resists change. In the former claim architecture has endemic attributes that remain the same throughout time, but its expression might change. For example, we have incredible classical, modern, deconstruction, and postmodern architecture as well as blob and flow architecture. So why is this problem? Simply put it precludes radical change by placing the essence of architecture into a timeless space that is articulated by linear temporal narrative. This is evident in most architectural history courses where Architecture (with a capital "A") begins at year zero unfolding logically towards an ever perfecting absolute. The latter claim above, however, rephrases the argument so that it can be examined. Stan Brakhage's films provide a unique wedge to open a new space for analysis.

CONCLUSION: PROBABILISTIC SPACE AND MOVEMENT NOT POTENTIAL SPACE AND MOVEMENT

Stan Brakhage's films are representative of the best non-narrative experimental products of the twentieth century. He explores a wide range of techniques, such as painting on film, collage, and using moth

wings for film negatives. The dominate aspect of his work stems from the presentation of duration, instead of a linear time unfolding in space. If something recognizable does appear, such as a person, building, or lamp, Brakhage presents it as parts rather than whole, disassociated from cause and effect, and the probability to make something happen rather than something actually happening. This is expressed by his use of pure visual and sonic images. These kinds of images resist both a totalizing or a rather bringing together into determinable entities and clearly marked spatial boundaries. Thus, a viewer must experience Brakhage films as complete immersion into a destabilizing and frantic world, requiring them to think in the immediate moment rather than recalling an idealized past [Figure 5]. What would architecture look like if it too produced pure visual and sonic images as way to move past the limits of representational thinking? One answer would have architecture comprised of spaces that are more probabilistic rather than intuitive. In other words, architecture would forgo narrative structure in the form descriptions of spatial uses and notions of place as a centered and meaningful locus that is waiting to be revealed by architecture. This is best understood through Deleuze's ideas of the movement-image and the time-image.

Figure 5

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* and *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* Gilles Deleuze provides a philosophy of film and an ontology of being that explores both traditional representational thinking in film which he calls the *movement-image* and a new liberating anti-representational thoughts which he calls the *time-image*. Deleuze explains that both address notions of movement, space, and time differently. In the representational model of the *movement-image* individuals are subservient to spatial locations and their movements are predetermined based on one's expectations emerging from the logic of cause and effect. Deleuze argues that the *movement-image* creates "automatic-movement [and it] gives rise to spiritual automation" or rather automatic-thinking.[19] The form of this spatial-temporal construction is based on a "sensory-motor schema" where one's thought processes are not derived from "deducing thoughts from each other" (like philosophy) but instead they are obtained from a "circuit…[of] shared power."[20] The "circuit of shared power" is the ideological system that warrants how someone should react when encountering certain situations, such as buying the right car, listening to "proper" music, or designing a house for those of low to moderate means of income. The *movement-image* is similar to the notion of spatial-thinking discussed previously. The sensory-motor schema is dangerous because it exploits our desire for certainty by imposing logical and ideological causes and effects.[21] Additionally, it provides the logical means to allow architecture to exist as if it were immemorial. The *movement-image*, according to Deleuze, replicates the totality of what we imagine our social praxis to be in narrative and internal monologue form. The *movement-image* is mobilized in classic filmmaking techniques, such as cutting to continuity, parallel editing, and three-part narrative structure.

On the other hand, the *time-image* unlinks or breaks the sensory-motor connection to become a free-floating negotiable expression. In Brakhage's films the time-image manifests as a direct response to the limitations of the movement-image that Brakhage saw as being unable to express the situations arising. Deleuze explains that people encounter situations to which they can no longer react because the traditional modes of representation fail. In other words, we are placed in a certain state where our environment presents us with "situations to which one can longer react, of environments with which there are now only chance relations, of empty space or disconnected any space-wherever replacing qualified extended space.[22] Thus, the modes of resolving these events cannot be accounted for in the techniques of the movement-image. Deleuze says the *time-image* is a "perpetual reorganization, in which a new image can arise from any point whatever of the pre-

ceding image," while the internal monologue (that which makes sense) is removed and replaced by "free indirect discourse."[23] This forces radically disparate images, both spatially and temporally, to be considered together; a sort of new time-space environment. In films, such as *Sans Soleil* and Brakhage's *Mothlight* this is accomplished by radical depth of field, camera movement, and irrational cuts to reveal disjunctive and irrational spaces.[24] This radical rethinking of space along with a new understanding of true movement and its existence in many tangents of time provides a paradigm to begin architecture again. But, it is not the "begin anew" stemming from the thought experiment that opened the essay but rather, a beginning that reoccurs as the always new. There is no lineage in the traditional sense but rather only creative events. And what could this kind of architecture look like?

ENDNOTES

1 Peter Eisenman, "The End of the Classical, The End of the Beginning, The End of the End," in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965–1995*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 220.
2 Kenneth Frampton, "Prospects for a Critical Regionalism," in *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965–1995*, ed. Kate Nesbitt (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 482.
3 Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Habberjam Barabara (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 104–6.
4 D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 3.
5 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Cambridge: University Press of Florida, 1986), 667.
6 Ibid, 667–68.
7 Ibid, 669.
8 Ibid, 669.
9 Ibid, 675.
10 Ibid, 679.
11 Ibid, 679.
12 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) and Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St Martin's Press, 1965).
13 Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 30.
14 Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*, 21.
15 Gilles Deleuze, "Bergson, 1959–1941," in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Christopher Bush, reprint, 1956 (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 24.
16 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, reprint, 1968 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 80–85.
17 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 76–77.
18 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know not What They Do* (London: Verso, 1991), 229.
19 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 157.
20 Ibid, 157.
21 Ibid, 12–56.
22 Ibid, 272.
23 Ibid,, 183–265.
24 Ibid, 176–80.