Review of *Architecture in Cinema*

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Abstract

This paper reviews the book *Architecture in Cinema*, which explores the multilayered relationship between architecture and cinema from both generic and historical perspectives, offering a critical framework for rethinking the role of architecture within cinematic narratives.
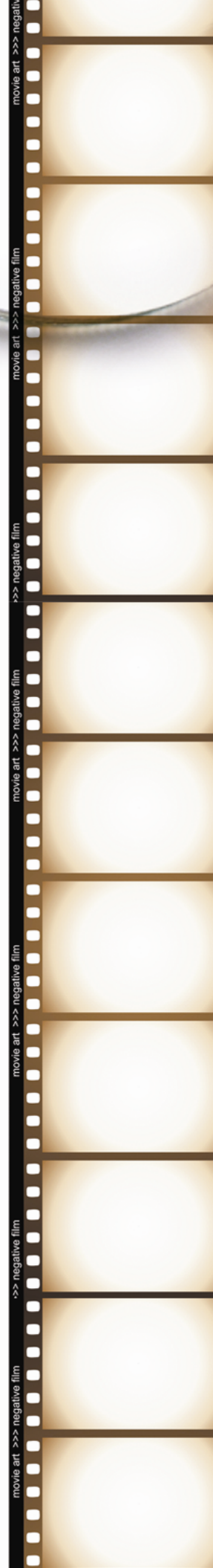
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Review of *Architecture in Cinema*[1]

Ebru Erdoğan

Architecture in Cinema, edited by Nevnihal Erdoğan and Hikmet Temel Akarsu, is published in 2024 by Bentham Science Publishers. This volume brings together analyses of fifty landmark films by architects, writers, theorists, and scholars, each offering professional insight from their respective fields. The book presents a renewed approach to architectural and design thinking by drawing on the expressive language of cinema, its capacity to evoke spatial experience, and the imaginative possibilities it offers for rethinking environments. Rather than limiting itself to the depiction or application of architecture, the chapters present critical reflections that inspire creativity, explore utopian and dystopian ideas, cultivate aesthetic awareness, and engage with broader sociological, ecological, and political concerns. The films discussed are categorized into fourteen dramas, nine horror films, seven comedies, seventeen science fiction films, and three documentaries.

Dramatic cinema discussed in the volume reveal the complex interplay between architecture and cinema, as explored through fourteen works produced between 1959 and 2020. These films engage with architectural space across a variety of themes, including urban environments, sacred architecture, monumental forms, personal experience, and socioeconomic

change. The convergence of historical narrative and spatial representation is powerfully

articulated in two formative films. *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), which constructs Rome

and Jerusalem as symbolic embodiments of political and sacred authority, and *Doctor Zhivago*

(David Lean, 1965), which traces the transformation from Tsarist Russia to the Soviet regime

through the shifting relationship between the individual and the built environment. In a different

vein, *Winter Sleep* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2014) foregrounds the psychological dimension of space

by linking the natural topography of Cappadocia to the intellectual entrapment of its characters,

while *Troy* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2004) demonstrates how architecture is instrumentalized in the

cinematic reconstruction of historical narratives through contemporary aesthetics, thereby

exposing the tension between dramatized storytelling and historical representation. The

relationship between architecture and memory is foregrounded in films such as Fellini's *Rome*

(Federico Fellini, 1972) and Ulysses' Gaze (Theodoros Angelopoulos, 1995). Fellini, for

instance, reimagines Rome as an aesthetic plane of both personal and collective memory,

redefining architecture as a space imbued with affective presence. Similarly, Peter Greenaway's

The Belly of an Architect (1987) engages with the aesthetic, philosophical, and existential

dimensions of architecture through the protagonist's gradual decline, transforming the

relationship between form, memory, and death into a powerful metaphorical terrain. In *The*

Name of the Rose (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1986), the oppressive aesthetics of Gothic architecture

and the spatial configuration of the monastery frame a narrative of intellectual and theological conflict. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg, 1976) provides an allegorical exploration of the relationship between architecture and nature, interrogating environmental ethics and sustainability through its speculative lens, and offering a conceptual foundation that resonates with contemporary ecological architecture discourse. The critique of modernism becomes more pronounced in *The Architect* (2006) and *City of God* (2002), where architectural design is placed in direct dialogue with questions of social disconnection and systemic inequality. While *The Architect* critiques the detachment of modernist ideals from their socio-cultural context, *City of God* examines housing policies in Rio de Janeiro through themes of violence, exclusion, and marginalization, prompting reflection on the ethical dimensions of architectural practice. Representations of space that are abstract, multisensory, or conceptually reduced emerge powerfully in *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003), *Johnny Got His Gun* (Dalton Trumbo, 1971), and *Nomadland* (Chloé Zhao, 2020). *Dogville* exposes the mechanisms of ideological construction through a scenographic minimalism that erases material context. *Johnny Got His Gun* intensifies spatial experience through sensory deprivation, foregrounding the body as a site of spatial perception. *Nomadland,* through its depiction of non-sedentary life practices, rethinks spatial identity along the axes of transience, mobility, and belonging, and gestures toward an alternative architectural ontology. All these dramatic films position space not merely as a

physical backdrop but as an aesthetic, symbolic, and political narrative device through which inner psychological states, historical ruptures, and social transformations are explored. In doing so, cinema emerges as a powerful medium that renders visible the historical, social, and personal dimensions of architecture.

The horror cinema creates a multilayered intersection with the discipline of architecture by visualizing subconscious fears and psychological disintegration through spatial narratives. Beginning with Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) and extending to works such as David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) and David Fincher's *Panic Room* (2002), these films reveal how architecture becomes an active conduit for psychological tension. In *The Shining*, *The Overlook Hotel* is portrayed as a psycho-architectural structure that shapes the character's mental collapse, aligning with Gaston Bachelard's notion of "spatial memory". In *Lost Highway*, dark corridors, foggy highways, and claustrophobic interiors function as architectural projections of the unconscious, enabling space to be explored on an experiential and existential dimension. The subconscious reflections of horror are not limited to psychological disintegration; they also take shape as a framework that guides the viewer's gaze and opens up a discussion on the ethical and political boundaries of space. In this context, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) stands as a seminal film that questions the relationship between architecture and visual perception. As Jefferies observes his neighbors from his window, the surrounding architecture

becomes a threshold where surveillance, privacy, and ethical concerns converge. The window itself, invoking Michel Foucault's theory of the panoptic gaze, reflects the power-generating capacity of architecture. Similarly, in the Coen brothers' *Barton Fink* (1991), the Hotel Earle operates as an "anti-space," serving as an architectural metaphor for alienation, internal collapse, and creative crisis. When interpreted through Henri Lefebvre's theory of "the ideological production of space," these settings reveal that architecture functions not only as a shelter but also as a site of psychological and ideological representation. A foundational example of German Expressionism, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) illustrates that architecture can function as an aesthetic means of expressing inner psychological states. Other films situated on the boundaries of the horror and thriller genres also use architecture as a medium of ideological and epistemological representation. *Parasite* (2019) reveals class stratification with striking force spatial hierarchy, while *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) employs architectural elements as visual carriers of knowledge and narrative complexity. Taken together, these films demonstrate how architecture becomes a vehicle for representing internal psychological worlds, social conflict, and systems of ideological control, thereby affirming its role as a narrative device grounded in ideology, perception, and knowledge.

Comedy cinema, despite its seemingly light tone, offers nuanced representations and critical perspectives on architecture. It often constructs an ironic engagement with modern lifestyles, social conventions, and spatial configurations by employing exaggeration, contrast, and parody in its portrayal of architectural and urban contexts. Within this scope, seven films are analyzed. Five are firmly situated within the comedy genre, while two, although primarily romantic dramas, provide significant contributions to the architecture-cinema dialogue through their spatial narratives. These films are regarded as complex cinematic texts that integrate architectural representation, individual-spatial experience, and urban critique through a humorous and reflective lens. Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), Jacques Tati's *Playtime* and *Mon Oncle,* Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), and Gustavo Taretto's *Medianeras* (2011) critically engage with the aesthetic, social, and psychological dimensions of architecture through a distinct comedic lens. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* constructs architecture as a space of historical memory, while *Playtime* and *Mon Oncle* adopt an ironic tone to question the functionalism of modernist architecture and the dehumanizing tendencies of urban development. By employing artificial cityscapes and sterile residential environments, these films visually reflect the individual's spatial alienation and critique the loss of human scale in contemporary design. *Modern Times* satirically addresses the mechanisms of control imposed by modern architecture and industrial life. In this context, spatial settings function as

disciplinary sites, reminiscent of Foucault's notion of heterotopia, while Chaplin's character resists such structures through humour, reclaiming agency and subjectivity. Films such as *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler, 1953) and *Before Sunrise* (Richard Linklater, 1995), which lean more toward romantic drama, nevertheless offer significant contributions to spatial narration by intertwining emotional transformation with the urban environment. These works are not comedies but can be evaluated within a separate framework centered on emotional intimacy and urban experience. In this respect, the aforementioned comedy films make visible how architecture operates beyond the production of physical settings, revealing its aesthetic, cultural, social, and psychological dimensions through humorous, ironic, and critical narratives. Comedy cinema redefines architecture not merely as a decorative element but as an active agent that shapes identity, behavior, relationships, and existential orientation.

Science fiction cinema is not confined to speculative visions of the future; it also interrogates the technological, cultural, and social dimensions of architecture. Among early and classic science fiction films distinguished by ideological and class-based representations, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) stands out as one of the first examples to depict architecture as an ideological instrument, representing class division through a vertically stratified spatial structure. Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is not only considered an iconic work in the history of

science fiction cinema but also serves as a key reference point in terms of spatial design, atmospheric construction, and the relationship between cinema and architecture. His subsequent film, *Blade Runner* (1982), explores the dystopian projections of postmodern urbanization through architectural representation. The chaotic urban fabric of Los Angeles visualizes concepts such as surveillance, identity, and alienation through spatial forms. Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) can be interpreted in parallel with Michel Foucault's reflections on disciplinary society, portraying infrastructure not as an aesthetic element but as a mechanism of bureaucratic oppression. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) elevates architecture to a metaphysical and philosophical realm. The iconic white room sequence, in particular, suspends conventional perceptions of time and space, revealing architecture's engagement with existential questions. *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997) presents a repressive architectural aesthetic, with its symmetrical and naturalness interiors reflecting a society structured by genetic determinism. Among contemporary science fiction films, Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) approaches architecture as a mental process of creation. The dream-layered structures demonstrate how architecture can transcend physical reality through notions of representation, perception, and simulation. In *Cloud Atlas* (Tom Tykwer, Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 2012), spatial transformation across time underscores the contextual and transitional nature of architecture. Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) explores the impact

of technology on architectural perception through digital simulations, while also suggesting the need to reconsider ecological sensitivity in design by highlighting the dangers of nature-detached environments. Similarly, *Dune* (Denis Villeneuve, 2021) presents the spatial manifestation of political power through monumental architecture that adapts to environmental conditions. The structures on the planet Arrakis articulate dynamics of domination and resistance through the use of stone, light, and void. Certain films that approach the boundaries of the fantasy genre also offer significant architectural insight. Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) constructs a world in which perception is distorted, and scale is fluid, reminding us that architecture can be imagined beyond fixed conventions. Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) likewise integrate architecture with emotional and social critique. In particular, the contrast between the gothic mansion and the pastel suburban houses in *Edward Scissorhands* conveys the individual's social exclusion through architectural metaphor. Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003) demonstrates how architectural preferences reflect cultural identity by presenting architecture as a bearer of value systems. Films such as *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and *Lost in Translation* (Sofia Coppola, 2003), which can be situated near the boundaries of science fiction, expose the psychological and social effects of architecture on the individual through artificial urban settings and digitized metropolitan landscapes. In these films, architecture is intertwined

with issues of surveillance, globalization, and identity. Within this framework, science fiction cinema emerges as a rich intellectual terrain that contributes to architectural discourse not only on a visual level but also conceptually, ideologically, and ethically. Each of these films reveals that architecture is not merely concerned with spatial production, but also engages with meaning, identity, belonging, and power relations through cinematic articulation. As such, science fiction cinema functions as a unique laboratory that expands the intellectual universe of architecture and enables the development of a critical perspective on the future.

Documentary cinema, with its narrative structure grounded in representations of reality, serves as a powerful medium for revealing not only the formal or aesthetic aspects of architecture but also its intellectual, cultural, ethical, and emotional dimensions. Three influential documentary films, namely *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), *Baraka* (1992), and *My Architect: A Son's Journey* (2003), explore the multilayered relationships architecture forms with the individual, society, nature, and ideology. These works examine the interaction between cinema and architecture not only through visual representation but also through intellectual, emotional, and critical engagement, each offering a distinct mode of architectural reflection. Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* critiques the spatial collapse produced by urbanization and technology, inviting a reconsideration of architecture's socio-ecological responsibilities. His cinematic language engages with themes such as sustainability, design ethics, and individual

alienation, translating these concerns into a compelling visual discourse. Ron Fricke's *Baraka*, conceived as a meditative cinematic experience, addresses the experiential and cultural dimensions of architecture and invites viewers into a sensory and intellectual dialogue. The film can be interpreted through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space, as it redefines the relationship between human beings and nature, ritual, and the urban environment. Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect* presents a personal account of Louis I. Kahn's life and architectural legacy, constructing a narrative shaped by the emotional tension between professional practice and familial memory. Through this autobiographical lens, the film reveals how architecture intersects with questions of personal identity, emotional inheritance, and the unresolved dimensions of memory.

This paper reviews the book *Architecture in Cinema*, which explores the multilayered relationship between architecture and cinema from both generic and historical perspectives, offering a critical framework for rethinking the role of architecture within cinematic narratives. Through a selection of films from the genres of drama, horror, comedy, science fiction, and documentary, the book demonstrates that architecture is not only a spatial construct but also a vehicle for intellectual, critical, and experiential expression. Each genre engages with architecture in distinct ways, revealing the aesthetic, ideological, psychological, and cultural

dimensions of space. While dramatic films illuminate architecture's connections to historical narratives, personal identities, and emotional transformation, comedies address these relationships through an ironic lens rooted in everyday life and social norms. Documentary films position architecture as a space shaped by reality, memory, and philosophical inquiry, whereas horror cinema projects architecture onto a psycho-ideological plane, linking it to unconscious processes, trauma, and structures of power. The science fiction genre reveals how architecture intersects with futuristic imagination as well as socio-political, cultural, and ethical concerns, thereby reconfiguring architectural thought within temporal and speculative contexts.

The book goes beyond this generic framework to argue that architecture in cinema is not merely a narrative setting but also a narrative subject, an intellectual medium, and a critical instrument. Cinema is thus positioned not only as a representational tool for architecture but also as a platform that transforms, critiques, and reimagines it. Through its multidimensional engagement with architectural theory, cinematic aesthetics, urban sociology, and cultural critique, this work offers a distinctive and integrated contribution that moves the architecture-cinema intersection beyond purely formal analysis and challenges the conceptual and intellectual boundaries of both fields. Overall, the book offers a significant conceptual contribution to the understanding of how architecture is represented through cinema. It successfully demonstrates the potential of cinema to reframe architectural thought in critical,

pluralistic, and imaginative ways. Serving as a valuable resource for both architectural theory

and film studies, the book establishes a solid foundation for interdisciplinary inquiry. Watching,

analysing, and internalizing the cinematic masterpieces discussed in this volume constitutes an

important intellectual endeavour, not only for imagining more liveable cities in the future but

also for making sense of the multilayered relationship between architecture and life.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] [Editor's note]: The book Architecture in Cinema is a pioneering new work updating the literature and going further than former studies by Videler (1993), Neumann (2000), Koeck (2012), Caims (2013), Lamster (2013), Tobe (2016). The book is especially timely regarding the recent achievements of films that make architecture front and centre like *The Brutalist* (2025).