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Site-seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image

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Film's undoubted ancestor...is -- architecture.

Sergei M. Eisenstein

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

Henri Lefebvre

Geography includes inhabitants and vessels.

Gertrude Stein



Writing on the architectonics of the traveling eye/I, my opening title got misspelled. By mistake, "sightseeing" became "siteseeing." As per its Latin root, an error implies a departure from a defined path.¹ Error incorporates erring--the act of traveling and wandering about. By way of such *error*, I make a theoretical move. Siteseeing signals a shift in film theory away from its focus on sight towards constructing a theory of site--a cartography, that is, **[End Page 9]** of film's position in the terrain of spatial arts and practices. My erring is ultimately a movement from optic to haptic.

The English language makes the transition from sight to site aurally seamless. Siteseeing is a "passage," out of the theory of the gaze. Many aspects of the moving image--for example, the acts of inhabiting and traversing space--could not be explained within the framework of theories of the eye. Locked within a fixed gaze, the film spectator was turned into a *voyeur*. Speaking of siteseeing implies that, because of film's spatio-corporeal kinetics, the spectator is a *voyageur* rather than a *voyeur*. Through this shift to *voy(ag)eur*, my aim is to reclaim female mobility, arguing, from the position of a (film) *voyageuse*, that film is modern cartography. It is a mobile map.

Genealogical Panoramas



The first step in a passage to "site-seeing" involves redrawing film's cultural map within the field of spatio-visibility. Film emerges out a shifting perceptual [End Page 10] arena and the architectural configurations of modern life. Cinema--the "motion" picture--inhabits modernity's moving urban culture.

On the eve of the invention of cinema, a network of architectural forms produced a new spatio-visibility. Arcades, railways, department stores, and exhibition halls, among others, incarnated the new geography of modernity. They were all sites of transit. Mobility--a form of cinematography--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--an outcome of the age of travel culture and the very epitome of modernity.

Film has much in common with this traveling geography, especially with regard to its constant reinvention of space. Film viewing is an imaginary form of *flânerie*, a "modern" gaze that wanders through space, fully open to women. ² A relative of the railway passenger and the urban stroller, the female spectator--a "*flâneuse*"--travels along architectural sites.

Modern Horizons: The Celluloid City

It is by way of architecture that film turns into cinema, for, in order to exist, the cinematic apparatus needs a home--a movie "house." And, housed in the city, "since the beginning of the twentieth century... the screen... became the city square." ³ Film was a product of the era of the metropolis, expressing an urban viewpoint from the very origin of its history. The city is present as "mise en abîme." ⁴ Addressed primarily to urban audiences, early film fed on the metropolitan consciousness and unconscious.

In particular, an international genre of panorama films made traveling through sites an extensive practice in the very early days of film. ⁵ The travel genre was instrumental in the development of the language of fiction films. In a mirroring effect, the life of the street, views of the city, and vistas of foreign lands were offered for viewing to urban audiences.

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In the nineteen-twenties, the city becomes the subject of a number of landmark films that narrated urban space, including *Manhatta* (Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler, 1921), *Paris qui dort* (René Clair, 1923), *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1926), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), *The Crowd* (King Vidor, 1928), *Sunrise* (F.W. Murnau, 1927), *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), and *A Propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1930). The city space becomes a genre in the German street dramas and in the Italian cinema of the street, both of which opened the road to women.

It was René Clair, the maker of a cinematic city film, who claimed that "the art that is

closest to cinema is architecture." ⁶ Moving with history, cinema begins to define itself as an architectural practice: an art form of the street, an agent in the building of city views. The image of the city ends up closely interacting with filmic representations. The streetscape is as much a filmic "construction" as it is an architectural one.

Material Cities

The link between film and urban culture that emerges in film history is also a function of film criticism. Think of Siegfried Kracauer, who called attention to the German street films by dwelling on film's *material* attraction for the street, the pavement, feet walking over stones. ⁷ For Kracauer, the affinity between [End Page 12] cinema and the city street pertains to the transient, for the street--like the cinema--is the site where transient impressions take place. ⁸ And what a clever coincidence that the entrance to a Berlin arcade was flanked by two travel offices, while the Anatomical Museum--a place of transport--towered inside the arcade with the world panorama, where cities looked like faces. The fiction of the city dwells in the movie house. In an article on Berlin's picture palaces, Kracauer showed that "the life of the street" transforms itself "into the street of life," giving rise to the cosmopolitan cinema audience. ⁹ The movie theatre housed the city, which was itself a movie house, a theatre of modernity's journeys.

Film Architectures



Turning to the architecture of movie theatres--"palaces" where a tourism of images takes architectural form--is one way to approach the architectonics of cinema. Located in the public architecture of the movie theatre, motion picture is an architectural affair. As architectural space, the film theater embodies a variety of experiences. The illusion offered by the cinema is fully a matter of space. It is produced by the spatial architectonics of the movie house as well as by the film's textuality. One never sees the same film twice. The reception is changed by the space of the cinema and the type of physical inhabitation that the site desires, projects, and actually creates, inside the theater, and outside on the street. Different models of spectatorship are prefigured in the architecture of the theatre and in its location. The spectatorial voyage is architecturally constructed and diversified. It is a matter of (dis)location. [End Page 13]

Traveling the Architectural Path

Moving along this siteseeing route, at the crossroads of film and architecture, we encounter Eisenstein's essay "Montage and Architecture." ¹⁰ Writing in the late nineteen-thirties, Eisenstein made a pioneering effort to link the architectural ensemble to film, designing a moving spectator for both. He proceeded to do so by literally taking the reader for a walk. Constructed as a path, the essay itself guides us on an architectural tour.

Path is the very word that opens Eisenstein's exploration. Underlined, it becomes almost an indexical mark, a street sign. An arrow points to the itinerary we are to take. We gladly

accept the invitation to "street-walk:"

[When talking about cinema]--Eisenstein tells us--the word *path* is not used by chance.... Nowadays it [is] the path followed by the mind across a multiplicity of phenomena, far apart in time and space, gathered in a certain sequence... in front of an immobile spectator.

In the past, however, the opposite was the case: the spectator moved between [a series of] carefully disposed phenomena that he observed sequentially with his visual sense. [11](#) **[End Page 14]**

The (im)mobile film spectator moves across an imaginary path, traversing multiple sites and times. Her navigation connects distant moments and far apart places. Film inherits the possibility of such a spectatorial voyage from the architectural field. As Eisenstein put it in an essay on visual space entitled "'El Greco y el cine':"

An architectural ensemble... is a montage from the point of view of a moving spectator.... Cinematographic montage is, too, a means to 'link' in one point--the screen--various elements (fragments) of a phenomenon filmed in diverse dimensions, from diverse points of view and sides. [12](#)

The filmic path is the modern version of the architectural itinerary and the geographic exploration. Film follows a historical course. It ventures to draw on the multiple viewpoints of the "picturesque" route, reinventing this practice in modern ways. It does so by leaving it up to a spectatorial body to take unexpected paths of exploration.

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 architectural and cinematic grounds. The consumer of architectural (viewing) space is the prototype of the film spectator.

Filmic and Architectural Promenades

Looking from this mobile viewpoint, one observes that an act of traversal adjoins film and the city. 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 light spaces.

The passage through light spaces is an important issue for both cinema and architecture--practices that engage seeing in relation to movement. As Le Corbusier puts it, developing the idea of *promenade architecturale*, echoed in Eisenstein by way of Auguste Choisy, [13](#) architecture "is appreciated *while on the move*, with one's feet... while walking, moving from one place to another.... **[End Page 15]** A true architectural promenade [offers] constantly changing views, unexpected, at times surprising." [14](#) A form of siteseeing, the moving image drives the dynamics of an architectural promenade, for it is able to create its own architectural promenade. A *promenade architecturale* is

inscribed into, and interacts with, film's own peripatetics and "street-walking."

Film Panoramas

The development of the turn-of-the-century travel film genre clearly exhibits the generative bind of film to the city. Early film envisioned "panoramic views" which incorporated modernity's desire for siteseeing. In these films, which were massively produced at the origins of cinema, the camera practices circular pans, up and down tilts, forward, vertical and lateral tracking motion, offering travelogues across the city space that range from panoramic perspectives to street level. This way, film reproduces a practice of urban space which involves the city's public, and its daily activities.

The travel genre is attracted to the street motion of urban strolling, and represents the urban circulation of male and female urban dwellers. Architectural tours turn into diverse gender travelogues, as the side-walk houses sexual mobility and freer circulation for a growing female urban public. Public circulation takes cinematic shape, and the side-walk becomes the site where gender dwells in various ways.

Not only do the subjects of urban views move, but the very technique of representation aspires to motion. Film cameras are placed on railroad cars, incline rail-cars, subway cars, boats, moving street vehicles, and even balloons for attempted aeriels. Movement was also simulated. Beginning with Hale's Tours and Scenes of the World in 1905, phantom rides were offered to spectators who would watch films in theatres designed like railroad cars, with the screen placed at the front of the vehicle.

The camera becomes the vehicle: it becomes, literally, a spectatorial means of transportation. The travel film genre inscribed motion in the language of film, **[End Page 16]** "transporting" the spectator through space and creating a multiform travel effect. The fascination involved the very means that produced a moving visual space. These "moving panoramas" were instrumental in developing the fiction film. The language of cinema was born not out of static theatrical views but out of urban motions.

Travel Space

"Viewed" through the lens of travel, the interrelation of film to the architectural ensemble unfolds a practice of mobilizing viewing space. The shifts in viewing positions, the traversal of diverse spatio-temporal dimensions and the movements of the spatial consumer link the city to travel to film. The spatial culture that film has developed with its *vedute* is a mobile "architectonics" of traveled space.

As a practice of urban space, film has mobilized the geography of *vedutismo*, the art of topographical view painting that sketched the image of the city. It has rendered feasible its "impossible" aerial perspectives and mobile street-scapes. Film's own *vedutismo* is a mobile mapping of space. It is the trajectory similarly drawn by a visitor or dweller of a city, who projects herself onto the cityscape, and who also engages the anatomy of the streets, the city's underbelly, traversing all different urban configurations. Heterotopic perspectives, and a montage of "traveling" shots with diverse viewpoints and rhythms

guide the cinema and its nomadic way of siteseeing. Changes in height, size, angle, and scale of the view, as well as the speed of the transport, are embedded in the very language of filmic shots, editing and camera movements. Travel culture is written on the very techniques of filmic observation.

The genealogical "architectonics" of film is an aesthetic touristic practice of spatial consumption. Film creates space for viewing, perusing, and wandering about. As in all forms of journey, space is physically consumed as a vast commodity. In film, architectural space becomes framed for viewing and offers itself for consumption as traveled space--for further traveling. Attracted to vistas, the spectator turns into a visitor. The film "viewer" is a practitioner of viewing space--a tourist. **[End Page 17]**

Touring the Cine City



Acting like a voyager, the itinerant spectator of the architectural-filmic ensemble reads moving views--practices of imaging. In the cine city, the framing of space and the succession of sites organized as shots from different viewpoints, adjoined and disjoined by way of editing, is a montage of spectatorial movements. A dweller inhabits the moving image. Incorporating the inhabitant (or intruder) in the space is a narrative passage. It does not simply mean reproducing, but reinventing her various trajectories through space and charting the narrative that these navigations create. Architectural frames, like filmic frames, are transformed by an open relation of movement to events. Not just vectors or directional arrows, these movements are mobilized territories, mappings of practiced places. They are spatial practices--veritable *plots*. ¹⁵ This is how urban experiences--dynamics of space, movement, and narrative--*embody* the effect of the cinema, and its promenades.

The relation between film and the architectural ensemble involves an embodiment, for it is based on the inscription of an observer in the field--a body making journeys in space. Such an observer is not a static contemplator, a fixed gaze, a disembodied eye/I. She is a physical entity, a moving spectator--a "skin job" drawing the map of haptical space. **[End Page 18]**

Haptic Routes: Interiors

How could I know that this city was made to the measure of love?
How could I know that you were made to the measure of my body?

From the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* ¹⁶



As this film that charts an amorous map of the body-city shows, the link between urban space and film concerns a haptical geography--lived space, tangible sites. As Henri Lefebvre wrote regarding this sexed architectonics:

Space--*my* space--... is first of all *my* body...: it is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits my body on the one hand, and all the other bodies on the other. ¹⁷

The history of urban space is to be read as a history of a socio-sexual body. ¹⁸ Bodies in space design spatial fields, which, in turn, design corporealities. **[End Page 19]** Film and architecture meet on this route, for they are practices of representation written on, and by, the body. By framing views, they frame spectatorial bodies. Their spatial mapping is material. As *loci* for the production of sexuality, they offer a mobile address to gender dwelling, for gender is housed, and the (movie) house moves. Insofar as they are productions of space, their imaging is to be understood as a map--a construction lived by users.

Film and the city share a dimension of living that Italians call *vissuto*, that is, the space of one's lived experiences. They are about lived space, and the fantasy of habitable places. They are both inhabited sites, and spaces for inhabitation, narrativized by motion. Such types of dwellings always construct a subjectivity. Their subjectivity is a body that occupies narrativized space, and leaves traces of her history on the wall and the screen. Crossing in-between perceived, conceived and lived space, the spatial arts thus embody the viewer.

Film/body/city: a haptic dynamics, a fantasmatic structure of lived space and habitable narrative. A narrativized space which is intersubjective--a complex of socio-sexual mobilities. Unraveling a sequence of views, the architectural-filmic ensemble writes body maps. The scope of the view--the horizon of siteseeing--is the mapping of tangible sites.

Inhabitation: Stories of Naked Cities

This haptic "closeness" was recognized by Walter Benjamin when he related cinema's new mode of spectatorship to the way we respond to buildings. "Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated." ¹⁹ An heir to this practice, film continues the architectural *habitus*. It makes a custom of constructing sites, and building "sets" of dwelling and motion. It has a habit of consuming space. It is space which is both used and appropriated. Just like an *abito*, that is, a dress, this habitat "suits" us. Being at the same time a space of consumption and a consumption of space, it is a user's space. One lives a film as one lives the space that one inhabits: as an everyday passage--tangibly. **[End Page 20]**

Perceived by way of habit and tactility, cinema and architecture are both a matter of touch. The haptic path of these two spatial practices touches the physical realm. Their kinetic affair is a carnal one. In their fictional architectonics, there is a tangible link between space and desire. Space unleashes desire. The *habitus* is absorption. In this domain, one absorbs, and is absorbed by, moving images--tales of inhabitation. The absorption of subject/object in the narrative of space involves a series of corporeal transformations. As in fashion, the mode of "consumption" involves the ingestion of body space. Providing space for living and lodging sites of biography, film and architecture are constantly reinvented by stories of the flesh.

Apparatuses *à vivre*, they house the erotic materiality of tactile interactions--the very terrain of intersubjectivity. Their geometry is the making of a connection between public

sites and private spaces. Doors that create a passage between interior and exterior, windows that open this passage to exploration, film and architecture are moving views. Their spatial perimeter always stretches by way of incorporation. Appropriated by bodily use, they expand through corporeal lodgings and traversals. Fantasies of habit, habitat, habitation, they map the narrativization of space.

***Transiti*: Towards a Mobile Map**

The erotics unleashed by the haptic architectonics escalates in the city, a concentrated site of narrative crossings that is deeply akin to the cinema and its own spatial (e)motion. Urban culture--an atlas of the flesh--thrives on the transitorial space of intersubjectivity. In the city, as when traveling with film, one does not end where the body or the walls end. As Georg Simmel film-ically wrote in 1903, in the metropolis, "a person does not end with limits of his physical body.... In the same way, the city exists only in the totality of effects which transcend their immediate sphere." [20](#)



The city is clearly laid out as social body. Laid bare as passage, it would eventually become "the naked city," adjoining cinema again by way of Situationist cartography, in the form of a psycho-geography--a map of *dérive*.

[21](#) Named after **[End Page 21]** the film noir *The Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948), the city was remade into a map of passages. The filmic metropolis was drawn on the model of Madeleine de Scudéry's *Carte de Tendre* (1654), a map of tenderness. An amorous map, this site bears the motion of emotion. Metropolis, the mother-city likened to film, exists as "*transport*." It is *emotional* cartography, a site of both inhabitation and voyage, a locus of the voyage of inhabitation.

A dweller-voyager moving through space drives the architectural itinerary of the city, the activity of travel, and film. All involve motion through culturally conceived space--a form of *transito*. [22](#) Not necessarily physical motion, the epistemology of *transito* is circulation which includes migrations, passages, traversals, transitions, transitory states, spatial erotics and (e)motion. Adopting this mobile urban viewpoint for both architecture and film viewing--two seemingly static activities--involves transforming our sense of these art forms. Working "in-between" aims at corroding the gender boxing of oppositions such as immobility-mobility, inside-outside, private-public, dwelling-travel. The city is a map of both dwelling and travel, and so is the cinema. In-between **[End Page 22]** housing and motion, these spaces question the very limits of the opposition. They force us to rethink cultural expression itself as a site of travel and of dwelling.

The space of cinema "moves" such cartographical rewriting. Layers of cultural space, densities of hybrid histories, visions of *transiti* are housed by film's spatial practice of cognition. A means of travel-dwelling, cinema designs the (im)mobility of cultural voyages, traversals, and transitions. Its narrativized space offers tracking shots to traveling cultures and vehicles for psycho-spatial journeys. A frame for cultural mappings, film is *modern cartography*. It is a mobile map--a map of differences, a production of socio-sexual fragments and cross-cultural travel. A voyage of identities in *transito*, and a complex tour of identifications, film's siteseeing is an actual means of exploration--a housing and a tour of one's narrative and geography.

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Notes

1. P. G.W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1982), 618.
2. See Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Anne Friedberg, *Window-Shopping* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1993). See also Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1995).
3. Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension*, trans. Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 25.
4. Tom Gunning, "Urban Spaces in Early Silent Film," *Arbejdsblad*, no. 17 (Dec. 1995): 1-27. [This essay is an earlier version of Gunning's article, "From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls* (1913)," that appears in this issue.]
5. Charles Musser turned historical attention to travel films in his "The Travel Genre in 1903-04: Moving Toward Fictional Narrative," in Thomas Elsaesser, ed. with Adam Barker, *Early Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1990).
6. René Clair's statement is cited by Virilio in *Lost Dimension*, 69.
7. Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), especially 157-60. For a recasting of Kracauer, see, among others, Miriam Hansen, "'With Skin and Hair': Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 19 (Spring 1993): 437-69.
8. Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), especially 52.
9. Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction," in *The Mass Ornament*, trans., ed., intro. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
10. Sergei M. Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture," with an introduction by Yves-Alain Bois, *Assemblage*, no. 10 (1989): 111-31. The text was written circa 1937, to be inserted in a book-length work.
11. Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture," 116.

- [12.](#) Eisenstein, "El Greco y el cine," in *Cinématisme: Peinture et cinéma*, ed. François Albera and trans. Anne Zouboff (Brussels: Editions complexe, 1980), 16-17. [My translation. Eisenstein's text bears a Spanish title in its original version.]
- [13.](#) In "Montage and Architecture," Eisenstein used Auguste Choisy's "picturesque" view of the Acropolis from *Histoire de l'architecture* (Paris: Rouveyre, 1899), following Le Corbusier's own appropriation to picture his notion of *promenade architecturale*. See Anthony Vidler, "The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary," in *Film Architecture*, ed. Dietrich Neumann (New York: Prestel, 1996).
- [14.](#) Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret, *Oeuvre complète*, ed. by Willi Boesiger (Zurich: Editions Girsberger, 1964), vol. 2: 24.
- [15.](#) See Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
- [16.](#) Written by Marguerite Duras and directed by Alain Resnais in 1959.
- [17.](#) Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 184.
- [18.](#) Unlike film studies, architectural studies have long and conspicuously disavowed the issue of gender. Recent works that address it include Beatriz Colomina, ed., *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992); and Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway and Leslie Kanes Weisman, eds., *The Sex of Architecture* (New York: Abrams, 1996).
- [19.](#) Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York, Schocken Books, 1969), 239.
- [20.](#) Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed., Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 335.
- [21.](#) See Thomas McDonough, "Situationist Space," *October*, no. 67 (Winter 1994): 58-77.
- [22.](#) The notion of *transito* is mainly developed from Italian philosophy. See Mario Perniola, *Transiti* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1985). For an anthropological perspective, see James Clifford, *Routes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).