

Barge Culture - The ebb and flow of cultural traffic

Karen Gaskill
The University of Huddersfield
karen@karengaskill.info

'Film's undoubted ancestor... is architecture'
Sergi M Eisenstein

Early moving image devices and viewing apparatus more often than not used the city as their muse. Displaying and re-representing urban views, they revealed the spaces of illusion in our everyday environment, offering prefilmic spectacles to a receptive public.

Bruno discusses the eve of cinema's invention in her book, *Atlas of Emotion*, noting how a network of new architectural forms produced a new spatiovisuality. Venues such as arcades, department stores, exhibition halls, glass houses and winter gardens incarnated the geography of modernity. They were all sites of transit. Mobility, a form of cinematics, was the essence of these new architectures[1]. This new relationship of bodily motion and spatial perception paved the way for the invention of moving image. Early film became an imaginary sort of *Flanerie*, or streetwalking, extending personal boundaries beyond that of the immediate.

Early spatial curiosity led to the development many pre-filmic visual devices and paraphernalia. The concept of landscapes and of travel dates back to the Sala Femenina, the ladies chamber in Barcelona, where Frederic Mares (1893-1991) collected an astonishing assortment of memorabilia. This cabinet of curiosity reveals a rich journey around a room of panoramic scenes and cityscapes; a gift of curiosity and a widening of horizons [2]. It contained handheld objects such as the fan, that formed early *veduta* in motion; a mobilised view painting, a panorama unfolding as a succession of views, its motion telling the story of a moving site.

In contrast to the travelling of urban pavements and such spaces of curiosity, Camera Obscuras became the first 'filmic rooms' where a spectator would sit and passively observe moving images, the natural projection of a 'live' scape. This and equivalent smaller devices such as Mondo Nuovo (a small portable viewing device), and the optical box, introduced the architecture of the movie theatre, a private viewing space housing a form of urban popular spectacle [3]

'A public cabinet of the curiosities of the everyday, film inherits the very architectonics of this 'new world'. It is the new art travelling the urban pavement.' [4]

In his book, *The Language of New Media*, Manovich defines the screen as 'the existence of another virtual space, a three dimensional world enclosed by a frame and situated in our normal space'. [5] The screen of cinema and video brings with it 'a certain relationship between the image and the spectator' [6], expecting us to suspend disbelief and focus our attention fully on the representation, thus disregarding the spaces outside the screen. This is why it is frustrating in a cinema when the projected

image does not coincide precisely with the screen's boundaries. It disrupts the illusion, making us conscious of what exists outside the representation. [7]

Social as much as than architectural, this interest in observing our immediate environment has provided us with a rich history of the relationship between architecture and the human body. Early films such as Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* and Laing's *Metropolis* create an interplay between the viewer and their spatiotemporal confines. The ability in film to manipulate time through freeze framing and slowing, and the multiplication and acceleration of movement, renders time as something elastic and magical. In the structures of many modern films such as *Memento* and *Mulholland Drive*, narrative structures are played with and chopped up, representing in themselves a fracturing of thought in different space-time structures.

I want to outline a project I curated in July 2006 called *Fast and Slow Networks*, that through its format considered the body in relation to urbanism, and also in relation to its peers.

This project took place on a barge on the Bridgewater Canal in central Manchester, and highlighted how technologies of the information age mirror older, slower networks of the industrial past. This work was interested in the collision of physical many-to-many networks with their digital counterparts, and how both have shaped our urban culture.

The UK's canal systems have always provided a source of fascination, primarily as they formed one of the original many-to-many industrial networks. Many essential services were provided by these networks, and not solely commercial or economic ones. Canal systems are representative of early social networks, connecting locations and people and forming essential communication loops - an analogue parallel to what digital networks are today.

The Bridgewater Canal, on which the barge sailed its journeys, is said to be one of England's first canals. It delivered goods and services amongst to other places what is now the Museum of Science and Industry. This was the location of the world's first passenger railway, and nurtured the growth of industry, containing factories, goods warehouses, and residential housing, effectively, a community.

Lining the edges of the canal are old warehouses, railway arches, a spectrum of the derelict and broken to the glossy and renewed. However the route of the canal as an artery through the city centre is a course that is tattooed on the topology of the city, and through its keylines comments on Manchester's iconic role as the centre of the industrial revolution.

The project took place on a wide beam restaurant barge, that journeyed up and down the Bridgewater canal four times a day. The trips lasted 40 minutes in total, and were open to the public and free. This mobile media space hosted four single channel video pieces that were projected onto a full size screen installed in the interior of the boat.

The works that were invited to be shown aboard the boat were all perceptions on urbanism, and through representative technologies highlighted unique perspectives on differing landscapes. They also aimed at drawing similarities to what the audience

was experiencing as they took their own visual journey down one of the oldest and most historically rich routes through central Manchester.

I want to briefly outline the four pieces that were shown and reveal the different reflections on urbanism that they offer.

In his work 'Block' Joe Duffy considers the relationship of individuals to their contemporary urban environment through the modernist architectural living spaces of a tower block in Salford, UK. The grid like structure of social urban planning is investigated through the rhythmic patterns of lights signalling room occupation and human habitation. The light changes indicate movement paths and spatial usage that create an illusion of tower block as entity; the flickering lights as pulses with the residents reduced to signals and data.

This is contrasted by Katy Woods piece 'Cornholme', that re-presents to us footage of Cornholme, a small village nestled in the picturesque Calder Valley in North Yorkshire. Through the footage is reflected an empty and claustrophobic landscape, where natural beauty and post-industrial decay overlap; a forgotten pocket in our environmental fabric, housing an area of decay and disintegration.

Katie Davies Piece ' After the house is burnt, pick up the nails' investigates manifestations of language. Providing a social commentary on the city of Seoul through contrasting shots of its public screens, the piece draws out contradictory flashes of familiarity and ambiguity. It seeks to sell you the notion of metropolis as utopia through the international language of advertising.

Graham Clayton-Chance's Municipal 44 is an experimental film exposing the inherent anxiety and conflict between our perception of space and the built environment. Taking its inspiration from *The Image of the city* by architectural theorist and city planner Kevin Lynch, *Municipal44* freely explores notions of place legibility, spatial cognition and way-finding. The work explores the idea of this perceptual encounter of the subject of the city with its architecture and in this case the abstract modernism of brutalist architecture.

It is compelling how contemporary artists reflect on urbanism, revealing abstract notions of cultural usage. Through the devices that capture these undertones, we continue to document our environment, continuing to culturally, socially and politically travel. If mobility was the essence of the architectures at the eve of cinema's invention, what form's the essence of today's architectures in the era of network culture? Locativeness, connectivity?

Already our perceptions of the observed city as the unencountered filmic muse have been reversed, our cities are increasingly mapped and categorised through social profiling and postcode lotteries. The UK especially is one of the most surveilled nations in the world, cameras capture our movements on every street corner translating us into urban statistics. No longer are we able to observe our city pleurably, in contrast to the experience of the *Camera Obscura*. Threat exists in the action of being observed, safety is in autonomy and private actions. What of the *Flaneur*, the streetwalker, what would we consider a contemporary cultural equivalent?

<http://www.karengaskill.info>
<http://www.interval.org.uk>

* * * * *

Associated References and Bibliography

- [1] Bruno, G, 2002, *Atlas of Emotion. Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, Verso.
p.17
- [2] *ibid.* p.134
- [3] *ibid.* p.159
- [4] *ibid.*
- [5] Manovich, L, 2001, *The Language of New Media*, MIT Press. p.95
- [6] *ibid.* p.96
- [7] *ibid.*

Auge, M. 1995, *Non-Places - Introduction to an anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso.

Bachelard, G, 1994, *The Poetics of space - A classic look at how we experience intimate places*, Beacon Press.

Foster, H, 1996, *The Return of the Real*, MIT Press.

Kwon, M, 2002, *One Place After Another – Site specific art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press.

Tuan, Y, 1977, *Space and Place – The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press.

Vidler, A, 2000, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and anxiety in modern culture*, MIT Press.

Virilio, P, 2000, *Polar Inertia*, SAGE.