Michael Gregory

SOCIAL SHAPES IN CINEMATIC SPACE: The Architectural Cinema of Roberto Rossellini

The perfect architectural dream is a filmic dream. Pictures become an environment. Architecture becomes a film.

-Giuliana Bruno

Stage setting and location are merely the most basic and easily recognized points of conversion between architecture and cinema. Yet the often overlooked connections between the two arts exist in the most fundamental properties of both architecture and cinema and carry on into the themes and content of both forms. For as long as motion pictures have been made, artists and thinkers have woven together the two spatially oriented art forms. Separate from the other arts, architecture and film share common physical elements and philosophic principles. Cinematic art began in the 20th century. Despite the invention of the moving image in the late 1800s, the turn of the century marked an explosion in the use and the exploration of film as a communicative media.

The novel art consumed the 20th century in the construction of their works. Since the birth of the moving image, the art’s unique capacity has been its ability to translate this “shifting point of view” through the replication of real life projected from photographic images. Architecture, in its most rudimentary definition, is the designed organization of volume and plain, a process of controlling and constructing real physical space. Cinema, then, is an art occupied by the same endeavor only abstracted and derived from architecture’s tangible three-dimensional physicality and turned into a two-dimensional replication. Architecture’s organization manifests in a structure’s elements – walls, ceilings, floors, windows, doors, and other constructed devices that designate physical end points or spots of connectivity. For film, organization manifests more abstractly - through the cut or edit which divides time and space (often in the service of structuring a narrative) as well as through the film frame which limits and boxes in the visual reality presented to the spectator (or, more aptly, Vidler’s “moving body”).

In a separate essay titled The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary, Vidler examines architecture as “an art that, while perceived visually, [is] experienced in space.” This loose definition of architecture is but a step away from defining the ontological experience of cinema – an art perceived visually and experienced in and as a simulated space. Vidler also notes a “preoccupation with space” in these two arts, both predicated on the “relationship between a viewer and a work or art […] based on a shifting ‘point of view’ determined by a moving body.” This “preoccupation” Vidler describes it, has been an underlying project equally concerning both architects and filmmakers of the 20th century in the construction of their works.

During this same stretch of time, architecture – one of the world’s oldest arts – embarked on an increasingly rapid pace of innovation. New methods, visions, and ideals were attached to the practice by individuals and ideologies eager to draw out the art’s greatest potential. The simultaneous development of architecture and cinema constantly intertwined throughout the 20th century. Shared artistic trends and perspectives informed each craft. Movements and concepts flowed through architecture and cinema, which, in turn, fed off of each other’s progressive developing knowledge.

While the general goals of each art may differ – architecture’s objective of creating a structure for habitation opposed to, say, cinema’s practice of storytelling – the framework from which an individual perceives each art is strikingly similar. In an essay titled Space, Time and Movement, Anthony Vidler examines architecture as “an art that, while perceived visually, [is] experienced in space.” This loose definition of architecture is but a step away from defining the ontological experience of cinema – an art perceived visually and experienced in and as a simulated space. Vidler also notes a “preoccupation with space” in these two arts, both predicated on the “relationship between a viewer and a work or art […] based on a shifting ‘point of view’ determined by a moving body.” This “preoccupation” Vidler describes it, has been an underlying project equally concerning both architects and filmmakers of the 20th century in the construction of their works.

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The interwoven natures of each art have been thoroughly explored for well over the past century by artists and thinkers alike. Many filmmakers have used the camera to play with the ontological properties of the two spatial arts and dissect the points at which architecture and cinema overlap, presenting varying renditions and contexts throughout the history of film. A new and vital development in this overlap occurred in the Italian cinema in the years immediately following World War II.

The new style of cinema that emerged from the rubble of the war marked a significant intersection of architecture and film which contributed greatly to the role of space and architecture in the narrative cinematic form. The architecture of the theater is a specific form of architecture whose very program is designed for the cinematic experience. The architecture and a work of film, founding the separate arts in the same elements – light, shape, scale and movement.

The movie theater is a specific form of architecture whose very program is designed for the cinematic experience. The architecture of the theater is therefore an institutionalizing foundation to the spectator’s interaction with cinema. Film, as an artistic form, is a simulation of movement through space and, congruently, architecture. Film’s ability to convey a sense of reality so believably arrives through its capacity to present a point of perception equal to that of a spectator interacting with the solid actuality of architecture and real physical space. Yet film remains eternally a simulation of this actuality; aware of its unreality, film can only construct a visual articulation of physical space, time, and movement.

As a continuation of his comments on the perception of architecture, Frankl discusses what distinguishes architecture as a spatial art, stating that “optical appearances, corporeality, and space do not alone make a building [and by extension, architecture].” Once we have interpreted the optical image into a conception of space, enclosed by mass, we read its purpose from spatial form.” According to Frankl’s description, our conception of architecture and space ultimately lead to the same roots as those of film – to a purpose or narrative through an understanding based in our perception of space and form. Both arts are similarly conceived as spatial and temporal events.

Even the presentation of cinema depends upon architecture. A designated space is required for the projection and viewing of a film. It is the function of architecture that houses the exchange between spectator and cinema. In her exploration of the relationships between the city and cinema, Giuliana Bruno eloquently notes that: Film is always housed. It needs more than an apparatus in order to exist as cinema. It needs a space, a public site – a movie ‘house.’ It is by way of architecture that film turns into cinema. Located in the public architecture of the movie theater, the motion picture is a social, architectural event. The film turns into cinema through the application of their new liberated art.

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concerns addressed both the physical, tangible architecture of the world filmed as well as the actual architecture of film structure. In his survey of Italian film history, Italian Cinema, Peter Bondanella characterized the neorealists of the postwar era as directors who, “in principle respected the ontological wholeness of the reality they filmed [...] and thus opposed the manipulation of reality in the cutting room.” Bondanella recognized that the architecture of the world in film articulated Neorealist cinema as the conscious regard toward the application of the edit. Reality was more fulfilled through the structural awareness of cinematic duration – a deliberate recognition of filmic time and space enclosed within the edit that was made more real with the elimination of manipulation.

Beyond editing, Italian Neorealism distinguished itself through a number of key aesthetic characteristics. The use of non-professional actors, natural lighting, and socialized storytelling proved as the determining elements of the stylistic movement. More significant, however, was Neorealism’s fixation on location shooting – the preoccupation of capturing reality through a spatial orientation.

In a collection of essays titled What is Cinema, the distinguished French film critic and theorist Andre Bazin examines the concept of space as the “common denominator between the cinematographic image and the world we live in.” Bazin, who championed the postwar Italian cinema, shared a primary concern with the Italian neorealist directors regarding the capacity of cinema to be real and to register real reality. Bazin wrote Siegfried Kracauer in his work on Theory in Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, his comment aimed in the direction of Neorealism. Rossellini orchestrated a cinema that sought to capture the drama of Italy’s new urban reality. Beautifully translating the political and social struggle of the everyday to the movie screen, Rossellini, in the truest sense, used cinema as a mirror held up to real life – or maybe, more aptly, as a map organizing a new Italian spatiality into dramatic representation.

Through his career as a director, Rossellini persisted in a style that embodied the new method of spatial contextualizing his cinema through the application of space. The aesthetic Rossellini engaged in postwar Italy, specifically in the films of his war trilogy – Roma, Città Aperta (Rome, Open City), Paisà (Paisa) 1944, and Germania Year Zero (German Year Zero) – set precedents in formulating an advanced cinematic style. These precedents and stylistic choices held inextricable bonds to a spatially and architecturally informed vision. Angelo Restivo points out the qualities of the vision pioneered by Rossellini in his book Cinema of Economic Miracles, noting that “neorealism aesthetics entail a kind of muteness, where character is not given through dialogue and self examination but rather through gesture, positioning in space, and architecture.”

While Bazin writes extensively about the ontological values of space in Neorealist cinema, he admired Neorealism’s tangible application of such values coupled with its originality in creating a new vocabulary in editing style. This in itself worked towards the goal of capturing social reality through a better cinematic organization and a better cinematic architecture which embraced Frank’s optical conception of space. Vidler’s moving body.
real and tangible bedrock that held story or situation together. Rossellini, like most directors, understood that film derived its power as an art form from the reality of the photographic image. Yet Rossellini, more than most directors, understood that the photographic image derived its power from the reality of the physical parameters captured in that image. For Rossellini, location – that is to say, space and architecture – was equally proof of a scenario’s reality as was the verifying authenticity of the photographic image.

Rossellini made architectural cinema. Regarding the structural architecture of cinematic form, Rossellini’s stylistic and editing choices broke ground by reshaping the manner in which a narrative could manifest in film. Yet, his filmmaking is not strictly architectural in its attention to the formal elements of cinema. Nor are his films merely architectural in their concern for structures or particular buildings themselves. Rather, Rossellini’s filmmaking is architectural in its use of space and the built world as a means to provide context and serve as metaphor in the content of his films. As Mark Shiel points out in his study Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City, “Rossellini used architecture to imply that [sic] the reconstruction of the European city would be much more than a matter of bricks and mortar alone.” Architecture was an expressive and formidable means of communicating social struggle and moral concern following the war. Yet, despite his mastery, space and architecture were not the chief concerns of Rossellini’s cinema. Rather, depicting the reality of the Italian social drama remained Rossellini’s highest, and perhaps sole, intention.

Ultimately, Rossellini’s films prove that an examination of space and architecture are crucial to understanding – and in the case of cinema, depicting – society and social conflict. His films were not intentional commentaries on the interrelations between architecture and film as forms or art. Nor did his films assume a critical examination of architecture and its physical properties. Space and architecture, however, became the most crucial and constructive features of Rossellini’s cinematic toolbox. These tools allowed him to shape and craft his stories of social struggle and wartime life. Space and architecture arrive in a variety of modes in Rossellini’s war trilogy and cinematic oeuvre, consistently enabling necessary contextualization and anchoring his narratives in Italy’s physical reality.

Neorealism is determinately a socially concerned cinema, and Rossellini’s films proved that a socially concerned examination requires spatial orientation and recognition.

Footnotes
5 Bruno, 44.
9 Bazin, 113.
10 Bazin, 108.