

# Architectural Identity through Film

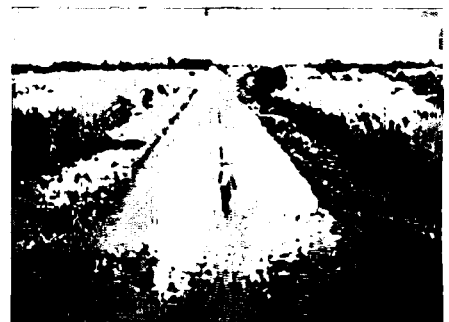
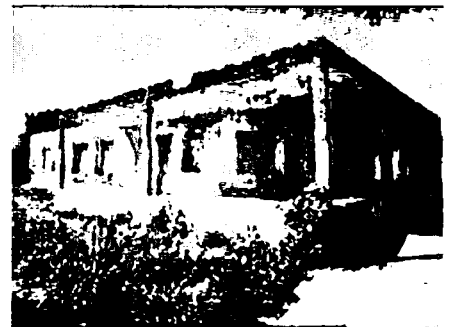
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Film has always had the power of displacing the viewer in space and time. Architecture as seen through film can be considered a displacement in space and time, not of the viewer, but rather of the notions and values attached to that architecture, the space itself and the phenomenon produced by the association of space and time to a specific place. That is to say, the representation of Architecture in Film can be a displacement of the same if not greater interest and complexity when the architecture itself becomes the subject. This displacement takes place in a realm somewhere between the "Real" and the "Virtual", an area that for the purpose of this paper will be referred to as the "Introvirtual." The depiction of architecture in film is practically unavoidable. Architecture will appear in most films by default simply because it becomes the back-

ground to an event. However, just how architecture is depicted in film is a matter seldom questioned and points to a phenomenon of representation particularly evident in a complex sociopolitical environment that is Cuba.

This paper attempts to explore the phenomenon of the "Introvirtual" by way of three films. *I am Cuba*, *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Before Night Falls* are films that represent these notions of Architecture and Identity and can describe this specific phenomenon. What is demonstrable by way of these films is that they depict an image of Cuba that, real or otherwise, is non the less in that realm somewhere between past and present, real and imagined.



*Soy Cuba (I am Cuba) Ya Kuba*, Mikhail Kalatozov 1964  
*Buena Vista Social Club*, Wim Wenders 1999  
*Before Night Falls*, Julian Schnabel 2000.

## THE ENTITY OF SPACE MEMORY

The representation of Architecture in Film can be a displacement of the same if not greater interest and complexity than the conventional subject of the film, when the architecture itself becomes the focus of the film. However in the world of reality, where architecture is still defined, a different sort of displacement is evident in relation to architecture and its representation on Film. Architecture, either in its mystical form or in its concrete absolute, is primarily represented as the shell or container of the subject. A form of shelter, not from the weather or the elements good or bad, but rather an enclosure of the topic or subject matter that is being communicated with in the film. In this way architecture acts as a barrier or protection from the possible peripheral distractions that might undermine any focus on the subject of the film. If and when the architecture itself becomes the subject of the film, a phenomenon of displacement can occur. Although, not always deliberate on the part of the film maker, nor for that matter, necessarily obvious to the viewer, the role of architecture as a symbol to this end is thereby displaced. This displacement is not restricted to the physical form of architecture in relation to space, but rather, it is a displacement in its values and representation.

Perhaps this refers to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenal Ontology or what Normberg Schults referred to as the Genius Loci. Simply stated, the value attached to a place that is known to us and becomes an entity itself as a memory, even when the place is no longer, or for that matter, a place that never was. Although, the latter would, more often than not, risk falling into the category of Science Fiction and thereby revert into the realm of the imagination.

## FILM TYPOLOGY

Current technological advances in camera size, location setup and mobility coupled with a general public acceptance of the documentary format has made it possible for the so-called documentary style to find its way into many commercial and the full feature film. Even the most banal of films can find it necessary to include the captivating effects of the precariously jerky, deceiving yet convincingly truthful hand-held camera that is the signature style of the documentary film. More often than not, for the purpose of lending an air of credibility to an otherwise oversimplified story or production. The documentary style derived from the Cinema Verité of the 60's presented a pseudo realistic or at least factually plausible illusion in a matter-of-fact approach to the immediate and mostly circumstantial environment in which a narrative unfolds.

Agnes Varda may have pioneered the documentary style by introducing it to the acclimatized feature film audiences of the 60's. But it was the association that an audience could make between the documentary format and its relation to a reality

that made it acceptable to that audience as another form of reality. Whatever the truth or intentions, it is not the film maker but rather the audience that must first accept this premise in order to understand or even hear the message as told by the film maker. While in the case of the feature film these are, more often than not, contrived settings or events, the documentary proper undoubtedly presents an even stronger boundary to that reality. Robert Flaherty's films cannot be questioned as to the earnestness of their content because typologically, as a documentary film, it can be assumed that the objective of the film maker is that of the capture of reality in all of its form and content.

In his film *Nanuk of the North*, R. Flaherty rebuilds an igloo to a specific height, leaving the top open in order to accommodate camera and lighting equipment that would otherwise be impossible to fit inside.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the subsequent scenes could only be considered a reconstruction of the original events. However carefully staged, an aspect of truth must always be forfeited in this process.

## CONSTRUCTION

There is an implied innocence in the fabrication of reality and the construction of a simple movie set that is part of a simple story of simple people. Yet an entire generation of architects trained in the maxims of modernism can not accept the idea of a false façade. Not unlike the Miesian precept: "truth in materials" a truth that never really was or could be in its relation to ornament. Violated by Mies himself in his treatment of the façade of the Seagrams building, this truth left all subsequent generations after the Modern in doubt of these purist ideals. Reality in relation to construct of the existing world had to be reviewed, redrawn and represented. Constructed reality as in the films: *One from the Heart* by Coppola or Kurosawa's *Dodeskaden* concoct a forced vision with a common thread that will always revert to an oversimplification of all matters relating to the background, indeed an apparent neglect for architecture itself. By way of their underlining or even deliberate emphasis on the subordinate background, these films use architecture by neglect in order to make their point. However, films like *Tokyo Story* by Ozu and Mikhail Kalatozov's *I am Cuba*, use architecture specifically to drive their point. Ozu's notoriously stationary and low-angled camera views in *Tokyo Story* categorically disqualify this film as a documentary style. Instead, Ozu makes use of architecture as a symbol sometimes representing progress, as in the cityscapes, and other times representing the opposite of progress in defense of the maintenance of traditional values, as in the family gathering over the traditional tatami room. To Ozu, Architecture cannot be neutral when represented in film.

Architecture to Kalatozov becomes a supporting actor. With the use of low angle camera shots that frame the architecture in the



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background and crane shots to equalize between the principal characters and the background characters that are the architecture. *I am Cuba* is replete with images that make Architecture itself an actor if not the principal personage. Towards the end of the film *I am Cuba*, Kalatozov directs the typical long take towards the crowd in the street. As if it were another pedestrian in the street the camera moves quickly in a single take over the crowd with a crane shot to the top of a building only to return to that personal eye level height in relation to the workers on that floor at that level of the building. In the same take, the camera moves across the desks and out the other end of this space where workers roll cigars. Through the window, over the street and across to the other building where you can now see the crowds below, the camera now floats over the buildings, back down to the street crowds, all in one take. Throughout this film Kalatozov explores the relation between space and time in a series of long takes that accentuate a state of being rather than a simple message. In doing so, a three dimensional and even almost tactile relationship to architecture is established. This relationship between film and architecture is a precarious one at best. Almost as if in denial of its opposite, film and architecture have danced a ritual of praise and dissent, but always in mutual respect.

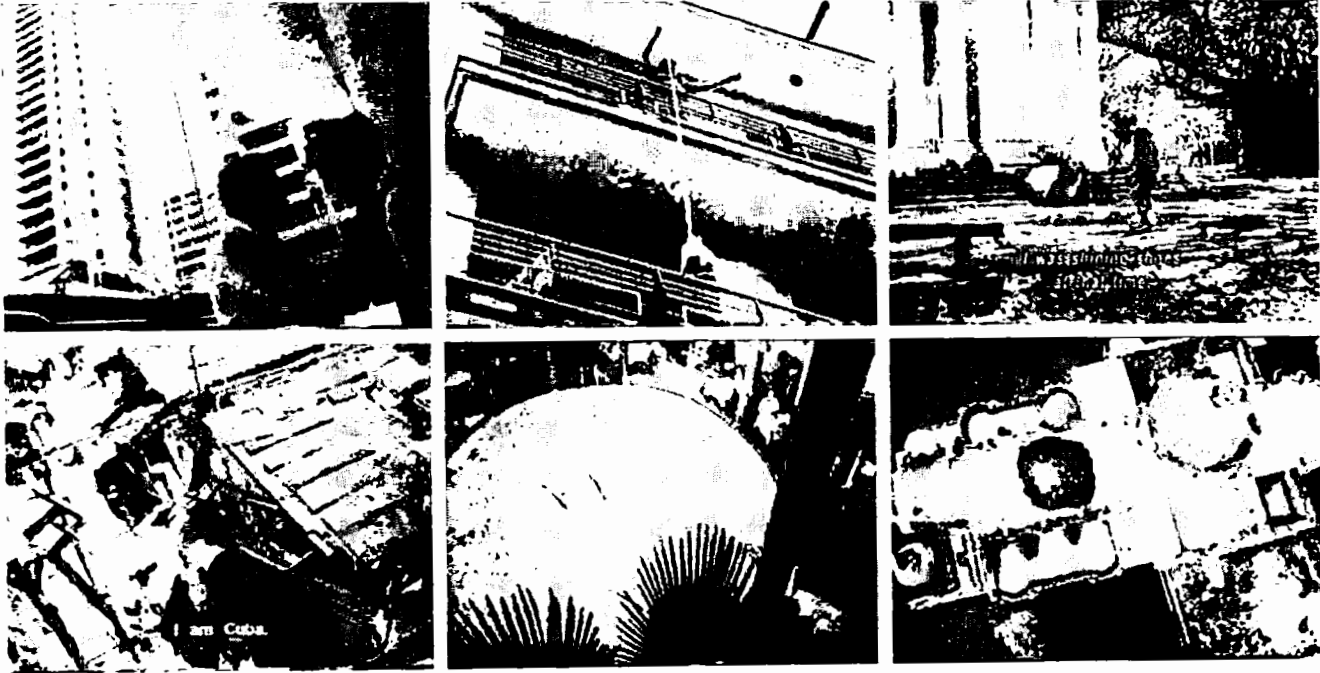
## TRUTH

Cinema Verité creates a sense of reality, not unrelated to the live camera perspective of a news reporter's view of the world. This can be deceiving if we accept the camera's motion

technique as a signifier, the signified being the truth or at least a pure form of information. Truth as in the Verité of "Cinema Verité" is no more truthful than truth is necessarily true in Pravda the Soviet newspaper by this name (pravda means truth in Russian). "Information sounds neutral, as if there were such a thing as knowledge without context, use, motive, or consequence"<sup>2</sup>

What threat could there be in this representation, given the sociopolitical truth that is Cuba today? Paul Virilio explains: "Information warfare is reality warfare. It isn't so much a war of history as it is a war of reality. The force of information warfare no longer resides in the molecular or nuclear explosives used in destructive warfare (the atomic bomb and its fallout), but rather in implosion, the capacity to eliminate all distances and delays. This is the information bomb. No longer are there fallout zones but, instead, information zones. Einstein had foreseen this in speaking of the three types of bombs: atomic bomb today, information bomb tomorrow and demographic or genetic bomb the day after tomorrow"<sup>3</sup>

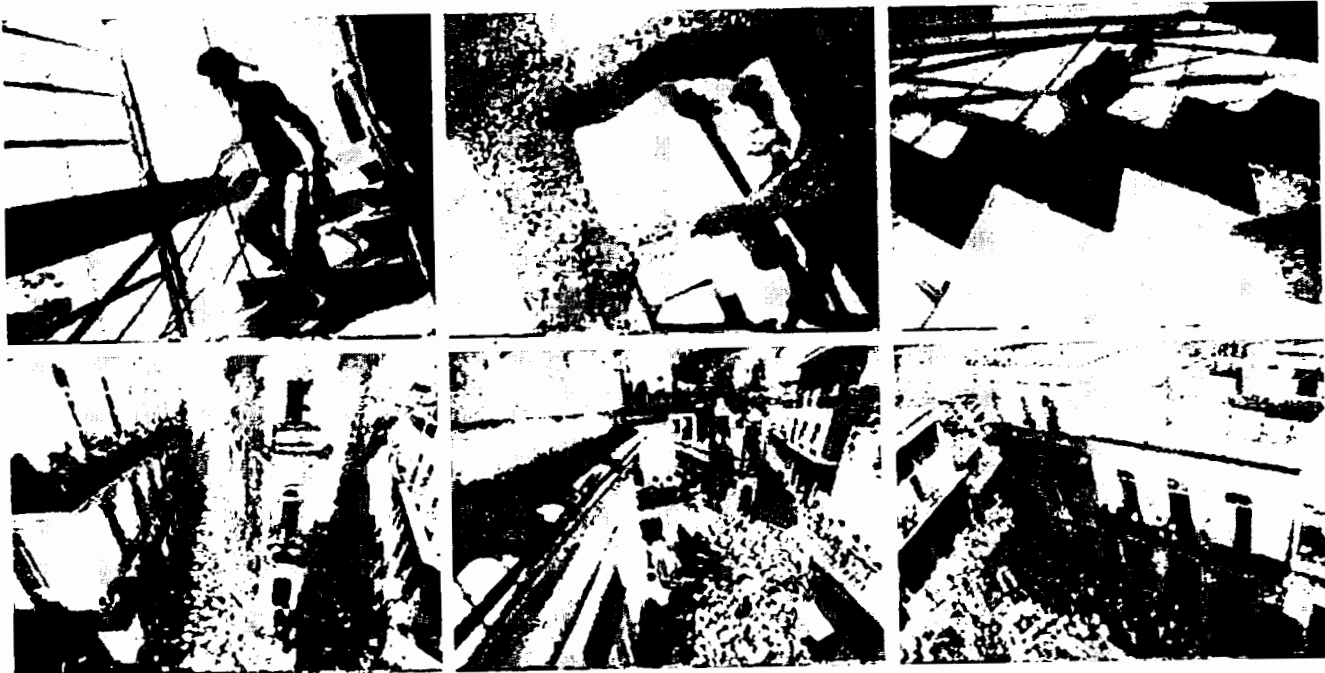
This information warfare is here now and it exist in every form of the introvirtual. Somewhere, between the "Virtual" and the "Real" there must be an "Introvirtual", which is not in the realm of the present, not in the foreseeable future but has somehow been. A reference to the Malecon in *Before Night Falls* can symbolically allude to the possibility of other truths within that same context. A hint of Copelia, even if never specifically referred to by name, can invoke a memory that is in all probability more real than the assembled architectural



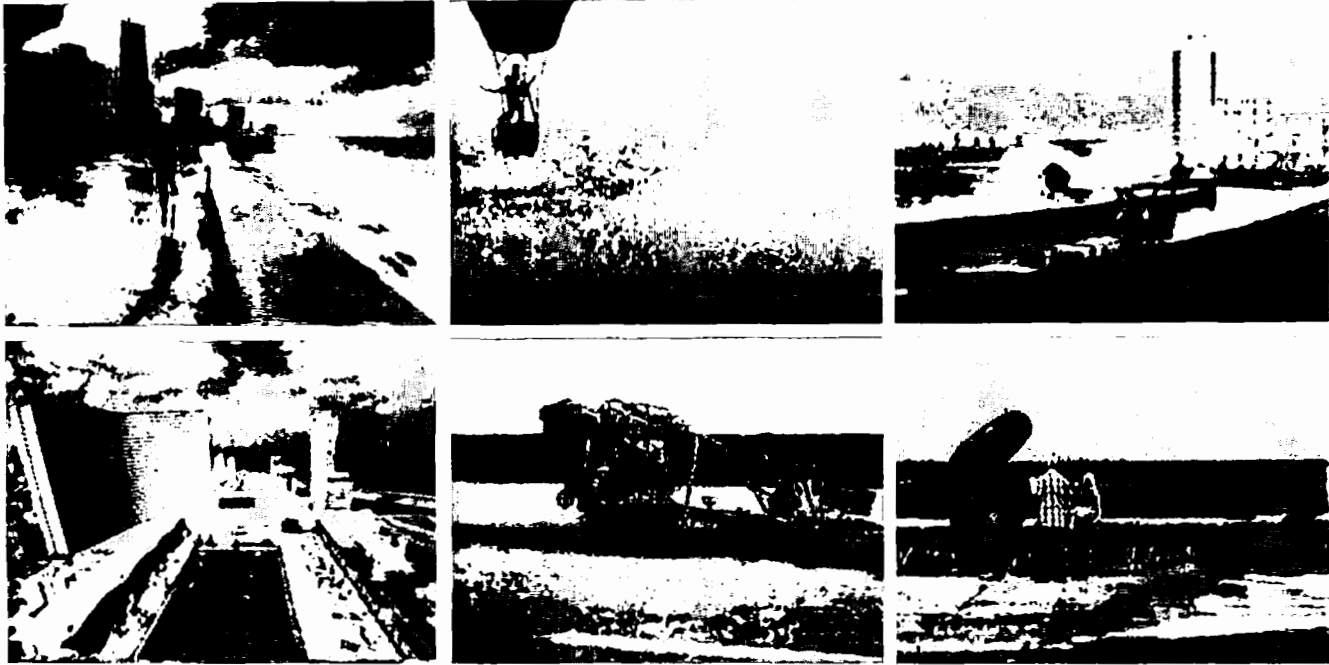
*Soy Cuba (I am Cuba) Ya Kuba*, Mikhail Kalatozov 1964  
*Buena Vista Social Club*, Wim Wenders 1999  
*Before Night Falls*, Julian Schnabel 2000.

elements that may have provoked it. Like that amputated limb that persists in some realm neither dead nor alive. Also possible, is that which is only proposed within the "Virtual" as an element of history, because it no longer exists, or in fact never existed as proposed except in the realm of memory. As is the influence of "paper architecture" on architects, only more powerful and always unnoticed. Not that it ceased to exist, after

all, it never really was. It would therefore qualify as a form of virtual past or virtual memory. It is in this realm that the "Introvirtual" can or must exist. Could this be what Federico Fellini calls the "neoreal", Fellini "wants his camera to look at any kind of reality: not just social reality, but also spiritual reality, metaphysical reality, anything man has inside him."<sup>4</sup> That, which cannot be virtual alone because we know it to have



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been real, yet cannot be real because we know it to have changed since.

### THE IMMOBILE

Architecture and Film are inherently linked by virtue of each other's opposing approach to the static, the immobile, motion itself and time. The very immobility of architecture and motion itself in film combine to produce the illusion of reality. In this space time continuum that affront the very notion of reality, a form of non-virtual or intro-virtual reality is born. Perhaps it is the reproduction of an idea, only it is an idea of itself. Maybe, it is merely a reproduction with diminishing value or self destructive, as conceived by Walter Benjamin and not unlike his notion that "The Cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art"<sup>5</sup>

A proper comparison between the Documentary style and the Period film could yield interesting results regarding the production of the "introvirtual" space. The Period film recreates the past by performing specific events in elaborate and costly reproductions, staged before carefully constructed sets that represent a reality if not the image of a reality that was or might have been but no longer exists. The Documentary style not a documentary itself, but rather borrowing from the typology to lend credibility to its content, produces a sort of manufactured history.

### HAVANA

A combined form of the Period film and the Documentary film could also, for the purpose of this paper, be termed "Introvirtual." This form follows a format borrowed from the period film and presented in a semi-documentary style by way of the hand-held camera and other techniques that reconstruct an image that is culturally and politically charged and cannot be divorced from its bias. While we cannot pretend that the phenomenon of introvirtual takes place only in Havana or for that matter in Cuba, it can be illustrated with particular lucidity in the example of places like Malecon or Copelia. Here the characteristics of a place or specific site are recognizable and even unmistakable in spite of sometimes not being factual. In the case of Malecon, the water's incessant battering against the barrier, the pedestrian walk that runs the same length and the avenue that separates the wall of buildings that are also battered by the same water, combine to create the effect of that place that is the Genius Loci according to Normberg Schults.

A scene of the Malecon is therefore a documentation of the place or a re-presentation of the place. Richard Meran Barsam clarifies the term re-presentation in reference to Frederick Wiseman's *Meat* (1975): "Consumers, workers and management all react differently to the film, yet all, including the filmmaker, agree that it faithfully represents reality. Nonfiction film is the art of re-presentation."<sup>6</sup> This representation could be mapped by way of informatics or what Huffman refers to as the "geography of Space"

"Equally important in a discussion of an electronically created terrain and virtual architecture is the consideration of a critical and theoretical discourse that connects video, informatics and the geography of space."<sup>7</sup> Architecture in Film is about reality being re-presented. Like the period film, the re-creation of a place that is known to have existed or for that matter, the feel or sense of a place as it was or as it was expected to be. This space lingers in our mind until dissected, analyzed and categorized.

## ARCHITECTURAL GENRE

### The Backdrop, The Epic, The Myth

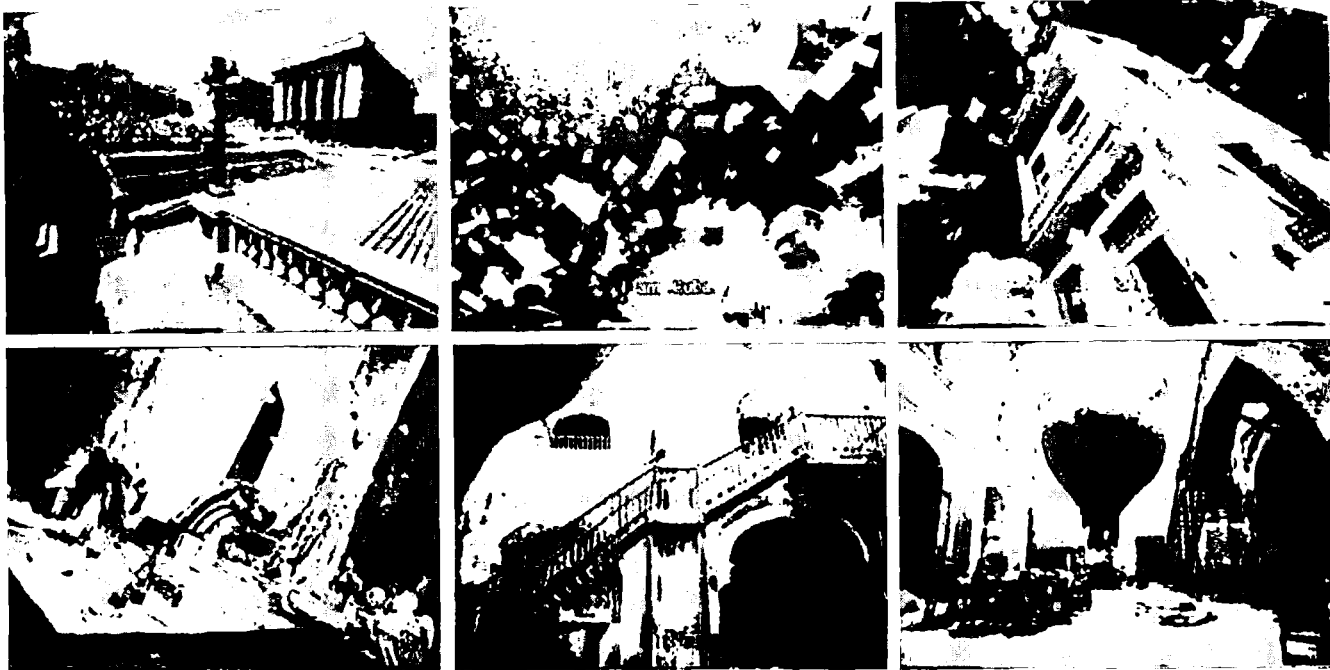
"We understand a genre-picture if we recognize what the people in it are doing. If this recognition does not come easily, there is a period of doubt followed by a familiar process of recognition."<sup>8</sup> As a form of re-presentation, Architecture in Film can be examined in three forms; architecture as a backdrop to the event, architecture as an epic character or actor within the event and architecture as a myth or mystical figure. In this case the Epic, as it is larger than life, is represented by Kalatozov in *I am Cuba*, The backdrop is represented by Wenders in the *Buena Vista Social Club* and the myth is represented by Julian Schnabel's *Before Night Falls*. These three forms depiction can take place in film, all of which represent architecture.

Architect Jean Nouvel explains how he is influenced by film makers like Wim Wenders, saying that "Cinema, has taught us to see images in relation to time"<sup>9</sup> The Myth in architectural re-presentation in Film is a form that best describes the Introvirtual place. There can be no doubt that architecture has had and continues to have an important influence on film but the power of film on architecture, the architects that conceive that architecture and the people that use it, is overwhelmingly superior. It is the fear of myth become reality that frightens the spectator as Cuban architect, urban planner and historian Mario Coyula can reaffirm in jest; "It is evident that all of these scenarios risk the creation of a crude and rapacious nouveau-riche, mutants of the maceta – that sad, perverse character result of scarcity – whose model appears to be the worst of the Cuban-Americans in Hialeah, Miami. A Havana dominated by those cheap hustlers, from here and there, decked out in heavy gold chains and panoramic sunglasses, comes out of a sunburned yet equally ominous version of 'Blade Runner'."<sup>10</sup>

Apart from a nearly obsessive passion for architecture, director Mikhail Kalatozov and cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky build an environment in *Soy Cuba*, that is a tribute to Modernism. "For better or worse, film makers can't stay away from modernist buildings. – Perhaps there's something in Hollywood's collective psyche that demands to be understood as transgressive, dangerous, wild even criminal – and it is this that has led to the unfortunate stereotyping of modern design and those who enjoy it."<sup>11</sup> However, the unquestionably Epic



*The Backdrop*  
*Soy Cuba (I am Cuba) Ya Kuba*, Mikhail Kalatozov 1964  
*Buena Vista Social Club*, Wim Wenders 1999  
*Before Night Falls*, Julian Schnabel 2000.



*The Epic & The Myth*  
*Soy Cuba (I am Cuba) Yu Kuba*, Mikhail Kalatozov 1964  
*Before Night Falls*, Julian Schnabel 2000.

grandeur Kalatozov's re-presentation of the architecture that remains an engraved memory to the viewer.

## CONCLUSION

In the post "Special Period" that is Cuba today, the information age has made its mark on a country that will probably see yet another revolution in its economy, its people and consequently its architecture. Filmmakers in Cuba as well as outside will inevitably find opportunities in these changes for the preservation of architecture as well as an architectural re-interpretation and re-presentation of the heritage that formulated their identity.

*I am Cuba*, *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Before Night Falls* are a stepping stone to what promises to be the re-definition if not at least a re-presentation of this nation's identity, so long disguised by an information rift. Architecture and Film in collaboration, each from a very different approach, will formulate both foreground and background to that scenario.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gideon Bachmann, Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker; *Frontiers of Realist Cinema; FILM: A Montage of Theories*. (Editor Richard Dyer MacCann 1966).
- <sup>2</sup> *The Domain of Images*, James Elkins, (Cornel University Press 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Virilio "Infowar" in conversation with Derrick De Kerekhove; Translated from the French by Paul Henninger and Josh Wise; *Ars Electronica Facing the Future*, Editor: Timothy Druckrey with Ars Electronica, (MIT Press 1999).
- <sup>4</sup> Federico Fellini, *The road beyond Neoralism; FILM: A Montage of Theories*, (Editor Richard Dyer MacCann 1966).
- <sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction; Film Theory & Criticism*, Editor: Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, (Oxford University Press 1979).
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Meran Barsam *Nonfiction Film: Form and Function; from Nonfiction Film: A Critical History; Film Theory & Criticism*, Editor: Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, (Oxford University Press 1979).
- <sup>7</sup> Kathy Rae Huffman "Video and Architecture"; *Ars Electronica Facing the Future*, Editor: Timothy Druckrey with Ars Electronica, *Informatics is the study of computer systems, networks, memory banks and terminals*, (MIT Press 1999).
- <sup>8</sup> *Philosophical Grammar*, Ludwig Wittgenstein, (University of California Press 1974).
- <sup>9</sup> Odile Fillion *Cinema & Architecture; Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, Editor François Penz and Maureen Thomas, *Life into Art, Art into Life: Fusions in Film, Video and Architecture*, (British Film Institute 1997).
- <sup>10</sup> Mario Coyula, *Havana For Ever, Forever Havana Translation (first draft) by Kurt Dillon*, (revised, updated and enlarged by the author, 1996/1997).
- <sup>11</sup> *Architecture & Film*, Editor: Mark Lauster, (Princeton Architectural Press 2000).