

RE: Framing of the Developing Surface

CATHERINE ANN SOMERVILLE VENART
Dalhousie University

FILM and ARCHITECTURE are immersive experiences; it is through movement—frames per second or steps per hour—that a series of relationships are gradually revealed, creating various understandings of the environment we inhabit, both visually and physically. It is this simultaneous meshing within the mind where cuts and splices of fragmentary images and attributes of the environment (light, sounds, textures, materials, details, etc.) are juxtaposed, creating a composite understanding of this environment.

This paper will examine two distinct ideologies of constructing space, juxtaposing two pairs of examples from architecture and film. It will attempt to reveal relationships between the means of conception and the constructed experiential understanding of space. The two pairs examined here are: (1) Rem Koolhaas's Kunsthal in Rotterdam, the Netherlands and Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* and (2) Peter Zumthor's Bath in Vals Switzerland and Andrey Tarkovsky's film *Nostalgia*. It looks at how these two pairs of architects and filmmakers construct distinctly different spatial experiences through their associations to site, their use of structure, program and path (point of view, framing and focus), and their use of materials. The manner in which these relationships inadvertently code understandings of these spaces will also be examined.

The first pair (1) are conceived formally, aggressively asserting their symbolic meaning on the whole, the surroundings, and those who view or inhabit them. Their materials are fetishized, exaggerated and placed within a series of montaged oppositions. They are *Pornographic*,¹ in their compressed perspectival views. Material here is coded, as signifier, set within a structural frame which emphasizes and focuses the specific view. These "views" or scenes are inward focusing and self-referential, being exclusive rather than inclusive to site or surroundings, program, scene and narrative.

Conceived as abstract, their materials become restrictive and bound to their imposed symbolic meanings.

The second pair (2) are conceptualized atmospherically, an enmeshed continuum referring beyond presence to their origins. Their means both connect and erode the flawlessness of their conception, continually obscuring, if only temporarily, their own meticulous construction. Their material is layered through surface detailing and spatial configuration, which continually brings us back to the surface. This relentlessness sets up a hypnotic, monotonous continuum which structures both anticipation and desire: desire for the impossibility of completion, a completion of the perfection set out in its structure, and a perfection which then dissolves into mist, reflection, or something outside our understanding—outside the frame. This animation by the other structures the *erotic*.²

Within the context of this paper "*pornographic*" and "*erotic*" are differentiated in terms of Barthes's definition in his book *Camera Lucida*, which defines the two terms as follows:

It is this presence of a '*blind field*' [which distinguishes] "the erotic... from the pornographic... Pornography ordinarily represents the sexual organs, making them into a motionless object (a fetish), flattered like an idol that does not leave its niche; for me there is no punctum in the pornographic image; at most it amuses me (and even then, boredom follows quickly). The erotic ... (and this is its very condition) does not make the sex organs into a central object; it may very well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside its frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me."³

REM KOOLHAAS'S KUNSTHAL & HITCHCOCK'S *VERTIGO*

Conceptualized formally, Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Rem Koolhaas's Kunsthall in Rotterdam aggressively assert their symbolic meaning on both their surroundings and those who inhabit or view them. Both are structured around a vortex or void and narrational path. In Koolhaas's Kunsthall, "The core is a void, a machine or robot that enables, like a stage tower, an endless series of permutations: walls, floors, slopes, set... each condition contaminating the perimeter hall."⁴ In *Vertigo*, a fear of heights is manifested in the void or stair tower, which structures the double plot. In both cases, it is this void around and through which one's path spirals, connecting various scenes, perspectival views and/or levels in a "vertical schism." It is this path or spiraling ramp upon which the "narrative" is hung. This narrative passage is conceived, viewed and experienced as a series of juxtaposed frames or points of view, each asserting its own abstract symbolic meaning to both its surroundings and the viewers or players who act within it. As Madelon Vriesendorp suggests, Rem Koolhaas's architecture "is very scripted, the way people move and the possibilities he leaves for people in his buildings ... the experiences are laid out. You go up and you have to look where you're meant to look."⁵ In both, this prescribed narrational path ends with "the climax" — the point where space collapses, compressing both beginning and end, and the inhabitant or viewer spirals downward, again. This repetition of movement and juxtaposed views, the close-up with the dramatic perspectival view, jars the inhabitant/viewer and represents an overcoming. The void becomes a portal between the real and illusionary worlds, both symbolically and physically. In *Vertigo*, Hitchcock uses the church stair and tower as one such portal. In the Kunsthall, Koolhaas removes a section of the floor, inserting metal mesh, thus creating this climactic point in the building and an extreme vertical compression of space.

It is this choreographed path which structures both the interpretation and the experience of the viewer/inhabitant. With each turn of the head, or each frame of the film, a series of collisions or montaged associations combine — "cut and edited" — to heighten the associative meaning. Therefore, material does not structure the architecture; the frame is concrete, the material is clad. Material is used for its shock value, its contrast, its color intensity, its texture, etc., becoming abstract elements within the composition. It creates a series of juxtapositions: the "luxurious and *démodé*," the large to the small ... which are used for purely visual effect. Material as objects are fetishized, framed and exaggerated through contrast or scalar relationships: for example in the Kunsthall the oversized heavy

wooden columns, and the green dress in which Scottie first sets eyes on Madeleine in *Vertigo*. Each piece is held within a frame — on display — composed in a series of montaged oppositions — *pornographic*⁶ — in their compressed perspectival views. Material here is coded — as signifier — within the structural frame, which emphasizes and focuses the specific view. These "views" are structured as inward focusing and self-referential, being exclusive rather than inclusive, becoming a series of watchings or structured views, held by the action/narrative and an obsessive pursuit — the climax.

Here the inhabitant's/viewer's gazing impulse is turned into a voyeuristic activity. Material becomes purely an outward symbol of visual stimulation being stripped of its material qualities. Rem Koolhaas, in a recent issue of *Wired* magazine, suggests that buildings and urban situations create a "tectonic pornography"⁷ where over-dimensional symbols or material produce an "over-stimulated visual excitement where each vies for our attention and yet each relentlessly pursues its own release."⁸ In *Vertigo*, Madeleine, "woman" — a simulacrum of desire — is image based. It is Scottie's obsessive desire to make this thing or woman into what he visualizes her to be: the object of his desire, which has nothing to do with the real person, Madeleine/Judy. The object and materials are fetishized to the point of icon, stripped and held impotent within the frame. In *Vertigo*, this is done through the close-up, the foreshortened depth of field and the indifference with which they are framed and brought into focus. It is this objectification of "matter" as subject, which is pornographic. In the Kunsthall the material additions to the space — i.e., the curtain, the fluorescent light wall — are each positioned in prescribed foreshortened views and are somewhat invasive, as with signage written on the floor, dictating the path.

Material qualities become at once surface and symbol. For example, Madeleine in the Golden Gate Bridge scene, throwing rose petals into the water, has "symbolist origins of Ophelia".⁹ The surface and thus the space becomes a construct of these concepts: surface becomes object, and object becomes symbol. It is this play of relationships which focuses each frame. The curtain, the wall, the stage, the words on the floor all become signs — a two-dimensional graphic image within what we know to be a three-dimensional world. What is two-dimensional, or large, turns and becomes three-dimensional with a change in focus and scale. The wall edge in Koolhaas's auditorium — the thickness of space cut and spliced — is revealed in one instance. Together these create a conceptual experience which stands on its

own — isolated — within the building itself. In turn, this is also the relationship of the building to its site.

Both building and film frame the landscape, removing it through abstraction. Landscape — as material — is similarly captured and used for symbolic and graphic effect. In Koolhaas's glass box the Kunsthal reveals to the outside world/park its contents and becomes a display or signifier—a framing onto which materials and meanings are applied and on which the action is played out. This use of material, program and site strips it of its sensual, ritualistic and even physical meaning, objectifying its own make-up. It is accessible only through visual means: the media, the eye. This creates a separation between the sensual material qualities of a space, leaving it cold and purely accessible through the visual senses and the mind. It is in this sense that the material or objects are as applied, a "tectonic pornography"¹⁰ assembled purely for visual excitement and effect.

PETER ZUMTHOR'S BATH IN VALS & ANDREY TARKOVSKY'S *NOSTALGIA*

Peter Zumthor's Bath in Vals, Switzerland and Andrey Tarkovsky's film *Nostalgia* are both conceived as a merging of poignant images. In *Nostalgia*, Tarkovsky merges present and past landscapes, the sound of water and memory remembered. Similarly, in his Bath building, Zumthor brings together the essences of "mountain, stone, water, building in stone, building with stone, building into the mountain, building out of the mountain..."¹¹ as a process of informing or making space. He says, "Space is influenced by the things that form it or by what envelops it ... One feels without necessarily seeing."¹² This speaks of an understanding of space infused by its surroundings, where the sensual experience of the space carries an atmospheric and materially intense structure.

By merging distant and near landscapes, and by building in the mountain and of the mountain stone, both refer beyond their present physicality to something outside themselves, and back to their origin. In the Bath, Zumthor creates a sense of the building "always having been in this landscape—establishing a special relationship with the mountain landscape, its natural power, geological substance and impressive topography."¹³ In *Nostalgia*, Tarkovsky creates a film that expresses the psychological state of the main character, Virgil, and a profound sense of nostalgia that merges memories, the landscape of his homeland, and places he presently occupies in Italy.

The Bath in Vals and the film *Nostalgia* are both conceived, viewed and constructed as slowly panning frames whose laborious surface compositions make us highly aware of the surface itself. This constructed "surround" is made almost entirely from one material, where "the aggregation of minuteness"¹⁴ or the build-up of "longing marks"¹⁵ structures this containment. It is this layered and entwined relationship between construction, material, and siting within a larger context (the valley in Vals or a space or place in Italy) which embeds conceptually and physically various meanings into the work. It is this compilation of material that infuses the space with meaning—both bodily and sensually—and it is this "sameness" or monotony of surface which creates a hypnotic effect and tension in the viewer/inhabitant. This hypnotic effect makes one acutely aware of any minute differences, triggering personal memories and "capturing the reflection of life, the dream of life."¹⁶

A slow linear movement or panning of the camera and the body perpendicular to the layering of surfaces set up physical separations between the viewer/inhabitant and the background plane, but also a compression of the space. This is accomplished by revealing only a portion of the entirety: for example, the scene in *Nostalgia* where the car, disappears outside the frame yet we hear it getting closer and then it reappears in the foreground. This, in effect, forces the viewer/inhabitant to use other sensory means to completely understand the space, instead of depending on the primary sense, the sense of sight. This makes one very aware of the frame, its edges and what one can see, which brings attention to the surface and edge of the frame, compressing the space. The unknown is revealed or hinted at through erosion or use of diffused edges, an unconscious use of periphery and an equality of tone or darkness, all of which heighten one's sensorial awareness, creating tension and desire, an anticipation of a complete understanding. The frame is used, both architecturally and cinematically, to structure this awareness of limits, through connections beyond the current frame to another space—one that we cannot fully see or comprehend. Space in both is treated as almost planar or two-dimensional. Surfaces are composed of layered material surfaces composed with light and shade, which draw attention from a perspectival movement and back to the surface. This technique of flattening or placing frame-within-frame suppresses the dynamic effect of the layered space, instead creating depth within the surface itself. This suppression of the dynamic effect again makes one acutely aware of the surface itself by cutting it in light, obscuring it with objects, or by hearing something beyond its containment. This creates, in Barthes's terms, for "desire".¹⁷ In

Virgil's evening scenes, where he lies between wake and sleep, and Tarkovsky merges the reality of place and his dreams of the homeland in a drop of water. Tarkovsky uses sound, as in the persistent drop of water, which creates tension in the viewer as its sound echoes just outside the frame of our view. In the Bath in Vals the various columns and program—specific bath types are independent spaces which cut off visual access but through sound, echo ... and chanting in the "sound chamber" reverberations or spill into the main space.

Tarkovsky's film *Nostalgia* and Zumthor's Bath enmesh programming, narrative, siting, and material by layering surfaces of material itself, or in combination with primary elements such as water, landscape (earth), fire, memory, dream and rituals. These become inseparable through a breaking down of boundaries or edges, which obscures the whole, pulling viewers/inhabitants past the edge of the frame or beyond what we can see, such as the floor submerged in water or a meadow merged with a building. It is this erosion through nature or time that frays the whole, breaking its purity into fragmentary pieces or "memories torn between recognition and time".¹⁸

With every added layer a new meaning and recollection are added. This is formulated at two levels: meaning brought about at the "matter" level and meaning through connections within and beyond the frame. This extension of space or "deep space" references its materiality and through its framing connects outside itself beyond the space itself and the surface value/meaning of the material. In the Bath, Zumthor uses the placement of the building in the mountain and of mountain stone, continually references the exterior landscape, acknowledging the origins of the building and achieving domain over the landscape by framing it. Through this strategic act, Zumthor creates a building that is one with its landscape through a partial obliteration of the whole. The roof of the building becomes part of the mountainside pasture. This merging, of a formal geometry, the building and nature; protection and exposure; figure and ground; real and imaginary; details/images and associations. This obliteration is programmatic, site specific. "A building must be capable of absorbing the traces of human life and thus of taking on a specific richness".¹⁹

Zumthor's and Tarkovsky's projects refer beyond themselves, outside the frame. This is accomplished through framing and making connections to the site, its materiality and through erosion to the frame by nature, by natural elements of water and the hillside superimpositions. This obscuring is what strengthens the erotic quality of the work. Koolhaas's and Hitchcock's projects,

on the other hand, are set up as signifiers; the frame is used to place material and object on view and to focus us on these specific views. They are inward rather than outward viewing.

"Architecture rarely seems to enter the realm of poetry or to awaken the world of unconscious imagery. The sheer poetic radiance of Tarkovsky's architectural images brings into relief the contemporary language of architecture... [Not just visual effects...]

"Architecture must again question its functionality and existence on the level of materiality and practicalities in order to touch the deeper levels of consciousness, dream, and feeling"²⁰

Of the two pairs, one (1) puts material in focus, only to obscure its material presence and meaning; the other (2) obscures material, only to bring into focus its significance.

NOTES

¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard, (London/Vintage 2000), 57.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rem Koolhaas, *S,M,L,XL, OMA, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau*, edited by Jennifer Sigler. (New York: The Monacelli Press 1995) Kunsthal Rotterdam Netherlands 1992.

⁵ Arthur Lubow, New York Times Sunday Magazine (quote from Madelon Vriesendorp July 9 2000).

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Reflections on Photography (translated by Richard Howard, Vintage 2000).

⁷ Rem Koolhaas, 'Wired' magazine, *Koolworld The Ultimate Atlas for the 21st Century* (June 2003), 168.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hitchcock and Art, *Fatal Coincidences*, edited by Dominique Paini & Guy Cogeval (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts 2000).

¹⁰ Rem Koolhaas, *Wired Magazine* (June 2003), 168.

¹¹ Peter Zumthor, Three Concepts, 'Thermal Bath in Vals', edition Architekturgalerie Luzern, (Luzern CH 1997), 11.

¹² Peter Zumthor, "Ich baue aus der Erfahrung der Welt..." ein Gespräch mit Peter Zumthore, *Detail Magazine*, Review of Architecture Series 2001 Concrete Construction (Institut für internationale Architektur-Dokumentation GmbH, München J), 25.

¹³ Peter Zumthor, Three Concepts, 'Thermal Bath in Vals', edition Architekturgalerie Luzern, Luzern CH 1997), 11.

¹⁴ John Ruskin, *Precious Thoughts* (John Wiley & Son 1869) similar Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain, The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press 1985).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Space and Image in Andrei Tarkovsky's "Nostalgia": Notes on a Phenomenology of Architecture in Cinema', *Chora 1*, edited by Alberto Perez-Gomez and Stephen Parcell (McGill-Queens University Press 1994), 165.

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Reflections on Photography, translated by Richard Howard (Published by Vintage 2000) 57.

¹⁸ Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time, Reflections on the Cinema*, translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair (University of Texas Press, 1986).

¹⁹ Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Lars Mueller Publishers 1998), 13.

²⁰ Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Space and Image in Andrei Tarkovsky's "*Nostalgia*": *Notes on a Phenomenology of Architecture in Cinema*', *Chora* 1, edited by Alberto Perez-Gomez and Stephen Parcell (McGill-Queens University Press 1994), 164.