Architectural Animation becomes Alive

Creating Spatial Narrative with Spatial Characters for Animations

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This paper sets up a paradigm for creative architectural animations, drawing cinematic, architectural and narrative theories together to form a ‘Spatial Character’. Based on this definition, students created architectural animations. These served as working platform of an entry to the FEIDAD-Competition that defined and placed architecture into a cinematic context.

Keywords: Theories; animation, methods; spatial narrative

Introduction

Animation is a means of making inanimate objects come alive. The tradition of animation has been embedded in the magical realm of cinema, where the photographic property of cinema had given its power to mimic the real that no other art had been able to do before and the photographic image set in motion the illusion of life itself.

Mark Burry (2001) argues that animation is equal to giving life to an object. Now with architectural animation, one certainly wonders how the magic of animation shall bestow the architectural object with life. For many, architecture is the background by which life itself makes its drama, but to see a building coming alive on-screen must be an art of animation itself that make possible.

This paper proposes the development of a spatial character by treating architectural space itself as if it is a character in a movie, giving it a background, a personality, a temperament, an adventure, and possible a climax and closure. In addition, the director’s point of view and the selection of biographical material of a certain architectural persona shall be considered.

Spatial Character

The idea of the spatial character is a way of creating spatial narrative for architectural conceptions. The ultimate goal of spatial narrative is to use the time-based medium in its full potential through cinematic techniques and the perceptual framing of narrative to vividly represent and describe built forms or the urban environment. In finding and defining different strategies for spatial narrative, one of the possible strategies is to treat buildings as characters in a film and create narrative for the building just as a protagonist in the storytelling process.

Cinematic narrative has long been defined by the figure-ground synergy since its conception that is the depiction of character or protagonist (figures) going through a certain action or event in a setting (ground). The idea of a spatial character starts by placing the emphasis onto seeing the background, the setting as the focus for narrative, with or without the figures as supporting actors.
Andre Bazin

Film-theorist Andre Bazin's idea of the mise-en-scene is instrumental in the understanding of spatial representation and description by cinema. His theory of the mise-en-scene (Bazin, 1967), which advocates the use of long camera take, wide angle lenses with deep depth of field and the long sequence tracking shot in the depiction of dramatic actions, as opposes to the montage method of cross cutting actions, result in a coherent spatial-temporal construct in the representation of space cinematically. His theory is used as a base for setting up a spectrum of cinematic practices pertaining to the different effects of spatial representation. With the montage method at one end of the spectrum and the continuous long take at the other extreme end. The various directors’ stylistic choices can be located at different points on this spectrum, reflecting the combined use of the mise-en-scene and montage techniques along the spectrum to represent each individual unique vision of the director towards the world.

One important implication of the mise-en-scene theory of Bazin is the depiction of spatial character and the construction of spatial narrative towards the emphasis on the sequential long take of the camera. Another one is the intent to preserve the spatial-temporal unity of the scene with the event or action. This technique invariably requires the director to put emphasis on what scene to shoot, instead of the survivor's struggle. It is a desert for the body as well as the mind. Therefore, one can even say that the film is as much about the place as about the man.

In a spatial narrative with spatial character, the question is the selection of what aspect of the built form shall be shown as well as how the audience shall be kept intrigued about the character of the building. In emphasizing the character of a building, the narrative has something to work with in seeing the built form from a certain point of view, and the techniques will as a result be dictated by such perception.

For example, in the classic spectacle Lawrence of Arabia, the main character Lawrence went through his adventure in the desert, and throughout the movie the audience is shown various sides of the desert, sometimes it is beautiful, sometimes it is life threatening, and other times it is a reflection of an ideal (Figure 1). In this multi-facet representation, the desert becomes three-dimensional for the audience, whether it is a backdrop for Lawrence's adventure or the war; it is a place where the audience truly felt the heat and its vastness, in part because of the wide-screen technology and the treatment of image by the director.

Because of the particular narrative choice, the audience seems to experience the desert more than in other films. The story is told from a certain point of view, partly from the eyes of Lawrence, who as a cultivated soldier, harboured a romanticised vision of the desert. The audience is enticed by the narrative to view the desert as a place for adventure instead of the survivor's struggle. It is a desert for the body as well as the mind. Therefore, one can even say that the film is as much about the place as about the man.

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Figure 1
Desert as spatial character in Lawrence of Arabia
No matter what part of the spectrum is used by the director, one important aspect of Bazin’s theory is the assumption of total control on the film author in capturing the raw material to create a unique vision of seeing the world. The ‘auteur theory’ (Tredell, 2002) that is the outcome of this thinking still has great influence in audience viewing and film criticism, and it has influential affects to the perception of the created work.

**Gilles Deleuze**

Gilles Deleuze’s theory of cinema had taken Bazin’s theory of the auteur even further, stating that the filmmaker’s perception of the world is equal, if not exceeding a thinker or philosopher about the world (Bogue, 2003).

His theory of the perceptual ability of a filmmaker is a provocative philosophy as film instead of a philosophy of film. This line of thought leads to an intense investigation of an ontology of the moving image itself: a study of the meaning of moving image in the development of human culture, and the eventual taxonomy of images that were outlined in his seminal works *Cinema 1 & 2* (Deleuze, 1986).

Deleuze’s proposal of studying images on their own terms implies that the normal framework of investigating cinematic works through careful study of narrative or drawing a ‘structuralist’ analogy with language to understand the workings of cinema gives way to finding a fundamental ‘logic of the image’. In this move Deleuze’s framework would be useful in creating a framework for a new ‘narratology’ of the spatial, because with narrating the spatial character, as different from the human character, narrative conventions may have to be changed or even shattered. New sets of relations and connections may have to be formed in a spatial narrative make sense conceptually for the audience. Thus with the ‘logic of image’, narrative definition is opened up for new connections to be made, yet to remain conceptually coherent in a time-based medium. For example, in a narrative about dream the sequence of events may not follow consequential logic, yet at least the concept of dream dictates that the film has a dreamlike quality, even though there can be argument from one spectator to another what constitute dreamlike quality, the discussion has elevated the seemingly nonsensical images construction to another level.

Deleuze’s philosophy as cinema is also instrumental in bringing forth the perception and point of view of the filmmaker in a cinematic work that centres on the architectural built form, in which the main focus of the subject is usually the perception or philosophy of the architect. With the filmmaker’s perception elevated to a philosophical level, two frames of perception must be taken into consideration within the construction of the spatial character and the spatial narrative. The architect’s perception of his work and the world as framed by the filmmaker’s perception of the built work are entailing a wider angle capable of critical, analytical and experiential rendition of the spatial concept. The filmmaker’s wider angle of view towards the spatial conception of the architect calls for a careful selection of aspects of investigation in the spatial narrative, thus Deleuze’s typology of the moving image can be a guide to measure the conceptual strength of the narrative and a framework to describe the ever mutating new images created in digital realm.

With a ‘spectrum of practice’ inspired by Bazin as well as the logic of image and frame of perceptions from a Deleuzian line of thought, a framework to evaluate spatial narratives and a paradigm for creating them is studied with two exercises. One being a selection of students’ short movies and the other being an animation for the *Far Eastern International Digital Architectural Design Award* (FEIDAD) competition.

A creative paradigm for student works and FEIDAD competition

Seven groups of two students each are introduced to the creative paradigm of spatial character for con-

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Entry is judged anonymously by an international jury (www.feidad.org/2005_html/jury.htm: May 2006). The movie was selected as one of the top ten finalists out of 125 submissions.

**Students’ spatial movies**

The student teams are asked to do three exercises in creating representation of built place. The spectrum of practice and the perceptual framing of the filmmaker as counterpoint to the architectural space are introduced, prompting the exploration of various angles in investigation of the material of their choice.

Beforehand, a selection of feature film examples is shown to the students to illustrate techniques and relation to expressive and descriptive narrative strategies. Essays of Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Walter Benjamin (Leach, 1997) are related directly to the screening of each presented films and students reflected upon their understanding.

After some initial exercises the students produced a video of a place of their choosing in the city of five minutes length. The result of the work reflects a diverse attempt to representation of place cinematically (Figure 4).

The students are less concerned with sustaining the interest of the viewer, although a sense of narrative drive and coherent of concepts is still required to hold audience attention near the end of the piece. They seek to strategize their treatment of material by a single idea, like a mood, or idea, or a comic tone, enhanced and driven by music, instead of developing an overall structure of presentation, the image and editing tends to be haphazard without internal rationale with where the pieces fit well together. In depicting places and spaces, the camera follows the wandering mindset more than the static, composed statement of the framed shot. However, it is in the drama-oriented pieces that more static shots are...
FEIDAD Animation
Based on the indications of the student exercise, the narrative strategy for the animation shall only have a single image to extrapolate the spatial character. This single image strategy is a postulation of the possible Deleuzian image typology of image if his theory were to include the new digital manipulation of image. A new term is given to the new typology: the *Space-Image*, as a conception of image pertaining to the expression and rendition of spatial meaning and experience in the cinematic realm.

To be classified under a Space-Image typology, the single image strategy for deriving a spatial character and narrative shall be termed the Revelatory Image. This way of deducting a narrative from a single image can be traced back to the paintings by artists in China and Europe alike. For example in the scroll painting of the Going Upriver on the Qingming Festival (Figure 5) and in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (Figure 6) depict a *Revelatory Image*. Here the various segments of the painting show events and actions simultaneously. Viewers are invited to construct a narrative weaving with the various events and form an impression of the overall story behind the entire work.

In Bosch's painting the various anonymous characters can be seen suffering from tortures of different kind, yet their faces can be read as representing the same person who has sinned. This reduction of the human character into a generic form carrying only a signified and symbolic trait can be read as the same person enacting or going through different events at different time, yet the incidents are depicted on the same space of the painting. In addition, the immense detail of the painting has created a mise-en-scene in which the viewers are invited to “read” the setting for its hidden story. The richness of the setting is simply impossible for the generally implied narrative of the painting to convey.

The same revelatory image can be found in Stanley Kubrick's film. The animation uses a single image to generate a spatial narrative from the image in which the astronaut David Bowman is sent into a neo-classical room with a lighted grid floor (Figure 3). The juxtaposition of the two distinctive architectural conceptions is rich enough to deduce a narrative about how the alien intelligent being encounter with earthlings. The setting, without much explanation in the film, provides enough space for the audience's imagination to fill in the possible pro-

![Figure 5](image1.jpg)
*Section of Going Upriver on the Qingming Festival.*

![Figure 6](image2.jpg)
*Details of Hieronymus Bosch’s Hell.*
procedure or rationale of such encounters; especially the spatial metaphors that the mise-en-scene might have generated.

Discussion

Out of the ten finalists of the FEIDAD competition, Ballroom ONE is the only entry that draws on the multidisciplinary exploration of cinema, narratology to inform the increasingly digital architectural practice. As mediated perception and communication of architectural ideas become pervasive, the need to open up architecture as a form of social discourse instead of a cryptic, technocratic operation is urgent.

As expressed in Robert Venturi’s Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture (1977), architecture must ultimately communicate with the users and participating in a dialogue with the urban in general, spatial narrative is an attempt to communicate effectively a mediated perception of architecture. It is even more relevant for architects today, as it is important to communicate the creative intent, among a culture of interaction and choices. Architects are engaging in public relation in order to communicate design content.

The transformative adaptability of narrative to describe and reflect on our present social collective imagination is important. The competition of the World Trade Centre in New York demonstrated the need of an architectural form that address the complexity and multi-facet problems that go beyond a traditional building description. With the winning design the architects tried to create an architectural narrative that weaves the various needs of a social reality as well as addressing the formal spatial problem.

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