

RE- PRESENTATIONS: MEDIA INQUIRIES REGARDING ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

Within the framework of architectural practice as well as the academy, media supported worldwide *interdependence* and *transient cultural waves* are essential forces activating the current globalization phenomenon. Schools that have always engaged themselves in international dialogue, are now increasingly immersed in the rapidly developing media arena and global information networks.

In this paper I propose a theoretical and pedagogical framework in which the concept of *migration* provides a useful model with which to investigate the transitory natures permeating cultures. These involve not only the literal moving from one physical world into another, but also the more abstract - from that of the so called "real" world into that of the "virtual." Through what I call *re-presentations* an experimental studio was conducted at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral in Santa Fe, Argentina involving multi-cultures (the USA and Argentina) and multi-disciplines (film/video and architecture). The conclusion suggests however, that such *re-presentations* posit paradoxical questions.

Resumen

Dentro del marco de la práctica y la educación arquitectónicas existe una fuerza fundamental que activa el fenómeno de globalización contemporáneo: los medios y su capacidad de crear una interdependencia planetaria junto a su diseminación de olas culturales transnacionales. Las facultades de arquitectura que han mantenido diálogos internacionales se encuentran ahora inmersas en un terreno dominado por el desarrollo de nuevos medios y redes informáticas globales.

En esta ponencia se propondrá un estructura teórica y pedagógica en la que el concepto de migración proveerá un modelo útil para investigar la naturaleza transitoria de nuestra cultura. Esto implicará no solo moverse física o literalmente de un mundo a otro sino también un desplazamiento más abstracto —de un mundo "real" a otro "virtual". Este tema fue abordado en un taller experimental denominado "Re-Presentaciones" que fue ofrecido en la Universidad Nacional del Litoral en Santa Fe, Argentina y que involucró múltiples culturas (USA y Argentina) y múltiples disciplinas (film, video y arquitectura). La conclusión sugiere, sin embargo, que tales re-presentaciones implican situaciones paradójicas.

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It is a well known fact that we are engaged in a globalization phenomenon of unprecedented scale. Two conditions have contributed to this situation - namely (1) *interdependence*, in which economic and political forces driving the process necessitate business and social stability and dependability; and (2) *transient cultural waves*, a fluidity of values and tastes that are nurtured through mass media and advertising in order to fuel and guarantee the consumption cycles of the consumer driven marketplace. ¹ In a previous paper entitled "Pedagogical Migrations: Constructing New Worlds Through Media" I and my colleague observed that these "two characteristics of globalization are totally dependent on the power of media to (1) support the immediate and continuous communication flows necessary to run the unfathomably complex political-economic networks and (2) create enough cultural homogeneity to assure product consumption regardless of place. We further argued that telecommunication technology is the one ultimate source and force behind contemporary global civilization. **Media is the new vehicle of power.**"²

In our paper we addressed what we called a **pedagogy of migration**.³ This metaphor conceptualizes the culture and media shifts by suggesting that there is an emerging migration from nation-states to that of a global culture. Furthermore, we are moving from a material to a media civilization. Consequently there exists the necessity to provide migratory routes and directions in attempting to inhabit these new territories.

In this paper I wish to expand on this notion further, by emphasizing the theoretical as well as the pragmatic framework in which I situated my studies as part of an experimental studio that I conducted at the Universidad Nacional del Litoral in Santa Fe, Argentina this past autumn (spring in the USA). The studio provided an opportunity for cross cultural migration to occur at two levels. First, that which was experienced by myself, from the USA, within the environment of Argentina in teaching students outside of my own culture. Second, within the studio setting I wished to address a second migration, namely that between disciplines involving architecture and media - in this scenario film/video that utilized the computer for both production and editing purposes.

This agenda required addressing the notion of *re-presentation* .



Re-presentation provides a moving away from the immediacy of things and experiences by entering another world. In the Postscript essay *in Via 9: Re-Presentation*, the editors note that “re-presentation separates us from the immediacy of the things and experiences themselves...” (a) re-presentation renders invisible, transcendent and absent entities visible, immanent and present.”⁴ In a sense, therefore, we are alienated from one existence in order to establish a new awareness of that existence through its re-presentation. Consequently, re-presentation provides a kind of migration. *Migration*, likewise, involves moving from one place or condition into another. Existentially, it also suggests “bridging.” Heidegger uses the bridge in order to establish the notion of place. He states: “Thus, the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it; rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge.”⁵ But the notion of bridging also suggests, I believe, a degree of instability. It suggests a moving from an anchored condition, place, or culture, to a new and potentially destabilizing position.

There exists, consequently, the need for an extension of the discipline in “bridging” new territories that becomes a necessary strategy in an era of increasing globalization. Therefore I would like to comment on three conditions: the *media*, the *inter-disciplinary* and the *cross-cultural* in addressing the concept of “bridging” these new territories.

Bridging New Territories

Condition One: the media

Media as the new vehicle of power has acquired global significance and therefore suggests incorporating multiple disciplines within its domain through migration. In architecture, this means that both practitioners and the academy must not only explore, but also colonize and eventually dwell in such seemingly unfamiliar territory. Two responses might be observed. First, while one may leave the more familiar territory of the “real”, inhabiting the “re-presentational” allows us the possibility to observe with greater clarity that so called “real” world. S.I. Hayakawa noted in the now distant modernist period of the 1960’s that “our basic knowings are no longer of ‘things’ and their ‘properties,’ but of structures...(that) are never directly experienced; they can only be visualized through the construction of (molecular) models...”⁶ This suggests that observation retains a kind of intrinsic reality, but only through technological intervention.

However, observation, as an extension of human nature, may itself be problematic. As early as the invention of the telescope the image that re-presents the thing itself has been both a source of fascination and suspicion. The era of mass media and the reproducible, ubiquitous “xerox” copy further suggests part of the problematic condition. Consequently, such a condition also means that “in fact, we have adopted the artificial in place of the real, and learned to make use of this new reality.”⁷ Therefore, a cross-migration appears to occur: one, in which we move from the real into a re-produced reality that enables us to see (with presumably greater clarity) new properties and structures of the original reality; the other in which moving into the “artificial” (or virtual) produces a new reality, consequently replacing the original reality.

Condition Two: the interdisciplinary

It is inevitable that *inter-disciplinary* conditions should be addressed. Within this context the work of John Forbes Nash, Jr. comes to mind. A brilliant mathematician, Mr. Nash developed the foundations of game theory (partly through his complete absorption in tea time games at Princeton) which were subsequently applied

to economics and even later, gravitational field theory. Consequently, his theories provided both theoretical as well as an applied knowledge basis within these seemingly disparate disciplines, that were received initially, without recognition, or else with skepticism.⁸

What this suggests, perhaps, is that which Walter Benjamin called a *critical reception of the technological experience*. For Benjamin, critical reception of recent technologies involved radio and the cinema. These employed montage and interruption- thus giving their works a “shock effect” that might awaken new responses to the political conditions of the time on the part of a seemingly disengaged public.⁹

Condition Three: the cross-cultural

The *cross-cultural*, engages both literal, as well as analogous situations. In migrating we literally move from one place, or condition to another. Therefore we are inevitably involved in another culture. Consequently one culture is inhabited and/or co-exists with another. Colonization is another matter. It is about establishing some kind of *remnant* order that is superimposed on the existing order. This relates to Piaget’s notions of *assimilation* and *accommodation*. Whenever we encounter a new situation an automatic cognitive attempt at framing the event as something known occurs- namely *assimilation*. This is accompanied, however, by an act of reframing reality to conform with our own projections, or definitions that allow for *accommodation* to occur.¹⁰

Consequently, in an era of post-colonization and the rapidly emerging globalization the need for *assimilation* and *accommodation* requires new definitions. How do we respond to new definitions of colonization, regardless of the 19th and early 20th centuries industrial demise and the emergence of information technologies? The bottom line: WalMart exists, just as much as Bill Gates’ Windows 98 - throughout the world! What are the new rules that dominate a culture that is increasingly based on both *assimilation* and *accommodation*? Are Piaget’s notions that I previously referred to, out the window? The pedagogical basis for cross-cultural investigations is a complex yet very necessary one.

Dwelling in New Territories

To inhabit a new land requires not only *bridging new territories* but also *dwelling*. Therefore, how do we engage a body-oriented understanding of place with a newly emerging electronic one? I would argue that this requires the act of “making” in order to inhabit new places. To dwell means to inhabit through the act of making. In order for the students to engage in a new world - in this case the medium of film/video, required their participation in making, and therefore to engage in the act of dwelling in new territories.

I chose to involve the students in a series of filmic investigations utilizing *video* as the medium and the *computer* as the post-production vehicle. The studio involved both theoretical presentations and discussions as well as a practicum. The students were presented with what I called three stratas of inquiry. These involved: (1) Excavations: explorations regarding the sources and issues of *re-presentation* regarding “authenticity” and film theory; (2) Extrusions: the evolution of theories *vis a vis* the development of story (narrativity) and theories of place (set theory); and finally (3) Extensions: typology in film (genre) and the Urbis (the city).



Excavations

What is original and what is not? Consequently, what is the meaning of something that is not original versus the original? Walter Benjamin in his now famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” addressed this issue through the concept of the “aura.” An art object originated as a kind of cultic phenomenon and consequently it retained qualities of authenticity. With the advent of reproduction, in particular photography, the original’s “aura” was lost.

As reproduction techniques developed within film, the notion of time and motion, of course, entered the scene. Early experimentations with images in motion that began in France, later extended into Russia, and the US. Vertov and Eisenstein, in

particular, provided one of cinema’s foundations through the concept of montage.¹¹

Both the concept of the «aura» and «montage» provided the students an opportunity to migrate into new territory, while at the same time anchoring themselves within the milieu of their own Argentinean culture. The studio, divided into several groups, explored the issue by the students’ selecting an architectural artifact, which curiously turned out to be a series of historic or abandoned buildings.

For one group, an abandoned railroad station (ferrocarril) suggested a kind of nostalgic journey- a return to the period in which the (now defunct) railroad was a significant element in the economic as well as cultural life of Argentina. (Figura 1).

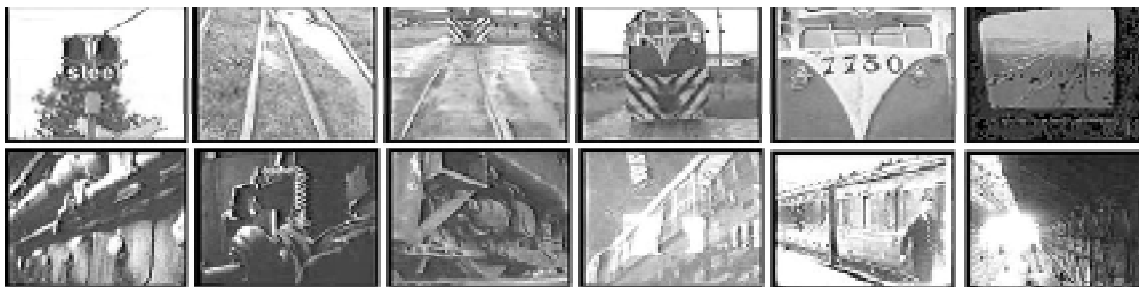


Fig 1 - “Steel” An abandoned railroad station (ferrocarril) suggests a nostalgic reverse journey in time and space. The train is momentarily “brought to life” through its re-presentation vis a vis the medium of film, only to metaphorically “die” at the end.. Students: Sebastian Adelia, Facundo Berra and Guillermo Mantaras.

It therefore had acquired a kind of “aura.” The images suggested through tempo as well as content, a momentary “life” that ultimately, at the end of the very short film, returns to a dead state. In contrast, another group selected an abandoned port facility but chose, instead of returning to a past scenario, to re-construct the building utilizing many of the techniques that the Russian Constructivists used in their own re-presentations (i.e. montage). (Figura 2). This suggested a positivist attitude towards history in which phenomenon are subjected to invariable natural laws¹² in contrast to the classical attitude (cyclical history) that the previous group presented.



Fig 2 - An abandoned port building is reconstructed utilizing the imagery of the Russian Constructivist movement. Built of fragmented images, only at the end is the entire “structure” completed – a paradoxical reading of the modernist and post-modern conditions. Students: Gustavo Weiskal, Martin Calabrese and Guillermo Weiskal

Extrusions

Architecture is about permanence. It has spatial structure and definable function. It is history constructed. By contrast, the architecture that resides as image (i.e. within the filmic environment as “set”) is ephemeral- lasting only as long as the production of the film. Curiously, because of its permanence and its connection with history, the non material film image is therefore closer to architecture.

Yet, ironically, in its materiality, the “set” is closest to architecture. Therefore, set may be seen as constituting five levels or conditions: denotative- the lowest level of narrative weight; punctuational - a claim for attention; as embellishment - in which the imitative aspects of architecture often are portrayed; as artifice - the totally fictitious (as in science fiction) ; and finally as narrative - a total integration of the set as narrative - the story itself.

The latter was investigated by the students through the integration of an abandoned power plant as the narrative itself. (Figura 3) Two perceptions of the narrative were explored. The first resided with the video camera in continual motion - a participatory, subjective point of view. Utilizing the computer’s software capabilities to provide filter processes, a high degree of pixelation enhanced the notion of a static, synchronic structure transformed into that of a dynamic, diachronic character. Here the architectural “set” became the actor and therefore the narrative. The second, however, suspended the temporal, acquiring an objective point of view. However, like the haunting images of Atget’s Paris,¹² the camera called into question the reality of time and place. Consequently, as with Atget, it constructed it’s own universe and therefore also re-established its own subjectivity.



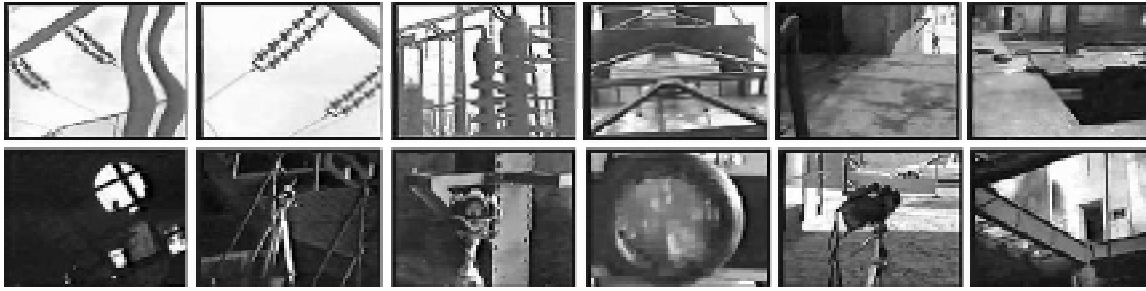


Fig 3 - "2" A powerplant is observed through dual "eyes" – that of the video camera (a subjective point of view) and that of the still photograph (an objective point of view) . At the same time the plant becomes both a character and a set that conveys both memories and potentialities. Students: Arq. Marcelo Molina, Arq. Miguel Vitale and Mauro Chiarella

Narrative may also be seen at an even more fundamental level. It provides the basic «structure» within filmic constructs. Stories may have beginnings, middles and endings... but not necessarily in that order. As such, the narrative can observe two possibilities - that of the *bildungsroman* - the «picture novel» and that which may be referred to as the «spatial narrative.» The first is linear, and therefore sequential in terms of temporality and story. It also has closure - the ubiquitous «the end.» The second, and more apropos to postmodern thought - the spatial, is non linear, inward moving, often conveying a fragmented view of the world and reality. It suspends time and remains ambiguous regarding closure. In the context with which the studio was conducted (Argentina) , the work of Jorge Luis Borges provides one model of spatial narrativity and a postmodern sensibility. Here notions of displacement, discontinuity and disjunction are essential elements in the structure of the works. Similar themes may also be found in the writings of Robbe Grillet and the films of Alan Resnais. ¹⁴

For one group of students the suspension of time and place, based on both the works of Borges, as well as the films of Resnais formed the ideological framework. Interestingly, and as a reflection of their own cultural background and awareness, the students were very familiar with the writings of Borges, their fellow Argentinean. Within this context a series of rooms formed spatial as well as metaphorical layers - both internally as well as externally (one of the house typologies found throughout Santa Fe, Argentina) (Figura 4).The group involved four students , each providing his own filmic point of view. A character (with no particular meaning or purpose) moved within these layers. Contrasting points of view either followed the character or, in the style of Yasujiro Ozu, ¹⁵ remained stationary. The only constant that acquired meaning resided in the architectural "set" itself. This suggested qualities of authenticity that architecture itself might be able to maintain in transcending the ephemeral aspects of the "set; " therefore, a return to Benjamin's "aura."

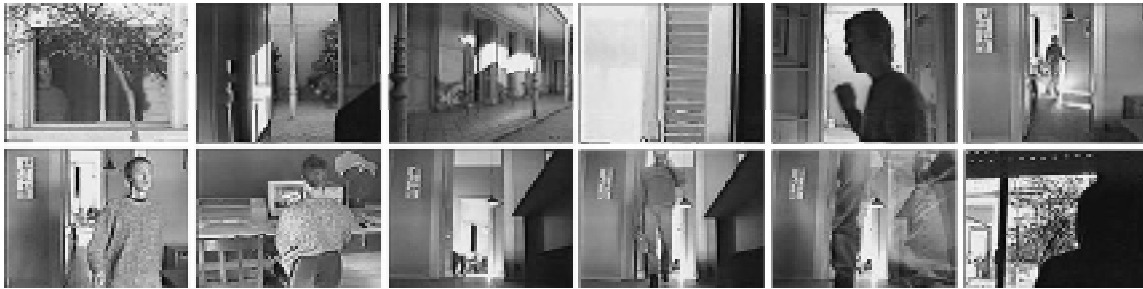


Fig 4 - " 0'-00"-20 " (20 Segundos) A traditional house in Santa Fe provides a series of layered spaces within which the "character" moves in seemingly meaningless patterns. Recalling the work of Resnais in film as well as Borges' own labyrinthian themes, the study suggests that perhaps the only meaning resides in the architectural spaces themselves. Students: Federico Anthony, Gonzalo Bonadeo, Marcelo Milone and Ruben Valdemarin

Extensions

History invites interpretation. On one hand it is based on a cyclical notion of history that suggests patterns based on rhythm and repetition. Contrasting this we are also confronted with the positivist notion of history suggesting an ever changing cultural condition implying transformation through improvement (more often, through technology). Both of these find their presence in the city - a place based on both repetition as well as transformation. But it is also a place to become existentially lost. As a detached observer - the *flaneur*, one might experience the city as dream or the city as labyrinth - the mythology of Daedalus and a return into mystery.

In response, and as a final exploration, one group of students explored the concept of the *flaneur* by examining their own city of Santa Fe (Figura 5). Their study, entitled « Los Intocables « («The Untouchables «) engaged in a series of reflections - windows containing what they called «trapped images.» The contents, reflecting a consumer driven society also reflected yet separated the consumers from the consumable. The consumers attempted to engage in the consumable world. Yet, unlike Benjamin's *flaneur* who elected his removed condition, they were disengaged, hence "untouchables" without knowing it.



Fig 5 “Los Intocables” (*The Untouchables*) Windows in the city provide reflections that form “trapped images.” The observers, however, by participating in their own disengagements, unlike Benjamin’s free willed Flaneur, suggest their own entrapment as part of a consuming culture. Students: Federico Antony, Gonzalo Bonadeo, Marcelo Milone and Ruben Valdemanin

Conclusions

The studio experiences that I participated in suggested ways of bridging new territories. Through the medium of video and film I and my students explored interdisciplinary and cross-cultural issues by re-presenting our experiences. Such re-presentations can be both transforming and interpretive, as well as distancing and obscure. Hence we are confronted with a paradoxical set of conditions. As a re-presentational medium, film is about communication and has its own systems. It has structural, emotive, and iconic properties in addition to the spatial/ temporal conditions that make it also an experiential medium. But so does architecture – involving us in similar issues and properties. Both engage us through transformation and interpretation.

Walter Benjamin once argued in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that “architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art, the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction.”¹⁶ His argument involved the distinction between those works of art that allow one to be absorbed by the work (and its “aura”) versus the distracted masses that merely absorb the art work. Consequently architecture remains within the realm of distancing and disengagement. He likewise argues that such also exists in film. “Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise.”¹⁷ Film (and now t.v. and the internet) have become the media of the masses who can only absorb it, and not be absorbed by it. Who really cares about long term qualitative attributes as long as the media provides immediate gratifications?

So do film and architecture really share these notions of distraction and distancing that Benjamin once found to be one of the emerging *zeitgeist* characteristics earlier in this century? Furthermore does their reception only reinforce such distractions through the increasing role of the computer, the internet, and the “virtual?”

My experiences with the students suggested otherwise. Engaging in the tactile world of Santa Fe, Argentina, with “real” buildings re-presented using the media of video and computer, the experiential, phenomenological notions of place and the world were conveyed with an Argentinean passion. If lessons were to be learned in this entire endeavor they suggest that film and architecture have much more in common than the distractions that Benjamin wrote about. Both have the ability to transform – emotionally as well as physically, one’s view of the world. But both also, and most intriguingly, are about paradoxes. “Ultimately, we are left with a final paradox: Is re-presentation an interpretive lens which allows us to understand an otherwise incomprehensible reality? Or is re-presentation an obscuring veil which might hinder us from perceiving the inherent order of the universe?”¹⁸

Paradoxes are stories inviting inquiry. That was what motivated Borges to engage so brilliantly in his endless fascination with the labyrinth, the library and ultimately, the story.

Beginning in Argentina, his stories ended with the world. This studio suggested only the beginning of just such a paradoxical journey.

End Notes

- ¹ Bermudez, J. and Hermanson, R. (1998). “Pedagogical Migrations: Constructing New Worlds Through Media,” Proceedings of the 1998 ACSA International Conference (Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, Washington D.C. : 66-71
- ² Bermudez and Hermanson, *ibid.*
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- ⁴ Postscript Editors (1988). *Via* . New York: Rizzoli, 167.
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- ⁶ Hayakawa, S.I. (1967). “ Domesticating the Invisible,” *The New Landscape in Art and Science*. Chicago: Paul Theobald and Co., 64-65.
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- ¹⁰ Piaget, J. (1982). *The Principles of Genetic Epistemology* , London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- ¹¹ Eisenstein S. (1969). *Film Form*, J. Leyda (transl. and ed.), New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- ¹² Perez -Gomez, A. (1983). *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 272-295.
- ¹³ Beaumont-Maillet, L. (undated) *Atget Paris*, Paris: Hazan
- ¹⁴ Resnais, A., (1961) *L’année dernière à Marienbad*
- ¹⁵ Cook, D.A., (1981). *A History of Narrative Film*, New York W.W. Norton & Comapny.
- ¹⁶ Benjamin, W. (1969). “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, New York 239.
- ¹⁷ Benjamin, 240
- ¹⁸ Hay, C., Wong, P., Fleenor, B., Gotthelf, A. “Postscript,” *Via*, New York, Rizzoli, 167.

