

## Celebrating the Inclusivity of Film

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**Abstract:** With an ever more diverse student body in design education and a profession that still does not fully reflect this evolution, what methods can educators call upon to allow this diversity to express itself? Emerging technologies, the fluidity of gender and a more global understanding of ethnicity and religion has changed the way students experience, perceive and represent the world around them. Utilizing film as a pedagogical tool to study space as well as the built environment and to represent this fluid, global and imperfect world can allow students a more robust understanding of reality and their place within it.

While the design industry and design schools have nominally embraced the rhetoric of “diversity,” both institutions—and their cultural offerings—continue to be dominated by cisgender white men. Despite the rhetoric of “inclusivity” embraced by these institutions, fewer women and people of color inhabit meaningful positions of power resulting in a limited and imbalanced expression of the built environment. Although people traditionally considered “minorities” in terms of race and gender are more often invited “into the academy,” their voices are still not as fully listened to as the voices of their white peers. There is quite a difference between being asked to be seen and being given a platform to be heard. Film can provide that platform. As a pedagogical tool, film can help both instructors and students address the challenges of inclusivity, especially when the design curriculum is based on a less diverse, patriarchal model and when technologies can be isolating rather than unifying.

With an ever more diverse student body in design education and a profession that still does not fully reflect this evolution, educators are searching for methods to express this diversity. Emerging technologies, the fluidity of gender and a more global understanding of ethnicity and religion has changed the way students experience, perceive and represent the world around them. Film can function as a valuable pedagogical tool for both students and instructors to study space and the built environment while addressing the challenges of inclusivity, especially when the design curriculum is based on a less diverse, patriarchal model and when technologies can be isolating rather than unifying. Watching/critically engaging with films as well as making films can allow students a more robust understanding of reality and their place within it.

Walter Benjamin believed film to be contemporary mass movements’ most powerful agent claiming, “Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.”<sup>1</sup> This catharsis can both challenge and add to the existing pedagogies used in design education. Film’s history as a tool of activism, alternative expression and representing minority viewpoints is a potential method of achieving this. At this point, every generation has been so exposed to the influence of film that we now have a kind of chicken-and-egg scenario to consider: what is the relationship between film and the built environment? Does one influence the other more, is it a symbiotic relationship?

When students are asked to watch and then critically engage with films it allows them to see diverse views of the world and of our built environment. For example, in my liberal arts course “Film, Space & Perception”<sup>2</sup> students watch Sophia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* after reading a chapter on “non-places” from anthropologist Marc Augé’s *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*.<sup>3</sup> This leads us to discussion of what constitutes space (physically and culturally) and how we perceive these culturally non-descript non-places. What the film adds to the overall equation is a way for the students to view these non-places from a female’s point-of-view and engage with each other about how a woman may inhabit these spaces and what cultural meaning they may or may not have for someone outside the patriarchy that created such spaces. This idea of the “gendered gaze” is a key issue within the design world and owes a debt to the term “male gaze” coined by film critic and theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” This illustrates the important link between film and design and the battles that both professions face in terms of our existing patriarchy. The alternative, or diverse, views of our built environment shown in film go beyond simply gender identity, they can also encourage students and instructors to address the issue of privilege in its other forms such as race and religion.

There is a universal accessibility that film introduces to a class setting when dealing with challenging or controversial issues—even students who may not feel to be part of an excluded group are often able to connect on a more personal and emotional level to those who are via the medium of film. It has been shown that films bring students closer to the people, events, concepts, and theories, and help them come alive



Figure 1. Student film “Toska” - themes of isolation and alienation.

academically.<sup>4</sup> Student-directed films allow the makers of said films to speak to the realities of their own lives, on their own terms, without interruption from patriarchal voices. Having control of a medium such as film allows the student to inhabit a traditional position of power.

Film functions as a primary source that allows individuals to walk in the emotional geography of someone else’s life. Whether the individual is the director or the spectator, they are given the opportunity to ask valuable questions such as “What is the canon?” or “Who decided what was canon in the first place?” For example, exposing students to films from directors such as Marjane Satrapi who tells her story as a young girl growing up in 1970’s Iran in *Persepolis*; Haifaa al-Mansour from Saudi Arabia who shows, in her film *Wadjda*, the environment facing a young Muslim girl or Nijla Mu’min’s film, *Jinn*, that explores the world of a black, Muslim teenage girl, can encourage those entering the design field to create for their world view, not simply follow the pre-existing privileged rules. As another example from my course, students watch Maya Deren’s surrealist film *Meshes of the Afternoon* paired with a reading from Juhani Pallasmaa “Identity, Intimacy and Domicile.” This allows us to dig into the issue of how identity is linked to our domestic setting but also by inserting a female-directed surrealist film, it also brings up the topic of subversion of expectations and how the built environment impacts a minority’s agency.

Another key concern design education realm is that of technological isolation. The design of our built environment does not happen in a vacuum; it has vast cultural and socio-political implications yet many of us exist in a distanced reality. “As spaces for public life are downsized and emptied of their interactive and deliberative purposes, people live in more isolating and privatized conditions... Computer technologies assist these processes AND can provide ways of escape for those fortunate to have access.”<sup>5</sup> Technology stems from a place of privilege and therefore skews toward a patriarchal system and its embedded biases creating a digital divide that hampers equal access and understanding of technology.

Our distance from both reality and emotions continues within design education via online courses that can only approximate genuine discussions, computer aided drafting that abstracts

the hand-mind connection, BIM software that allows building and construction professionals to work “together” while never actually encountering one another and rendering programs that create such ideal views of the world that reality is a disappointing second. This solipsistic view of the world is one where reality becomes secondary to creations that do not accurately represent our diverse environment.

Yet technology can also serve as the connective tissue that brings together experiential points of view that previously unexposed to others. Even though watching a film may be a singular experience, or one not rooted in reality, when coupled with critical thinking it can become an empowering lesson. By watching films and learning to be comfortable questioning what one sees on a screen, critical spectatorship can compensate for some of these alienating factors. Literally seeing alternative points of view can make the spectator feel less personally and/or culturally isolated; “many students—feeling powerless and insecure in a society marked by a cutthroat economy, increasing privatization, and a breakdown of all notions of public life—find a sense of relief and escape...”<sup>6</sup> So rather than engendering a feeling of isolation, a student can instead find unity or inclusiveness.

While watching and critically discussing films is an extremely valuable tool for the design education, making films may be even more so. The ability to record moving images and edit them into a filmic format has become so easy that the making of a film has become possible for virtually anyone with access to basic technology, especially students. As architect/theorist Juhani Pallasmaa states, “Experiential images of space and place are contained in practically all films, and that the most powerful cinematic architecture is usually concealed in the representation of normal events, not in the specific exposition of buildings and spaces of exceptional architectural merit.”<sup>7</sup>

Current students were born and raised in a video culture where film/video is an accepted and familiar means of expression. Statistics show 32 million YouTube Creators (individuals who create content) and 56.6 million subscribers as of October 2019.<sup>8</sup> This comfort with making video/film means that students have yet another means of expressing their own world views and are less reliant on the privileged gaze as a representation of



Figure 2. Student film “Urban Geographies” - themes of gender and the built environment.

the built environment. Multiple points of view are much more possible. “Those in the field of critical pedagogy and cultural studies might argue that cinema as a site of cultural politics, has the power to mask and negate current realities or to challenge them.”<sup>9</sup> Film making becomes a form of expression that is potentially less loaded with stereotypes and cultural limiters.

Film after film created by the students in my course bear this out. They repeatedly engage the viewer with struggles for inclusivity and worries about their isolation. They take the built environment and begin to re-purpose it to the reality of the world they inhabit. In one student film, *Toska*<sup>10</sup> (Figure 1), the director tells a story of isolation. The main protagonist is shown surrounded by the cultural normalcy of the holiday shopping season in Boston, yet is clearly apart, or “other” in this setting. The student director was able to convey his challenges as someone who inhabits two cultures, Russia and the United States, and the resulting isolation he feels. Externally, he may appear to fit into the cultural landscape of Boston, yet internally there is a distance or a foreignness to even familiar surroundings. These abstract, philosophic concepts are difficult to convey in more conventional design methodologies, but with film an individual’s phenomenological experience can be more explicitly conveyed.

In the films *Urban Geographies* (Figure 2) and *Gender as Exterior Façade* (Figure 3), two female students explored the relationship between gender and the built environment. In *Urban Geographies* the director’s cultural background and status as a Latino female designer is celebrated by dancing to Latin music in front of Frank Gehry’s Stata Center. Her film is both a celebration of non-traditional design and a subversion of the white, male dominance in architecture. Her dance performance forces the audience to re-interpret a patriarchal institutional building in her own experience of it while lending it a new point

of view. In *Gender as Exterior Façade*, a young woman explores how she feels her appearance is a façade, both physically and psychologically using the built environment to mirror (literally and figuratively) these emotions. She films herself in social situations within the built environment from a bathroom to a concert to a park, juxtaposing the way she is expected to fit into her environment (her exterior façade) and the way she truly feels she does not, the pressures they exert on her interior being.

In other films students took on the issues of race and place. *Red Lips* (Figure 4) delves into the challenge of maintaining a cross-cultural relationship is explored within a domestic setting. The student director used his film to explore the challenges posed by his Muslim/Hindu marriage, work and studies in the design field and his wife’s struggles with isolation and newly married life in Boston. The film allowed him to show the differing domestic settings they inhabit as well as the psychological effect domestic spaces can have on individuals. A young Moroccan student explored the notion of home in her film *Home* (Figure 5). She recorded friends and family describing what home was to them, but rather than simply show their faces, she chose to represent them via a kinetic model made by her representing this concept of home. For each new iteration of individuals adding to the growing description of “home,” the model moves, re-defining this visual and psychological idea of home. Her film generated a vivid discussion about the experience of home, the linguistic implications of the term “home,” and how a concept can have both an objective and subjective element to it.

These student films have ended up as learning experiences not simply for the class participants but also for the school community and me as the instructor. They have shown that the way we understand our environment, our surroundings is more diverse than standard theory would tell us. The students have





Figure 3. Student film "Gender as Exterior Facade" - themes of gender and environment.

said they felt a real ownership of both the work creatively but also in a larger cultural context.

Because film has a unique ability to allow a student to simultaneously consider representation and perception, it asks them to move beyond architecture, interiors and landscape to explore how the changing realities of space and the built environment can and should be communicated. Design and film have historically had strong ties; however, many design programs still do not fully utilize film as a method of studying the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of design as it pertains to a more diverse student body. Film can allow us to move beyond the instructor-centered pedagogical model to a student-centered model where students deepen their philosophic understandings of the built environment while giving voice to their unique and evolving points of view. Film can be about allowing the previously subaltern, the previously unheard to envision and represent a future absent the imperatives of normativity, providing a valuable pedagogy in moving past design's exclusive history into its inclusive future.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Harry Zorn. *Illuminations*. (London: Bodley Head, 2015), 3.
2. I will be using as examples and case study my class taught at the Boston Architectural College that I have taught for over 10 years called "Ideas & Design: Film, Space and Perception." This class is a liberal studies course and focuses on using film, design, sociological and psychological theories to better understand the way we perceive and represent the built environment. Students are required to watch films paired with readings for critical discussions, develop and write a scholarly paper on a related topic, further their research by making a 5-minute film and presenting it to the public.
3. Marc Auge. *Non-Places: an Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2008), 84.
4. Allen S. Marcus. (2005). 'It is as it was': Feature films in the history classroom. *The Social Studies*, 96 (2) (2005), 61-67.
5. Zillah R. Eisenstein. *Global Obscenities: Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Lure of Cyberfantasy*. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1998), 2.
6. Henry A. Giroux. "Breaking into the Movies: Pedagogy and the Politics of Film." *JAC* 21, no. 3 (2001): 589.
7. Juhani Pallasmaa. *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*. (Helsinki: Rakennustieto, 2007), 7.
8. "Analytics Made Easy." *SocialBlade*. Accessed October 10, 2019. <https://socialblade.com>.
9. David R. Cole, Joff P.N. Bradley, and Michael Peters. *A Pedagogy of Cinema*. (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016), Xii.
10. Toska - noun - Russian word roughly translated as sadness, melancholia, lugubriousness. "No single word in English renders all the shades of toska. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom." "A Quote by Vladimir Nabokov," Goodreads (Goodreads), accessed January 14, 2020, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/309633-toska---noun-t-sk---russian-word-roughly-translated-as>

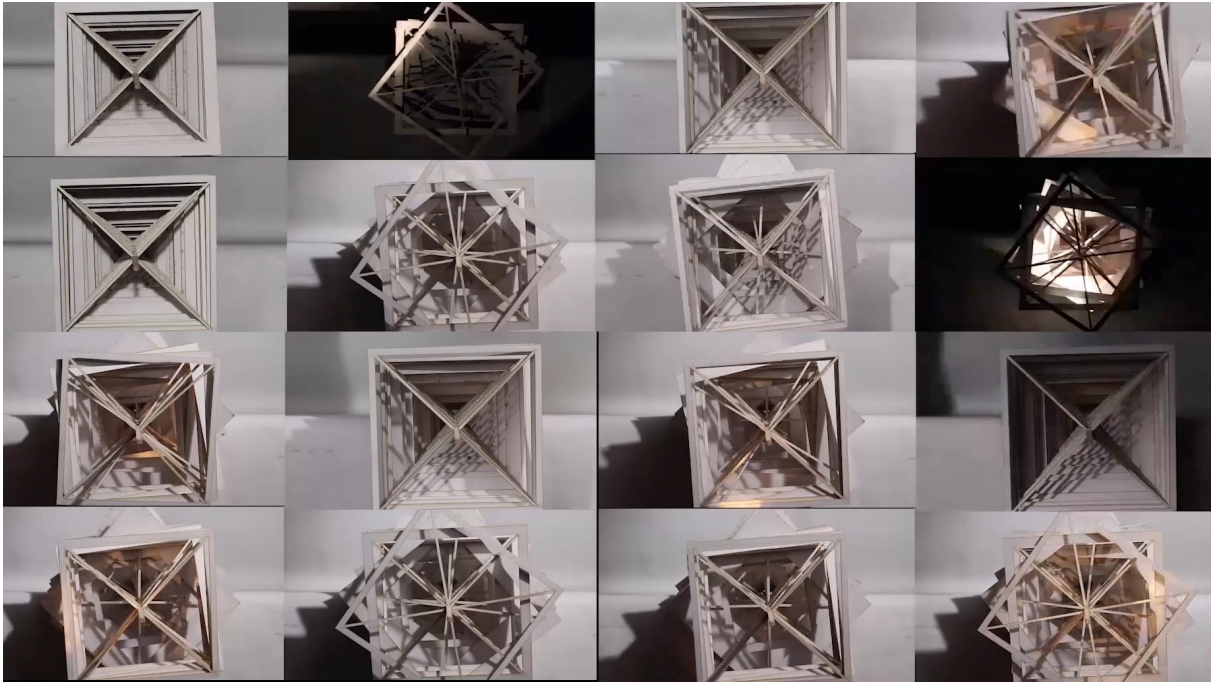


Figure 4. Student film "Red Lips" - themes of religion, isolation and the domestic sphere.



Figure 4. Student film "Home" - themes of phenomenology, place, belonging.