

## **Cinema's (Ir)rational Pose: Exploring the Historical Influences of Alterity in the Work of Tobias Putrih**

*The Black Cat* was released as an early horror film in 1934 with the tag line, "Things you never even dreamed of," and featured Boris Karloff in the lead role of the demonic architect Hjalmar Poelzig. It is rare within the history of film that an architect should appear as the main protagonist, and even rarer that an architect be portrayed as anything other than rational, visionary and, if existentially troubled, only moderately so (recall Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* or Kirk Douglas in *Strangers When We Meet*). Yet in this early cinematic venture, the film's protagonist steers an active fantasy located outside any real operative frame of civilized behavior. Perhaps *The Black Cat* can be read as cinema's timely attempt to highlight the exoticism of a profession known throughout the 1930s for its unconventional and vanguard contributions. As a medium of representation located fully within the visual field, film has lent to architecture the possibility of projecting a future without fidelity to the present or the need to articulate a particular being-in-the-world—Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* are the most oft-cited examples of this. The uneasy relationship between the drafting of space and a contesting reliance on function only helps to show that the real creative opportunities for architecture remain in those domains of experimentation that are ultimately linked to the simultaneity of construction and imagination. On a parallel level, this interarticulation contributes to a wider discussion of the logic inherent in any given artwork, since that which transcends both the artwork's factual existence as an object and its rational constructive moment must be located within an enigmatic otherness that has yet to be defined.

Architecture draws art into its discourse and subjects it to its mannerisms and procedures when it gestures toward abstraction. Similarly, architecture veers into the realm of art to seek out original inquiries as to how space can be imagined. The correspondence forged between Alvar Aalto and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy in the late 1920s, for example, illustrates parallel approaches of an artist and an architect looking for options in each other's field; the first in an abstract proposal with the eventual goal of functionality and the latter a kinetic abstraction with sculptural applications. Both Aalto and Moholy-Nagy were fixated on the problem of how a cinema theater is able to evoke and sustain a mental state while privileging the tech-

nical and psychological aspects of the film projection. Aalto, influenced by Moholy-Nagy, was less motivated by the significance of cinema in the formation of a particular approach to architecture (as Bernard Tschumi, Rem Koolhaas, Coop Himmelb(l)au and Jean Nouvel would be later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) but rather in the very properties and dynamics of film projection and light. His founding of *Projektio*, an experimental film club in Helsinki, which screened Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's propaganda films, Buñuel's *Andalusian Dog*, and Sternberg's *Blue Angel*, reaffirmed his interest in non-commercial films that were either marginalized because of their experimental nature or out-and-out forbidden by censors. The architect also authored an article entitled "Rational Cinema" in 1928 for the Danish cultural journal *Kritisk Rev*, in which he defined the optimal standard for the cinema, positing an unconventional design that would address visual perception in relation to film projection. Coincidentally, the essay appeared as Moholy-Nagy was nearing completion of his seminal work *Light Prop*, also known as *Light Space Modulator*, a kinetic sculpture that illustrated the relationship between theatrical space and the properties of light and film. Aalto was plagued by the traditional framing of the projected image as a photographic image in darkness, and proposed an alternative design that called for the construction of an auditorium less as a site than as a system. This challenged the then-pervasive architectural approach to the cinema, which treated it as a theatre and included dramatic stage design, often integrating curtains and a stage set. In Aalto's view traditional cinema design neglected what he saw as the true challenge facing the cinema architect: to shift attention from the decoration of the interior to the creation of an environment in which the screen was as perfectly visible to the public as possible, thereby foregrounding light and the physical nature of the projected image.<sup>1</sup>

1. Goran Schildt, ed. *Alvar Aalto In His Own Words*. Helsinki: Otava, 1997, pp. 66-71.

The clarity of the picture depends on absolute darkness, but this cannot be attained in an ordinary auditorium because the projected image itself is such a strong light source that it lights up the room. In other words, reflections from inappropriate surfaces (walls and ceilings) cause light rays other than those coming directly from the screen to catch the eye.<sup>2</sup>

Aalto regarded the black interior, adopted at the infancy of cinema as the best way to create a kind of "sculptural frame for the image," as symptomatic of the shortcomings of cinema design. He claimed that the "plan for the cinema does not rest on the question of color, but instead, on overall design with functionally constructed form." Moreover, he related this to the drafting of a functionally constructed form that could respond to elements that a static system was unable

2. Ibid.

to register. He proposed a system of slats that would be readily adjustable according to the given needs of a particular film and its content, thereby ensuring that "none of the surfaces, walls, and ceiling elements visible to the public would be reached directly by the light thrown off by the screen during projection."<sup>3</sup> In many ways, the proposal evoked Moholy-Nagy's own robotic construction, which illustrated the dialectics of light and space and allowed for movements in the projection of light and shadow.

Although its rhetoric seems to point toward functionality, Aalto's proposal was in fact a kind of utopic resolution to "counter the tendency toward the design for baroque and sensational interior architectures of cinema houses in order to grasp the variable, ever-shifting, anti-monumental quality inherent in film." Cinema eventually succumbed to a commodity form with film content increasingly subservient to what Debord would define as the spectacle, contradicting Aalto's predictions that film—and therefore cinema architecture—would retain its experimental nature. Movie houses evolved from arthouses into movie palaces, multiplexes, megaplexes and IMAX theater. Despite this evolution, the line of inquiry manifest in Aalto's hypothetical proposal for an adjustable interior designed to adapt to the content of any given film and in essence to the dynamic of film history, continues today in the work Tobias Putrih. As an artist intrigued by cinema architecture, specifically the deconstruction of visual perception as it relates to photography and film, Putrih revisits original cinema designs and buildings to rearrange and reanimate them in the form of models and maquettes. In doing so, Putrih sidesteps constraints of function to employ what otherwise may be referred to in architectural theory as "alterity," suggesting allusions to forms that have yet to be created, even if this means referring to forms that have already been created on either a functional or imagined level. In rendering models such as *Lost Cinema*, *Underground Cinema*, and *Deconstructed Cinema* (all three from 2001), Putrih reformulates original design proposals for actual buildings as entropic sculptural compositions affixed to notions of the present, the past and the yet-to-be (or the never-to-be). In so doing, his work references Robert Smithson's ideas regarding temporality and decay, as well as the notion of "ruins in reverse," as elaborated in his text "Entropy and New Monuments." Reading this essay, one can begin to understand why Putrih is sympathetic to Smithson's work:

Time is compressed or stopped inside, in turn providing the viewer with entropic conditions—in the modern interior architecture of the movie house in contrast to the baroque and rococo of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street theaters, we get the "padded cell" look, the "stripped down" look, or the "good taste look."<sup>4</sup>

Jack Flam, ed.  
Robert Smithson:  
The Collected Writings.  
Berkeley: University  
of California Press,  
1996, p.17.

By approaching architecture (and design) with an eye turned toward the ramifications of temporality, Putrih is able to address art's potential to locate the material concerns of otherness; at the same time, he draws attention to architecture's failure to sever the direct relationship between form and function.

Putrih's pursuit of sculptural compositions that are at once complete and incomplete recalls Bataille's principle of the formless (*l'informe*)—of materiality and the process of its revelation as such. Rather than referencing the architectonic as a calculus of the static object or as a proposal for the rendering of such an object, Putrih treats the building as a sign—one not to be conflated with the actual organization of space. His works inevitably call attention to that which falls within the possibility of presentation, conjuring shadows of complete fragmentation in order to define alterity as a critically engaged form of appearance. Openings, fissures, delays—all of these point to the limits of appearance and to a notion of a complex surface, one that differentiates, as Bataille also does, between the "form of a project" and the "project" itself. This distinction allows for material presence while simultaneously making visible the relationship between the material and immaterial. By operating along these lines, Putrih forsakes the functionality of his project in favor of treating it as a site of complexity that suggests only the possible completion of a structure; his inquiry therefore results in a work of art rather than a design object or an architectural structure.

More concerned with the generation of form than form itself, Putrih undoes, disturbs, and rearranges architectural propositions so as to cease their direct relationship to function. For Theodor Adorno, this dialectic was expressed in the tension between construction and expression (as opposed to the historical isolation of expression from construction, which was prevalent in the debates around rationalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Adorno writes that "construction gains its expression through coldness and this extends the debate over and beyond functionalism." He adds,

Functionalism today, prototypically in architecture, would need to push construction so far that it would win expression through the rejection of traditional and semitradectional forms. Great architecture gains this suprafunctional language when it works directly from its purposes, effectively announcing them mimetically in the work's content. H.B. Sharoun's Philharmonic Hall in Berlin is beautiful because, in order to create the ideal spatial conditions for orchestral music, it assimilates itself to these conditions rather than borrowing from them.<sup>5</sup>

5. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, London: Athlone Press, 1997, p. 44.

The example is applicable to cinema despite the fact that cinema is more closely related to architecture than music, not solely because of its temporal and spatial structure, but because both architecture and cinema animate lived space to create and mediate comprehensive images of life. Adorno's example describes how construction arrives at expression qua construction: via the imagination and its ability to transform pure utility. In this sense, construction and expression, so often treated as exclusive methodologies, actually evolve according to a shared dialectic. Whether one regards Constructivism, on the one hand, as no more than a strategy to reject the myth of spontaneous subjectivity and expression, or on the other hand as a kind of protest against the alienation that assumes reactionary forms, it inevitably gestures toward abstraction. Objects created under its aegis eventually begin to shy away from representational content in favor of increased self-consciousness of the process of production.

In his routes of investigation and in his work, Tobias Putrih responds to such logic by similarly addressing the type of challenge Adorno puts forth: "How can a certain purpose become space, through which forms and materials?" In his responses, it is architectonic imagination that enables one to articulate space purposefully, and it may do so in an enriching manner only when imagination breaks free from immanent connections to purpose.<sup>6</sup> Putrih presents such constructions and systems of relations to set out a conceptual framework that explores, in short, the possibility of a methodology of construction that would effect political emancipation. By revisiting the designs of early cinema architecture and recasting them as original, or even non-existing, hypothetical plans, buildings, and objects, Putrih diagnoses the mutability of spatial logic as endemic to the last century while encouraging its withdrawal from a hierarchy that favors visuality. He builds semiotic structures and offers discursive propositions that negate the very forms validated by modernist architecture, deconstructing the modernist grid as a dominant architectural form, calling into question its complicity with an increasingly present corporate and capitalist system. At the same time, he examines film and cinematographic projection, revealing the ways in which cinema is implicated in the distributive circuits of the commodity form as explored by Guy Debord in his writings concerning the spectacle.

6. Ibid, p. 44.