The Role of Modernity, Media and Communication in the Critical and Transformative Potential of the Everyday Space

Katarina Andjelkovic

Abstract

It is impossible to consider that architecture relies solely on its own systems of representation because space always comes through images. The history of architectural representation testifies that modern media of photography, film and TV are a relevant component of its historical evolution. It means that we trust camera as a model of a faithful reproduction of a reality and the possibility to represent this reality in our collective cinematic imagination. Likewise, presenting recorded spaces on screen means that film becomes a vast intellectual archive of the daily practice of urban space, the changing society and material culture. In this way, film presents evolving conceptions of architecture and urban spaces. Curiously, what happens in reverse is that the screenic environment has redesigned architecture, at least the way we think of architecture. Therefore, to talk about architecture is to talk about the screen as space-framing device in the media environment. This post-Cartesian space of mediated vision remains within the delimited bounds of a frame, on a screen. Starting from Beatriz Colomina's discussion of 'the history of the modern window as a history of communication', the understanding of space will be problematized through the theoretical transfiguration of 'window' into the 'screen'. I will deal the synthesis of the opposite modern subjectivities in the transition between inside and outside space. I act from the belief that these modes of communication will dissolve the sharp line of inhabited, practised and lived space, earlier elaborated by Lefebvre and Soja.

Introduction

For the purpose of placing my argument in the context of modern media conditions, I will use the dialectic role of the 'window' as indicator of our experience of the everyday space and as a critical device for transforming the spatial tropes of everydayness, its values and system of visuality. A 'window', as a basic architectural element, functions not only for letting light, ventilation and views in and out of the building, or to search profound meaning in architecture as in Jeffrey Kipnis' ventures, but rather as a device of communication. The trope of the window has been established early in the renaissance as a trust to the geometrics of vision of the "perspectival window" that decoupled the figure of transparent glass from the metaphor of the window as a "frame of vision".[1] As the metaphor, window has functioned to situate the artist and the viewer in relation to the flat plane of representation.[2] In other words, if window is for the eyes, then "framing" views is common function of camera, film and architecture; equally then, the architectural elements are classified into the category of communication devices. For example, Le Corbusier demonstrates how architecture of his Bestegui apartment windows (figure 1) can be a commentary on the new conditions attained by the media, although its basic function is to frame a view. Likewise, the critical and transformative potential of the everyday space achieves trustful systems of representation with 'screens in the media environments.' The aim of this discussion is to demonstrate how the screen environment changes the way we think of architecture through the dimension of communication nowadays, which mediates the overall image of the world as a permanently changing mosaic.
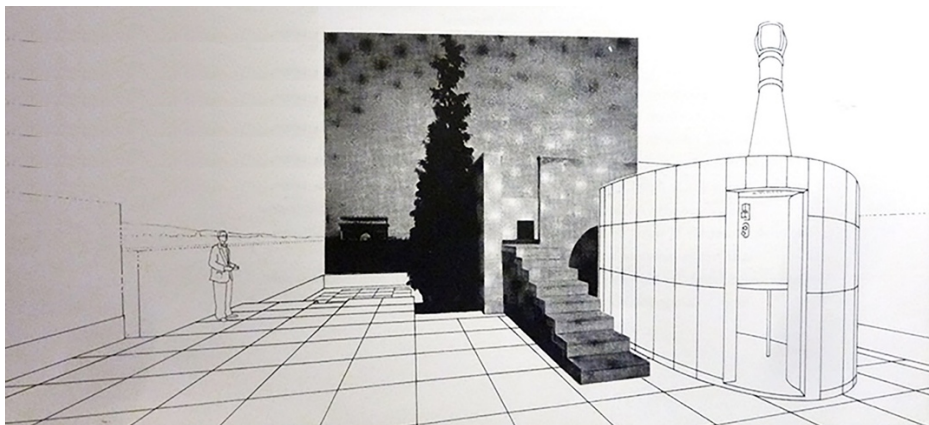

Figure 1: Le Corbusier, Charles de Bestegui apartment, exterior view of the roof garden and the room with periscope, Paris, France, 1929-32 @ Licensed under CC BY 2.0

Act of Transformation

What we once had as a singular seemingly all-encompassing view of the "whole earth"- a "Blue marble" photograph of our planet taken on December 7, 1972, through the window of the Apollo 17, has been displaced today by live feeds from the International Space Station orbiting the planet at 17,000 miles an hour …, as exemplified by the real-time images made, distributed and watched on billions of cellphones.[3] Accordingly, embodying architecture's *non-finito* in Heraklitian terms of the ever-present change being in the essence of the universe, re-adjusts the order of imagination in architecture to maintain our perceived reality. Accordingly, the primary function of the frame is: act of transformation. Observed through window as shown in the Planet Earth photograph case, the image of the world is a permanently changing kaleidoscopic instant appearance instead of an all-encompassing unchangeable picture of the world. Laced into this commentary is the idea that communication allows us to see the very possibility of change, more clearly and in detail, when experiencing the moment. For example, in his film *Un homme qui dort,* French novelist and filmmaker Georges Perec portrays the everyday life of a young Parisian man (figure 2).
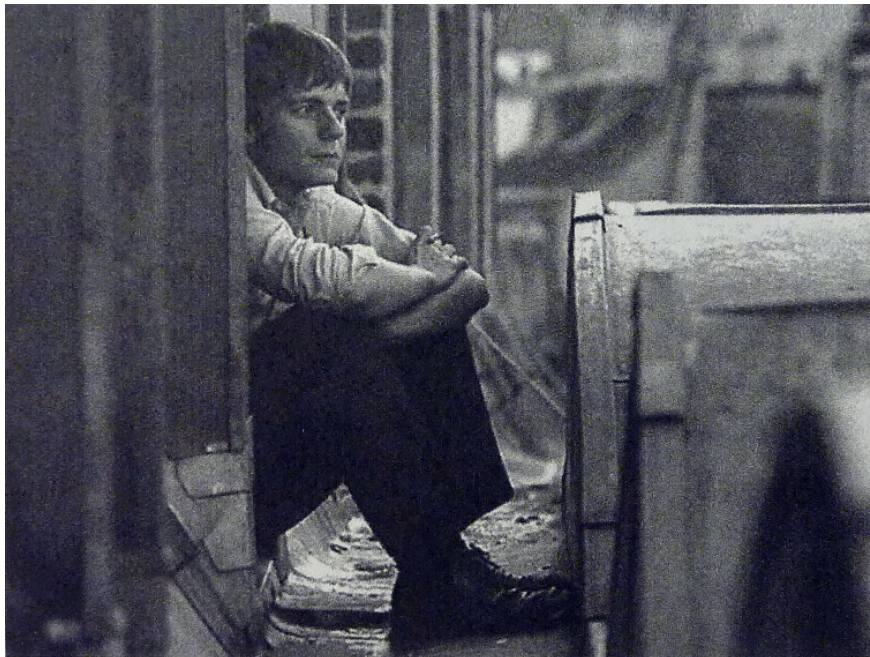

Figure 2. Bernard Queysanne and Georges Perec, Un homme qui dort, 1974.
@ Film Still. Licensed under CC BY 2.0

He uses a small attic bedroom with a window that turns quickly into the main motif of the film frames. By extending one's field of vision through the window, he pulls the main protagonist to the outdoor space. His intention is to shoot the constant transformation of the scene: the clouds and shadows over roofs, traffic and people, constantly moving and changing the overall picture of the world captured in the window frame. However small an aperture, this possibility to step outside the window frame, as shown in the film shots, becomes an opportunity for a change of the inner world of the young man searching freedom, liberty and exploration. Although the modes of practicing the window are in relation to the everyday activities (sleeping, eating, smoking, observation), in Perec's films the window becomes a framing device embodied through communication. Nonetheless, it is exactly this communication with the world outside the house that provides contemplation over the image of the ever-changing world.

Act of Display

The second function of the frame is: act of display. Practicing architects use the notion of a display to challenge different ideas about what it means to design for display. Architecture theorists problematize the notion of an urban display as a window to other realities. What started with Benjamin's recognition that "distraction" occurs in film through the "shock effect" of its image sequences,[4] originates from the urban environment where the collective seeks to be distracted. This can be recognized in some of its most radical versions constructed by film, where it becomes a means to escape everyday reality. That is to say, it is possible to continue the modernistic aspiration for alienation from our reality, trapped in a high degree of insecurity asking what time and place they actually belong to. As shown in a science-fiction 10-episode TV series *Philip k. Dick: Electric Dreams* (Ronald D. Moore and Michael Dinner, 2017), the main motif is *communication* to other unknown realities of human memory. The film narrative unfolds as the passage between mental states, with an idea to disclose memories of a person. The mental state of the protagonist functions as a metaphoric window through which he seeks to uncover reality. Remembering an everyday life situation is presented as follows: each protagonist's presumably primary reality is the other's vacation. What we get at the end is mirroring alternate realities.

Consequently, the mental state of the protagonist seems to be the device for challenging reality, asking: which is the real one of the two alternate realities? Yet another dilemma: how do our needs transform that reality in order to maintain it through the productive tension with illusion? In order to maintain the dynamic continuity of permanently unfolding events (which is in the etymology of the word display), while searching to keep up the spectator's attention or work in the Baudrillardian *simulacrum*[5], the film-maker would respond by establishing anew the continuity of tension through the protagonist of the film action.

Act of Communication

The third function of the frame is: act of communication. We know that some architects, like Philip Johnson with his *Glass House* (1949, figure 3), referred to the glass barriers as a device of communication between inside and outside of the house. They underlined the core values of modernity by flattening picture of the everyday life to the film and TV screens. Moreover, accelerated circulation of the photographc' reproduction of space, across magazines and advertisements, with implications of camera optics, have announced the play of dualisms: the conscious vs. the unconscious, presence vs. absence, the visible vs. the invisible. As does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses in Freud's ventures, these venues challenged the concept of fixed frontier that separates interior from exterior and thus undermined its status. Freud tried to clarify this in his psycho-analytic research. He made the provocation of the "fixed limit" clear and made it understandable by placing a framed mirror against the window of his studio, right next to his work table. As Marie-Odile Briot notes: "The mirror (the psyche) is in the same plane as the window. The reflection is also a self-portrait projected onto the outside world."[6] This way, Freud's mirror, placed in the frontier that separates interior from exterior, has architectural consequences: it breaks, excludes and dissociates this limit. Communication developed this way points to the end of conventional criticism which portrays modern architecture as a high artistic practice and categorize it within the systems of communication and mass media.
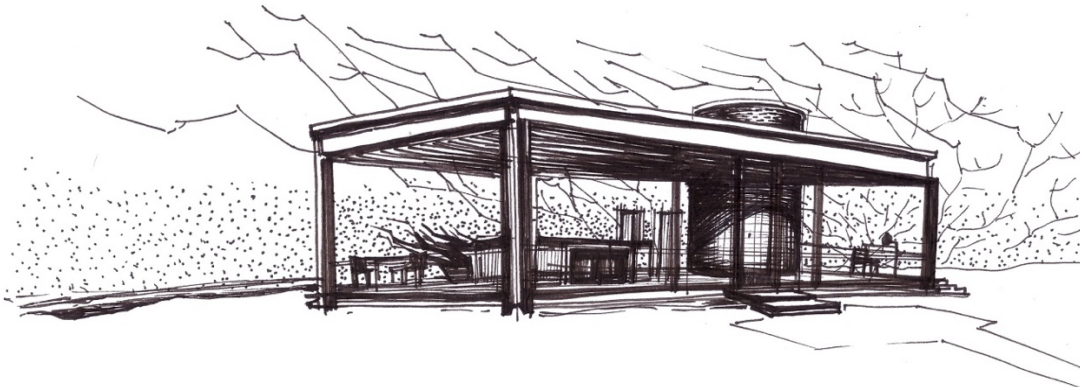
Figure 3: Philip Johnson, The Glass House. 1949 @ Delineated by author.

The Birth and Raise of a New Subject: A Modern Tale

Marit Pasche claims: "cinema offers a completely new kind of subject."[7] This assertion gives us an opportunity to examine a peculiar type of subjectivity at the very heart of modernism. In a dramatic passage in *The Order of Things*, Foucault describes the epistemological shift from eighteenth-century empiricism to the invention of a transcendental concept of "man" as "the threshold of modernity".[8] The panopticon prison[9] was thought of as a spatial reformatorium that could change and "correct" subjectivity by architectural means.[10] Reordering of power, knowledge and the visible[11] (*voir, pouvoir et savoir*), as Foucault claimed, and placing the panoptic model in a pivotal position of this transition, marks "the birth of a modern subject." Later, modernity manifested mediations of the "virtual" gaze through panorama, diorama, and other optical devices. This way, our modern subject began gradually migrating from the exclusively physical to media environment: modern architecture projected on film screen. This trend emerges from a desire to establish visual mastery over the constraints of space and time. Regardless, the filmmaker lacks a means of communication with the architect to accomplish this.

In difference to panopticon subjective effect - the 'seer' with the sense of omnipotent voyeurism and the 'seen' with the sense of disciplined surveillance - modernity started to embody foremost an image of 'shock' as a barometer of the psychological state of mankind's 'alienation'. As such, the problem of alienation mediates the evolution of the modernist model of thinking: a progressive crisis of the experience of space and time accompanied by the foundation of modern physics, the invention of radio, TV and film, the beginning of mass production, the automobile and aviation industry of the early 20th century (John Berger, 1969; David Harvey, 1990).[12] It is precisely in this disparate environment of film and architectural practices that has acquired the definition for the role of *communication.* Namely, on the occasion of critical examination of the everyday space in the same period, the collaboration between architects and filmmakers began to channel abstract thought models. In this regard, architects begin exploring film as a critical source of spatial concepts applicable in architecture by recognizing the intention of the director to *communicate* the desired values of the architect.

Projecting Everyday Spaces on Screen

Unlike enveloping the viewer in the illusion of narrative fiction, early films relied heavily on attractions and thus depended (solely) on conventions of display. To describe the concept of alienation, they posited windows to unreal events – astonishing sights right in front of our eyes. Basically, what modern architecture intended by celebrating white empty surfaces deprived of any sensitivities for the senses, on the contrary TV screens with filmic content tried to re-compensate. More precisely, by exposing sensational subjects like a train crash (as the Lumières' train approached the station at La Ciotat), or electrocution of an elephant[13], these films enhanced the multisensory, multidimensional experience, stimulated the senses to correspond to the dynamic conditions of modern metropolis. In his "An Aesthetic of Astonishment" (1989), film historian Tom Gunning challenges readings of this "primal" train scene as a reaction to the realism of screened images, or a misrecognition of the imaginary as real: "Rather than mistaking the image for reality, the spectator is astonished by its transformation through the new illusion of projected motion

…The astonishment derived from a magical metamorphosis rather than a seamless reproduction of reality."[14] Apart from the fact that early filmmakers were aware of the tension between stasis and movement as a possible dramatic component of their films and favored the increasing drama to make the scene more real than reality itself, some other components of the screen were equally important for the final effect of desired reality. Namely, although viewing these scenes through the screen implies a separation of the physical surface (as in the case of window), it doesn't reduce the final effect of immersion. In other words, in the simple act of reduction, even the painterly convention of perspective centers everything on the eye of the beholder and call this appearance "reality"[15], which is, in truth, just a faithful "reproduction" of a reality outside itself. It seems that Victor Burgin stands for the appropriate analogy with an object and its appearance (that is, reality and illusion) when he claims that "separation of knowledge from belief characteristic of representation the photograph stands to the viewer as does the fetishized object … we know we see a two-dimensional surface, we believe we look through it into three-dimensional space, we cannot do both at the same time – there is a 'coming and going' between knowledge and belief."[16] It is so because the conception of the world that accompanies camera disassociates itself from a classical humanist episteme. In conclusion, framing views as an act of display differs substantially from the ancient discontinuous and heterogeneous spaces based on the multiplicity points of view. Indeed, the transition to the screenic environment is the centered space of a motionless and continuous whole, a virtual image[17] - a "faithful" simulation of reality.

Conclusion

So, who is our modern subject born in such media environment? …de-temporalized … de-territorialized and re-territorialized: through the cinematic re-constellation of images imploded perpetually in urban space? Is he in reality or …absent, alienated … immersed, distracted, and again fully immersed in film as in latest technology: in an increasingly derealized sense of 'presence'[18] (Friedberg, 1994)?

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre claims that "image "kills" and cannot account for the richness of the lived experience."[19] Architects, in Lefebvre's eyes are complicit within the whole alienating nature of contemporary existence.[20] This would be true if we talk exclusively about physical reality, but not about the media reality. Do we even think of the real world and what is real today? The filmmaker may quote Veclavik, Baudrillard's predecessor, "The biggest mistake is that there is only one reality. What really exists is a very large number of different realities. Some of them are contradictory, but they are all generated by communication, and none of them is the reflection of objective truth." All the more so, this progressively changing reality was triggered by removing the boundaries between subject and technology, as correctly observed by Virilio. He claims that the world today needs no architecture anymore in order to keep the utopian relationship between technology, media and contemporary life.[21] Such role of the subject becomes the backbone of architectural representation to date when we face reality as progressively mediated by mobile screens. How do we re-ensure the value of our everyday space if we constantly re-territorialize ourselves between the screen and real physical space?

Then, it turned out that our modern subject belongs to no other regime of reality to his own. It is so because today we see our subject as autonomous and detached from history and temporality into a more fluid form of subjectivity. We see him constantly transported virtually between past, present and future times, in diverse image regimes. We all perceive the world around us in images and these images are mediations between us and the virtual environment. Baudrillard reminds us, through the concept of simulacra, that images bear no relation to any reality whatever.[22] And what we get in the end is perceived reality through the screen transgressing the limits of our imagery, revealing to each and every one of us the potential agency of moving and creating images of our own realities. It is complicit with Heraklitian terms of the ever-changing world, which is in the essence of the universe. It also seems to be the most appropriate embodiment of the modern subject that has been prepared for our permanently changing world of today, asking what will the future of architecture have to offer?

Author Biography

Katarina Andjelkovic, Atelier AG Andjelkovic, with a PhD, M.Arch.Eng., is a theorist, a practicing architect and a painter, with teaching/research experience as a Visiting Professor at University of Oklahoma, Chair of Creative Architecture, at Institute of Form Theory and History and Institute of Urbanism and Landscape in Oslo; at University of Belgrade. She lectures at international conferences and gives workshops: Europe, America and Canada; published her research widely in international journals (Web of Science); won numerous awards for her architecture design and urban design competitions; published two scientific monographs. She is a full author of the National project supported by the Government (RoS); exhibited internationally (architectural, painting and photography); won the Belgrade Chamber of Commerce Award for Best Master Thesis in Serbia in all disciplines. katarina.code@gmail.com

Notes

1. Anne Friedberg, "Introduction: The Virtual Window," in The Virtual Window: from Alberti to Microsoft (London: The MIT Press, 2009), 1-24.
2. Anne Friedberg, "The Window: Lens I: Descartes's Window," in Virtual Window (London: The MIT Press, 2009), 28-30.
3. Beatriz Colomina & Mark Wigley, Are We Human? Notes on an archaeology of design (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), 16.
4. Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2008 [1936]).
5. Baudrillard is arguing that the everydayness of the terrestrial habitat hypostatized in space marks the end of metaphysics, and signals the beginning of the era of hyper-reality: that which was previously mentally projected, which was lived as a metaphor in the terrestrial habitat is from now on projected, entirely without metaphor, into the absolute space of simulation. Especially important in this context is his notion of 'the satellization of the real itself'. Read more in: Jean Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication, trans. Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012).

6. Marie-Odile Briot, "L'Esprit nouveau; son regard sur les sciences," in Léger at l'esprit moderne, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Musée d'Art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1982), 38.

7. Marit Paasche, "The New Protagonist: On the Films of Hito Steyerl," in Urban Images. Unruly Desires in Film and Architecture, eds. Synne Bull, Marit Paasche (Sternberg Press, 2011), 24.

8. Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences, translated from Les Mots et Les Choses (New York: Random House, 1970), 319. Also see Martin Jay, "In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought," in Foucault: A Critical Reader, ed. David Couzens Hoy (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

9. Jeremy Bentham's panoptic device (1791) provided the model for Foucault's characterization of panoptic power and the "disciplines" of imagined scrutiny. The panopticon was an apparatus- a "machine of the visible," to use Comolli's phrase- which controlled the seer-seen relation. In the panopticon, an unseen seer surveys a confined and controlled subject. The panopticon produces a subjective effect: the seer with the sense of omnipotent voyeurism and the seen with the sense of disciplined surveillance.

10. Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) (Surveiller et Punir [Paris, 1975]), 201-207.

11. Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, translated from Les Mots et Les Choses (New York: Random House, 1970), 319.

12. John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin Books, 2008); David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change (Wiley-Blackwell, 1991[1990]).

13. Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," and Miriam Hansen, "Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Transformations of the Public Sphere," in Linda Williams, ed. Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 114-133: 134-152.

14. Tom Gunning cit.in: Anne Friedberg, The Virtual Window, 155.

15. Beatriz Colomina, Privacy and Publicity, 283.

16. Victor Burgin, The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1986), 44; Victor Burgin cit. in: Beatriz Colomina, Privacy and Publicity, 91.

17. Anne Friedberg, Virtual Window, 101-140.

18. Anne Friedberg, Window Shopping: Cinema and The Postmodern (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 2.

19. Henri Lefebvre, "The Production of Space" (Extracts), in Neil Leach, Rethinking Architecture; A Reader in Cultural Theory (Routledge: Oxon, England, 1997), 139.

20. Ibid, 139.

21. Paul Virilio, The Lost Dimension, translated by Daniel Moshenberg (New York: SEMIOTEXT(E), 1991.

22. Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (Semiotext[e], 1983).

References

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Ecstasy of Communication.* Translated by Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations.* Translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. Semiotext[e], 1983.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.* Translated by J. A. Underwood. London: Penguin Books, 2008 [1936].

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing.* London: Penguin Books, 2008.

Briot, Marie-Odile. *L'Esprit nouveau; son regard sur les sciences.* In *Léger at l'esprit moderne, exhibition catalogue.* Paris: Musée d'Art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1982.

Bull, Synne and Paasche, Marit. *Urban Images. Unruly Desires in Film and Architecture.* Sternberg Press, 2011.

Burgin, Victor. *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity.* Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1986.

Colomina, Beatriz & Wigley, Mark. *Are We Human? Notes on an archaeology of design.* Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016.

Couzens Hoy, David, ed. Foucault: *A Critical Reader.* London: Basil Blackwell, 1986.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish.* Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* Translated from Les Mots et Les Choses. New York: Random House, 1970.

Friedberg, Anne. *The Virtual Window: from Alberti to Microsoft.* London: The MIT Press, 2009.

Friedberg, Anne. *Window Shopping: Cinema and The Postmodern.* Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change.* Wiley-Blackwell, 1991[1990].

Leach, Neil. *Rethinking Architecture; A Reader in Cultural Theory.* Routledge: Oxon, England, 1997.

Virilio, Paul. *The Lost Dimension.* Translated by Daniel Moshenberg. New York: SEMIOTEXT(E), 1991.

Williams, Linda, ed. *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.