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**The essential role of architecture
in the relationship between cinema and novel.
The classic example of “Psycho” by Alfred Hitchcock**

Abstract

A notorious close connection between cinema and architecture exists, as between cinematography and literature, however we are convinced that architecture plays a central role in this context.

These topics are easily identified in Alfred Hitchcock's vast filmography, which shows that architecture is fundamental in order to create the atmosphere the director wishes to obtain to infuse further emotions to the story. Hitchcock through the editing, the shots and the course of actions provides the movie with what lacks in the conventional narrative of the novel the movie itself is taken. The director manages to enhance the audience's emotions especially through the expressive help of the architectures that frame the story.

Keywords

Architecture – Cinema – Novel

A notorious close connection between cinema and architecture exists, as between cinema and literature, however we are convinced that architecture plays a central role in this context.

In other words, the relationship between cinema and literature can hardly ignore the connecting role of architecture inside this triad, since the link between movies and novels cannot be disregarded.

We know that the “scenario” usually allows the stories to unfold, thus the relationship between “scenario” and action is just as close as the one between stage and theatre play, as written by Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh also adds that we enter into the “scenario” a little at a time until it appears real to us and we become a part of it. This is why the “sense of place” is notoriously one of the great magic aspects of novels. (Gosh 2017)

Architecture, which is the ultimate “scenario”, either depicted in the pages of a book, or shot in a movie sequence, represents an essential element of storytelling. However, when a story is told through the movie technique, architecture shows it's imperative role.

We only need to think of movies such as *Le Mèpris* (based on the novel by Alberto Moravia and entirely shot in the Villa Malaparte on Capri, by Jean Luc Godard, starring Michel Piccoli and Brigitte Bardot; or *Le Procès* by Orson Welles, from Kafka's novel, shot mostly at the Gare d'Orsay which at the time was decommissioned; or of *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott, inspired by Philip K. Dick's novel, where in a dystopian Los Angeles Sebastien, the designer of replicants, lives in Ennies House by Frank Lloyd Wright (Fig. 1)

Architecture, as well as movies, obviously disregards being faithful to novels. When Francois Truffaut, in a paper written in 1958, covers the



Fig. 1
Frank Lloyd Wright, *Ennis House*, 1924.

literary adaptation to cinema, he clearly states that between faithfulness to what is written and faithfulness to the spirit, no rule is possible and every case is particular. He adds that everything is allowed except for trivialisation, impoverishment and sweetening¹.

Luchino Visconti used to interpret very freely the novels from which his movies originated, so much so that during the shooting of *Lo straniero*, in 1967, when he was obliged to strictly adhere to the literary text, he admitted that the movie – that makes use of Marcello Mastroianni's impeccable acting- was one of his less successful films².

The movie is inspired by a work by Albert Camus and it is the result of a compromise with Camus' widow. While giving up her ownership rights she required absolute allegiance to the literary text. She even imposed the presence of two French scriptwriters she trusted.

According to David Lynch a book, or a script, are nothing but a skeleton to which one must add flesh and blood³. This is true if wanting to adhere to the novel as well as if wanting to interpret it more freely.

In this respect naturally architecture, as well as being the place for the setting, also inevitably plays a strong symbolic key role that concentrates the hidden elements and the psychological implications of the plot.

These topics are easily identified in Alfred Hitchcock's vast filmography which shows that allegiance to the novel is a false problem to him⁴, and that architecture is fundamental in order to create the atmosphere the director wishes to obtain to infuse further emotions to the story. Truffaut points out that Hitchcock in many of his movies uses the same principal of exposure, moving from far away to nearer. At first you see a city, then a building inside the town and then a room inside the building (Truffaut 2010, p. 224) Even *Psycho* starts the same way. In fact, before showing us the central place where the whole story will develop, the film starts with a long overview, then moving closer to the building and framing the window that will bring us inside the room where the first scene takes place.

While the images of the town flow in motion, a writing at the bottom of the screen appears by which we understand that the town is Phoenix, Arizona. We then see date and time on the screen: it is seventeen minutes before



Figg. 2-3

Bates Motel, location of *Psycho*
by A. Hitchcock

Edward Hopper, *House by the Railroad*, 1925.

three in the afternoon, this apparently marginal detail is used by the director to suggest a possible clandestine relationship between Marion and Sam, even before they appear on the scene (Truffaut 2010, p. 225).

No doubt Hitchcock through the editing, the shots and the course of actions, provides the movie with what lacks in the conventional narrative of the novel the movie is taken from. The director manages to enhance the audience's emotional involvement also thanks to the architecture chosen as frame of the plot. He actually states: «I have chosen this house and this motel as I realised that the story would not have had the same effect in an ordinary bungalow; this kind of architecture was appropriate for the atmosphere.» (Truffaut 2010, p. 227) (Fig.2).

Many like to think that the idea for the house in “Psycho” originates from a painting by Hopper, but even though Norman mother's house is very similar to the one in Edward Hopper's picture *House by the Railroad*, painted in 1925 (Fig.3), Hitchcock clarifies that it is in fact an exact replica of an existing house. His intention was not to recreate the atmosphere of a classical horror film, but to go beyond the film fiction in order to give a sense

of authenticity to its narration. The mysterious atmosphere is partly accidental because, as the great director points out, the Californian Gothic style of this house is found in many isolated houses of Northern California. Even though the *House by the Railroad* belongs to a quite normal typology, it is wrapped in an atmosphere of such neglect and isolation that it causes a feeling of insecurity and even fear in the spectator. In the painting the building expresses a condition of underlying mystery, emphasised by the clean cut of the railroad that crosses horizontally the whole surface at the bottom of the painting, and conceals a part of the volume of the house at the bedrock's height.

We are not, obviously, so much interested in the similarity between the two houses, as we know it is a very common typology, and it could be a fortuitous coincidence, but in the conceptual analogy between the composition of the elements in the painting and the architecture present in the movie.

What Hitchcock, talking about *Psycho*, calls the composition of the vertical block and the horizontal block, namely the squareness between lines and figures we also found in Hopper.

As in the American artist's painting, the verticality of the house is opposed to the horizontality of the railroad, so that Norman mother's house is opposed to the horizontal block of the motel.

Maybe this "contrast" between geometries, even more pronounced in the second case by the antithesis between the motel's bear formal block look and the austere style of the home somehow adds to the slight sense of tension and raises a latent sense of concern.

Slavoj Žižek even blames the contrast between the two buildings for the mental distress of the lead character in the film. He writes (2011, pp. 45-46):

«... one can consider Norman as having a personality split between the two houses, the modern and horizontal motel and his mother's modern gothic house. He tirelessly moves between the two, never finding his own place. The unheimlich feeling of the end of the film signifies that Norman, who totally identifies with his mother, has finally found his heim, his home.»

Žižek even uses the example of the point of intersection which signals the union between the preexisting building and the expansion, implemented by the architect in the famous Gehry House in Santa Monica, California⁵. (Fig.4) He indicates the union between the preexisting building and the expansion made by the architect, he also underlines how Fredric Jameson identifies in the room of the intersection between the two spaces the place where the antagonism between the two subjects resolves itself. Which means the room itself is the place where the mediation between two opposites takes place.

This brings him to a peculiar conclusion. A hypothesis which is as weird as it is intriguing: the Slovenian philosopher concludes that if the Bates motel had been designed by Gehry, Norman would not have needed to kill his victims as «he would have been relieved of the unsustainable tension that forces him to run between the two places. He would have had a third place as a mediation between two extremes.» (Žižek 2011, p. 47)

Even without sharing Žižek's theory, one cannot deny that the two simple artefacts play a crucial role in the narrative structure of the story. So much so that the whole story can be synthesised by two single images: the house that stands over the motel of the homicides and the scene of the killing in the shower.

Truffaut suggests that there are no good stories, just good movies. The



Fig. 4
Frank O. Gehry, Gehry House,
Santa Monica, California, 1977-
78, 1991-94.

latter are all based on a deep idea which can always be summarised in a single word⁶.

Even though the plot in *Psycho* cannot be summarised in one word, it certainly resolves itself around these two images, without the great French critic and film director's thought being altered.

Everyone knows that Truffaut adored Hitchcock and that he included him within the greatest film directors, and probably considered him the greatest.

«Hitchcock, from the beginning of his carrier, understood that if one is able to read a paper with one's own eyes and one's own mind, one is also able to read a novel with one's own eyes and with a pounding heart. A film should be watched in the same way one reads novel.» (Truffaut 2010, p. 227)

Notes

¹ «Anything goes except low blows. Infidelity to the letter or to the spirit is only tolerable if the director is only interested in one of them and if he managed to do a) the same thing, b) the same thing, in a better way, c) something else, better done. Trivialisation, impoverishment and "sweetening" of the text are unacceptable.» (Truffaut 2010)

Francois Truffaut, L'adattamento letterario al cinema, from La Revue des Lettres modernes, summer 1958, in Il piacere degli occhi, by Jean Narboni and Serge Toubiana. Ed. Minimum Fax, Rome, 2010, p.279

² Nearly all Visconti's movies are inspired by novels, but the director never adhered to the literary text.

³ «... A script is, so to say, a skeleton. One must provide it with flesh and blood. The director is an interpreter. He translates the images into the script. This applies to all ideas that originate from a script or from a book. The idea does not belong to you, you received it just like the images, the sounds and the atmosphere that radiate from the script. As well as the other variable issues such as the shooting locations, the choice of the actors and so on...» (Lynch 2012, pp. 331-332)

⁴ «My greatest satisfaction is when a film has an effect on the audience, this is what I most cared about. In *Psycho* I am not extremely interested in the subject or in the characters, what really matters to me is the editing, the photography, the music and all the technical aspects that may make the audience shout. Using cinematic arts to create a mass emotion is a great satisfaction. We were able to do it in *Psycho*. It is not a message that interested the public. It wasn't a great interpretation that shocked the audience, it wasn't a great play that gripped the public. What moved the audience was the pure film.» (Truffaut 2014, p. 233)

⁵ «In 1977 Frank and Berta Gehry bought a pink two storied bungalow with a mansard roof. It had been built around 1920 and was located on a corner block. The building was completely renovated, with a relatively low expense. Gehry chooses materials he has used before - corrugated metal, multilayer, wire mesh - in order to explore its possibilities and to elaborate on the use of rough wooden frames. As for the models, he draws from the "sketches in wood" of the

Wagner, Familian and Gunther houses, trying to install them with an expressive vitality equal to that of the study drawings.

Once again playing with perspective and movement, and thanks to numerous axonometric drawings, he assembles a collage of customary materials equipped with new connotations.

Gehry wanted to encase the building inside a casing through which one could still see the old house; so that new and old could converse and enrich each other...» (Dal Co, Forster and Arnold 1998, p. 151)

⁶ «There are no good stories, just good movies. The latter are all based on a deep idea which can always be summarised in a single word. *Lola Montès* is a movie about overexertion, *Eliaana e gli uomini* is about ambition and flesh, *Un re a New York* about delation, *L'infernale Quinlan* about nobility, *Ordet* about grace, *Hiroshima, mon amour* about original sin.» (Truffaut 2010, p. 97)

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