CHOICES & STRATEGIES

Writing, Filming, Building

Using a Taxonomy of Moviegoers to Appraise Spatial Imagination in Architecture

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Spatial imagination, understood as our ability to advance visions of possible futures for the built environment, is a fundamental quality of architecture. It is obviously not an exclusive quality – several other disciplines in the arts and sciences share it. A writer can tell a story that takes place in a city that does not yet exist, an environmental scientist can evaluate that city's expected impact and performance, a politician can argue for its capacity to articulate citizens' needs and hopes. Unlike other disciplines, though, architecture is distinct in the sense that it brings together spatial imagination with the technical apparatus required to actually materialize the built future it predicts. Even if this materialization remains hypothetical, every architecture one can think of evaluates an existing spatial condition, explores ways to turn it into something else, and specifies a way to do so by using a set of known instruments and methods. In that sense, one can argue that unlike

other professions, architecture produces visions of possible futures for the built environment that are simultaneously *telic* and *technical*.[1]

Oftentimes, though, it would appear that we tend to take the awesomeness of this simultaneity for granted. Completely habituated to buildings and cities, we seldom allow ourselves to be marvelled by the miracle that is our ability to materialize spatial thoughts. We can praise exciting futures much more than we appreciate the technical sophistication and ingenuity required to embody them; we can be seduced by our conceptualization of built space more than by the logics and processes that lead to its construction.

Against this imbalance I perceive between our interest in buildings and the little attention we give to the means used to attain them, I have developed this article, as an approach to the technical rudiments of spatial imagination in architecture, based on analyses of works of art from another discipline. Transactions among disciplines, or the use of instruments and methods from a particular field to appraise or practice another, are a valuable source of knowledge. They can challenge conventions, refresh stagnant discussions, and offer new perspectives from which to reframe old problems within a human activity by adopting or adapting the traits of another.

In order to reflect on the means the architect uses to materialize spatial imagination, I will discuss a little-known text that has allowed me to understand the role of technique in an architect's work, and its importance in the way we study and discuss architecture. The text itself is an exchange between disciplines: as an architect I have obtained valuable knowledge from the work of a literary author, whose study of cinema demonstrates how the technical analysis of an artist's choices can produce valuable operative knowledge for further artistic action.

The writer Andrés Caicedo was born in Cali (Colombia) in 1951. Before taking his life at the age of 25, he published a couple dozen stories,[2] a few plays[3] and screenplays, and a seminal urban novel.[4] Overall, his writing tried to capture the intense transformations and conflicts that defined his city. Caicedo's Cali lies tense between the 'Little North' of the whiter, Americanized better-offs (including himself and his upper-middle-class family), and the vast South of the mestizo working classes. His stories unfold amid descriptions of run-down villas, breezy boulevards, sombre bars, modern apartments, stern catholic schools, neighbourhood parks and other architectures that both shape and characterize the urban environment of Cali and its inhabitants.

Certainly, reflecting on architecture and on the particularities of its development in contemporary Latin American cities based on Caicedo's stories seems like a fascinating task. In this article, though, I have chosen to focus explicitly on his study of the technical aspects of art, not on the backdrop for his stories. For this reason, I will not discuss here his literary descriptions of architecture and the city, but will rather reflect on his analysis of cinema as a means to obtain knowledge that can be used to write, and in our case, design and build.

Besides being a prolific writer, Caicedo was literally addicted to cinema. He was an acute movie critic, acted and collaborated behind the scenes in a couple of movies, founded and ran the Cine Club de Cali, and published the periodical *Ojo al Cine*.[5] From the posthumous collected edition of that periodical,[6] I would like to refer to a small piece, transcribed from the lecture 'Especificidad del Cine',[7] in which Caicedo developed two basic arguments. The first is that cinema is a unique artistic discipline, which deals with discernible questions based on a set of instruments and methods that are specific to that discipline and allow anyone practicing it to carry out their intentions by making concrete choices through equally concrete strategies. The second is that that specificity, and the particular choices and strate-

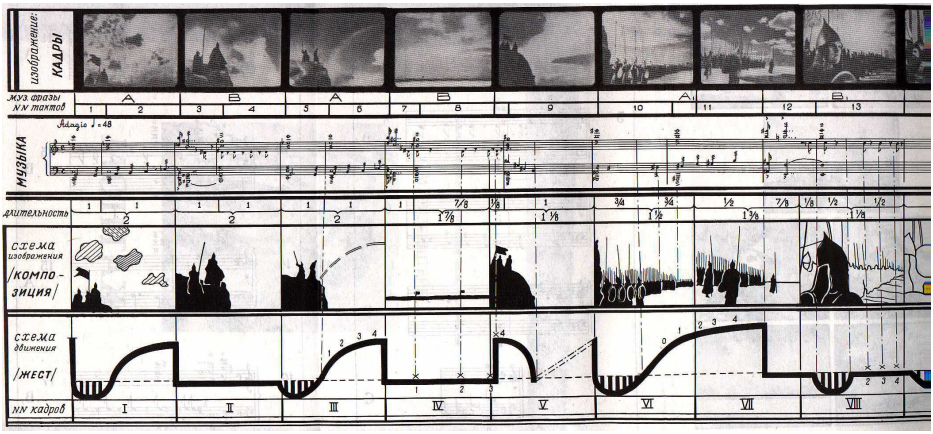

Fig. 1. Structure of a scene in Sergein Eisenstein's film "Alexander Nevsky" (1938).

gies it entails, are not evident or important for most people who enter into contact with a movie, but are crucial for anyone engaging with films with the intention to actually make them.

The first of these arguments, for the specificity of cinema, is aided by a disciplinary transaction between writing and film. As a writer, Caicedo explained the process of moviemaking by comparing it to the process of literary writing. 'A film,' he said, 'is *written* on the screen, and in two dimensions. The cinematographic unit is called a shot,[8] that equates to the *word*, the *phrase*, or even (in the case of the shot sequence[9]) the *chapter*.'[10]

This transaction between writing and cinema suggests that every artist relies on a series of elements, assembles those elements into simple configurations, and then into complex forms, but it also recognizes that different kinds of artists operate, not with just any elements, configurations and forms, but only with those that are inherent to their own art. Words turn into phrases and then into chapters, in a process that is characteristic to literature, granted that words and phrases can be used for general communication, but it is only in literary language that they take the form of the chapter. Caicedo's disciplinary transaction between writing and cinema equates words to shots, phrases to scenes and chapters to sequences; registering similarities but also differences between the disciplines these items are part of.

The second argument developed by Caicedo in his lecture observes that the elements that characterize an artistic discipline, and the ways in which they are assembled into works of art, is not evident or relevant to most people, but is crucial to anyone engaged with artistic practice. To develop that argument Caicedo unfolded a taxonomy of moviegoers, which draws a series of conceptual transpositions between the different relations that people can establish with film. 'Among the thousands of spectators that flood movie theaters,' he argued, '[is] the average *petit-bourgeois* spectator, who goes to

the movies twice a week, after work, always with someone.'[11] This basically refers to folks who perceive films as entertainment.

Following, Caicedo described another group of spectators, now extinct by the demise of the large or periphery movie hall.[12] He described them as:

> *Lumpen, who go through the entire everyday program at poor neighborhood theaters, usually in areas of criminality; take refuge in the movies to avoid work, come in at two in the afternoon, see the whole program twice, sleep, and leave at night to go home and sleep some more.[13] . . . [they] judge movies in relation to the practice of their reality, which is cruel and dangerous. Thus, their sabotage and heckling of great movies, etc.[14]*

Caicedo tagged a third kind of moviegoer, familiar to anyone who frequents artistic environments, as the 'intellectual, university formed spectator, who recognizes in cinema a powerful form of expression and ideological penetration, and that prefers, given the choice, films by lauded directors: Fellini, Buñuel, Pasolini, Bergman and left wing Italian movies.'[15]

'More often than not,' Caicedo noted, this spectator 'tries to decipher or interpret a message in a movie by Bergman, without noticing that by interpreting a film he is really disarming it in order to assimilate it to his reality, which is often poor and colonized and penetrated.' In similar terms, 'the Marxist (version of this) spectator judges films in relation to their coincidence with his theory of reality. If the film coincides with that theory, it is progressive, and therefore good.'[16]

[This] man of letters goes to the movies, most of the times, to broaden his general culture. He judges movies according to the importance of the 'topics'. Oftentimes he decides to become a movie critic, praising or condemning the results of a movie, never the different alternatives that were

available to the director, and the reasons why that director chose only one among them: the right one.[17]

Caicedo reacted to intellectual spectators' neglect for technique. Against their attempts to decipher and interpret messages in the projected movie, rather than to study the director's choices and strategies, he advanced a fourth kind of spectator: 'The professional moviegoer, interested in cinema as structure and trained to read the assembly and direction of images.' This spectator, Caicedo noted:

> *. . . knows that a zoom lens[18] eliminates perspective and therefore groups different elements beautifully within a frame, providing the ideal writing to show a couple of lovers holding hands on a beach, or a couple of lovers who have not seen each other in 20 years run to embrace each other, and run and run and yet appear not move forward.*

Based on such technical analysis, Caicedo saw how the professional moviegoer:

> *. . . learns that aside from Visconti's use of the zoom lens (and the actual act of zooming) to penetrate the reality of a suffering person, the excessive use of this instrument usually ends up in bad writing. This spectator also recognizes that a short lens will give perspective or depth to a field, allowing two separate subjects within a frame to undergo a moment of agitation that links them (granted that they are both within focus). This is all because in cinema, distances between different shots, as choices, are worth as much as the noun and the adjective. The use of slow motion will give poetry to the composition. The use of fast motion will add a 'burlesque' note. If the camera comes very close to the face of an actor, it tells us that that actor is thinking something important, or is ready to tell a story, and given this case, a close-up will be followed by a blurring of the image and then by a flashback. This blurring also gives the image a poetic tone in*

> *relation to the passing of time, while fading to black indicates the end of a chapter and temporary ellipsis.*[19]

Beyond the entertainment, sabotage or ideologies that characterize other spectators, Caicedo's demarcation of the

> *. . . professional moviegoer tries to capture, in that definitive and autonomous form that is the film during its projection, the moment of the 'mise-en-scène', or the relation between the movements of the camera and the actors created by the director as he films.*[20] *. . . the professional moviegoer will try to foresee possible clusters of writing (in the movie), or the punctuation of the following phrase, which will lead him to imagine the space beyond the frame, at the moment of filming. He learns, thus, to see not only the filmed object but the invisible: the camera.*[21]

It is this ability to analyse a work of art by focusing on the instruments and methods required to achieve it; this aim to recognize the technical process leading unequivocally to the perceived end result, that fit within my initial observations regarding the simultaneously telic and technical nature of the discipline of architecture. Paraphrasing Caicedo, a film is not only written on a script – a movie's *telos*. It is also, and fundamentally, developed through a series of actions (staging, lighting, framing, shooting, editing) that depend on a particular *technique*. His recognition of this technique as the *sine qua non* of professional practice has been extremely useful to me, not only to clarify my role and responsibility as an architect, but also to establish clearer communication with others, especially in an educational setting.

It is never easy to understand or explain how someone can envision a defined or delimited space, and can then turn that vision into a physical presence. Based on Caicedo's dissection of a movie into a series of actions and decisions that can be analysed, I am convinced that the adoption of our own version of the professional moviegoer's approach is key to appraise spatial imagination in architecture.

This conviction springs from two very different formative experiences. At an early stage of my education I was trained in a radically modernist understanding of architecture as an artistic discipline, based on a modern European definition of art as original, meaningful creation by individual authors. This understanding implied a rather blurry explanation of the way telos, that vision of a possible future of the built environment that I mentioned earlier, actually turned into a built object. Dissociated from technique, the crystallization of architectural thought was instead attributed to genius, or the ability of a few exceptional individuals to interpret supposed spirits of time and place accurately through built form. True: there was room in this interpretation for everyone to learn about materials and construction processes, and eventually anyone could build by mechanically copying known forms and employing known building methods; but that was certainly not architecture, just plain uninteresting construction.[22]

Fitting Caicedo's taxonomy, our teachers sometimes adopted the role of lumpen moviegoers, trashing the work of local adversaries or global celebrities from their own cruel and dangerous reality; but for the most part they acted as intellectual spectators, who explained and judged buildings in relation to that same reality – always poor and colonized and penetrated, and often Marxist too. They expected us to do good architecture, just like Fellini, Buñuel, Pasolini and Bergman did good movies, but absent the link between telos and technique, the way in which that was supposed to happen remained mysterious.

Caicedo's outline of an analytical theory of cinema came to my attention at a later stage of my education, marked by the study of analytical theories of architecture which were formulated as a reaction to the superstitious basis of modernist architecture I just described.[23] These analytical theories recognized the whole built environment and the entire history of architecture as a vast repository of means that have been utilized by many architects to link telos and technique. The only condition to access and use those means

is the adoption of what Caicedo described as a professional attitude, from which buildings, movies and books are understood as visions of possible futures in their fields, together with the means required to get there.

Caicedo's taxonomy of moviegoers suggests that, as happens with film, different publics interact with an architectural presence in different ways. Lumpen vandalize, average users of architecture are entertained (verbatim: *inter* + *tenēre* = being held within) by, and intellectuals interpret buildings in relation to their ideology. Professional architects, on the other hand, aim to identify the choices and strategies that lead from spatial imagination to the physical presence of those buildings, interested as they are in learning how to eventually make them themselves. In order to do so they try to reconstruct their *mise en scène* – their process of becoming – and try to see the invisible: a pen or CAD program that traces a buildable project, layer upon layer of decision making, like a camera that congeals the choices that support what is projected on a screen.

Like movies and novels, the process of becoming of every architecture implies choices and strategies, from which the architect must choose one: the right one. In Caicedo's terms, the professional architect, interested in the built environment as structure and trained to read the way in which architectural elements have been assembled, knows that a column defines space without dividing it, and therefore provides the ideal writing to mediate between spaces with different gradients of public activity. Based on such technical analysis, he understands that aside from Islamic architecture's use of the column (and the resulting hypostyle typology[24]) in vast spaces of complex public interaction, the excessive use of this element usually ends up in bad writing. The architect also recognizes that a blank wall will provide perspective or depth to a field, allowing spaces that enter in contact with it to become virtually linked (granted that they remain in proportion to the wall).[25] This is because in architecture, the sizes of and the distances between different elements, as choices, are worth as much as the noun and

the adjective. The use of reflective surfaces will give poetry to a composition.[26] The use of sharp contrasts in colour will add a 'picturesque' note. If windows are arranged symmetrically, they will tell us that the building they are part of has a special dignity to it, and given this case, will most probably also distance itself from the ground by standing on a plinth. This higher vantage point can also give a building a poetic tone in relation to its surroundings, while a simple change in the direction of pavement can indicate the end of one space and the beginning of another.

In order to appraise the rudiments of spatial imagination in architecture, as I have tried to do here, our use of interdisciplinary transactions has proven fruitful; not only to unlock potential knowledge from one discipline and make it available for another, but also to identify or conceive possible methodologies that can render this knowledge operative. Caicedo's lecture illustrates how the growth and development of knowledge in any artistic discipline, as well as the architect's ability to produce the built environment, benefit from an understanding of art that balances process and product, means and ends.

1 Marx Wartofsky, 'Telos and Technique: Models as Modes of Action', in: Stanford Anderson (ed.), *Planning for Diversity and Choice: Possible Futures and Their Relation to the Man Controlled Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 259-274.
2 Among the different collections of these stories: Andrés Caicedo, *Destinitos Fatales* (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1984).
3 Andrés Caicedo, *Teatro*, edited by Sandro Romero Rey (Cali: Universidad del Valle, 2017).
4 Andrés Caicedo, *¡Que Viva la Música!* (Bogotá: Colcultura, 1977). The novel was recently translated by Frank Wynne as *Liveforever* (London: Penguin, 2014).
5 Meaning both 'eye on cinema' and 'attention to cinema'.
6 Andrés Caicedo, *Ojo al Cine*, edited by Luis Ospina and Sandro Romero Rey (Bogotá: Norma, 1999).

7 Andrés Caicedo, 'Especificidad del Cine', in: Ibid., 27-34. A group of students from the local Universidad del Valle, organized as a group of 'aesthetic studies', requested this lecture from the Cine Club de Cali, which was delivered by Caicedo in 1973 (precise date not known).
8 Caicedo used the Spanish *plano* or plane, which makes sense of his idea of this unit operating in two dimensions of Cartesian space.
9 In Spanish, *plano-secuencia.*
10 Caicedo, *Ojo al Cine*, op. cit. (note 6), 32.
11 Caicedo, *Ojo al Cine*, op. cit. (note 6), 30.
12 The radical transformation in the location, size and internal configuration of movie halls (from the large neighbourhood or city-centre theatre to the multiplex compound in a mall) offers interesting research possibilities regarding the mechanisms of social control in architecture.
13 Ibid., 30.
14 Ibid., 33.
15 Ibid., 30.
16 Ibid., 32.
17 Ibid., 33.
18 In Spanish: *tele-objetivo*.
19 Caicedo, *Ojo al Cine*, op. cit. (note 6), 32.
20 Ibid., 33.
21 Ibid., 32.
22 'A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal.' Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 23.
23 With strong bases in Italian neo-rationalism, aside from the best known architects (Rossi, Grassi, Muratori, etcetera) this formative period owes much to the Master in Architecture programme at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, and the in-depth study by Carlos Martí Arís, *Las Variaciones de la Identidad: Ensayo sombre el tipo en arquitectura* (Barcelona: Ediciones del Serbal, 1993).
24 For example, the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba.
25 For example, the colourful blank walls in the architecture of Luis Barragán.
26 Cf. Josep Quetglas, *Fear of Glass* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2001).