# The Grey Area between reality and representation: The practices of architects and film-makers

**GEMMA BARTON**
UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON, UK

There is a well-documented relationship between cinema and the city - but what of their creators, the filmmaker and the architect? It is clear that both propose conditions for inhabitation, compose spatial sequences and communicate multiple narratives, but what other insights can we draw about their operation within the grey area between reality and representation? Act 1 of this paper looks to set the scene; establishing the characteristics, presence and parameters of the grey area, Act 2 investigates this shared territory through the frames of 'the city' and 'the narrative' - chosen for exploration as these are the exchange points, the positions of interaction, and the methods by which each other can be recognized and explained. Here the nature of practicing in the third space is explored through quotes from and interviews with those currently producing work in this territory. Through my practice as an academic, editor and writer, my skills and knowledge lie in communication, thus my methodology derives directly from my experience of the dissemination of conversation, and by association considers the role of the architect and the filmmaker as 'communicators'.

## ACT 1:
## THE GREY AREA - presence and parameters

Events take place, are imagined, and remembered all in one moment. Deciphering where creating, thinking and communicating begin and end is challenging and makes examining the relationship between reality and representation problematic. Separating representative imagery from the actualities that inspire them would be a difficult task, however this does not mean that representation could not or should not be an extension or manipulation of existent realities. Both films and spatial constructions are complex entities, each one being delicate and different from the next. There are architectures that fall outside of this narrative foothold such as digital form finding techniques and auto-authorship, yet in order to understand the core themes behind the creative process we must begin to formalize the structure. Architectural and filmmaking processes take place across the reality > representation spectrum, and as they do so, the output they produce can also exist across this threshold. Buildings, once complete, exist in real time and space however photographs of them, in journals and the press, are continually developing representations of the fact. *"To paraphrase Roland Barthes – the reality of an object is not exhausted by its phenomenal existence, but extends into each and every representation of it. In other words, we have works, and we have photographs, and it is not that the photograph is simply a poor substitute for the work, but rather that it is another facet of the world's being, and one that can be thought about in its own right; as a result of course, the work is never 'finished – as long as images of it continue to go on being produced, it will, so to speak, always still be in development"* (Forty, 2014).

What do architects do? What don't architects do? Robin Evans famously asserted *"Architects do not make buildings; they make drawings of building"* (EVANS, Robin, 1989) and fourteen years later Neil Spiller added *"Architects do not make buildings; they make a range of different types of representations that may be used in the construction of buildings or they may be used in a number of ways to create a wide array of spatial possibilities"* (Spiller, 2013). In addition to this composite conversation, I believe that *architects do not make buildings: they envision life in a space/place*, which is translated through architectural convention, without which the building could never become a reality - thus extracting that the value of architecture is not only found in the reality of the built form but equally in its representational form. Communicating the vision effectively is as important at the vision itself. Along with other prestigious names (Alexander Brodsky, Lebbeus Woods, Neil Denari) Perry Kulper works in this field of 'visionary architecture' or 'paper architecture' where representations, through technique and content incite critical debate and also communicate a message without the need for construction (Pohl, 2012). As Brodsky says *"From the moment a structure is built it becomes a real thing and it stops being paper architecture. Before the realization of the building is the border between what I am drawing and what I am building. I am always trying to destroy this border"* (Brodsky, 2013-14). The border Brodsky describes here is the grey area, the expanding threshold constantly challenged by architects, artists and filmmakers who believe boundaries to be flexible, fluid and ripe for manipulation.

Filmmaking projects exist as representation, in construct and process - both the planning and realization of film exist across multiple media; storyboards, scripts, stills, moving images. Outside of props, sets and locations there is no tangible output/product – further drawing attention to the greying area. In an interview with Perry Kulper he tells me *"I think of architecture as having multiple levels, or families of representation, all real; the plan, a story told*

*about a building, data collected from it, photographs. The levels of representation play different roles in structuring the 'whole'"* (Kulper, 2014). Architects therefore find themselves 'caught' in the realm between things that exist and things that do not. Here they are not alone; they exist alongside filmmakers and directors treading this territory between reality and representation. Pallasmaa reportedly described the physical space created within film as 'architecture without architect' and the filmmaker as the 'architect without client' (Khorshidifard).
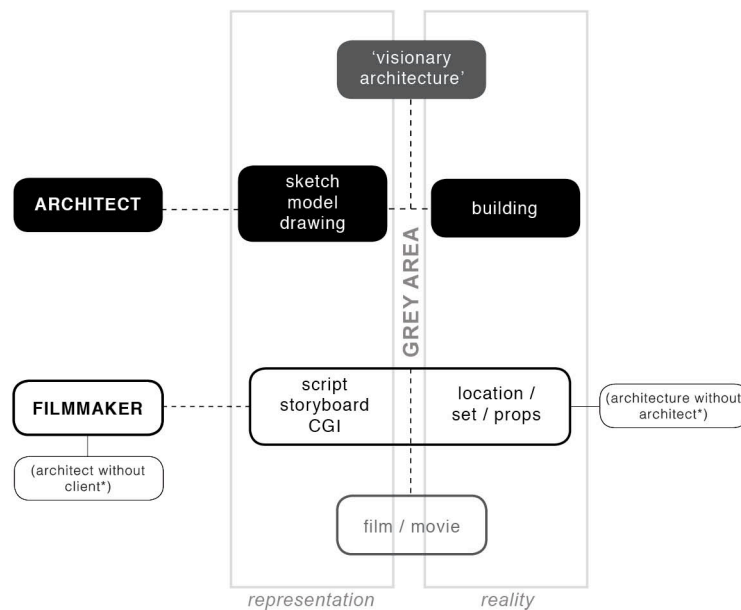


*Figure 1*
*Reality + Representation*
*© G. Barton*

Visionary Architecture performs as a hybrid - in that the critical image is the output itself. In filmmaking the screening of the product is pure representation but the constituent parts can be a combination of real life locations, fictional characters and inspired-by-a-true-story plotlines. In exploring the extents of this territory it becomes clear that it is less of a 'grey area' and more of a 'grey scale' as the edge definition between reality and representation appears both perforated and fluid. The architect makes proposals for a (biographic/prosthetic) narrative that might come into existence. The filmmaker constructs worlds to make sense of narratives that will exist only in the film and not (yet) in reality. In filmmaking a real space (the site, the location) featuring in an artificial narrative becomes imagined by association. Both architect and filmmaker powerfully dwell side by side in this transience between reality and representation; where buildings are facilitative, vehicles by which stories are orchestrated and/or where lives are lived. In essence, fiction can be grounded by reality and conversely a reality can be displaced by fiction.


## ACT 2:
## THE CITY & THE NARRATIVE  - authenticity and articulation

*"The city is big, the image is small"* (Andersen, Los Angeles Plays Itself, 2003). As a collective, the material presence of the city, exists in reality without question, however it also appears among fictional characters both human (actors) and as augmented reality (CGI creations) – by changing this built landscape the meaning and the representation of the city becomes altered, even prosthetic in part. Narrative appears in different manifestations throughout architecture and cinema. Narrative offers architects a way of engaging with  the way a city feels and works, as well as with it's people. It does not dilute the discipline to aesthetic or technological reading but instead champions the experiential dimension of architecture. Broadly speaking, in architecture, the narrative is the theme, the defining and inspirational thread, be it derived from a historical site context, a political manifesto or a childhood memory, this concept drives decision making and allows a language to appear and a creation to be legible. An architectural programme can also be an imagining of narrative, the fiction of the imagined life. In filmmaking the narrative could be the plotline, the tempo at which the story is unraveled and the way in which it does so. The narrative comes in the form of words, images, music and cinematography, something the entire film attends to. Film began as a method to communicate to the masses 'actualities' or scenes of things they had heard or read about, but

never actually seen, such as the Lumiere brothers' documentaries. Others were experimenting with a more playful side of popular culture, developing the trend for narrative story telling, which continues today.
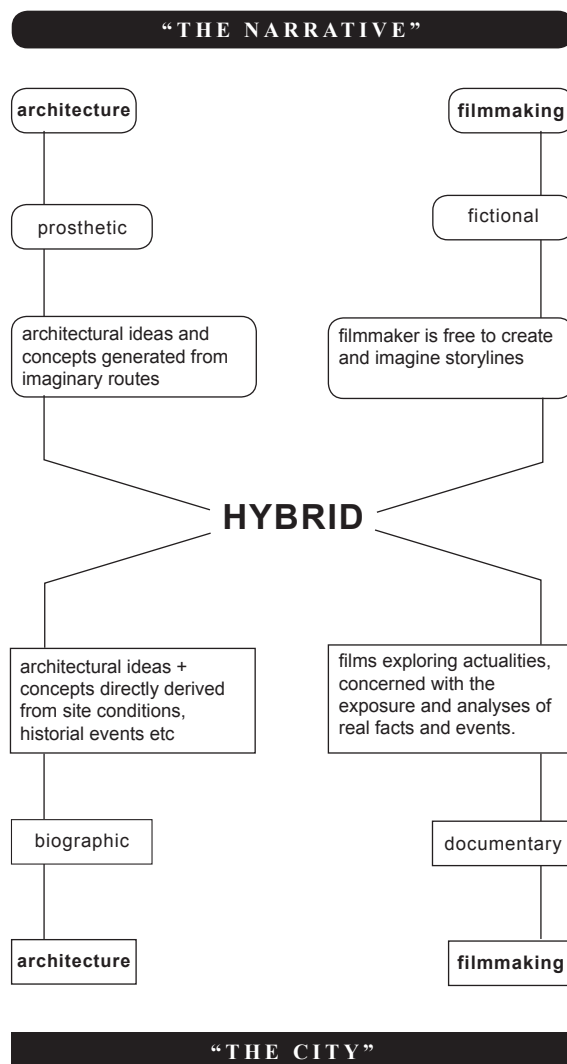
**"THE NARRATIVE"**

**architecture**

prosthetic

architectural ideas and concepts generated from imaginary routes

**filmmaking**

fictional

filmmaker is free to create and imagine storylines

**HYBRID**

architectural ideas + concepts directly derived from site conditions, historial events etc

films exploring actualities, concerned with the exposure and analyses of real facts and events.

biographic

documentary

**architecture**

**filmmaking**

**"THE CITY"**

*Figure 2*
*City + Narrative*
*© G. Barton*

Architectural narrative is present in the built environment and the medium in which this is visualized varies greatly from city to city. *"Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased"* (Calvino, 1997). The purpose and power of the narrative can become diluted if it cannot be readily interpreted, therefore at times moving image and built form need to be stripped back to ensure a clear message can be communicated. In films such as Koyaanisqatsi, directed by Godfrey Reggio in 1982 there is no verbal narration to support the time-lapse footage of cities and natural landscapes. Dubbed a visual-tone-poem, Reggio states, "*It's not for lack of love of the language that these films have no words. It's because, from my point of view, our language is in a state of vast humiliation. It no longer describes the world in which we live*" (Reggio, Koyaanisqatsi, 1982). This resonates clearly in the world of narrative and architectural representation, where words cannot sufficiently describe the intention, expression or feeling a space and a story can generate. Kulper asserts, *"The conventional use of language – words - for spatial design purposes is largely antiquated. Proactively, words can initiate, trigger, and thicken spatial possibilities. The use of language can be an active form of representation and design"* (Kulper, The Precision of Promiscuity, 2015). In Koyaanisqatsi, by removing verbal content (and with it auditory assertion) the narrative lays itself open for interpretation and participation. The 'scenery' and footage is real, but the speed at which it is displayed has been manipulated: slowed down, or sped up into a time-lapse. This manipulation of tempo and order of delivery alongside a Philip Glass score give this film an artistic power open for personal analysis of a narrative. This approach tends to be reserved for the

artist rather than the director, who by virtue of his/her title aims to direct the thoughts and feelings of the audience using both dialogue and moving image.

Architectural narratives hold a sense of ideological power. WAI Architecture Think Tank who focuses on the understanding and execution of Architecture from a panoramic approach (from theoretical texts to architectural artifacts, narrative architectures, buildings and urban and cultural conditions) published *Narrative Architecture: A Manifesto*. This unbuilt investigatory work bases the characteristics of its existence upon non-existence. Existing as pure representation ensures the criticality of the image, and allows for genuine conjecture of composition and meaning. This has a direct impact on our understanding of architectural principles that are holistically connected. *"There is a form of architecture that aims at not getting built [...] Narrative Architecture, as we call this form of critical architectural project that relies on narrative to construct a critique of architectural ideology, exists beyond the realm of the mind"* (Frankowski & Garcia, 2013). In 1999 Lebbeus Wood created the image Lower Manhattan, an example of this fantastical and propositional ideology that illustrates the composition of real and representative content within an image. Authenticity of place here makes the vision more critically plausible and allows for an in depth critique of social and architectural possibility. Woods explains *"I wanted to suggest that maybe lower Manhattan – not lower downtown, but lower in the sense of below the city – could form a new relationship with the planet. So, in the drawing you see that the East River and the Hudson are both dammed. They're purposefully drained, as it were. The underground – or lower Manhattan – is revealed, and, in the drawing, there are suggestions of inhabitation in that lower region"* (Woods, 2007). Woods uses certain recognizable elements such as the New York plan formation and high-rise density to communicate the reality in the image. This familiarity allows space for the representation in the image, in this case, the proposition of the underground and the 'what if' consequences of spatial and social decisions.

A comment from the video-essay by CalArts professor of Film Composition Thom Andersen in which he discusses the representation of Los Angeles in movies; *"Of course I know movies aren't about places, they're about stories. If we notice the location, we're not really watching the movie"* (Andersen, Los Angeles Plays Itself, 2003). Conversely Robert Mallet-Stevens suggested some 70 years earlier in the 1925 article 'Le Cinema et les arts: Architecture' (Becherer, 1996) that architecture, in film, should not simply enframe but become a part of the narrative action, become an actor. It is no surprise here that the architect places a greater significance on the role of the city than the filmmaker but could this also suggest a decline in the importance and/or impact of the representation of the city between the 1920s and 2003? I reached out to Andersen to discuss my thoughts with him, this was his response *"Los Angeles Plays Itself is, of course, primarily about places, and only incidentally about stories. The line you quote is an acknowledgment that its analysis goes against the grain, which it is not a conventional film that it appeals to the viewer's voluntary attention, as I say later. I think it shows that architecture is an actor. [...] The unexpected success of my modest movie demonstrates that the representation of the city on film is more a concern now than ever before."* (Andersen, 2014) And of course he is right, in our digital age, the medium cannot be questioned, our cities are exposed daily in films, documentaries, TV shows and commercials - the question remains however whether the audience indeed is seeing? Andersen talks of voluntary attention, the content which the mind permits oneself to focus on. Our cities are also 'represented' daily in sequences of fiction, imagination, dreams, hallucinations and mythical projections. This curating of our vision requires participation – in these 'prosthetic' representations we are no longer spectators, we become stars in our very own screenplays (actors, directors and cinematographers.)

For architects and filmmakers, existing on the same creative spectrum offers up many advantages brought about by shared skillsets, allowing one to move freely between the vocations. Many trained architects and designers transition into filmmaking such as Anshuman Prasad, Tino Schaedler and Joseph Kosinski, indicating that the movement is somewhat mono-directional. Recognized as a valid and experiential offshoot from architecture, it is not to be considered abandonment but rather specialization. Attracted by the diversity, magic and freedom being involved in the creation of cinematic space can offer, these 'transistors' recognize the benefits that their architectural training provide, skills which they now showcase and exercise in a world not hampered by the limits of construction, but expanded by the openness of imagination (and bigger budgets). Joseph Kosinksi (Tron Legacy director) studied at Columbus University where he is now an adjunct professor of architecture. Kosinski creates an entirely new city for the 2010 Tron remake, *"I saw the opportunity to build a universe from scratch, not only with the architecture, but also with the character and vehicle design"* (Kosinski, 2010) utilizing his architectural training and a great deal of imagination. This new 'city' will only ever be a representation of Kosinski's imagined reality, those elements; the sets, the digital and physical models have a synergy with the stage at which an architectural project would be presented to an investor or client, the very moment before it gets the go ahead to be built, to become a reality. In this scenario Tron's 'realisation' takes place on screen, rendering it 'screen architecture.' Similarly, cities can be adapted in film, changed for the better or worse, on the screen or in the mind. Three architecture graduates from the Bartlett, UCL, formed film company Factory Fifteen. Their brand of animated films or 'synthetic architecture' which include Robots of Brixton (2011) and Jonah (2013) have received high acclaim from both the architecture and film industries. Both films play out with an intentional focus on utilizing and/or reimagining the existing city. In these examples The City

and The Narrative are intertwined perfectly, for example in Robots of Brixton 'biographic' happenings such as the 1981 riots in Brixton are said to have inspired the prosthetic narrative and augmented locality of the film. Incidentally the release of Robots of Brixton in June 2011 came just months before the London Riots, placing their architectural/social insight on the cusp of actualism. Jonathan Gales of Factory Fifteen says *"We work to create projects that engage in narrative and envisage space. [...] All projects engage in some way with the built environment, posing "what if" scenarios, or using the visualized environment to aid the narrative of the story"* (Gales, 2013). Engaging with architecture to generate these more temporal and ephemeral outputs rather than traditional buildings, allows creation and critique without the imposition of responsibility and/or longevity.

As Kosinski and Factory Fifteen evidence, architecture training provides numerous transferable skills, which opens the doors between the two fields, yet there is an extremely unique exchange that takes place when architects and filmmakers work side by side. An example of this collaboration was released in October 2013 when French filmmaker Benjamin Seroussi and French architect David Tajchman made Kaplinski, a film showing several different structures, made from the same repetitive wooden element, gathered around the human body. It is aimed at communicating the ideas of mobility, articulation and demolition. In interviewing Seroussi and Tajchman I was intrigued by the varying texture of their answers. When asked how they would describe their roles Seroussi talks of his ability as a director to reinvent and reimagine the existing, manipulating time and space to alter the perception of reality in his films. Tajchman considers his role as an architect to envision the future, with a lesser focus on the manipulation of the existing and a greater emphasis on creating a vision of the unknown through the illusionary power of digital media. As representatives of their vocations, both individuals obtain the ability to deal creatively (yet differently) with unseen reality. *"I'm always searching for a way to extract things and people from reality. Film lets me do this by stopping time and stretching space"* (Seroussi, 2013). Both Seroussi and Tajchman believe their roles have a magical strength, when talking of the power of digital technologies used to create his imagery Tajchman says, *"I can achieve an illusion of reality. I am a sort of "illusionist".*

When these powers meet in a creative capacity the output has the potential not just to transcend the limits of each discipline but to create a new one, where medium and creation are both one and the same. One filmmaker who has successfully turned their hand to architecture and design is the stylistically and symmetrically driven Wes Andersen who, alongside OMA has recreated familiar scenes from his seminal films into Café Luce, a Milanese café, for Prada. Wes Andersen uses a magical mix of narrative, imagination and real life elements to generate the plots and scenes for his films, when the films then inspire real architectural projects - reality > representation > reality goes full circle - closing this loop however opens up even more dialogue and possibility. This poses an interesting cyclical relationship and highlights the blurring of the boundaries between reality and representation even further, becoming greyers and ever more diluted, the possibility for future collaboration of architects and filmmakers and generation of new genres become possible.

## ACT 3: FINAL STATEMENTS

Researching a subject centered on communication and representation can be well articulated through the texture of voice and imagery, telling the story of the intricacies of narrative processing through quotes and conversations. It therefore seems fitting to conclude with some comments and questions to enable a further extension of this conversation.

The nature of the film pre-production process (scripts, storyboards, casting) is to formulate and ensure the successful execution of the preordained outcome. In (most) films, eventualities are tested and explored in advance, and deviation from the agreed path is avoided at all costs. Filmmakers rely upon architectural conventions to instill familiarity, authenticity and understanding into a film; scale, purpose and atmosphere, they rely upon the visual conditioning of the built environment as a mode of entry into their imagined world. Where the two disciplines really differ is in this intention; architects imagine life, and plan for the realization of their designs but they cannot preordain its end use; families split, plots are divided, rivers flood and developers swoop, planning for the final outcome is thus not an easy task for an architect. In many cases, longevity and flexibility are considered preferable, designing for any person at any time, but often the outcome of this approach can lack the desired narrative or personality. People are unpredictable; they use space differently and will interpret films in their own way. This variety is powerful; stairs are designed to aid movement between floors, yet they become re-appropriated in many ways; as a place to sit and talk on the phone or a place to make love (in Hollywood movies). These functions are rarely considered when choosing materials and following building regulations yet these are the 'realities' or the 'sub-plots' of spatial occupation.

It is essential to highlight the role of significance, what makes something significant is its story, a collection of occurrences; memories are formed around events, be they historical or filmic. A sense of place can be both made and destroyed through its portrayal on the screen or at the hands of an architects' decision. The spectacle of an on-location movie shoot can make a street or a café a landmark. Architects and filmmakers could learn from each other about the role that narrative plays in curating reputations, place making and their joint duty to continue to be innovative.

*"The representational mediums, techniques and design methods architects conjure are approximate, indirect, and sometimes downright mischievous. Trading in tropes, metaphors, half-truths, and distortions, we pick the pockets of truth, acting like con artists leveraging sleight of hand tactics, poking around for possible worlds in the act of the design. Using languages and visual accomplices of all manner, architects are metaphorical Houdinis escape artists, fictitious and duplicitous writers on spatial dreams, invoking imagined worlds riddled with a politics of communication on the lookout for architecture that advocates for real cultural agency"* (Kulper, The Precision of Promiscuity, 2015). Kulper here describes the methods of the architect in the same fantastic way one imagines the daily chores of the filmmaker; choosing locations, cutting seamlessly between cities, changing actors characteristics and voices with the press of a button – but what Kulper is suggesting here is that the two approaches are very similar, it is all about perception and visibility – the architect makes serious his role, he plays down the elements of emotion and gut instinct in favor of justification and value engineering. The more architects that recognize their inner Houdidni the more cinematic life might be. Filmmakers place their focus on the characters and their ability to communicate a storyline or narrative, putting the spotlight on life, humanity and experience. Too often architecture is centered on the built form or the ego as the lead, focusing on the container of an experience rather than the creation of the experience itself. Architects might place an equal amount of attention on the end user, their 'leading lady' in order to connect more with the community more.

Anything is possible, the imagined future is endless, and architects and filmmakers are at the heart of the production>communication network. The responsibility is heavy but the true advantage of representation is its ability to be consumed and interpreted by many. As the 'city' demands more information, a blend of activities, typologies, people and cultures, the production of imagery, representation and conversations is increasing to generate a new backdrop and story. Perhaps the future will hold more cross-disciplinary collaborations, exploring the joint responsibilities and the new possibilities that shared skills can afford. The role of the architect and the filmmaker is to provide platforms for further critical insight into the world we believe we know and the city we believe can become reality. Architecture and the City are a dependable constant, irrespective of quality, which kiss and collide with stories, both real and imaginary. At the fore architecture can deflect and affect the trajectory of the storyline as well as frame and incubate narrative processing. But films get edited, cut and mediated. Buildings weather, get re-purposed and amended. Reality is not a fixed condition, it is continually analyzed in relation to time, distance and it's vital representational counterpart. The medium of this analysis will continue to change, the edges will become more blurred, we may never be able to extract the black and white from the grey, yet if this ensures a greater consideration of what is 'possible' then this can only be a good thing.

# Bibliography

Andersen, T. (2014, January). (G. Barton, Interviewer)

Andersen, T. (Writer). (2003). *Los Angeles Plays Itself* [Motion Picture]. Youtube.

Becherer, R. (1996). *Architecture of Duration.* (R. Mallet-Stevens, Ed.) MIT Press.

Brodsky, A. (2013-14). The Place of Paper. (B. Ronngren, Interviewer) AArchitecture 21.

Calvino, I. (1997). *Invisible Cities.* London: Random House.

Clarke, A. (2012). *Spatial experience narrative and Architecture.* Byera Hadley.

Evans, R. (1989). *Architecture and It's Image: Four Centuries of Architectural Representation.* (E. K. Eve Blau, Ed.) Montreal: MIT Press.

Evans, R. (1997). Translations from Drawig to Building. *AA Document Series* .

Fitzgearld, N. (2010). *Paper architects and the razing of Moscow [Interview: Yuri Avvakumov] Russia beyond the headlines.*

Forty, A. (2014). *Forty Ways to Think About Architecture: Architectural history and theory today.* (B. Iain, M. Fraser, & B. Penner, Eds.) Wiley.

Frankowski, N., & Garcia, C. (2013, November). (G. Barton, Interviewer)

Gales, J. (2013, October). Beyond Built Architecture. (E. Baraona Pohl, & C. Reyes Najera, Interviewers) MAS Context.

Gioni, M., & Avvakumov, Y. (2012, March 21). Retrieved April 9, 2015, from Domus: http://domusweb.it/en/architecture/2012/03/21/paper-tigers.html

Jacobs, S. (2007). *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock.* O10.

Khorshidifard, S. *Leadership in Architectural Research.* (S. R. Hazem Rashed-Ali, Ed.) 2009.

Kosinski, J. (2010, November 23). *BUilding the Grid: a conversation with Tron Legacy director Joe Kosinski*. (C. Lamar, Interviewer) IO9.com.

Kulper, P. (2014, J 7).

Kulper, P. (2015). The Precision of Promiscuity. *Sci-Arc Offramp: Lies , 9*.

Parsons, D. L. (1999). Review of the Cinematic City. Film-Philosophy Journal Vol.03.

Pohl, E. B. (2012, December 3). *Domus Web*. Retrieved January 3, 2013, from Domus: https://www.domusweb.it/en/architecture/2012/03/12/from-line-to-hyperreality.html

*Postopolis - Lebbeus Woods*. (2007, June 8). Retrieved December 30, 2013, from City of Sound: http://www.cityofsound.com/blog/2007/06/postopolis_lebb.html

Reggio, G. (Director). (1982). *Koyaanisqatsi* [Motion Picture]. YouTube.

Reggio, G. (Director). (1982). *Koyaanisqatsi* [Motion Picture].

Seroussi, B. (n.d.). Retrieved October 24, 2013, from http://www.benjaminseroussi.com

Seroussi, B. (2013, November). (G. Barton, Interviewer)

Spiller, N. (2013). *Drawing Architecture AD.* John Wiley & Sons.

Tajchman, D. (2013, November). (G. Barton, Interviewer)

Tajchman, D. (n.d.). *David Tajchman Architects*. Retrieved October 24, 2013, from http://www.davidtajchman.com

*The Kaplinski project is an experimental film collaboration between a filmmaker and an architect*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Archinect: http://archinect.com/news/article/84778343/the-kaplinski-project-is-an-experimental-film-collaboration-between-a-filmmaker-and-an-architect

Thinktank, W. (n.d.). *What about WAI?* Retrieved October 30, 2013, from http;//waithinktank/about

Toy, M. (Ed.). (1994). *Architecture & Film: Architectural Design.* Academy Group Ltd.

Webb, M. (1987). The City in Film. *Design Quarterly , 136*.

Woods, L. (2007, March 8). Without Walls. (B. BLOG, Interviewer) http://bldgblog.blogspot.co.uk/2007/10/without-walls-interview-with-lebbeus.html.