

THE MEMORY OF THE WORLD

MUSEUMS IN CINEMA

By Esther Johnson

Architecture has always had a close relationship with film, having a mutual concern with public and private space and being, in the words of Sergei Eisenstein, “film’s undoubted ancestor”. Not only is there an inextricable link between the way in which films are made and the development of the built environment, there is also the extensive representation of architecture within film, each influencing the other. Buildings, like films, create rhythm and repetition, contrasts in light and shadow and juxtapositions in space and time. Architecture can provide the setting and subject for narrative, as in King Vidor’s *The Fountainhead* (1948), Peter Greenaway’s *The Belly of an Architect* (1987) and the work of Jacques Tati. Film can also investigate the repercussions of architectural space and place on the individual’s emotions and psyche, as in Godard’s *Alphaville* (1962) and the work of Antonioni. Here I will consider the use of the museum in film.

George Bataille wrote in *Documents* (1929) that “architecture is the expression of the true nature of societies, as physiognomy is the expression of the nature of individuals”. This is particularly pertinent to the relationship of the museum to the moving image, as the latter repeatedly subverts the imposed hierarchies of such a space in the search for more involving insights.

As a means of accessing the past, the representation of museums in cinema is utilized in a number of different ways. George Franju’s *Hôtel des Invalides* (1952) is a poetic documentary set out like a personal meditation-cum-historical essay which takes place in the Parisian Musée de l’Armée, a hospital for ex-soldiers and home to Napoleon’s tomb. A tour around the museum highlights the pomp, ceremony and grotesqueness of war, through the presentation of a myriad of preserved implements of battle.¹ The lushness and wealth of the museum objects in both quantity and monetary value are set against the reality of crippled war survivors and everyday public museum tours. True to Franju’s surrealist connections, these juxtapositions present a disturbing study of the effects and remembrance of war, with children playing amongst objects of destruction. The interaction of a romantic young couple² allows for

an engagement with the museum contents, the voiceover proposing that “some of these engines of war amuse the visitor, and yet considering how things have mushroomed, it’s no laughing matter,” while the couple are counter-pointed by footage of a blossoming A-bomb. A later sequence trivialises the museum objects when, for example, the girl peers through an old periscope before turning it on herself so she can check her hair.

As the film progresses with an increasingly sarcastic voice-over (“paradise lies in the surety of the sword”) we are gradually led through the museum by a guide (an old soldier, now an exhibit himself, along with the war disabled ex-combatants seen in the hospital) who demands that the visitors respect the dead. The engines of war all point to a controlling empire reveling in its wealth and caring little for the ‘lower ranks’ lost in battle. The film’s oppressive closure shows war orphans singing, “and the white doves sing day and night.”³

We are left with the question of what particular ‘truth’ museums might offer. The film clearly shows the antithesis between victim and hero, reality and legend, petrified past and crippled present, and between the chroniclers of history and the sufferings of those who achieved the conquest.

The motif of the museum as a false memory of the past is also dramatically seen in Alain Resnais’ first feature *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). Part *nouveau roman* (the script was written by Marguerite Duras), part romantic fantasy, the film centres around the affair of a Japanese man whose life has been shattered by the vivid memories of the bombings in Hiroshima, and a French woman who has previously been punished as a wartime collaborator because of her affair with a German officer. Each struggles to understand the other’s personal history; each collides with their perception of the other.

The film makes particular reference to the museum in Hiroshima which commemorates the bombing. A mixture of tracking and static shots shows a museum which reflects the memory of an event through reconstructions in models and film, remnants of melted objects, human skin, photographs and newsreel footage of crippled survivors. The building is effectively an empty shell of memories and aftermath, as the woman reflects, “people

walk pensively past photographs, reconstructions since there is nothing else, descriptions since there is nothing else.” The museum becomes a place concerned with the ‘horror of forgetting’. Hiroshima is seen as a city of perpetual sadness, home to ‘Atomic Tours’ and gift shops, a city struggling at once to remember the past whilst creating the new Hiroshima we see in the museum’s modern structure and the Hotel New Hiroshima where the French woman stays whilst acting in a film about peace in the city. When she tells her lover she has visited the museum four times, his repetitive reply is simply, “you saw nothing in Hiroshima, nothing”; by simply visiting one can never understand the horrifying nature of the event.

Roberto Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* (1953), meanwhile, uses the surrounding external world to reflect on the internal metaphysics and consciousness of the film’s characters. Katherine and Alexander Joyce (Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders) are a reserved English couple who, whilst visiting Naples to find a buyer for an inherited property, are brought face to face with the shallowness of their relationship. Rossellini described it as “a film that rested on something very subtle, the variations in a couple’s relationship under the influence of a third person: the exterior world surrounding them”. In one of the film’s poignant *longueur* episodes, Katherine visits the Naples museum alone and is faced with Roman statuary, each piece telling individual tales. Katherine’s questioning of the foundations of her marriage is awakened by the intrusion of these powerful stone beings. She later recounts the trip to her husband. “To think that those men lived thousands of years ago and you feel they are just like the man today...you can understand exactly what they were like...what struck me was the complete lack of modesty with which everything was expressed”.

Tortured by marital crises, Katharine admires and connects with the life-in-the-flesh freedom of the statues she has encountered, which seem to embody an outspoken attitude she and her husband never can. The museum’s contents are the embodiment of the sensuous and the eternal. The sequence is like a waking dream or epiphany, with living humans overshadowed by powerful



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heroes and legends. It is as if the statues are more alive than her. Bergman even describes her part (on the insistence of Rossellini) as, “walking through” with little outward expression. With the discovery of the moulded shape of two lovers at Pompeii, she realises “life is so short”, the objects of past history affirming the sadness in her own life.

The melancholy continues in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) where the art museum is an empty place of mystery and loneliness which frames the beautiful Madeleine Elster (Kim Novak), gazing at the image of Carlotta Valdes, her supposed great-grandmother and past-life doppelgänger.

Museums have always acted, of course, as telling backdrops to actions. The grandeur of the British Museum is used in sequences in Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* (1929), Walter Forde’s *Bulldog Jack* (1934) and James Ivory’s *Maurice* (1987). These films use the museum as a defining image of London and of institutional authority.⁴ That said, this quality can be always be challenged. It might be subtle, as in Godard’s *Bande à Part* (1964) in which the lead characters charge such a site with a light-hearted potential, deciding to view the contents of the Louvre as quickly as possible⁵. Or it might be more systematically deconstructed. Isaac Julien’s two-screen kaleidoscope *Vagabondia* (2000) takes place in

London’s Sir John Soane’s Museum. There is an amalgam of implied narrative relationships, as a black woman in exuberant historical dress observes the surrounding displays and sits down to dinner with a white man. The straying camera questions who and what is on display, where the objects come from and what their relationship is to this wealthy Englishman’s celebration of multi-culture.

Previously, Julien had re-visioned the racial and gender politics of the white marbled museum in *The Attendant* (1993). In focusing on a black museum attendant, the film subverts traditional notions of history and of the museum as a ‘superior’ architectural space, where paintings and sculpture represent a largely white and heterosexual history. Historical representations of violence and black slaves in classical art, seen in F.A. Biard’s *Scene on the Coast of Africa*, are reassessed as the attendant effectively becomes curator, walking past paintings which change into living colour scenes of reorganized slave paintings, the models positioned in an Sado-Masochistic fantasy. History is ‘re-remembered’ in an altogether different form.

Elsewhere, in a formally dazzling innovation, Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* (2002) inhabits history via a single-shot, single take digital journey through the space and time of the Hermitage Museum in

1-3. The Phantom Museum
4. Hiroshima Mon Amour

St Petersburg. The virtuoso mise-en-scène gives way to a touring commentary by a nineteenth-century diplomat guide. We are transported past paintings, furnishings and *objets d’art*, and given a glimpse of ceremonies which once took place within the building. Along the journey we encounter a host of characters, both contemporary and historic, in a blending of past and present, whilst hearing pontifications on the Russian soul and its long relationship with Europe.⁶ Sokurov’s impulse here however is towards a continuity in memory and life, towards a healing preservation over Julien’s liberating reassessment.

A glimpse at the unseen life of objects is reflected in the Brothers Quay’s *Phantom Museum* (2002), an insight into Sir Henry Wellcome’s collection of medical curiosities, inanimate objects which have witnessed extraordinary medical practices, exhibited at The British Museum in June 2003. By scouring the British Empire, Wellcome sought to demonstrate ‘by means of objects... the actuality of every notable step in evolution and progress from the first germ of life to the fully developed man of today’. The bizarre collection, which has been intricately catalogued and packaged away, is given dreamlike life by white gloved hands opening museum drawers. Through documentation and re-animation, and intimate attention to the objects’ surface decay and subtleties of character, the Quays position these objects as inscrutable *mementoes vivre*.

Like *Phantom Museum*, many of the films outlined above draw attention to the fact that museums seek to pacify the past by neatly encasing and memorialising it behind glass, yet remain haunting places which can psychologically affect the visitor. In these and many other ways, museums (and films...) offer a paradigm of our world, being shrines which can question truths and received memory, while all the time initiating new visions in the present. ▽

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¹ Although commissioned by the French Ministry of the Army, the film reflects an ambiguous anti-war stance. Franju himself served in the Resistance against the Nazis.

² Narrative film techniques are interestingly intermingled in this film, the romantic couple serving as props to link different sequences.

³ This is a trench song known as *Auprès de Ma Blonde*.

⁴ *Encounters in the Dark*, produced for Associated Television by Leonard Brett in 1958, features Kenneth Clark and Henry Moore visiting the British Museum at dark and looking at sculptures via torchlight, seeing things in them not normally shown in daylight. Here the museum has a life after closing time, history defiantly existing in the dark.

⁵ This is later paid homage to in Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers* (2003), in which the characters are obsessive cineastes.

⁶ The content of this film reflects Sokurov’s *Elegy of a Voyage* (2001), commissioned by the Boijmans Museum.

