



Film, Architecture and Spatial Imagination

Renée Tobe

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FILM, ARCHITECTURE AND SPATIAL IMAGINATION

Films use architecture as visual shorthand to tell viewers everything they need to know about the characters in a short amount of time. Illustrated by a diverse range of films from different eras and cultures, this book investigates the reciprocity between film and architecture. Using a phenomenological approach, it describes how we, the viewers, can learn to read architecture and design in film in order to see the many inherent messages. Architecture's representational capacity contributes to the plausibility or 'reality' possible in film. The book provides an ontological understanding that clarifies and stabilizes the reciprocity of the actual world and a filmic world of illusion and human imagination, thereby shedding light on both film and architecture.

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Introduction

Films use architecture as visual shorthand to tell viewers everything they need to know about the characters in a short amount of time. A single second suffices to portray a room, a place, or landscape; who the characters are, whether good or evil; whether they will advance in the world, or go down; whether or not they will fall in love by the end of the film or suffer heartbreak, anguish, or worse, indifference; whether they will engage with the world, or remain passive observers. Contemporary film viewers recognize a home or place of business, a love interest or a villain through explorations of mimetic representation that often originated in the avant-garde or silent era. While these are codes of representation, they are also haptic responses to fragments that our imaginations create into an image of a whole.

We all see the same thing and yet each of us regards it differently. The world of one person's perception arises from the world required to make a film, the background world from which that film draws, through which it communicates, and the public world that receives it. Each of us sees a fragment of film set as a whole building. Individuals perceive this communication in wildly divergent fashions, based on our separate experiences, yet the shared world enables meaning to be transferred. When viewers watch a film, they have the impression they hear the whole world when in fact they hear only the sounds picked up on the recording and placed there by the director. Film re-enacts praxis (following Aristotle's mimesis of praxis) and by endowing it with structure, film joins the tradition of representation to help us see better. Film forms part of the continuum of the world that provides an arc connecting what is communicated with what is imagined.

We, the viewers, imagine the 'space behind the screen' as if it is real. Images edited together that often show only fragments in themselves become something we feel, see and understand. Our imagination becomes a vehicle of orientation that captures and transforms the image shaped by spatial experience.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The book's principal aim is the description and explanation of this ontological understanding that clarifies and stabilizes the reciprocity of the actual world and a filmic world of illusion and human imagination. For the film to 'work' the background and setting have to appear lived-in as though they have had a life before the film begins. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Martin Heidegger's evocations and descriptions of the reciprocity between ourselves and the world we inhabit explicates how spatiality is understood and experienced. The Heideggerian approach to the notion of 'being' and 'world' reveals being-in-the-world as dependent on those things taken for granted everyday. 'Everydayness' refers not to the literal background in front of which the action takes place, but to the deeper structure of familiarity, the deep background, with which we relate, as to a familiar place.¹ Using a phenomenological approach, this book describes how we, the viewers, can learn how to 'read' architecture and design in film in order to 'see' the many inherent messages. Architecture provides the setting in which film is granted its mimetic closure and integrity. It also contributes to the plausibility or reality possible in film.

Other writings contribute to the knowledge and understanding of architecture in film. Mark Lamster's collection of essays, *Architecture and Film* looks at different aspects of architecture and film together.² Another excellent resource that covers a similar breadth of films to this discussion is Dietrich Neumann's *Film Architecture: Set Designs from Metropolis to Blade Runner*.³ Neumann's essays explain how set design, filmmakers' intentions and narrative come together to create the overall impression of a single film. François Penz and Maureen Thomas's *Cinema and Architecture: Méliès, Mallet-Stevens, Multimedia*, is an excellent collection of essays. It offers exemplary insight into aspects of architecture and film together, and different ways of reading, analyzing, or creating architecture in moving image technology.⁴

Steven Jacobs' publication, *The Wrong House; The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock*, reproduces the architecture of Alfred Hitchcock's films as if the sets were real architecture.⁵ In Hitchcock's films the interweaving between set design and narrative establishes the scene for the enactment of mystery. Another seminal and original interpretation of architecture and its relation to film is Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*.⁶ Bruno's writing presents a personal response to aspects of art, architecture and film and how we interpret them. Discourse on how we interpret film, and understand it from what we see and hear has been deeply influenced by Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*.⁷ Pallasmaa applies a phenomenological approach to how we interpret architecture in film and his book also includes architectural plans and focuses on particular films. Katherine Shonfield's *Walls have feelings: architecture, film, and the city* interprets architecture and film together and covers London in the 1960s in the chapter on *Alfie*.⁸

Jane Barnwell's *Production Design: Architects of the Screen* describes how and why films are made the way they are.⁹ It describes the role of the production designer in

filmmaking. Books such as Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice's, *Cinema and the City*; or Mitchell Schwarzer's *Zoomscape: Architecture in Motion and Media* look at how cities are portrayed in film.¹⁰ While there is some crossover, such as Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's *Manhatta*, or the discussion of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up* that includes an analysis of London, my book differs from those on film and philosophy in that it explains the different and almost invisible means by which we 'read' architecture in film.¹¹ Films such as *Metropolis* or *Blade Runner* are discussed extensively and cleverly in other publications, so while they are seminal in the discussion of architecture and its relation with film, I refer to them here but do not linger on analysis better presented elsewhere.¹² In particular I recommend *Metropolis: BFI Film Classic, 20th Anniversary Edition* by Thomas Elsaesser and *Blade Runner: The Inside Story* by Don Shay.¹³

Films influence other films. For example, German Expressionism impacted on Hitchcock's employment of light and shadow to enhance suspense, and from Hitchcock, film noir, and other influences of sound and light, the surreality of David Lynch ensued. Tropes can be found throughout. For example, the iconic shot of Jack Nicholson's face looking through the door he has just broken through with an axe in *The Shining* appears first in Victor Sjöström's *Phantom Carriage* in 1921.¹⁴ *Metropolis* influenced *Blade Runner*, that in turn influenced Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* and many others.¹⁵

In addition to Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, a variety of philosophers offer insight into how we see or perceive spatiality. This book is organized into chapters, each of which is also an essay explaining particular philosophical notions in the context of specific films or filmmakers, styles of representing architectural themes or diverse films from across genres and eras of filmmaking. Each chapter describes different examples of how to interpret architecture in film. While there is a great deal of crossover of discussion, with some films and concepts appearing in more than one chapter, for clarity of reading the chapters are arranged in approximate chronological order.

Different chapters discuss Plato's parable of the cave, F. G. W. Hegel's master and slave dialectic, Heidegger's notion of 'world' and of the fourfold, Merleau-Ponty's spatial perception, Paul Ricoeur's tripartite mimesis, Gilles Deleuze's movement-image and time-image, and the Japanese concept of *ma*, the space in-between, as well as Siegfried Kracauer's explanation of how film brings forward reality. Our perception of what is 'image' as 'real' is explained through descriptions of Plato's divided line, that takes us through what we see, what is reflected, and fantasy; Aristotle's mimesis of praxis, that brings human experience into representation; Henri Bergson's description of the 'cinematic illusion' that describes the filmic apparatus that includes both the camera and the projector; and Merleau-Ponty's description of the dream, by which we see what feels real but know it to be fantasy. Jean-Luc Nancy's phenomenological description of both 'touch' and 'listening' offers insight into the experience of watching film and how what we see and hear touches our emotions. Jean-Luc Marion's notion of the gift provides a platform for examining what we receive from film.

Other thinkers offer insight into what we perceive symbolically, although these are not mutually exclusive. Rudolph Arnheim writes on visual thinking and

Walter Benjamin elaborates on the image and history. Feminists' description of cinema as language producing meaning, or as a social apparatus of semiotic production, resembles the discourse of psychoanalytic film theories.¹⁶ Judith Butler describes Merleau-Ponty's discussion of body/world duality as nonfeminist and non-gender-specific. She calls for a feminist appropriation but acknowledges that phenomenological reflection allows access to a description of the female body as territory for both exercising impartial juridical power and the partiality of desire. Despite Butler's claim that Merleau-Ponty devalues women by being non-gender specific and assessing only the heterosexual male subject, I return to Merleau-Ponty's original intention, to describe the body as an expressive and dramatic medium.¹⁷ Iris Marion Young offers a phenomenological description of lived-body experience that is gender specific and historicized. Young traces modalities of feminine body comportment, the manner of moving and relation in space.¹⁸

Gilles Deleuze's any-space-whatevers are nonrational links between shots that, like vacant and disconnected spaces, relate to Marc Augé's anonymous spaces, such as waiting rooms for example. Any-space-whatevers remove us temporarily from the place of action, where we are 'elsewhere' in an undefined space and time, that according to Deleuze can also be a black screen, a white screen, or change in colour intensity. The any-space-whatever is an empty or interrupted space which, in film, links any number of narratives.¹⁹ Deleuze's movement-image and time-image respond to philosophical as much as they do filmic discourse.

Alain Badiou, Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Bergson and others explore relations between time, temporality, space, spatiality, and movement as well as perceptual understanding.²⁰ For Bernard Stiegler film is one of the technical constructs we fabricate to make sense of the world around us.

ENTER PLATO'S CAVE OF CINEMATIC DELIGHT

When we watch a film, we suspend our disbelief to get caught up in a world that must be familiar enough to be recognized by us and into which we can situate ourselves in our imaginations. Spatial perception combines with emplotment, or diegesis, to help us connect the visuals into a narrative combining the haptic with the optic through mimesis. There are many tales that engage us with visual gameplay or that enact familiar stories, but it is the situated spatiality that enables us to get lost in these films. This is the role that architecture plays in film. It gives us a 'there' in which to be. Architecture mediates the dialectics of dwelling and remoteness, belonging and estrangement. As Stanley Cavell explains, film acts as a screen on which our hopes and fears are projected, as well as screening us from real aspirations and actual nightmares.²¹ Cavell deliberately plays with the relationship between revealing and concealing inherent in the word 'screen' utilizing the double entendre of the verb (screens) as both filtering it from sight, and presented as a backdrop against which it may be seen and understood. Film disguises or camouflages the given world, while allowing a glimpse into more meaningful aspects of the lives that exist within it. Although film hides given

'reality' and what the viewer sees is illusion, it reveals meaning in the given world, our world.²²

This is the essence of Plato's shadow play. As our focus narrows we both find and lose ourselves in another world. We, the viewer look at the screen, and it is as if we are looking through a window frame, as if the screen is a window that frames another world, and we are in fact looking at the projections on the back of Plato's cave. We move through these screens imperceptibly as we watch a film.

Careful investigation of the nature of the relationship of architecture and its representation in film grants a deeper understanding of how architecture in film illuminates both architecture itself and the culture that produces it. The exchange between the two, architecture and film, is grounded in mimesis. Mimesis stabilizes this dialogue and offers insight into the phenomenon of 'recognition' by which we readily recognize a particular place such as a home, a library, a private or public space, etc. There is an accumulation of culture, knowledge and artefacts we carry within ourselves and bring to the viewing of the film. We look at architecture, recognize it, it looks 'like' things with which we are familiar. We 'see' it 'as if' it is real and the narrative moves us along.

While I examine the conventions and innovations of film, (taking into account formal procedures such as camera movement, framing and editing techniques) my point of departure lies in looking not at how films are fabricated, assembled to bring about a particular message, but at the structure of the meanings created and how these orient the viewer in a world or situation. My interpretation draws upon, but also differs distinctly from, the methodologies of film theory. I look through the screen at what we 'see'; a world we create in our spatial imaginations, fully formed, sensual and dimensional.

In film this making of the set into a 'world' of its own and creating a scene concocted of fragments, is referred to as *mise en scène* and filmmakers whose focus is on this world as *metteurs en scène*. *Mise en scène* includes staging, direction, production. Everyone has a slightly different definition, but agree that it 'establishes a relation to the world'.²³ Some filmmakers build up the scene through carefully cultivated sets based on intense historical and cultural research. Others, such as Jean-Luc Godard, rely on existing cultural references. In Antonioni's *Blow-up*, architecture and sets are used interchangeably as a visual language to play with representation in two-dimensional film, which actually serves to emphasize the vitality

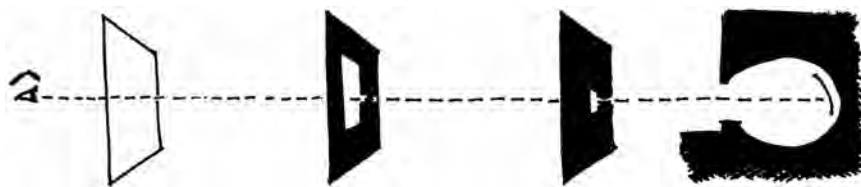


Figure I.1 The cinema resembles Plato's cave. We look at the film screen and it narrows our focus, so that ultimately we see only the perspective of what is projected on the back of the cave (drawn by author).

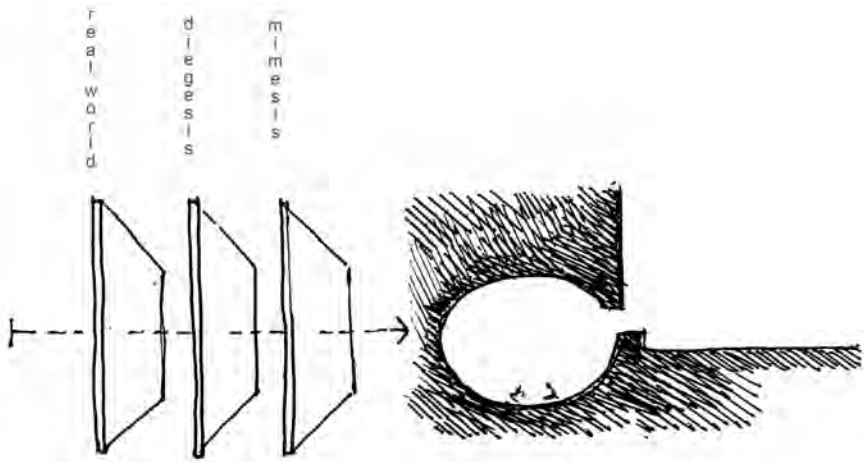


Figure 1.2 Filters of: the world we know; diegesis; and mimesis. Seated around the fire, it is as though we look through architecture (the world we know around us); diegesis (the constructed world created by the filmmaker); and mimesis, (by which what we see resembles what we understand and with which we are familiar). Behind us, high on the wall of the cave, is a mirror that projects the mimetic image onto the screen in front of us (drawn by author).

of 1960s London as both object and subject of representation. In another example from earlier in the same era, Joseph Losey uses London visually in an entirely different manner. Set within Britain's transition from imperial to post-war capitalist culture, *The Servant* involves architecture in a dialogue with itself that brings the viewer on a path first through the open door of an Edwardian house and all it represents, with its butler and gentleman's club décor, and then back onto King's Road in Chelsea, in a full circle.²⁴

The importance of *mise en scène* is that everything within the frame is selected for inclusion by the filmmaker. Framing is an act of design, the decision what to include and what to exclude. Architects are familiar with this kind of decision making. Beyond the obvious function of what architecture communicates, for example shelter, the interpretation discloses the metaphorical and antonymic expressions of enclosure and exposure, protection and imprisonment that form the *mise en scène* (everything in the frame) of place and space in film. The relation of thresholds such as doors or windows, or structures of connections such as stairs, offers insight into the framing of human existence. Filmmakers frame things in diverse ways to convey a different narrative or even a different meaning within the same narrative.

Architectural elements operate on many levels and develop one aspect that gets increasingly embodied into the everyday world where we are deeply situated. The doorway frames us; the stair suggests either ascendance, or descent to hell and the nether regions. The bridge 'bridges' disparate ideas and the city itself is a dynamic ever changing place often best captured in the fluidity of film. Cities offer the chance to show the protagonist in motion, the movement of time during the day, and the city as a constantly evolving reflection of human progress.

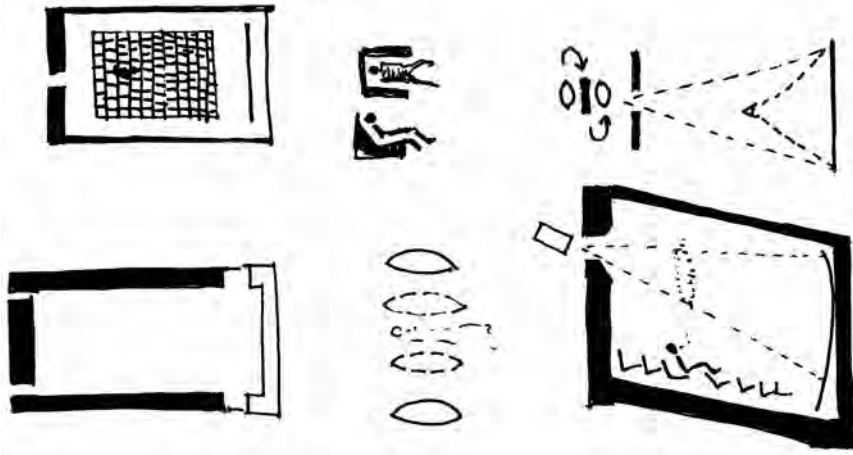


Figure 1.3 Getting cosy in the cave. I replace the cave with a cinema, with lounge seats and sound insulation to exclude the outside world. We take a seat and arrange cushions around us to make ourselves comfortable. We are cut off from all distracting sights and sounds and focus on the images on the screen. Filmic apparatus helps us to focus better on a series of shadow plays or stories (drawn by author).

For example, when a film opens with a landscape scene or a rural setting (often set in or suggestive of the past) it frames the tale so it is almost like a fable. In contrast, if the film opens with the establishing shot (the shot that establishes the locale in which the action will take place) in a city, this positions the story in a contemporary world, of movement, development, complexity. The kind of story that can take place in a peaceful country setting would be entirely different in an urban one.

Suburban settings suggest the 'everyday' and life as bland and repetitive as the streets on which they are set. For example, in a scene from *American Beauty* a teenage boy looks through his suburban window and spies on the teenage girl who lives in the identical suburban house next door. He videos her, with her knowledge, thus creating a movie (within a movie) that gives warmth and meaning to their otherwise disenfranchised lives. Window frames frame their lives, and the frame of the boy's video camera frames them again in a way that gives them meaning. The scene depicts their mutual need to escape the confines of their restricted sameness of suburban life, whereas if the same story happens in Manhattan, it becomes about voyeurism and exhibitionism.

Some films are compelling when made, but lose their 'shine' once the story is told. Others can continue to captivate us on subsequent and repeated viewing. Still others become cultural artefacts or references over time, embedded within historical context and architectural precedent.

In film, as elsewhere, the most originary is the most familiar, the closest, and therefore, the furthest removed, the most deeply hidden. The usual structure: what we see, expect, imagine, the simplest, is the most imperceptible. Film touches us.

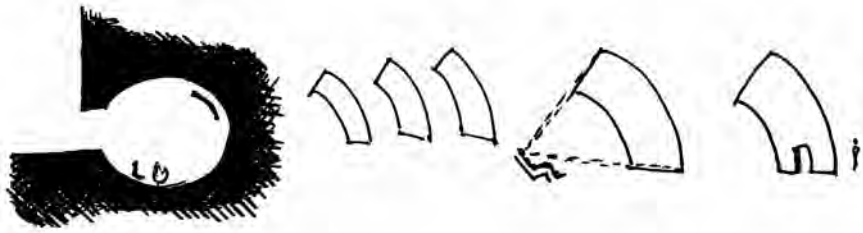


Figure I.4 When we leave the cave we are blinded by reality. Comfortably seated within the cave we see images projected as if they are the whole world, but after, when the film is over, we have to make an effort to 'break' with that reality, and walk out of the cinema where we are blinded by the light (drawn by author).

We do not literally put our finger on it, nor can we always pinpoint that image, thought, dialogue or action that affects us. Yet the camera illuminates: bringing forward a truth. This 'moving' image moves us, or arouses us, as Stiegler suggests.²⁵

For Roland Barthes there is, in a still photograph, a *punctum*, a part of the image, that pokes us and touches us, but in film this is always receding from our view as we try to find it. It is often sentimental, in a manner we would not enjoy in life. As we know, overanalysis can take away the 'feeling' yet the message is just as strong. Architecture is an intrinsic and essential part of that conversation. It tells us much in very little time.

Welcome to Plato's cave

I begin by leading us gently into Plato's cave, explaining how and what it is, and what we do there. While seated comfortably, for I have replaced Plato's chains for comfy cinema sofas and surround sound, we watch some images passing by that tell us the story of cinema, of 'realism', of darkness and light and of architecture, then a something helps lead us out of the cave.

In the cave the two-dimensional screen becomes fully dimensional in our imaginations – we need to be comfortable for this – and then, once we have understood a few things, we step 'through' the screen, and the other side, into a mirror reverse world where we have to look backwards at the raked seats of the cinema, stare the projectionist in the face, and climb back out into the world, the city street. We incorporate what we have seen into our own experiences and return to our own world, enriched and transformed, the 'breaking moment' when one enters the pathway of everyday life.²⁶

The Plato's cave simile elaborates vision and sight, using light as a metaphor for the truth.²⁷ Plato debates whether truth appears to thought as the visual world appears to sight. Plato presents a world of shadow and illusion, where what appears to be real is an allegory for the enlightenment or ignorance of the human condition.²⁸ It is worthwhile here to re-examine Plato's allegory, which asks the reader to visualize an underground chamber. Picture a cave, he begins.

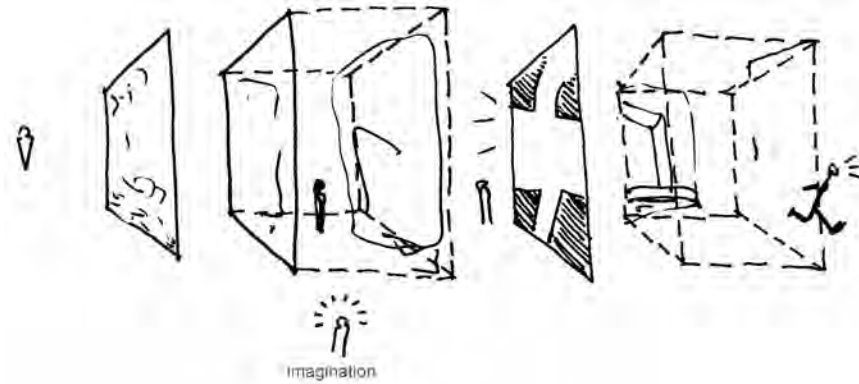


Figure I.5 The two-dimensional screen enriches our spatial imagination. We don't step out of the cave, but into the world of our imagination, fully temporal and spatial, then through the screen and out into the world, onto the path of everyday life that is brighter, noisier, dirtier or else more quiet and mundane (depending on the film) (drawn by author).

The light of a fire some way off shines on passing figures and creates shadows projected on the wall as in a puppet show.²⁹ They play a dual role like the shadow puppets of the Malay peninsula, of entertainer and spirit medium giving outline to beings which do not actually exist, represented in human form in some way distorted.³⁰ Unaware of any other existence, Plato's prisoners believe the shadows they see to be the whole truth and presume the sounds they hear to be emitted from the shadowy figures they see in front of them.³¹

There are two levels of shadows within the cave, those of the prisoners themselves, for they also see their own shadows, and those of the figures passing by, in this case a secondary level of representations. Plato's parable tells us that which we see and believe to be real is only a shadow of the ideal and film takes place within this field. The story of the cave is a drama of human finitude where enlightenment is not reached in one move but through the process of understanding. The reciprocity between light and dark, is that between truth and illusion, with film intermediary between them, both enhancing and obscuring reality. The prisoners' initial state is one of illusion about themselves and the world. The escaped prisoner, at first blinded by the light and reality, gradually adjusts, perceives the various levels of Plato's divided line, first shadows, then reflections, and ultimately questions the nature of objects themselves. When he returns to tell the other prisoners they think him mad, and he is destroyed.

The frequent suggestion that a modern Plato would compare his cave to a cinema, where the film itself is only an image of real things and events in the world outside, approaches the literal but not figurative aspects of the allegory.³² Plato's description refers to the unidentified prisoners undifferentiated one from the other as 'people like us'.³³ The allegory remains unclear as to whether the prisoners, who mistake their own shadows for themselves, see themselves as individuals or have yet to acquire this sense of the self.

In *The Conformist*, Bernardo Bertolucci visually translates the cave metaphor, depicting the prisoners in the cave as prisoners within a given political system; political prisoners of a fascist regime, unwilling or unable to emerge into the brightness of enlightened emancipation.³⁴ Bertolucci begins at the *Ara Pacis* of Caesar Augustus, (an image used again by Peter Greenaway in *Belly of an Architect*).³⁵ The film travels to the EUR, Benito Mussolini's fascist city of progress designed in the 1930s, then crosses from Renaissance Rome on the *Ponte Sant' Angelo* when, with the *Castel Sant' Angelo*, designed and built by the emperor Hadrian as his own mausoleum, framed behind them, Clerici the protagonist and conformist of the title, is nearly hit by a giant and symbolic decapitated head of 'current emperor' Mussolini. It ends in the Colosseum, symbol of ancient, pagan and Imperial Rome.

Bertolucci adapted *The Conformist* from the novel of the same name by Alberto Moravia.³⁶ In 1930s Fascist Italy, after a sequence of scenes in Rome that enact vignettes of conformism and fascism, a man, Clerici, travels to Paris in order to assassinate his old professor, Quadri, who inspires people to think for themselves. Quadri, who has left the cave, lives in Paris, in the light. Paris represents a place where one can speak the truth. The professor has escaped there to escape the fascists who imprisoned and tortured him. In Paris there is not only light but also colour, in particular pastel shades. For example, in Paris Clerici finds a young gypsy woman selling lavender from Parma, Bertolucci's home town.

Bertolucci plainly indicates both Clerici's and his fiancée's contentment in their prison cells when Clerici visits her in her apartment where she lives with her parents. Director of photography Vittorio Storaro created a modernist prison with the blinds, the stripes of the fiancée's dress and the striped lines of light and shadow. Light is used in a sharp way; there is no harmony of shades. Clerici's passive watching and the fiancée's absurd dancing show how complacent one can be when nothing is questioned. In this scene we see the maid, described as 'part of the dowry' on the right and the fiancée with her striped dress on the left, with Clerici, comfortably bedded between them.

Prior to his trip to Paris Clerici visits both his parents, who live separately. The family home where his mother resides represents past grandeur, decadence and decay. The tall iron gate that encloses the house suggests that life within a prison is familiar to him but the posts of the gate are not upright in the film frame. Strange camera angles draw things to our notice, setting up a surreal narrative. The moving camera draws back and the figures come forward through the fallen leaves blowing in the wind. In film, wind is incredibly photogenic.³⁷ It is referent of the spiritual, and of the passage of time. Here, in this scene, introduced by the unusual camera angle to show a world out of balance or the past not yet left behind, the sweeping camera and the movement of the leaves draws our attention to time passing, a twilight world, faded and inevitable.

The contrast of these images with the white rectilinearity of the next scene, in which Clerici visits his father in the lunatic asylum, situates it somewhat outside the everyday, appropriate as a home for those who have lost their reason. Bertolucci casts the cold marble and clinical white rooftop open air theatre of



Figure 1.6 Adalberto Libera's Palace of the Congresses, EUR, Rome, Italy. Individuals walk past, dwarfed by the enormous fascist symbols they carry (*The Conformist*, Bernardo Bertolucci, 1973).

Adalberto Libera's Palace of the Congresses in the EUR as a madhouse. The use of Libera's Palace of the Congresses suggest the madness of the EUR itself. Even if we 'see' the building with which we are familiar we are carried away to see this as a place of insanity, and this affects how we continue to perceive this building.

The interior of Libera's building becomes, in the film, the location for the Ministry of the Interior where individuals walk past, dwarfed by the giant fascist symbols they carry, which emphasize the theatricality, the artifice, of both the fascist regime and the architecture itself. Sent to meet the minister, Clerici, always the interloper, spies on him from behind a very theatrical curtain. With him, we sneak a look and find the minister in a sensual embrace with a woman. A few minutes later, when Clerici makes his official entrance to the minister we approach slowly, reluctantly as, like Clerici, we feel differently about entering this grand room. Its intended grandeur has been transgressed by our peepshow view into it as place of sexual congress.

In addition to confusing us with places (the Palace of the Congresses as a madhouse) Bertolucci elides the characters. The woman on the desk with the minister appears later at an actual brothel that is situated at the border between Italy and France (the mediating zone) and again in the apartment in Paris, where, despite being cast as quite a different character, the wife of Quadri, she is played by the same actor, Dominique Sanda. We see Sanda twice in different personas (in a brothel and making out on the desk of the minister) before we 'meet' her in Paris. She is both the political and the sexual. This uncertainty confuses us – is it the same woman? didn't we see her before? – and makes her role less real, and therefore the ambiguity and transgressive sexuality more real. Quadri's wife contrasts with Clerici's fiancée, described as: good in the kitchen and good in bed and who represents old time values, the normalcy to which he aspires.