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Park Avenue & East 53rd Street

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Abstract

Park Avenue & East 53rd Street is a film about the Seagram Building and a New York City street corner on which it stands. It features a voice over by Asheq Akhtar, camera by Tom Lecky, synthesizer improvisations by Ben Edwards (aka Bengie), and archival footage from the film Birth of a Building (provided by the Hagley Museum and Library). Drawing primarily on the geographer Doreen Massey's theoretical work on space, Park Avenue & East 53rd Street is an experimental, poetic attempt to use digital video and sound to explore the ways in which a specific urban location might develop a character (or characters) – through a process of 'becoming' – that could not have been imagined by architects and planners. The film also seeks to examine how far representations might affect the identity or even the life of an urban space. The film asks: what are the potential 'uses' or 'potentials' or 'experiences' of architectural spaces, as opposed to their original plans and design intentions? Employing contemporary iPhone footage of a street corner by the Seagram Building in New York City (a celebrated corporate architectural structure emblematic of modernity and US capitalism), alongside stock documentary footage of this building being constructed in the late 1950s, Park Avenue & East 53rd Street uses a voice-over to examine links between personal memory, nostalgia and loss, but also poetry, visual representations, architectural design, history, and the everyday rhythms of an urban place. By writing the voice-over/voice-off to be performed in a variety of modes of delivery – such as personal reminiscence, dialogue, academic lecture, omniscient expository narrator (direct address) – and mixing this voice with an evocative synthesizer soundtrack that serves to evoke the rhythms of the modern city as industrial complex – the film becomes a meditation on how far specific places in cities might be understood to be in a process of 'becoming' (Massey), and how representations can facilitate this 'becoming'.

Research Statement

The geographer Doreen Massey once asked 'Can we rethink our sense of place? Is it not possible for a sense of place to be progressive; not self-enclosing and defensive, but outward-looking?' (1994: 147) In conceptualising such a new, progressive sense of place in the contemporary world, Massey argued that instead of thinking about places as enclosed, grounded areas defined by boundaries, 'they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings' (1994: 154). In her book *For Space* (2005), Massey also raised the question: 'What if we open up the imagination of the single narrative to give space (literally) for a multiplicity of trajectories?' (2005: 5) Thus, in its simultaneous temporality, space for Massey might always be in a process of 'becoming'; of being made. If one follows this logic, the same can be said for buildings and streets. Architectural structures are always 'becoming', and can open up space for multiple trajectories. Drawing primarily

on Massey's theoretical work on space and place, *Park Avenue & East 53rd Street* is an experimental, poetic attempt to use digital video and sound to explore the ways in which a specific urban location and architectural structure that informs this location might develop a character (or characters) through a process of 'becoming' which could never have been imagined by architects and planners. Linked to this, the film aims to examine how far a system or history representations might affect the identity or imagined life of an urban space or a specific building. By doing this, the film asks: what are the 'potentials' or 'potential experiences' of architectural spaces, as opposed to their original plans and design intentions? And how are these potentials – more accurately, spatial potentials – related to the ontologies of the specific places concerned? As well as Massey, the film cites via the voice-over the critical and theoretical work of writers such as Kevin Lynch, Georges Perec, Steen Eiler Rasmussen and William Whyte. Employing contemporary iPhone footage of a Park Avenue street corner by the Seagram Building in New York City (shot by the American artist Tom Lecky during the COVID-19 pandemic), interwoven with stock documentary footage of this building being constructed in the late 1950s, the film *Park Avenue & East 53rd Street* uses a voice-over (performed by the actor Asheq Akhtar) to examine links between personal memory, nostalgia and loss, poetry (e.g. Frank O'Hara), cinema (e.g. *The Best of Everything*), photography, architectural design, history, and the quotidian rhythms of a distinct urban place at one specific moment in 2020.

Voiceover and Spatiality

For Bill Nichols, in the mode of 'direct address' often seen in documentary films, the male voice-over is 'overwhelmingly didactic' in its domination of the visual (1988: 48). The traditional expository mode of direct address relies on proximity between text and image: the words explicate the visuals, telling the spectator how he or she should interpret them; the potential for secondary, connotative meaning is limited. A crucial component of such an 'unproblematic' narration has traditionally been held to be the masculinity of the 'voice of God', the traditional tones of authority and universality (Bruzzi 2000: 57). Writers such as Michel Chion and Mary Ann Doane have considered film voice-overs as 'disembodied' phenomena. In my work (2016) on the function of the voice in Patrick Keiller's film *Robinson in Ruins* I argue that through a combination of omniscient authority, self-reflexive irony, and the mannered vocal performance of the role of a fictional character, Vanessa Redgrave's voice-over evokes an uncontainable presence. I demonstrate that the fluid play of presence and absence in Redgrave's disembodied voice-over - but also the grain of her voice (Barthes 1977), its performative qualities, and its display of traces of an enduring star persona – informs the free and open concept of place and spatiality that the film explores and articulates. What primarily interested me about Redgrave's performance in this film, but also the voice-overs provided by Paul Schofield in the earlier Keiller 'Robinson' films *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997), is the fact that these voices create interestingly rich spatial effects. I wanted to experiment with the ways in which the aesthetic device of a performed voice-over might help us to better understand the ontology of architectural structures and nodes in cities within the contexts of human experience, memory and imagination.

Phonotopes as Architectural Structures

The sonic space I call a 'phonotope' (the prefix 'phono' deriving from the Greek word for 'sound', but also suggesting 'speech' or 'voice') can be best understood as an audio-visual redevelopment of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the literary chronotope, specifically pertaining to the potentially spatial effects and functions of the human voice. For Bakhtin, a chronotope is a 'time-space'. (1981: 84) I have argued elsewhere (2010 and 2016) that a phonotope can be best understood as a 'voice-space' which temporally informs and structures the spatial imaginary and, as it does this, transcends material, 'real' spaces represented by the images in a film. In other words, phonotopes are filmic time-spaces in which voices develop a temporal dialogue between 'real' places, places represented in images on screen, and places that are described by these voices but that remain unseen and off-screen. I see phonotopes very much as a geographically spatial phenomenon, not just as a means of describing how a space impacts on sound. Rather, a phonotope might be understood as a conceptual voice/space that can allow a spectator/listener to imagine and subsequently describe specific landscapes or territories suggested by vocal performances. Because phonotopes can reorganise, reimagine and restructure our experience of material reality they can effectively become architectural.

The plan for *Park Avenue & East 53rd Street* was to develop an architectural phonotope through a voice-over performance influenced by the work of Sarah Turner, Chris Marker and Patrick Keiller, whereby the voice is not to be yoked to a singular mode of address, documentary or otherwise. I encouraged a heterogeneous, multi-generic performance from the actor Asheq Akhtar in which his voice ultimately floats free of interiority and exteriority, omniscience, characterisation, persona, individual expression, and, as such, generic expectation, but also, importantly, the precise grounded location in the city shot in the film.

The shifting mode of vocal address in the film – moving quickly between hesitancy to knowing irony to authority – is designed to lend Akhtar's voice (or the voice of an unnamed character) a fluid sense of enunciation. In its constant shifting between describing and departing from the image, and in its shifts in performative style, this voice assumes an open, unlocated, or 'unenclosed' status. As such, Akhtar's voice-over becomes a strategic aesthetic device that facilitates the exploration of architectural spatiality. It develops a boundless, uncontainable phonotope; a 'voice-space' which temporally informs and structures the architectural and spatial imaginary and, as it does this, restructures the material, 'real' spaces represented by the images. This phonotope suggests, in aesthetic terms, the 'multiplicity of trajectories' that Massey calls for in her spatial theory, thereby invoking and articulating a process 'becoming' through film and film sound.

Groundedness and Photogénie

At the same time, the film explores and critiques the concept of 'groundedness'. Arif Dirlik advocates that 'Place as metaphor suggests groundedness from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extra local, all the way to the global.' (2011: 57). The film employs the recurring and central symbolic device of a brass manhole situated on the sidewalk below the Seagram building on Park Avenue to work through and critique some of the interesting tensions evident in Dirlik's conceptualisation of grounded place. For example, Dirlik argues: 'This is where ecological and indigenous conceptions of place have some crucial insights to contribute by bringing nature into the conceptualization of place. The ecological conception insists that an important aspect of the concept of place is its groundedness in topography.' (55) The island of Manhattan, which through its massive development since the nineteenth century has of course come to disguise much of its natural topography and ecology, nevertheless is not entirely spatially divorced from (or alien) to the topographical and ecological aspects of its specific grounded location. By focusing on the manhole cover at Park Avenue and E53 Street, the film plays with and explores the essential absence that informs this location's relationship to the natural topography and ecology of the ground on which it has been constructed, while also playfully drawing the gaze of the viewer away from the celebrated, monumental Seagram building (designed by Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson) and through a poetic process of the 'making-strange' of an aspect of the location which would usually be unnoticed. Here I drew on the Russian formalist concept of *ostranenie*, and Jean Epstein's notion (or interpretation) of the concept of *photogénie* (see Farmer 2010). For Daniel Frampton: 'the concept of *photogénie* [is] that sublime, indefinable, ineffable quality given by film to the objects and people within it (and found most readily in close-ups and slow-motion).' (2006: 52) However, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell advocate that 'photogénie is created by the properties of the camera: framing isolates objects from their environment, black-and-white film stock further transforms their appearance, special optical effects further change them, and so on. By such means [...] the cinema gives us access to a realm beyond everyday experience' (2003: 91). And Richard Abel states that *photogénie* 'assumed that the 'real' was transformed by the camera/screen, which, without eliminating that 'realness', changed it into something radically new [...] the effect of *photogénie* was singular: to make us see ordinary things as they had never been seen before.' (1988: 110) Through the repetition of close-up images of the manhole cover, the aim with my film was to develop *photogénie* as a spatial device, which it is hoped helps to articulate and develop the potential of new spatial awareness of this locale in New York City. In this way, a quotidian street object is shown to be connected, through poetic language, to wider, global, atomic and/or universal forms of spatiality.

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