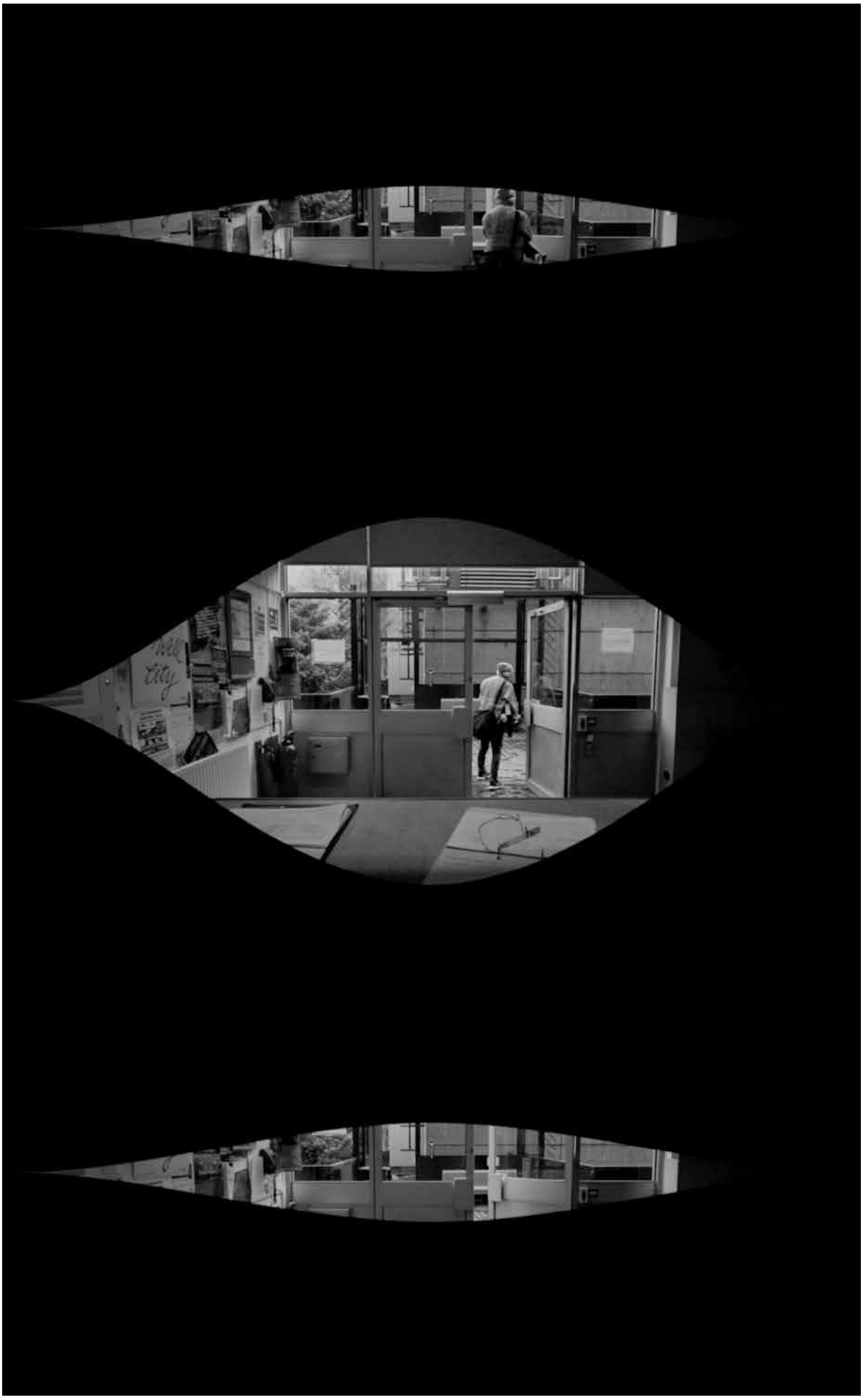


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Three projects that connect film and architecture are discussed with the aim of defining the 'architectural essay film': a genre between architectural design and filmmaking, theory and practice.

The architectural essay film

Penelope Haralambidou

Darkness is marked by the sound of a single piano note.[1] On the next note, the image of a figure in front of a piano appears, her fingers pressing the keys and fading back to darkness. A female voice punctuates the void while the darkness opens up, like the blinking of a large Cyclopean eye, with a view of the entrance to a building [1]. Another blink and the view shifts to the exterior scanning the building upwards while dusk settles. All the while the voice ponders:

> ***Why am I so unloved just because of who I am? There remains a part of me that is happy in my isolation. I am different form the others, but is that such a bad thing? I observe different types of bodies here: working bodies, talking bodies, drinking bodies, criminal bodies, loving bodies*** **[…]** ***Some bodies I see more than others. Some seem to come and go with such frequency that sometimes I feel like a stranger within these walls.***[2]

Is the building talking to us?

Starting from white, a circle draws itself in the middle of the screen.[3] Dashed lines emerge from its centre and expand outwards. More lines begin to mark a territory, where vertical planes arise and concentric horizontal surfaces slide clockwise. Soon after, the territory that the lines and planes have established starts to get populated by an abundance of architectural, figurative, and mechanical symbols: a Doric column, a pediment, a shark, a horse, a car, a man. Is that a pig? [2] Moulded out of digital glossy matter, some static, but most in motion, the symbols proliferate and set themselves in orbits. Neoclassical architectural features in grey/white but often also lacquered in the colours of digital printing – magenta, cyan, yellow, and black – coalesce and delineate a surreal world, a collage of figures and architecture, in suspension.

At the back of the gallery, in the middle of a darkened space, fragments of a black and white film flicker on a table. Small paper screens, strategically positioned on the surface of the table, catch the light from a projector placed directly in front of it.[4] Each screen presents a different scene: one catches the last moment of a theatre play in a loop; another presents sliding corridor and ceiling views of a highly embellished Baroque edifice; a frozen view of an ornamental garden falls on the surface of the table; while pawn-like wooden blocks present close-ups of the three protagonists: A, X, and M [3]. Light seeps through this paper model portraying a grand hotel, allowing the moments captured in its 'rooms' to be seen from the back; a slight air movement caused by my presence in the space gently flickers one of the screens. One by one, the rooms fade to black and the gallery is plunged into darkness before starting all over again.

According to German filmmaker Wim Wenders, there are obvious overlaps between the work of film directors and that of architects: they both have the same obsession with 'a sense of place'. However, Wenders warns that a 'certain modesty' is required from filmmakers when they compare themselves to architects because 'buildings are very real, after all, and they really determine and condition people's lives. Films sometimes form people's visions and dreams, but don't have such an immediate impact on their reality. Or am I wrong?'[5]

In this article I will present three projects – *Agit-Prop* (2014) by Liam Davis, *Wates House* (2014) by Daniel Cotton, and my project *Déjà vu* (2009) – which combine techniques and tropes from film and architecture as a means for reflection and commentary, but also as a propositional technique, in architectural design.[6]

The three projects exploit recent advancements in digital technology, which have deeply transformed the production of both film and architecture. These advancements have allowed groundbreaking, if not hasty, changes in the way that architecture is not only constructed, but also designed and conceived. In contrast, however, to the extensive use of computational design to interrogate the formal, material, and structural possibilities of built architecture, I will focus on how new time-based media – combined with computer-generated imagery – might unlock the storytelling and affective, but also political and philosophical, potential of architectural thinking.

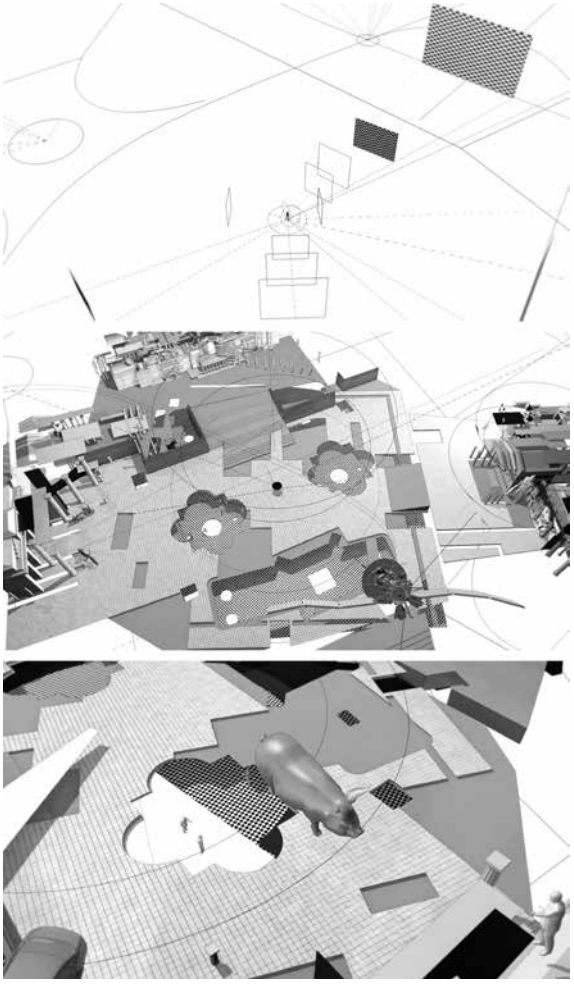
By imagining and describing space in time, all three projects question and push the boundaries of architectural representation: *Agit-Prop* casts the

1 Daniel Cotton, *Wates House* (2014). Film stills from opening sequence with Wates' blinking 'eye'.

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traditional tools of the line and plane into a dynamic environment of colliding symbols; *Wates House* redraws the building it observes onto its own walls through projection mapping; and *Déjà vu* deconstructs the audience's relationship with the screen and the linear structure of time in cinema, by restaging a film onto an architectural model.



2

Furthermore, I will focus on the way the three projects: reveal architecture's relationship with memory, in symbolic, affective, and structural terms; complicate the idea of site; and merge film attributes, such as editing, continuity and montage, with architectural representation attributes, thus proposing film as architectural drawing.

Avoiding a focus on technology, the article will attempt to define the paradigm shift that new digital time-based media afford by drawing a comparison between the three projects and the 'essay film' genre.[7] Originally coined by the German artist Hans Richter in the 1940s, the term 'essay film' describes an intimate, allusive, and idiosyncratic genre at the margins between fiction and documentary.[8] Richter poignantly suggests that the essay film makes the invisible world of thoughts and ideas visible on the screen; it produces complex thought-reflections that are not necessarily bound to reality, but can also be contradictory, irrational, and fantastical.

By analysing *Agit-Prop*, *Wates House*, and *Déjà vu* in comparison, but also in contrast, to historical and contemporary examples of essay films that focus on architecture, I propose a hybrid genre that lies at the boundaries between architectural design, theory and film, what I call: the 'architectural essay film'.

Essay film

In the last few years there has been a burst of interest in the 'essay film', a genre that sits somewhere between documentary and fiction and, as all its advocates agree, is very difficult to define.

Professor of Cinema Studies, Timothy Corrigan, in *The Essay Film: From Montaigne After Marker* suggests that the form should not be seen as a new genre but a continuation of the tradition of the literary essay, starting with Michel de Montaigne through Jorge Louis Borges, Aldous Huxley and Roland Barthes.[9] Admitting that it is difficult to give a single definition of the essay film, he



3

2 Liam Davis, *Agit-Prop* (2015). Selected film stills from the opening sequence.

3 Penelope Haralambidou, *Déjà vu* (2009). Close-up of the arrangement of the screens on the table.

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suggests that this literary legacy formulates its distinctive terms: it is a form that stretches between an 'abstracted and exaggerated representation of the self (in language and image) and an experiential world encountered and acquired through the discourse of thinking out loud'.[10] In Jean-Luc Godard's words, the essay film is 'form that thinks and thought that forms'.[11]

Writing for *Thought in Action: The Art of the Essay Film,* a season of screenings at BFI Southbank, film critic Kieron Corless suggests that the essay film 'signals and probes, like no other form of cinema, the filmmaker's personal relationship to the images on screen'. By tackling urgent political and philosophical issues of the day, the essay film is 'cinema at its most engaged and liberated'.[12]

In 'The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments', Professor of film and screen media, Laura Rascaroli, asserts that the main 'primary markers' of the essay film form are 'reflectivity and subjectivity' but also 'heresy and openness'.[13] She suggests that essay films can be 'informal, skeptical, diverse, disjunctive, paradoxical, contradictory, heretical, open, free, and formless' and urges that 'we must resist the temptation of overtheorizing the form or, worse, crystallizing it into a genre'.[14] Categorising work under the genre of the essay film can be problematic, but for the purposes of this article, I will go even further to suggest what might be described as a subgenre: essay films that more specifically focus on urban or architectural design subject matter, which I call 'architectural essay films'.

Questioning and probing, but often also deeply infatuated by, the cities and buildings they portray, these films are wide-ranging historically and geographically, for instance: *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by Dziga Vertov; *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) by Alain Resnais; *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997) by Patrick Keiller; *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) by Thom Andersen; *If Buildings Could Talk* (2010) and *Cathedrals of Culture* (2014) by Wim Wenders; and *Koolhaas Houselife* (2013), *Barbicania* (2014) and *Infinite Happiness* (2015) by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, to name but a few.

Despite the recent exposure of essay films and although some of the directors above have either trained as architects – Patrick Keiller and Ila Bêka – or have long-term interest in architecture – Wenders and Andersen – there has been no attempt to link these with recent moving image design explorations in architecture.[15]

Developments in digital technology have brought on a revolution in technical drawing creating powerful tools for architects. By adding the dimension of time to their already sophisticated drawing skills, architects can explore the storytelling potential of architecture and start flirting with the world of filmmaking. Davis and Cotton were students in the MArch Unit 24 at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, which I teach with Simon Kennedy and Michael Tite. The unit focuses on the relationship between film and architecture.[16] Created in an academic environment, the projects that I am going to present here also share a speculative, self-reflective, and boundary-breaking approach, which comfortably places them in the essayist tradition.

Davis's *Agit-Prop* aims to portray social and political conflict in urban public spaces through a hybrid computer-generated animation that translates cinematic montage into architectural drawing. The film traces the design and production of a dialectic structure, a modern tower of Babel, constructed from the clash of cultural icons to incite strong emotional associations through a process of 'superimposition and superadjacency'.[17] In Cotton's *Wates House*, a building narrates its own life story in a short film that explores the multifarious nature of our lived-in spaces and comments on the role of memory in our experience of architecture. Projection-mapped animations uncover hidden narratives – drawn from material collected through interviews with its inhabitants – and replay on the walls of soon-to-be-demolished Wates House.[18] My project *Déjà vu* is an artefact, which performs a critical analysis of Alain Resnais's enigmatic film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). The original film is based on a screenplay by Alain Robbe-Grillet and takes place in a labyrinthine Baroque hotel. *Déjà vu* is an abstract paper model of the cinematic hotel designed to receive the projection of my digital reworking of selected scenes, thus 'redrawing' the original film in space.[19]

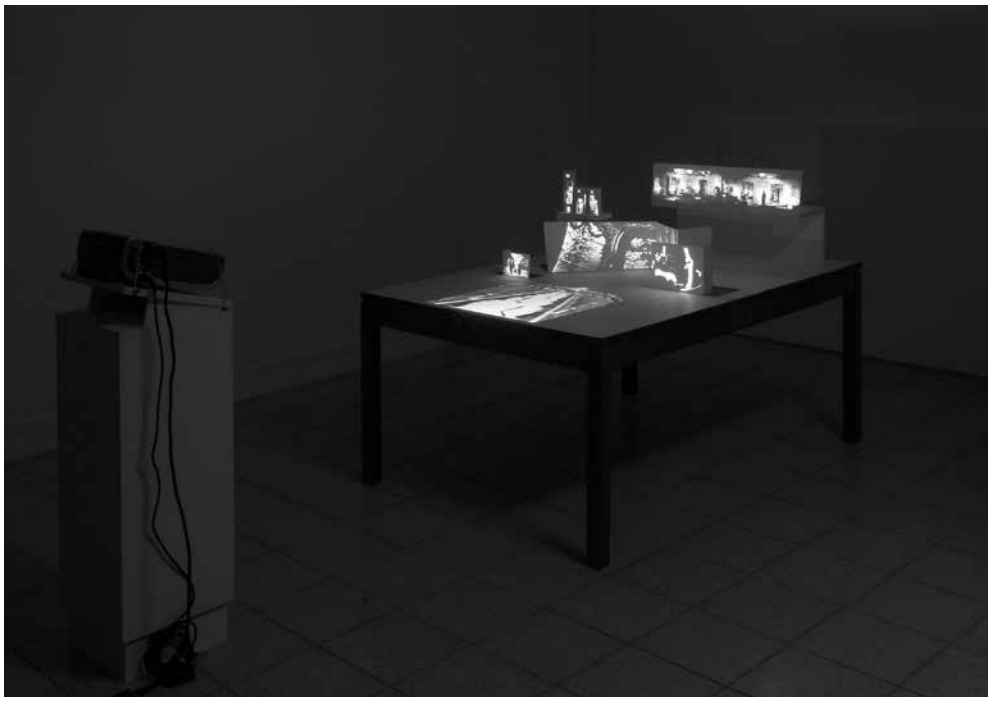
Beyond the clear disciplinary divide – all of the architectural essay films by Vertov, Resnais Wenders, Bêka and Lemoine have been produced through film distribution channels, while *Agit-Prop*, *Wates House*, and *Déjà vu* are experimental and research-driven architectural projects produced in academia – I believe that the films share important traits and can all be seen as 'architectural essay films'. One significant difference between the two groups of films is that the former are composed by largely camera-produced imagery, whereas the latter combine digital technology with camera work to create the worlds they portray.[20]

Constructing memory

Irrespective of their subject matter, essay films show a strong predilection towards introspection. Like their literary counterparts in prose, essayist directors use film to project their personal reflections and reveries. As if the camera has turned around, and is now recording the residue that film leaves in the mind, rather than the image of the world outside, essayist films often become elegies of the nature and structure of memory.

The French photographer, documentary film director, and multimedia artist Chris Marker is widely considered to be the quintessential film essayist.[21] Most of his work, including the cult films *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sans Soleil* (1983), are meditations on the nature of human memory. *Sans Soleil* takes the form of a travelogue accompanied by a female voice reading letters by a fictional director – Marker's alter ego. The camera steals moments of people's expressions and gestures, closely observes the texture of urban and natural habitats, records the choreography of rituals and splices them together in an open narrative that links

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4a



4b

4 a + b Penelope Haralambidou, *Déjà vu* (2009). Installation with and without projection.

5 Penelope Haralambidou, *Déjà vu* (2009). The layers of past, present, and desire/imagination arranged in accordance to focal length.

geographically disparate locations from Tokyo to Guinea-Bissau. The film explicitly probes the influence of film in the construction of memories and how this affects the perception of personal, communal and global histories:

> *He liked the fragility of those moments suspended in time. Those memories whose only function had been to leave behind nothing but memories.*
>
> *I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember; we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten. How can one remember thirst?*[22]

Later in the film the narrator describes the role of filmed moments:

> *They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory. I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape. How has mankind managed to remember?*

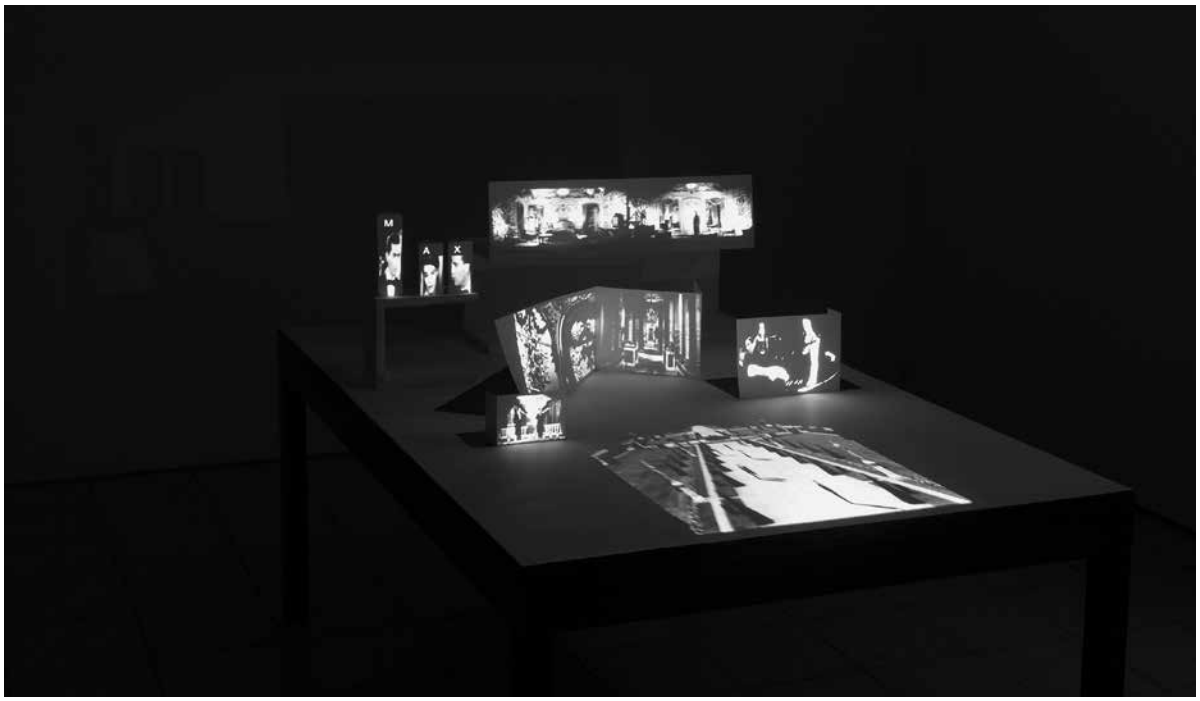
Essay films often ponder on the structure of memory, its symbolism and affective qualities, perhaps because film records and replays the present in ways we recognise as similar to human memory. In architectural essay films the reflective and introspective attitude of the director is reflected on the architecture, revealing a link between our perception of the built environment and the structure of intellectual processes. The affective qualities of film reveal how our everyday experience of built architecture sculpts our inner intellectual faculty, partly in its image.

Constructing memory as architecture has early roots in ancient mnemonic techniques. In what was known as mnemotechnics, or 'art of memory', a poet or orator used to translate an oral text into a system of images, words into figures or objects, sentences into rooms and the whole text into a building, binding together the separate parts of the narration spatially. Imaginary architecture was constructed to link ideas that might otherwise float disconnected and lose their meaning, or dissolve into oblivion.[23] In *Art of Memory*, Frances Yates establishes a link between the technique and the origins of modern theatre, which can be extended to its successor: cinema.[24]

An architectural essay film that explicitly links the preservation of human memory to architecture is *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) by Alain Resnais. The film has been seen as an essay on the human need to preserve memory and knowledge taking the guise of a short documentary on the old national library in Paris. Starting at the dark basement of the library amongst old books, the camera slides and remotely caresses the surfaces of the building: 'With Resnais's probing, mobile camerawork and a commentary by French writer Remo Forlani, *Toute la mémoire du monde* transforms the library into a mysterious labyrinth, something between an edifice and an organism: part brain and part tomb.'[25]

Resnais's celebrated *Last Year at Marienbad*, which is the subject matter of *Déjà vu*, also takes as its central theme the link between memory and architecture.[26] The plot interweaves around the lost, or perhaps

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supressed memory of an amorous encounter that allegedly has taken place the year before. Architecture, in the form of a grand Baroque hotel, becomes both the labyrinth within which the memory is lost and the backdrop on which it is reconstructed. Repetitions combined with the fractured timeline and enigmatic plot produce an effect equivalent to a collage or a cubist painting. The screenplay's lack of chronological indications led the script supervisor Sylvette Baudrot to draw an elaborate graph that organises the film sequences on an X and Y axis in relation to change of set but also time.[27]

In *Déjà vu*, a diagrammatic delineation of time exists in the arrangement of the folded paper screens in relation to the projector's focal range. In cinema, the vertical surface of the projection screen coincides with the sharpest focus, but in *Déjà vu* the projection is designed to fall at an angle and span the whole horizontal surface of the table *[4a-b]*. Placed in different locations within the focal range, the paper screens interrupt the projection pyramid in and out of focus. The selected scenes of 'the present' – the scanning of the embellished ceilings and views of lavish corridors – are in the middle of the table where the projection is in sharp focus. Scenes belonging to the past, 'last year', or the future, 'desire', – for instance the timeless garden scene and the mysterious bedroom scene – appear slightly out of focus at the back and front of the table. Belonging to memory or imagination, these scenes are blurred compared to the sharpness of the present *[5]*.

Furthermore in my reworking of the key bedroom scene, the room appears as a stark interior bathed in a blinding white light, but gradually the walls 'blossom' into a suffocating, complex, flowery pattern. In *Déjà vu* my digital reworking of the bedroom scene accentuates the blossoming of the architectural ornamentation, which I see as the signifier of the budding desire and the force that opens up, or unfolds, a repressed – or newly constructed and, therefore, false – recollection.[28] As Ro Spankie has suggested in her review of the exhibition of *Déjà vu* at London Gallery West, the resulting installation strangely both 'deconstructs the film yet re-constructs its sense of déjà vu'.[29]

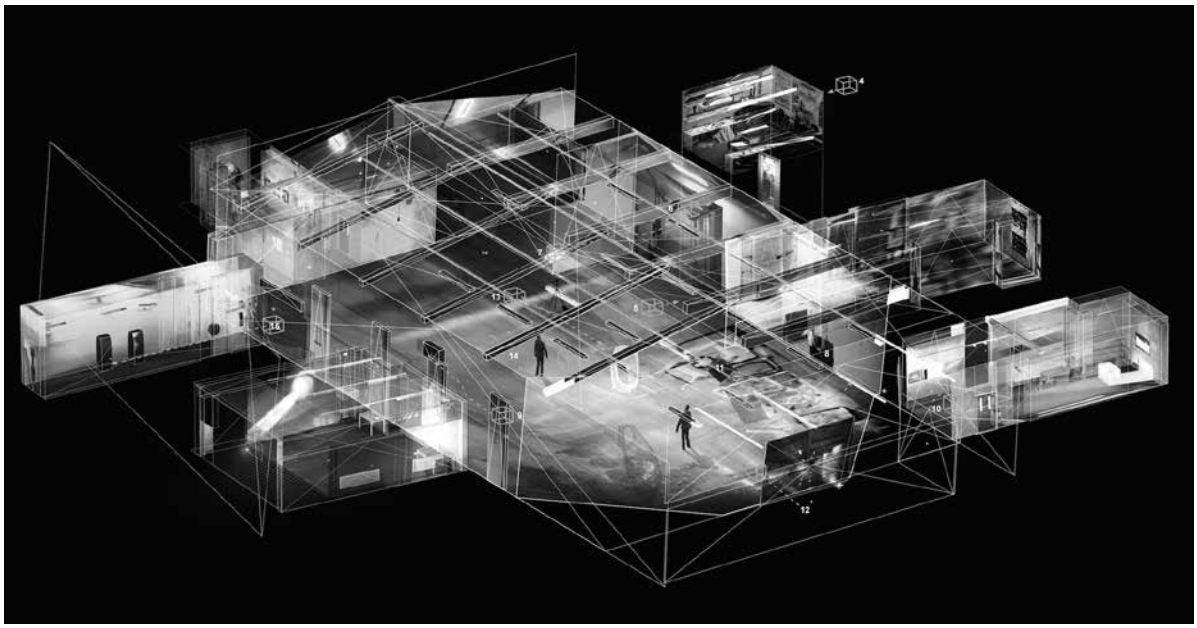
According to Cotton, 'projection involves an overlaying of information – the projection of light upon a surface or the projection of ideas upon a space. Our lived-in spaces are similarly layered constructions, a hybrid of present, past, and future projections, real and imagined. The many lives and histories that animate the surfaces and spaces of buildings we inhabit contribute to our experience in ways that, while less tangible, are no less powerful than the materials with which they are constructed'.[30] During 2014, Wates House, which used to be the home to the Bartlett Schools of Architecture and Planning, UCL, was due to be part-demolished and refurbished. Recognising this as a significant moment in the building's life, Cotton's film, *Wates House*, attempts to offer 'a unique perspective on the life cycle of the building and draws attention to the role of memory in our experience of space'.

Embarking on an ambitious process of collecting 'memories' of the building through interviews with current and past students, members of staff and workers, Cotton gathered intimate stories and narrated events, which informed his dissertation and became the raw material inspiring the scenes of his film. Through projection mapping he was able to record, digitally manipulate and project the building onto itself. Wates, the female persona in *Wates House* whispers:

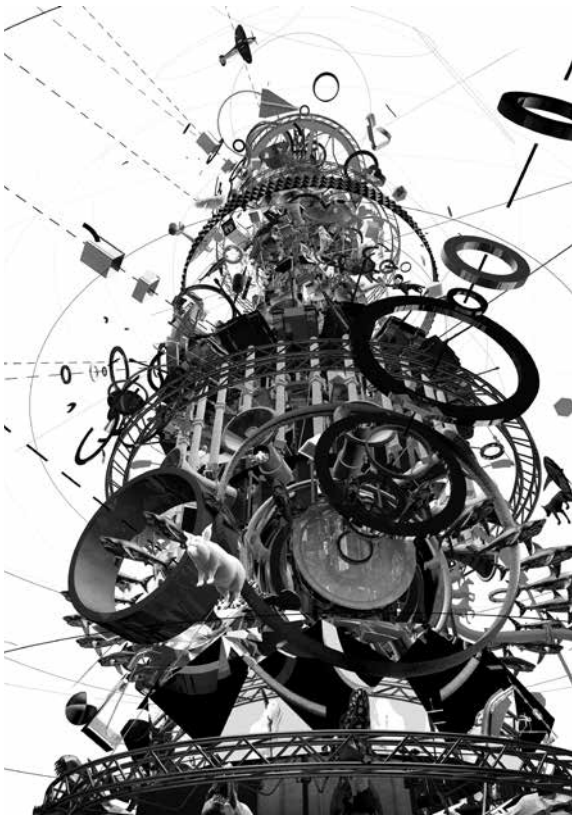
> *'My rooms are full of memories* [...] *I keep them here in this space that no one knows. There is nothing that is lost in this building* [...]'.[31]

To convey the idea that Wates House is collecting and

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7

6 Daniel Cotton, *Wates House* (2014). Spatio-temporal drawing showing the arrangement of the fictional, hidden memory vault of Wates House, which was filmed in a warehouse in Hackney.

7 Liam Davis, *Agit-Prop* (2015). The tower of discontent.

storing memories, Cotton proposed a fictional third space, compressed and hidden in the core of the building *[6]*. Filming this notional space took place in an empty warehouse in Hackney. In the film this secret space is discovered by accident: two students walk along a corridor when they unintentionally step out of the screen and find themselves within this uncanny realm of the building's hidden memories. Recollections appear in the form of deep projections lining the walls, like open windows to the inner life of the building. The cacophony of the superimposed voices in Cotton's recorded interviews fills the space while spectres of memorable objects mentioned in the interviewees' accounts hover overhead.

Davis's imaginary architectural construct becomes a repository of objects linked to ideas, meanings, and narratives that connect us to and create a sense of place: a digital mnemotechnics. In *Agit-Prop*, the residue of our experience of public space is portrayed as a whirlwind of symbols. These symbols are fleshed out as three-dimensional, rendered figures in motion, often crashing onto one another or the architectural structures that frame, generate, and support them. The figures are symbolic of the memories, desires, and histories shaping the sites in opposition to the symbolism carried on the surface of the buildings delineating the sites. Davis assembles his collaged art of memory locus with the purpose of constructing his rhetorical architecture of conflict and provocation.

The figures, set in menacing orbits, accumulate in ever-mounting speeds and ever-rising trajectories, gradually forming a tower of discontent *[7]*. Unlike the ancient architectural loci safeguarding the structure of a speech in the art of memory, in *Agit-Prop* clear meaning is scrambled and the rising architecture, split by the meandering eye of the camera and multiplied kaleidoscopically in its inner surface, resembles a tower of Babel doomed to collapse. Davis's film comments on the lack of stability of images, symbols, and their supporting architectural structures.

Losing site

Wenders works 'from a sense of place'.[32] He strongly believes that places have stories to tell: 'if you are in a place for a while and if you are able to listen, you will

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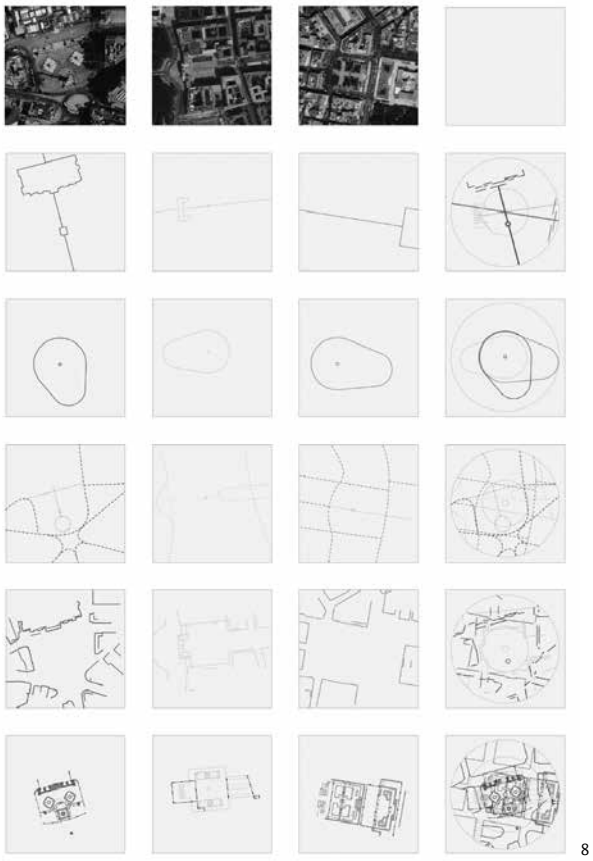
hear the place's story'. Invited by SANAA to develop an installation, or a film, about their Rolex Learning Center, Wenders decided to turn architecture into the main protagonist. Entitled *If Buildings Could Talk...* the film was shot in 3-D accentuating the supple curves of this architectural landscape and creating an immersive experience; it was really important for Wenders that the viewers really feel as if they are walking inside the building. The poetic monologue read by the building herself explains that she learnt to speak from the books in the library.[33] This sense of place is what Wenders recognises as a common fascination between architects and filmmakers.

Unlike Wenders and through montage, Vertov's work obfuscates the singularity of place in film. Widely acknowledged as an archetype of the essay film, Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* is a recording of citizens interacting with the machinery of modern life at work and at play, from dawn till dusk, in modern Soviet Union city life, which becomes one of the main characters in the film alongside the cameraman himself. Vertov believed that the camera, what he called the Kino-eye, was able to capture fragments of reality which, when organised together through montage, showed a deeper truth that was invisible to the naked eye.[34] Working within a Marxist ideology and through filming and montaging together footage from different cities – Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa – Vertov strove to propose a composite futuristic city, electrified by the machine vision of the Kino-eye.

Agit-Prop, *Déjà vu*, and *Wates House* display a complicated relationship to site. Where are the projects sited? Where do they take place?

Inspired by Vertov's ideas, Davis's *Agit-Prop* claims as a site the fabricated convergence of three geographically distinct places. The iconography of the film draws together three European squares: Syntagma (Constitution) Square in Athens, Trafalgar Square in London, and the public space in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. The squares are major touristic destinations in their respective cities, but also political epicentres, where people gather to protest *[8]*. The buildings framing these public spaces where people gather to express dissent are fine examples of neoclassical architecture: a triumphal arch, a national gallery, and an old royal palace, currently housing the parliament, all three designed and built in the late 18th and early 19th century. According to Davis, 'cinematic montage is the art of conflict. It is a theoretical and practical method of deliberate agitation through juxtaposition, provoking the audience to address the social, political and environmental consequences of how we live.'[35]

Ascribing to Vertov's belief in the social power of the camera – by exposing remote parts of the Soviet Union to each other film was seen as promoting the goals of the revolution – Davis brings together the three European squares with the aim to create a provocation.[36] The site is constructed as montage, so as a consequence all the actions taking place are unavoidably conflicted. The film comments on the tensions of current European politics by portraying them as a kaleidoscope of cultures brought together in a digitally constructed



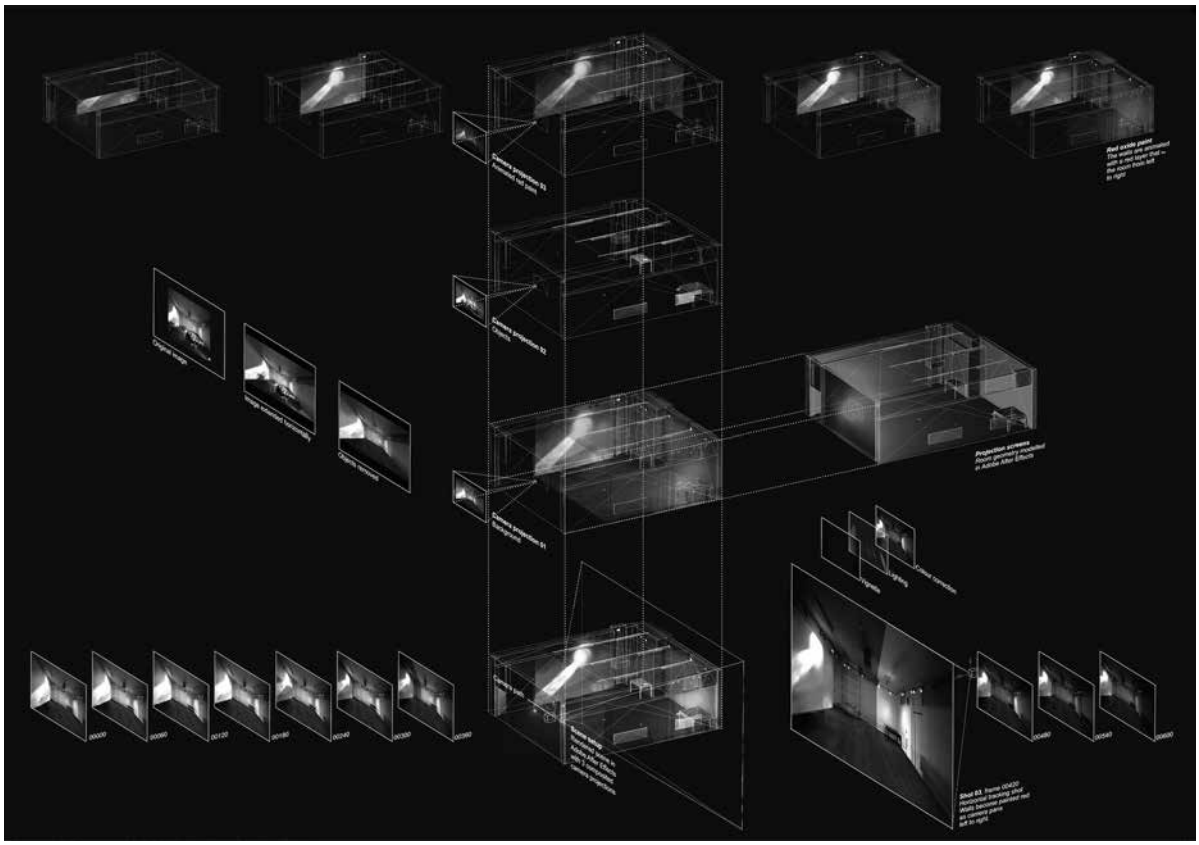
8 Liam Davis, *Agit-Prop* (2015). Montage draws together three European squares: Syntagma (Constitution) Square in Athens, Trafalgar Square in London, and the public space in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin.

realm. Power is represented by the neoclassical architectural style; the buildings acquire combating powers and the identity of the villain. Architecture cast as a villain is not new. By cleverly splicing together snippets of different films in his essay film *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, Andersen shows how Hollywood movies have almost systematically denigrated the modernist residential architecture heritage, 'one of the glories of Los Angeles', by casting many of these houses as the residencies of movie villains, their character directly projected on the architecture.[37]

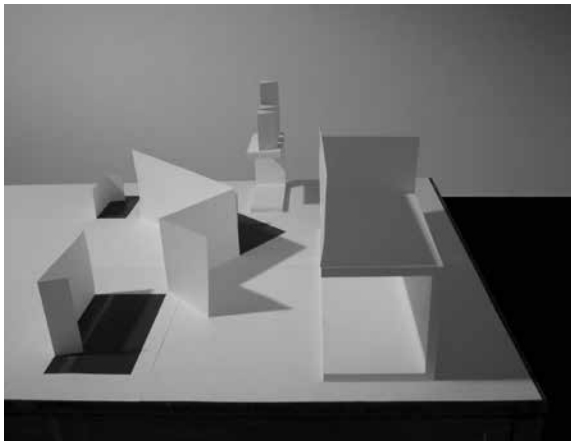
Coming across as politically confused, the project seems lost in the proliferation and conflict between visual symbols that deny stability or clarity. As such, however, it is perhaps an accurate reflection of, and commentary on, the current state of not only European politics but politics in general, echoing the message of a recent film by another essayist director Adam Curtis. In *Bitter Lake* (2015), he has tried to convey through a collage of complicated, fragmentary, and emotional images that evoke the chaos of real experience, a more emotional depiction of what 'really happened in Afghanistan', which is the subject matter of the film.[38] According to Curtis:

> *No one knows what is real or fake. A strategy of power that keeps any opposition constantly confused, a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it is indefinable.*[39]

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In Cotton's work the building itself doubles-up as the site. Its skin becomes the canvas for playing back its memories, desires, and fears. By projecting on the surface of a building Cotton's work belongs to what architectural historian and critic Sylvia Lavin sees as a mutual attraction between architecture and new types of art, especially digital films projected on interior, or exterior, surfaces of buildings and large structures. In her book *Kissing Architecture*, she develops the concept of 'kissing' to describe the growing intimacy between buildings and video installations.[40] According to Lavin, 'architecture's original sin was that it could not tell stories in the manner of poetry or painting, although it has certainly tried, offering up such gestures of atonement as *architecture parlante* and postmodernism'.[41] Lavin focuses on the erotic encounter between the ephemeral projections the Swiss installation artist Pipilotti Rist onto the solid institutional walls of Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi's Museum of Modern Art in New York, where her show entitled *Pour Your Body Out* was hosted in 2009. She finds that although Rist's colourful projected film relies on the structural support of Taniguchi's building 'it has nothing genetic or material in common with it'. The architecture and the projection 'may occupy a single plane, but they emerge from different disciplinary conventions and hence must be said to be only temporarily cohabiting, with all the extra marital frisson that might imply.'[42]

In Cotton's *Wates House* the projection and the building become one in a new form of architectural representation. During the development of his work in 2014 Cotton often presented his films live onto the walls of crit spaces in Wates House, contributing to an unnerving, uncanny effect of the building becoming alive *[9]*.

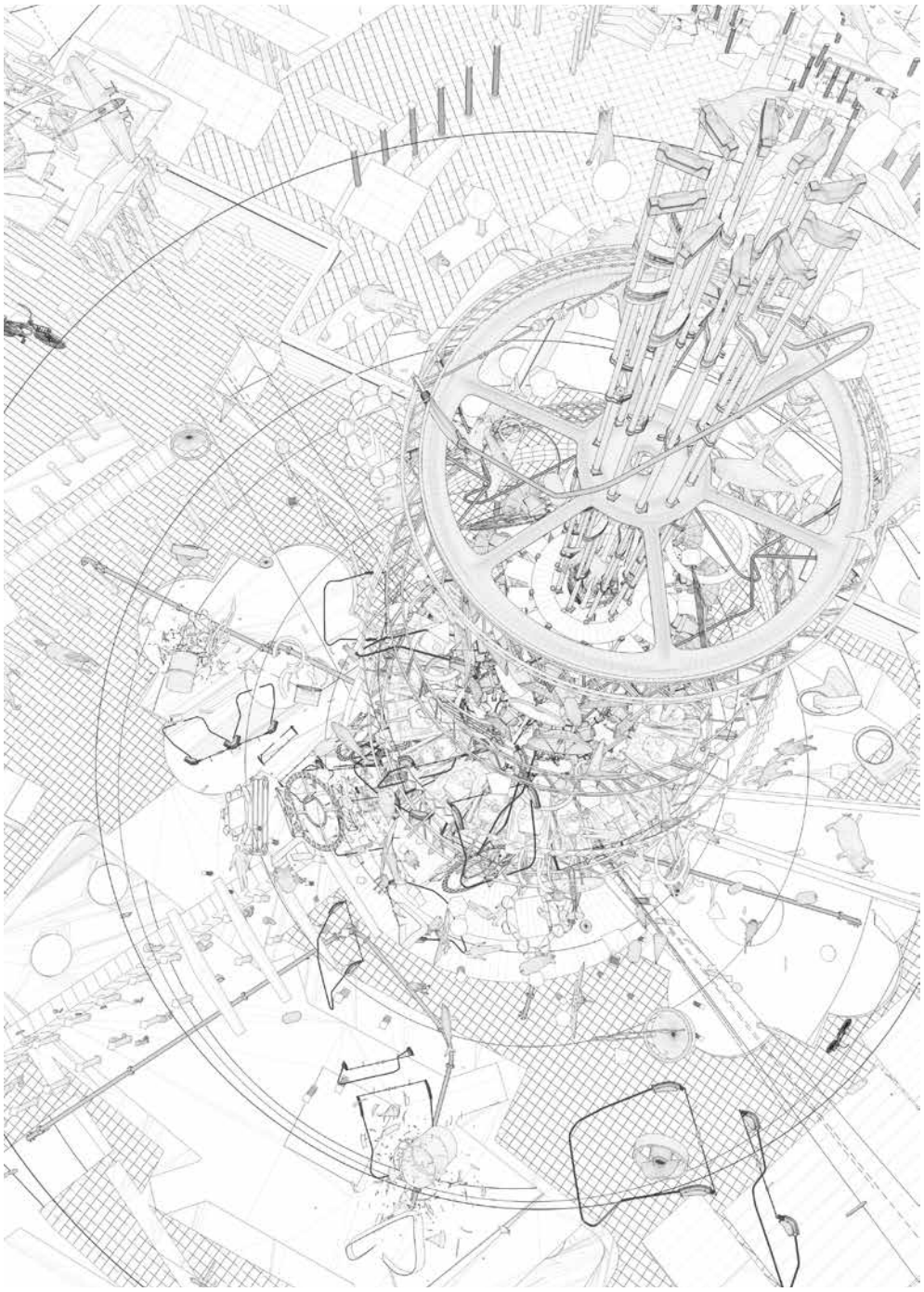
In *Déjà vu* the site of my proposed 'paper' architecture is the composite building portrayed in Resnais's original film. In *Last Year at Marienbad* the Baroque hotel setting is not a single building, but a sinuous montage of different locations in Munich – including scenes at the Schloss Nymphenburg palace and the Amalienburg hunting lodge – mixed with studio-constructed sets. By spatially splicing together different scenes from the film in a model, *Déjà vu* repairs the fragmentary architectural structure of the film. My reworking of the film uses as a site the table on which the paper is laid and where the projection is cast. The use of the table adds a dimension of intimacy with the projection and the model breaks the linearity of the plot and recounts events concurrently.

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9 Daniel Cotton, *Wates House* (2014). The red room, where Wates expresses feelings of anger.

10 Penelope Haralambidou, *Déjà vu* (2009). Detail of the minimal paper and wood model on the table without the embellishing projection.

11 Liam Davis, *Agit-Prop* (2015). Drawing showing the tower from above.



11

Rather than focusing only on the stylistic or formal architectural attributes of the setting where events take place, the model constructs a new architecture from the study of the psychological geometry portrayed in the film: a parallel inner architecture, erected by the encounter of the two protagonists that merges the real with the imagined, or the remembered. The paired down simplicity of the model reflects the modernist narrative of Robbe-Grillet's screenplay *[10]*.

The idea of reading this psychological dimension of architecture through film is similar to what film essayists Bêka and Lemoine call their 'Living Architectures' project.[43] This is a series of films focusing on celebrated architectural masterworks, that puts into question 'the fascination with the picture, which covers up the buildings with preconceived ideas of perfection, virtuosity and infallibility, in order to demonstrate the vitality, fragility and vulnerable beauty of architecture as recounted and witnessed by people who actually live in, use or maintain the spaces'.[44] Their intention is rather than talking about architecture 'to let architecture talk to us, from an "inner" point of view, both personal and subjective'.[45]

Drawing heresy

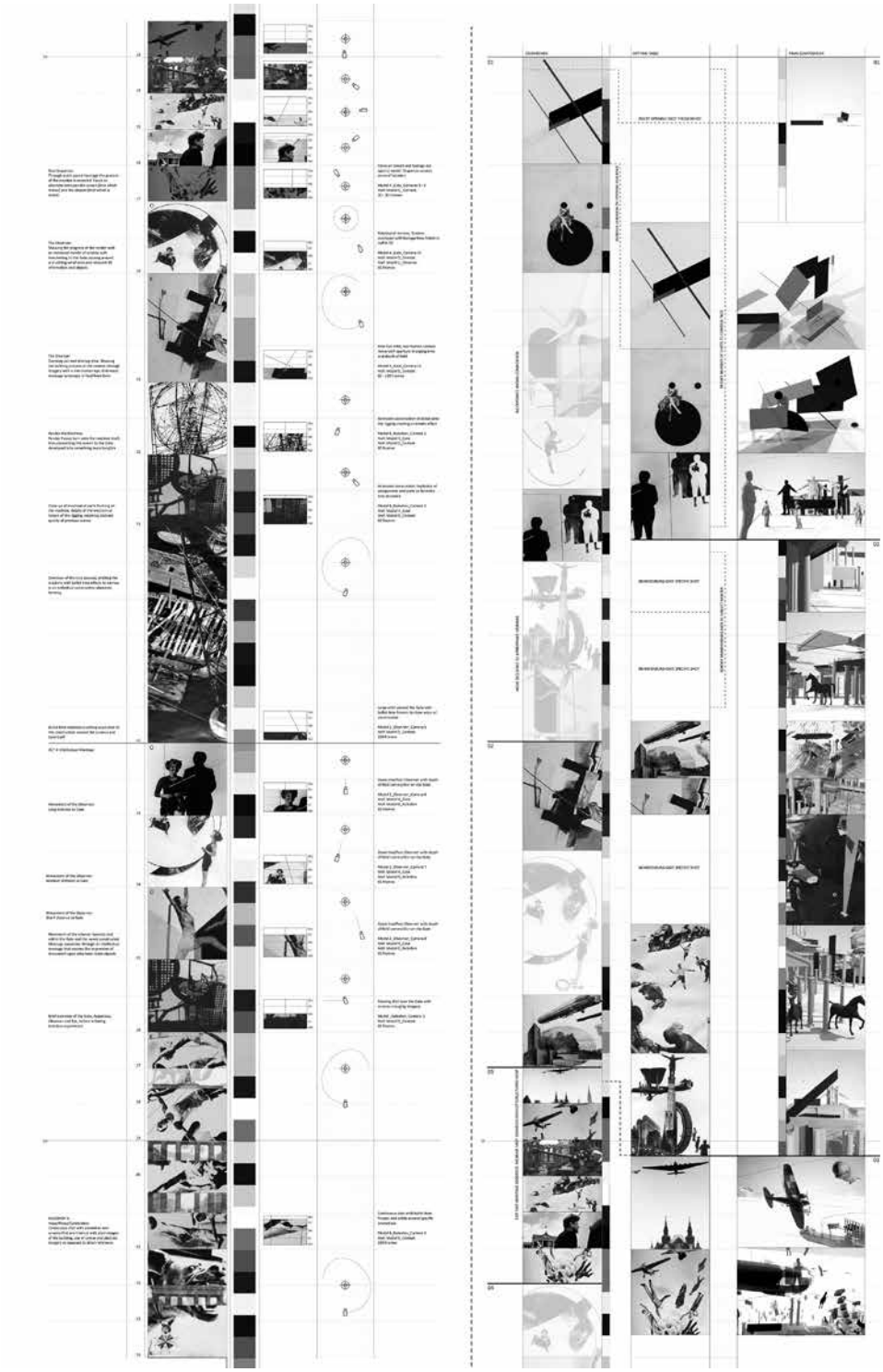
As we have seen, Rascaroli defines 'heresy and openness' as the primary markers of the essay film. Essayist film directors often tend to break the rules not only in terms of form and subject matter but also in their use of experimental cinematic techniques. For instance, Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* is a test bed for trialling a wide range of cutting-edge

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cinematic techniques, such as double exposure, split screen, Dutch angle, jump cut, footage played backwards, and plays with scale to name a few. In *Sans Soleil*, Marker experimented with digital manipulation of footage and Wenders shot *If Buildings Could Talk…* in 3-D with a cutting-edge, but simple, device combing a steady cam and two very light photo cameras shooting in HD, constructed by stereographer Alain Derobe, a pioneer in the field.

Facilitated by the advancement of digital technologies has the convergence between film and architecture changed architectural representation in *Wates House*, *Agit-Prop*, and *Déjà vu*? Can the tendency for 'heresy and openness' carried through the essayist dimension of these architectural drawings/films transform canonical architectural representation paradigms? And if these architectural essay films are also drawings, what kind of architecture are they drawing forth?

Agit-Prop proposes a hybrid genre that lies between film and architectural drawing, while questioning the syntax of both. Starting with a white screen, the equivalent of a blank sheet of paper, points, circles, lines and planes the traditional elements of architectural drawing sprout and extend, marking the 'ground' where the architecture is going to take place. Other lines begin to delineate trajectories, on which objects begin to orbit emanating more lines



12

12 Liam Davis, *Agit-Prop* (2015). Davis's score inspired by Eisenstein's graphic notations and Tschumi's drawings.

13 Daniel Cotton, *Wates House* (2014). Spatio-temporal drawing studying the stop motion, unfolding Wates House façade sequence.

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that link them back to the ground. The drawing turns into a playground, where design decisions are exposed in animation and where anything can happen: Davis's film captures the process of intuitive architectural design in the making, which is characterised by a boundless vitality, but also the folly and pointlessness of doodling *[11]*.

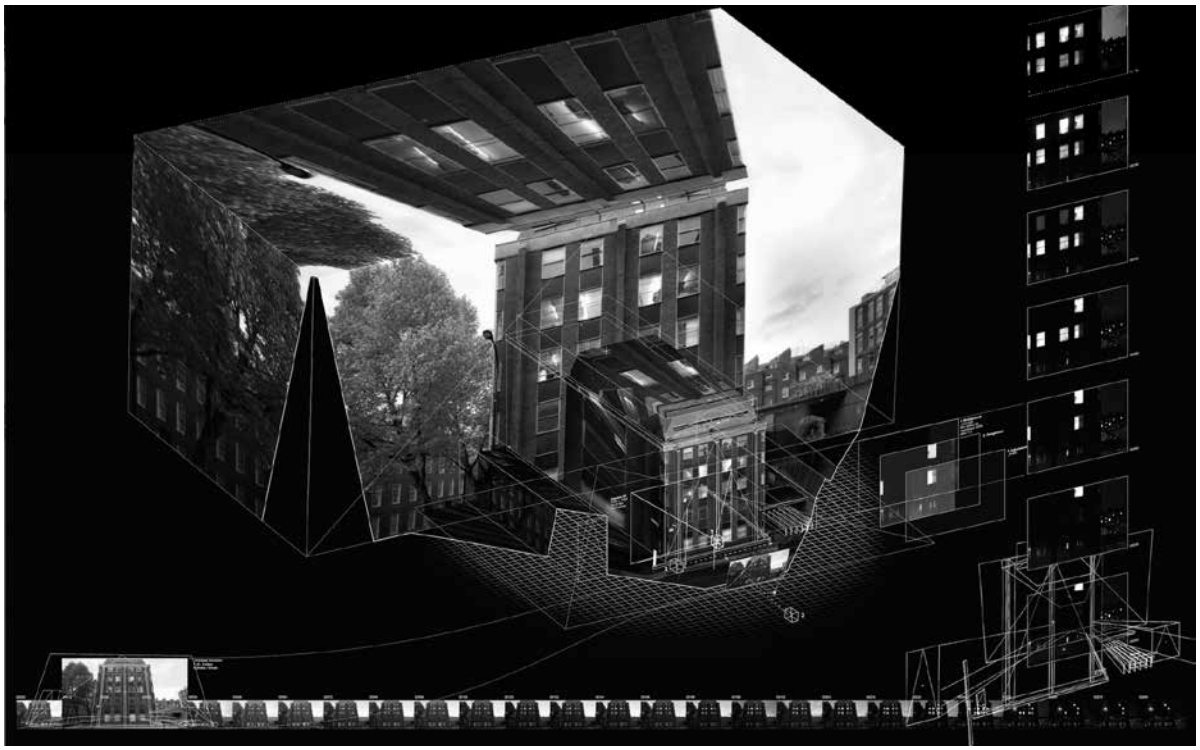
Revealing an inherent contradiction in Davis's practice, the apparent chaos and conflict of the film is organised through a painstakingly precise score, a graphic method of regulating time, space, iconography, and camera movements. The method derives from a study of Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory and a direct interpretation of his graphic notations *[12]*.[46] It also bears a clear debt to Bernard Tschumi's drawings for his *Manhattan Transcripts*, which also draw from the work of the celebrated Russian director.

But what kind of architecture is Davis's film drawing? The 'proposal' for a tower of discontent remains speculative and allegorical, a digital Kino-architecture occupying the realm of imagination. Was it ever to be built, however, perhaps the closest physical contemporary architectural equivalent to Davis's vision would be City Museum in St Louis. The museum is an eclectic mixture of a giant playground, surrealistic pavilion, and architectural marvel, housed in the former International Shoe Company building and constructed from the very stuff of the city: repurposed architectural and industrial objects, urban detritus, and fragments of old infrastructure.[47] *Agit-Prop* also pays tribute to the work of artist Sarah Sze, who uses everyday objects to construct complex and precarious spatial installations that redraw the spaces they occupy.[48]

Wates House incorporates the architectural drawing's capacity to imagine the future. Taking the form of dreams, wishes or fears, the building wears its imagination on its skin, as an animated blueprint of its possible future. Contained within the film is a notional proposal for an architecture school, derived from the memories of its inhabitants and realised through the technique of projection mapping. Here, projection is employed as a tool with which to augment or reimagine the spaces of Wates House by merging the real and the propositional to create a new spatial construct, a 'third space' *[13]*. A deeply personal and reflective narration runs throughout, revealing the 'multifarious, sometimes hilarious and often precarious relationships we maintain with our built environment'. It also speculates on what it means for a building to 'have life', and calls for a more holistic approach to architectural design that incorporates and celebrates notions of death and decay'.[49]

The premise of allowing a building to 'imagine' what it 'can or could be' in situ expands the imaginary possibilities traditionally offered by the orthographic plan and section on paper.[50] The building imagines its 'body' changing: the walls open up and two studios connect. Indeed Wates' dream of opening up and mirroring the studios is currently materialised in its temporary reincarnation at 140 Hampstead Road: a dream come true!

By assigning a voice to the building, similarly to Wenders' *If Buildings could Talk*, Cotton casts Wates House as a character, the protagonist in his short film. The camera travels down its corridors, scans details, and colours the spaces with emotional undertones. The building reflects on its past, confesses that it has the ability to collect memories but also imagines and projects its desires and wishes. But this character is also a user of the building, the writer of the monologue read by Wates, as well as the designer turned filmmaker: Cotton himself.[51] The essay film allows Cotton to engage with Wates House,

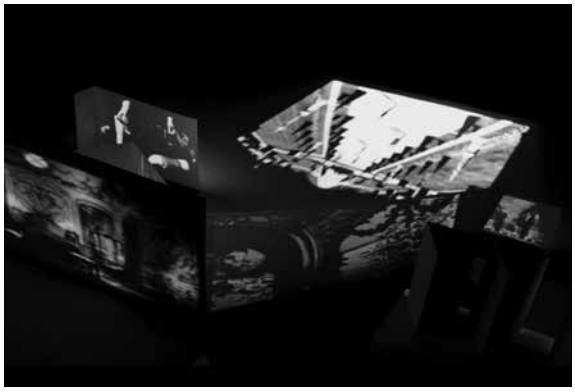


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14



15

14 Daniel Cotton, *Wates House* (2014). Selected film stills.

15 Penelope Haralambidou, *Déjà vu* (2009). Paper screens from the back.

the site and subject of his design, with a potent sense of empathy *[14]*.

Déjà vu combines model making with projection mapping to perform and display an analysis of Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*. Instead of being propositional, design is here analytical. The work reflects on the communicative possibilities of the architectural model and proposes it as a dialectical and critical artefact; the model studies the complex architecture of the film thus performing a form of film theory. This restaging of the film uncovers the architectural significance of the themes that Resnais's film explores: the link between architecture, memory, and oblivion; the clash between the Baroque setting (the Amalienburg hunting lodge in Munich) and the Modernist narrative (the 'nouveau roman' of Robbe-Grillet); the trope of mise en abyme in architecture, literature, and film; and the link between erotic desire and architecture. Finally, *Déjà vu* exposes the architectural structure of the screenplay by becoming a topographical rather than chronological incarnation of the plot.

Corrigan uses the term 'refractive' to describe essay films that interrogate other films: 'If the tradition of films about aesthetic objects, practices and figures can be described as commentaries in the most flexible sense of the term, refractive essay films, across their spectrum of differences, describe the move towards criticism.'[52] *Déjà vu* is doubly 'refractive': it is a film commenting on a film, but also an architectural model commenting on architectural models.

Déjà vu is inspired by the work of artist Douglas Gordon who has appropriated well-known films as the subject matter of his work. His *Feature Film* (1999), and *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), restage, or perhaps re-project, Alfred Hitchcock's films. In *Feature Film*, Gordon arranges 'a divorce between sound and vision' and orchestrates 'an affair between what you remember and what you see'. Gordon produced a new film focusing on American conductor James Conlon as he conducted a new live interpretation of the score from *Vertigo* in a studio. The work is 'a portrait and a landscape, a soundtrack and a motion picture'.[53] *Déjà vu* extends Gordon's approach into architectural representation, and asks whether scaled architectural models can convey psychological nuances of occupation, as well as the spatial imprint of memory and imagination, by incorporating film.

I have also seen *Déjà vu* as a drawing of light on paper, where the play of black and white seeps through and stains the screens like ephemeral ink *[15]*. The concept of 'drawing in light' and offering possibility of 'redrawing' *Déjà vu* I have explored in drawing workshops.[54]

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed three projects, *Agit-Prop*, *Wates House*, and *Déjà vu,* which by exploiting recent advancements in digital technology, have merged film and architecture in their exploration of defining a 'sense of place'. My aim was not to focus on the details of the technologies used, but instead to reflect on how the bringing together film and architecture might change not only the way architecture is represented but also designed. By comparing these hybrid projects with the elusive genre of the essay film, and more specifically essay films that use architecture as their subject matter, I defined a subgenre: the 'architectural essay film'

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that predates and includes *Agit-Prop*, *Wates House*, and *Déjà vu*.

Architects, perhaps as a result of the long-standing use of orthographic projection – the static architectural plans and sections – tend to think of space outside time. By adding the dimension of time space becomes 'alive', so film offers the potential of generating an affective relationship with architecture, a form of empathy, where the architect/filmmaker more closely identifies with the building. I have attempted to show how the three films explore the impact that our experience of architecture has on the structure of our memory and imagination and how working with film as a design method offers an amplified sense of identification with architecture. Furthermore, I reflected on the ways that all three projects create a novel relationship with place by complicating the idea of site.

I have asked whether the three projects using film as medium can be seen as architectural drawings and if so what kind of architecture they propose. All three projects break the picture plane, enter the space of the representation, and occupy it in time, allowing a view of the design process as an architecture in the making. Consequently, the essayist characteristics of 'reflectivity and subjectivity' are passed on to the proposed architecture, which can become a character that speaks to us. However, although proposing a fascinating way of not only rethinking but also designing architecture the projects embrace heresy and soliloquy. *Agit-Prop*, *Wates House*, and *Déjà vu* are perhaps primarily 'essays' dissenting canonical disciplines, or more correctly 'architectural essay films' that defy categorisation as either film or architecture.

Notes

1. Daniel Cotton, *Wates House* (2014). Written, directed, animated, and filmed by Cotton. Music composed and performed by Dora Lam. Filmed on location at Wates House, and at Hackney Downs Studios in North London. Available online: <https://vimeo.com/97604597> (accessed 11.11.2015).
2. Monologue written by Cotton and narrated by Dora Lam.
3. Liam Davis, *Agit-Prop* (2014). Designed and animated by Liam Davis.
4. Penelope Haralambidou, *Déjà vu* (1996). For more details and related images, see: <http://bartlettdesignresearchfolios.com/deja-vu-restaging-resnaiss-last-year-at-marienbad/> (accessed 11.11.2015).
5. Geoffrey Macnab, 'Robert Redford and Wim Wenders on New Architecture Film Cathedrals of Culture', in *Independent*, Wednesday 12 February (2014). See: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/robert-redford-and-wim-wenders-on-new-architecture-film-cathedrals-of-culture-9122224.html> (accessed 11.11.2015).
6. Cotton and Davis are Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, graduates.
7. See the BFI website, available online: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/essay-film> (accessed 11.11.2015).
8. Hans Richter, 'The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film', in *Schreiben Bilder Sprechen: Texte zum essayistischen Film*, eds. by Christa Blümlinger and Constatin Wuldd, trans. by Richard Langston (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1992), pp. 195–8.
9. Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne After Marker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
10. Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, p. 15.
11. Ibid., p. 33. Jean-Luc Godard is widely considered to be an essayistic director.
12. Kieron Corless for *Thought in Action: The Art of the Essay Film*, a season of screenings at BFI Southbank, 1–28 August 2013. Available online: <http://southbanklondon.com/the-art-of-the-essay-film> (accessed 11.11.2015).
13. Laura Rascaroli, 'The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments', in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 49:2, Fall (2008), p. 34. See also: Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and The Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009).
14. Rascaroli, 'The Essay Film', p. 39.
15. Wenders has made evocative films giving a 'voice' to the Rolex Institute in Lausanne by SANAA, The Berliner Philharmonie in Berlin by Hans Scharoun and is working on another project with Peter Zumthor, while Andersen studies the role of the ruin in the work of architect Eduardo Souto de Moura in the film *Reconversão*. See: <http://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/architecture/articles/2012/july/09/peter-zumthor-working-on-film-with-wim-wenders/> (accessed 11.11.2015) and <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/06/movies/thom-andersens-reconversao-at-the-first-look-series.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed 11.11.2015).
16. See information about the unit and other students' projects at the Unit 24 website, available online: <http://www.unittwentyfour.com/> (accessed 11.11.2015).
17. Project description in *Bartlett Book 2014*, eds. by Frederic Migayrou and Bob Sheil (London: Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, 2014), p. 284.
18. Project description in ibid., p. 288.
19. See: Penelope Haralambidou, *Marcel Duchamp and the Architecture of Desire* (London: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 244–5, pp. 289–91.
20. Professor Nic Clear and Simon Kennedy have established a tradition of digitally produced architectural films in their Unit 15 teaching at the Bartlett, UCL. Factory Fifteen is an award-winning film and animation studio, formed by ex-Unit 15 students, Jonathan Gales, Paul Nicholls, and Kibwe Tavares.
21. An exhibition dedicated to Marker's wide-ranging work was hosted by the Whitechapel Gallery in 2014. See: Chris Marker, *Chris Marker: A Grin Without a Cat*, eds. by Chris Darke and Hadba Rashid (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2014).
22. See transcript of Marker's English version of the narrator's monologue, available online: <http://www.markertext.com/sans_soleil.htm> (accessed 11.11.015).
23. Haralambidou, *Architecture of Desire*, p. 49.
24. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992).
25. Chris Darke, in 'Deep Focus: The Essay Film', *Sight & Sound*, August (2013), available online: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/essay-film> (accessed 11.11.2015).
26. In the highly embellished surroundings, X, the male protagonist, meets A, the female protagonist, and confronts her with descriptions of their romantic involvement a year ago, of which she has no recollection.

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A riddle of seduction, the narrative of the film flips between present and past, memory and imagination, and has been described as a love story, abstract thriller, or philosophical puzzle. Although it received mixed reviews, the film was winner of the Golden Lion award at the 1961 Venice Film Festival.

27. Sylvette Baudrot in François Thomas, *L'atelier d'Alain Resnais* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989).
28. Penelope Haralambidou, 'The Act of Looking and Déjà vu: Notes on a "Figural Theory"', in *KTHA (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, School of Architecture journal,* 2011), 2, pp. 2–9.
29. Ro Spankie, 'Speculative Models: *Air Grid* and *The Blossoming of Perspective*', in *The Journal of Architecture*, 14:4 (2009), p. 536.
30. Cotton, project description for the Bartlett School of Architecture end of year show, June 2014.
31. Monologue written by Cotton.
32. Geoffrey Macnab, 'Robert Redford and Wim Wenders on new architecture film Cathedrals of Culture', in *Independent*, Wednesday 12 February (2014), available online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/robert-redford-and-wim-wenders-on-new-architecture-film-cathedrals-of-culture-9122224.html> (accessed 11.11.2015).
33. Wenders uses again the trope of giving a building a (female) voice in his later film, *Cathedrals of Culture* (2014). Shot in 3-D, *Cathedrals of Culture* searches for the 'soul' of buildings, exploring what these buildings would say to us if they could talk. Six directors, including Wenders and Robert Redford, have contributed a different 'essay', each choosing a building that means something special to them. See: Macnab, 'Robert Redford and Wim Wenders'.
34. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov,* ed. by Annette Michelson, trans. by Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
35. Liam Davis, 'Flâneur/Monteur/Provocateur: A Cinematic Approach to Agonistic Space', unpublished thesis, 2014, p.5.
36. Vertov, *Kino-Eye,* p. 52.
37. Nick Bradshaw in 'Deep Focus: The Essay Film', in *Sight & Sound*, August (2013), available online: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/essay-film> (accessed 11.11.2015).
38. Bitter Lake may be found on BBC iPlayer, available online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02gyz6b> (accessed 11.11.2015). According to the description Bitter Lake is experimental: 'Curtis has taken the unedited rushes of everything that the BBC has ever shot in Afghanistan – and used them in new and radical ways. He has tried to build a different and more emotional way of depicting what really happened in Afghanistan. A counterpoint to the thin, narrow and increasingly destructive stories told by those in power today.'
39. Transcription of Curtis' narration for Bitter Lake.
40. Sylvia Lavin, *Kissing Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
41. Ibid., p. 10.
42. Ibid., pp. 23–6.
43. Some of the architectural projects portrayed in Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine's films are: Maison à Bordeaux, by Rem Koolhaas, OMA; The Barbican Centre, by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon; and 8 House by Bjarke Ingels.
44. See Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, 'Living Architectures', available online: <http://www.living-architectures.com/project.php> (accessed 11.11.2015).
45. Bêka and Lemoine, 'Living Architectures'.
46. Bernard Tschumi, *Manhattan Transcripts* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).
47. City Museum was conceived and constructed by the artist Bob Cassilly, a classically trained sculptor and serial entrepreneur and opened for visitors in 1997. Reaching no further than municipal borders for its reclaimed building materials, City Museum boasts containing features such as old chimneys, salvaged bridges, construction cranes, a bank vault, and even two abandoned planes. Dependent largely on donations, the space is always growing and changing, precariously perched at the edge of accepted health and safety norms.
48. Sze transforms everyday objects into gravity-defying works in horizontal and tower-like formations that zigzag into the heights of gallery spaces. Sze's compositions mirror the improvisational quality of cities, labour, and everyday life. See: <http://www.sarahsze.com/> (accessed 11.11.2015).
49. Cotton, project description for the Bartlett School of Architecture end of year show, June 2014.
50. Barbara Ann Campbell-Lange suggests that Cotton's work proposes a new paradigm for architectural drawing.
51. The film is closely related to, and informed by the research in Cotton's thesis, which was supervised by Professor Iain Borden, where he collected the 'memories' of the inhabitants of Wates House: 'The thesis argues for the power of memories to influence our experience and perception of space. Accounting for the imminent demolition and reconstruction of Wates House, this thesis performs an ethnographic unraveling of the interwoven histories forming its phenomenological fabric. The thesis will show how the history of Wates House is made up of multiple, diverse and often unexpected themes, stories and events.' Daniel Cotton, 'Wates House', unpublished thesis (2014).
52. Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, p. 187.
53. *Feature Film* was co-produced by Artangel & Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, New Media Department as The Artangel/Beck's commission in association with Kölnischer Kunstverein/Central Krankenversicherung A.G. on the occasion of the CENTRAL ART AWARD 1998. It was originally screened at The Atlantis Building, Brick Lane, London, April–May 1999. See: <http://www.artangel.org.uk//projects/1999/feature_film/about_the_project/feature_film> (accessed 11.11.2015).
54. I have explored the concept of 'drawing in light' and offering the possibility of 'redrawing' *Déjà vu* in drawing workshops.

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