

Image-Building: A Branded Occupation by Night

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INTRODUCTION: HOW FILM TRANSFORMS ARCHITECTURE

The aim of this paper is to interrogate the narratives of two films, *Les Nuits Électriques* by Eugène Deslaw (1928) and *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05* by Olivio Barbieri (2005), using a favorite theme of avant-garde filmmakers: urban lighting in direct combination with neon light advertising. The paper examines the branded occupation of space and the appropriation of strategies employed in artistic practice. The two examples are analyzed in order to explore the relationship between location, image-building and identity, and to highlight connections to wider social, cultural, economic and political issues. This paper offers a nuanced perspective on how film affects the understanding of neon advertising in relation to the built environment. Also, the paper explores the social, cultural, economic and political and conceptual implications of architecture as a sign through the interpretation of those who capture it.

AGENDAS OF SURFACE IN DESLAW AND SIMULACRUM IN BARBIERI

Deslaw's (1928) black and white film *Les Nuits Électriques* was a serious attempt to celebrate the dynamic visual appeal of modern neon light advertising within the city centers of Berlin and Paris. This film is unique in the way it captures the urban world of two metropolises by night. It is a laboratory and editing experiment presenting unified modern surface architecture to capture the commercial urban street experience of the era. This experimental movie was an exercise in rhythmic choreography, and the effect was increased by the accompanying musical score played on a "rumor armonio," a special musical instrument reproducing the widest possible range of sounds found in cities.

Abstract /

The aim of this paper is to examine the narratives of two films, *Les Nuits Électriques* by Eugène Deslaw (1928) and *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05* by Olivio Barbieri (2005), using a favorite theme of avant-garde filmmakers: urban lighting in direct combination with neon light advertising. This paper offers a nuanced perspective on how film affects the understanding of neon advertising in relation to the built environment. Also, the paper explores the social, cultural, economic and political and conceptual implications of architecture as a sign through the interpretation of those who capture it.

Keywords /

Mass cultural phenomena, consumerism, image, sign and architecture

While *Les Nuits Électriques* was filmed from the street view, Barbieri's *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05*, in contrast, was shot from a helicopter using a tilt shift lens technique. This visual approach transforms Barbieri's subjects to such an extent that they look fake. The result is that the urban space loses reality and seems like a filmed model, and reality thereby becomes simulation. Juxtaposing these two films creates a dialogue between the past and present to reveal both the ways film frames the perception of architecture and also the architecturalization of film.

ARCHITECTURAL SPACE AND MASS CULTURAL PHENOMENA

For over one hundred years, mass cultural phenomena like newspapers, radio, motion pictures, television, and illuminated advertising have been growing in importance, taking over from elite cultural expressions to become sites where real power resides. These mass phenomena ever more surely dominate our social imagination¹. Architecture as a sign or as advertising has been significant since the 1920s when structures began to be designed as a sign for advertisement and entertainment. For example, *Reklame Architektur*, a new type of building that arose in the German metropolis during the period of economic reconstruction, created buildings that included advertising as an integral part of the façade. Examples include movie theaters and department stores, such as the Schocken stores designed by Erich Mendelsohn. *Reklame Architektur* was a test-run of the extreme—an architecture that is also an advertisement.

These stores were a mirror image of German politics and the economy at the time. After the failed revolutions that followed the catastrophe of World War I, Germany embraced capitalism. In 1923 the currency was reformed because of inflation, and the Dawes Plan loan from the United States began. With foreign investment and new technology, German industry and business soon recovered. Driven by the increased demand for display windows and movie theaters, *Reklame Architektur* presented a new kind of cultural expression in the urban context.

Ward (2001) argues in her book *Weimar Surfaces*²

that mass cultural phenomena have been growing in importance. "As reflections of the processes of capitalist industrialization in forms clad for popular consumption, these manifestations are literal and connective expressions of surface. They promote external appearance to us in such arenas as architecture, advertising, film and fashion" (Ward, 2001, p. 1).

MODERN SURFACES: URBAN VISUAL CULTURE IN 1920

The sites of surface in Germany in the 1920s were aestheticizations of function. They were the latest in artistic design and yet served the public. They were very much part of the industrial economy of the era, having been built up along the model of the new industrial production lines. In the Weimar years, there were continual crossovers in art and architecture. For example, the Bauhaus sought to realize its mission in applied arts for the masses, including deornamented typography, kitchen units and other mass-produced furniture. Architects like Mendelsohn built some of their most radical designs in Berlin and Stuttgart for the display needs of consumerism (department stores) and the film industry (movie theaters).

The principles of Taylorism and Fordism migrated to Germany from the United States. These concepts of infinite expansion and efficiency determined the predominant system of labor, products, and capital for most of the twentieth century. They "were adhered to the Weimar Republic with a unique fanaticism born of a collective need to repair wounded nationhood in the wake of the humiliations of the Treaty of Versailles and Germany's loss of colonial and military strength" (Ward, 2001, p. 9).

Consequently, in the relative boom phase of 1924-1929, Weimar society enjoyed a concomitant upswing in architectural output that entirely matched the economic philosophy of this period. Only in Germany during the Weimar Republic did modernity's cult of surface extend uniformly into all visual fields and come to dominate culture and business so simultaneously.

Known as functionalism or *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Sobriety or New Objectivity)³, this approach embraces

design following strictly the purpose that the building should serve (Muthesius, 1902) and was not just operative in architecture but also in all areas of design, art, photography, film and interior design. A starting point for new architecture was the invention of the curtain wall, calling for the liberation of the façade from its former heaviness by undermining the solidity of the outer wall as a barrier between the interior of a building and its exterior. This design brought absolute attention to the surface of the wall or the façade. These new spatial techniques of openness were perfect for buildings designed for a mass-mediated society because they give priority to publicity growing to gigantic proportions for promoting consumer goods like a film screen on the street.

New Functionalism's rejection of decorative style was also a host to an uncomfortable rivalry between image and text, resulting in an anti-mimetic condition of representation that constitutes the century's most concentrated systematization of surface. This design style has become one of European modernism's best-known visual codes. Those indicators related to Reklame Architektur include such terms/labels as "façade culture" (translucent display windows), "glamour" (mirrored glass), "asphalt" (reflective street), and "surface" (curtain wall). These terms appeared repeatedly in the media to describe the modern urban, commercial experience of the era. In the age of a surface architecture, building materials like glass and steel in curtain wall construction and reinforced concrete promote a perfect surface and mirror of the industrial age and suggest that key aspects of design methods were closely allied to the techniques of modern advertising and promotion.

Colomina (1994) argues that the use of such technologies is, in fact, a prerequisite for an architect to be properly considered "modern." She states: "Modern architecture becomes 'modern' not simply by using glass, steel, or reinforced concrete, as is usually understood, but precisely by engaging with the new mechanical equipment of the mass media: photography, film, advertising, publicity, publications, and so on," (Colomina, 1994, p. 73). Modernist thought was both obsessed with and repelled by visual design's most rapid expansion into the social imagination.

ELECTRICSTIMULATION AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF LIGHT: REKLAME ARCHITEKTUR

A determinant of the aesthetic value of buildings is and will be their ability to integrate, reflect and promote the purest surface of all, electric light. The surfaces of buildings must be bright, smooth, and large. From this perspective, it is not the construction, but light that matters most. The building functions not as a structure, but instead more as a spatial-physical creation and only as a phenomenon of immaterial surfaces whose substance no one regards or notes. The reflective qualities of building materials in relation to electric light was the most important criterion for the design of Reklame Architektur.

Evidence of New Functionalism "surface" style is found in the transformation through glass curtain walls introduced by modern architecture and the interrelation of outdoor electric advertising with the city street. This surface style is also evident in the evolution of the Weimar film industry, with its movie palaces and film set designs as the surfaces of German silent cinema. Further examples of surface in New Functionalism are the displays of actual commodities in the illuminated shrines of display windows.

What most transformed the power of outdoor advertising as a mass of visual signifiers was the use of electricity. Modern urban surface culture was experienced as an outdoor reading of the city's commercial life force, the street. These streets as surface in which zones of business, dwelling, advertising, and entertainment all simultaneously coexisted and intermingled were mostly located in the city center.

BERLIN IN LIGHT: LIGHT AS A LIVING AND MOVING FORCE IN SPACE

Germany's rise of electric advertising occurred during The Berlin in Light week in October 1928, when for four nights, a full illumination of the city's monuments and commercial buildings was staged by the city's major retail association. (Verein der Kaufleute und Industriellen). "Light is life" proclaimed the Osram Electric Company's adornment of the Siegesaue

(Berlin Victory Column), which was clad with a sixty-six-foot surface of electric light (see Figure 1). This spectacle was admired by a journalist as a “tower of pure fire” (Ward, 2001, p. 109). In response to this electric celebration, there were parades and open-air concerts. Retail stores of all kinds treated the event like Christmas, with a city-wide competition for the best window display. New modernist buildings, including AEG’s Haus der Technik, which was shining bright blue on the Friedrichstrasse, and the white-lit BEWAG building, were featured as examples of the latest in Lichtarchitektur (architecture of light).

CASE STUDY I

LES NUITS ÉLECTRIQUES BY EUGÈNE DESLAW:
LIGHT MOBILIZES ALL THINGS IN SPACE

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBC6ZvFzo4E>

During four nights in October 1928, avant-garde filmmaker Eugène Deslaw observed the Berlin in Light week through his camera and created his experimental avant-garde film *Les Nuits Électriques*. Deslaw worshipped the illumination and special effects by night of Reklame Architektur in Berlin and Paris as a new form of urban lightning and promotion.

Later, Deslaw’s film moved to Paris to be part of a montage between Europe’s two cities of light, Paris and Berlin. The film concentrates machinic movement that is orchestrated with cartoon-like music by Theo Martelet. Martelet’s score evokes sound as much through visual reference to sound sources (telephones, radios, bells, steam whistles, car horns etc.) as through an awareness of an image’s potential to engender a sense of synaesthesia in its viewers.

This film championed an abstract black and white animated form that foregrounded rhythmic and compositional patterns in the tradition of Viking Eggeling’s *Diagonal-Symphony* from 1925. Deslaw’s structuring principles are diagonal layering and mirroring techniques to simulate space and to demonstrate that at night, light mobilizes all things in space (see Figure 2). Modern entertainment forms that mirror the mechanically determined speed of the

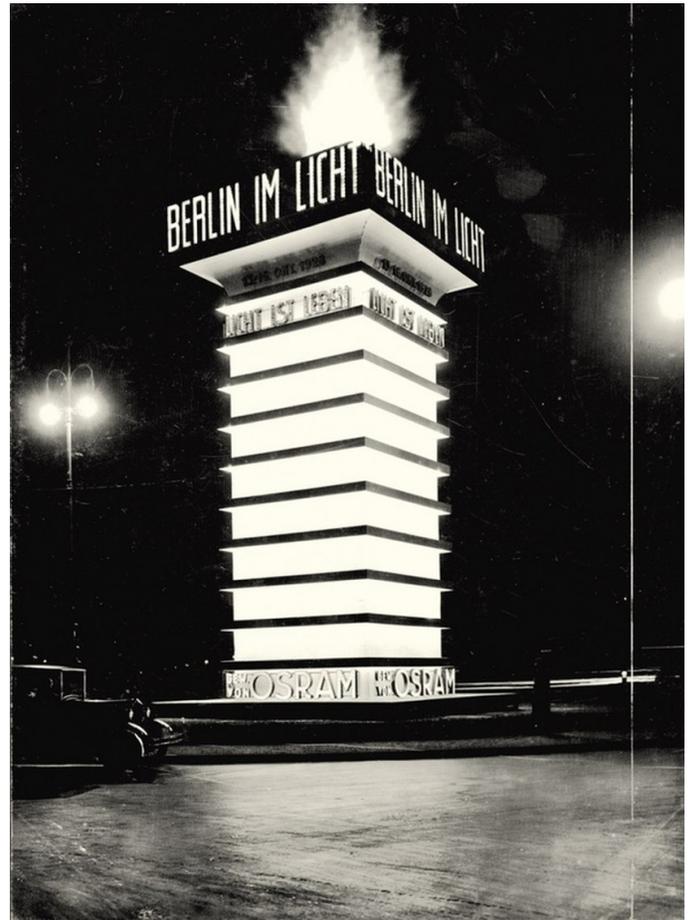


Figure 1 Siegestaule (Berlin Victory Column)

From *Les Nuits Électriques* by Eugene Deslaw, 1928: The Osram Electric Company’s electric adornment for the Siegestaule during the Berlin in Light week in October 1928.

metropolis are clearly reflected in the film. In a later scene, a shot of a merry-go-round is intercut with a spiral spinning to increase the visual speed of the movie. This scene is evidence that the goal of this film experiment was clearly not representation but instead the creation of stimulation and simulation to evoke visual pleasure.

Les Nuits Électriques is indeed aesthetics of pure surface, taking film out of the studio and onto the street itself. However, this film was not a means of critiquing class differences and the suffering of actual people who live below the sheen of the Weimar surface culture. According to the logic of modern street advertising, that which lies projected behind the illuminated glass plane or on the film screen is not to be understood as a mirror of empty illusionism, but as modernity's legitimization of the masses' right to democratic self-expression via spectacle. *Les Nuits Électriques* brings to perfection the fetishization of spectacle but does so without critical awareness.

POSTMODERN SIMULATION

The postwar years have brought about a tectonic shift of urban identities away from their heterogeneous sites of modernity, and toward what Saskia Sassen has determined to be far more streamlined postmodern condition of globalization (Ward, 2001). From the *Weltstadt* (metropolis) of modernity, we have thus reached the global city of postmodernity.

The exterior of a city like Las Vegas, a city in the form of a strip mall, is no longer a collective theater where "it" happens like in Berlin or Paris. There is no collective in "it." The street in this context has become residue or an organizational device—a mere segment of the metropolitan plane.

Electronic transparency is replacing the traditional opacity of buildings' surfaces to the extent that we are no longer ever in front of the city but always inside it. There is only the interface (interfaçade) of monitors and control screens. All around, the tinted glass facades of the buildings are like faces or frosted surfaces. The projected message is that there is no one inside the buildings and no one behind the faces.



Figure 2 Berlin in Light (Berlin im Licht), Light is life (Licht ist Leben)

From *Les Nuits Électriques* by Eugene Deslaw, 1928, during the Berlin in Light week in October 1928

There is now only surface as postmodern simulation, rather than modern stimulation. We experience an invasion of electronic imagery into all things, a forced extroversion of all interior (Ward, 2001). This state is our postmodern condition– in short, a perversion of surface culture. There is nothing more to show. We have no more desire for spectacle in the modernist sense of the word because we are always constantly displaying all.

The site–specificity of the postmodern street is now the globalized centrality of transnational capital and therefore has no sense of place at all. This postmodern global homogeneity contrasts with the urban modernity that bespoke the Fordist dictates of mass production and consumption but was still host to definite sense of place. Weimar visual display was created as a spatial experience with a location that was still phenomenological and still on the street.

CASE STUDY II

SITE SPECIFIC_LAS VEGAS 05 BY OLIVO BARBIERI: MANIPULATING REALITY TO BECOME A MINIATURIZED WORLD:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-QI9znZ-yQ>

The video works of Italian photographer Olivo Barbieri provide perplexing views of contemporary urban landscapes. These videos are shot from a helicopter using a large format camera with a tilt shift lens and accompanied by complex soundtracks. Barbieri's aerial portraits reduce monuments of civilization to the scale of miniature models or, as the artist calls them, "site specific" installations.

"Site Specific" is the title Barbieri gave to his series for which he photographed and filmed more than 40 cities around the world. This term is normally used to describe artworks conceived for a specific place. Indeed, his aerial shots of Las Vegas do not seem to show a real city. Thanks to a special lens and digital postproduction, they look strangely artificial instead, recalling miniature models (Barbieri, 2013). "I try to look at the world like an installation,"⁴ explains the photo artist. "I have never been interested in photography. I'm interested in images," Barbieri proceeds. Site Specific shows the 21st-century city as a constantly changing construct, as an "avatar of itself," as according to Barbieri (2013, p. 7).

Barbieri realized dramatic aerial views by shooting from a low-flying helicopter to drastically alter perspective and scale (see Figure 3). The film includes four minutes of footage from a sunny day and eight minutes from a flashy night as the chopper throbs above the city, staccato engine sounds mixing with a lively score of slot machines clunking, chattering voices at a cocktail party, and artificial casino soundscapes. The American flag in neon, the Bellagio's dancing nighttime water show and much more pass by

as a colored image of the Las Vegas landscape by night rolls out endlessly to the horizon (see Figure 4). Images appear of the city's equally gigantic hotels and casinos, defining its skyline day and night as well as its megalomaniac aesthetic in form of building façades with constantly changing colored light animations.

These visuals set an absolute focus on the accentuatedly artificial and spectacular. Only a minimal portion of the overall image is crisply defined in these panoramic views. The rest is blurred by means of selective focusing (see Figure 5). This kind of vision corresponds to that of the human eye, which can only put a part of the field of vision into focus. Still and movie cameras are instead capable of presenting the entire image of an urban landscape in homogeneous focus. Barbieri uses the tilt-shift technique, which adjusts the position of the lens with respect to the image plane and also results in partial blurring.



Figure 3

From *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05* by Olivo Barbieri, courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York



Figure 4

From *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05* by Olivo Barbieri, courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York

Figure 4

From *site specific_LAS VEGAS 05* by Olivo Barbieri,
courtesy Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York



The feeling produced when watching his films is one of disorientation, akin to the vertigo one may feel when gazing down from a great height. In using this technique, Barbieri highlights the ambiguity of all vision, ultimately forcing us to consider the relationship between reality and representation. In his teasing, humorous work, the real becomes fake and the fake becomes real. Barbieri claims: “All my work is about perception. It’s a deconstruction of the normal way of seeing” (Barbieri, Pecha Kucha, 2016).

Barbieri’s “Site Specific” series exemplifies the way in which he uses his camera to make the familiar seem strange. While the overhead viewpoint seems designed to endow the panoramic image with supposedly documentary value, Barbieri’s interest is not in simply providing documentation of the place but primarily in the figurative presentation of a new way to see and understand a place, abandoning any precise and detailed scanning for a deeper sense of atmosphere.

“I started out from classical photography,” Barbieri (2013) recalls, “from an attempt to describe the world around me as objectively as possible. It turned out the results of this approach showed a world which seemed absolutely phantasmagoric and unreal” (p. 6).

CONCLUSION:

ELECTRIC SIMULATION VERSUS POSTMODERN SIMULATION

Both Deslaw and Barbieri use the medium of film for experimentation and the manipulation of reality and not for the purpose of documentation. Deslaw engages in abstract construction with an emphasis on surface simulation through visible electricity. Barbieri engages in deconstructivist play via surface simulation through invisible electronics. Both share the goal of reflecting how urban space functions as a vehicle for extending neon advertising as a form of representation (surface versus model) in order to

explore the relationship between location, space, image, and identity. Their distinct yet contrary approaches entail questions of image-building of urban advertising through the branded occupation of space and the appropriation of strategies employed in artistic practice. They also imply a need for a different view on the intertwined impulses of architecture and advertisement in modernism and postmodernism. These two eras must be understood not as chronological but as political positions in the century.

ENDNOTES

1 / Social imagination is understood as objective-collective-symbolic orders of and for active representation.

2 / The word surface, like superficies, is derived from the Latin super (above) and facies (face, form, figure, appearance, visage).

3 / Neue Sachlichkeit caught on as a term after being featured as the title of a contemporary art exhibition in Mannheim in 1925.

4 / Olivo Barbieri, "Appunti di viaggio in Cina" (Mantua, Italy: Publi-Paolini, 1989); and Paesaggi in Miniatura: Viaggio nell'architettura cines (Bolzano, Italy:Ar/Ge Kunst, 1991), 22.

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