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Research on History of Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Approach
to Investigate the Discourse of Spaces

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Cinema is able to vividly reproduce architectonic spaces. Location shooting and set design are not only the settings where the action of the film takes place; spaces in films also communicate meanings and produce cultural discourses. These discourses influence our perceptions and spatial experiences of the real world, by promoting negative or positive values linked to certain places.

This essay describes an historical research approach to investigate the discourse of space, and presents the main findings of a study on American and British films produced between the 1930s and 1960s. This study is based on the analysis of cities, neighborhoods, and domestic spaces that appear in films, as valuable sources not only to give visibility to certain places, but also to create a dominant discourse of space. This essay also suggests that the analysis of the cinematic discourse illuminates historical aspects that are not evident by traditional analysis of spaces.
Including Products of Popular Culture to Analyze Architecture

Historical research on architecture has been traditionally studied, to put it simplistically, through two main forms of analyses: one is based on built projects and interpretation of graphical documents, such as plans, photographs, and drawings; and the other is based on the study and interpretation of written sources, such as biographies, writings, etc. Both analyses are focused on authors and projects, and even if these studies include historical contexts, they create a narrative that emerges exclusively from the design discipline. As an example, historians, such as Henry Russell Hitchcock, Nikolaus Pevsner, and Siegfried Giedion,\(^1\) wrote the first “official” history of the Modern Movement on architecture, which not only celebrated modernist projects, they also influenced many generations of architects and scholars. By contrast, modernist-housing solutions, for example, although were celebrated by governmental documentaries of the 1930s and 40s produced in America and Britain, were barely promoted by the commercial cinema. During several decades, American and British commercial films used modernist spaces mainly to portray places of work and productivity, but rarely as houses of normal people. For the contrary, in the 1930s-60s, American and British films represented domestic spaces as cozy houses, recalling a traditional architectural style of small villages inherited from past centuries. While cinematic representations of metropolitan spaces were associated with poverty, delinquency and crime, or at least with selfish interests and sexual temptations, small towns close to the countryside, and low-density suburbs with single-family homes and cared gardens, were presented as healthy environments to maintain moral values and raise a family. This apparent discrepancy between the discourse of design disseminated by intellectuals of the design field, and the discourse promoted by films, suggests that the material produced by popular culture is a valuable source that should be included in historical studies, in order to illuminate on the one hand the common public perception regarding their spaces, cities and architecture in past periods, and on the other hand, to illuminate how films not only represent immediate cultural contexts, but also distribute and reinforce dominant discourses of spaces.

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\(^1\)S. Gideon was appointed in 1928 as General Secretary of the CIAM (International Congress for Modern Architecture),
Defining Discourse of Spaces and the Notion of Historical A Priori

During the second-half of the twentieth century, scholars from fields, such as history and geography, have moved their spatial approach from a notion based exclusively on formal and geometrical aspects, to a socio-cultural critique. French social theorists, such as Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu, and British geographers, such as David Harvey and Doreen Massey, and the American Edward Soja, understand space as an artifact that is socially constructed.

Representation of spaces in films can be seen as clear forms of social products that pervade the formal construction of historical knowledge. Using the terms of John Gold, “Grand Narratives” in historical research, are those stories that unify properties and act as taken-for-granted frameworks. In films, grand narratives of spatial discourses can be seen as systematic associations between certain spaces and recurrent stories, characters, and specific kinds of social life. In this way, a cinematic space can communicate positive or negative values; can be the backdrop of a criminal, or the backdrop of a happy and well-constituted family. Thus, a research on spatial discourses using films must be focused, not only on the identification and description of spaces, buildings or cities that appear on the screen, but also on the kind of stories and characters that inhabit these spaces. If we see that certain associations between spaces and values are systematically used in many films, we can see that these spaces are able to communicate a dominant discourse.

Film theorists tend to explain the emergence of certain film genres that speak about cities, by relying on contingent facts that supposedly define their emergence. For example, Film Noir that depicts the city as a dangerous place is commonly related to World War II, the fear of the atomic bomb or the presence of German film directors, who were strongly influenced by the Expressionist Movement. Suburban comedies are also related to the boom of suburbanization, occurred in America after the World War II. I am not arguing that these facts did not influence the emergence of these genres, but I suggest that films are also linked to broad cultural categories that shape the historical a priori of the time.

The discourse analysis elaborated by Michel Foucault, understands discourse as a historical phenomenon. His analysis involves research into the historical conditions and the power relations that interact in a particular time period, and facilitate the emergence of certain

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discourses. From this approach, discourses are shaped through nets of relationships between
dissimilar elements that do not have necessarily linear and causal successions. The elements that
form a discourse are not connected by general rules; neither do they present horizontal coherence
between their elements. Foucault calls this approach *Historical Discontinuity*; establishing non-
traditional connections between disciplines, and opening up the exploration of new relations
among apparently disconnected events. The historical discontinuity framework and the
genealogical approach are not focused on authors (film directors, and/or architects), but instead
certain discourses and their rules of formation. These discourses are shaped through nets of
relations between dissimilar elements, such as (1) Urban planning, as a regulatory institution
supported by the government; (2) Urban models that define types of neighborhoods, and/or city
growth; (3) Urban regulatory laws, such as zoning uses, which operate as strategies and tactics of
power/government that seek to use space for particular ends; (4) The process of systematization
and distribution of the discourses that allow them as games of truth or take-for-granted
frameworks (for example the planner who recommends certain urban models, the sociologist who
opines what are the best forms of human communities, or films that represents urban models
associated with certain forms of social life); and (5) The process of subjectivation that articulates
the learned discourses as knowledge and as the production of political subjectivities and self-
forming subjects. The subjectivation has to do with the way individuals perceive themselves and
understand the world they live in, and how taken-for-granted frameworks explain the events that
surround them. The historical discontinuity allows us to understand that discourses are formations
that occur through a process of accumulation.

Foucault’s foundational book *The Archeology of Knowledge*, explains the context from
which the notion of historical discontinuity emerged. In *The Archeology*, Foucault explains the
tools that he had used in his great investigations, and presents his vision about discourse, from
the anonymous rules that define its apparition, to the rules that define its conditions of existence.

Foucault considers the author as an operator, an emergency surface, who is not only
exposed to certain discursive practices, but is at the same time, the response and result of the
discourse. This theoretical model suggests that film directors and architects not only create

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3 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New
4 The investigations Foucault realized before the publication of *The Archeology of Knowledge* were: (1) *Folie et
Deraison: Histoire de la Folie a l’age Classique*; first published in France in 1961 and the first English edition was
published in 1967 as *Madness and Civilization*. (2) *Death and the Labyrinth: the World of Raymond Roussel*, first
published in French in 1963 by Gallimard and first translated into English in 1986 by Doubleday. (3) *Naissance de la
Clinique: une Archéologie du Regard Médical*, first published in France in 1963 and translated into English in 1973 by
the title *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. 
inspired by their originality, or under the direct influence of certain economic, productive and technological processes, but also under a dominant discourse or historical a priori, which tends to be invisible because it affects the way the knowledge is apprehended.

Methodological Considerations to Analyze Spatial Discourses in Films

Films can be studied from multiple approaches, including research focused on actors, plots, directors, genres, the film industry, etc. Any film can be studied as a unique text, however in order to research dominant discourses, first, we have to consider that the study must include a significant number of films. If the aim is to identify whether a trend is systematically repeated, we could not deduce dominant discourses only by analyzing few examples. Second, we need to define a period time and a place in which we investigate a specific topic. Third, we must select films in which we can observe the phenomena we are investigating. Thus the selection criteria cannot be a complete random sample, but a directed sample, which implies the review of many films in order to be sure that we have the proper material to observe our research topic. Fourth, we need to complement our film analysis with the analysis of architectural projects, urban models, and urban laws that surround our studied historical period, putting attention on the widest range of discourses that are functioning previously and at the same time films are produced.

The research I conducted, focused on American and British films produced in the 1930s-60s, aimed on the one hand, to identify the most predominant urban models and housing models that appear in films; and on the other hand, illuminate how film genres commented on spatial discourses.

In terms of methodology, the selection of films had to include American and British movies produced in that period in which urban spaces and housing play a relevant role within the story. Many films that speak about city spaces have been commented on by the scholarly literature of the topic, providing some examples of films that this study included, however an extensive search of films had to be done, which included the review of more than 300 films and a final selection of 87 films. These 87 selected films belong to diverse genres, considering films that set the action in a city, stories that describe how social life of the characters is influenced by the city space, and films that describe a community, organized in certain spaces that influence their communitarian life.

The film analysis was complemented with the study of the main urban models promoted in American and Britain during the first half of the twentieth century, such as the Garden City
model promoted by Ebezner Howard, and the urban models with high-density buildings promoted by the Modern Movement of architecture, such as the well-known 1920s’ *Siedlung* in Berlin, among others. The study also included the analysis of urban laws and governmental initiatives, such as the slum clearance program of America and Britain, and the New Deal initiatives promoted by president Roosevelt, only to mention few examples.

In order to identify the most predominant urban models and architectural models of housing commented on American and British films in the 1930s-1960s, the analysis emphasized the pro-filmic elements, or what kind of city and houses were placed in front of the camera. In order to identify how American and British films commented on urban discourses in the same historical period, the study compared the rhetorical practices and film techniques that were used to depict spaces in specific historical genres. This analysis aimed to illuminate possible links between certain film genres and certain spatial discourses.

**Main Findings of the Study**

In 1887, the German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies wrote *Community and Society* (*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*), which reflects the great division between folk and urban society, or between the intimate relationships of family and community, and the impersonal alliances born of modern polity, economic exchange, and state power. Toennies defines community as the social system that involves an everyday life, face-to-face interactions between a relatively stable set of persons in relatively fixed institutions. On the other hand, he defines a society merely as a collection of communities, with a market town, where many relationships are no longer face-to-face, and institutions are impersonal rather than personal. This dichotomy serves also to illustrate how American and British films represent urban spaces between the 1930s and 1960s.

Metropolitan spaces are portrayed as places without identity that refuse to support moral values, and any establishment of family life. For this reason, the representation of domestic

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5 The term “Garden City” was due entirely to a book published in London in 1898 by Ebezner Howard. His book *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* was republished in 1902 with the title *The Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. Many aspects of the Garden City’s discourse were borrowed from other discourses of the time. The idea of decentralization of cities, the democratization of wealth and power, the need to revitalize British agriculture, and other approaches, such as the Arts and Crafts Movement that claimed the return to hand-made traditions, were discourses, which as a whole acted to combat the “evils” of industrialization. The Garden City model provided a life style closer to nature; and it was accepted and supported by the most diverse positions.

6 The *Siedlung* is a massive housing settlement for factory workers with a park like court-yard ringed by apartment dwellings. Was designed by Bruno Taut for 5,000 people and erected in 1925. Other similar examples are the series of *Siedlungen* planned by Ernst May, when he was appointed as city architect for Frankfurt in 1925.

spaces that portray middle-class families in big metropolis is rare in the films produced in that period. By contrast, domestic spaces of apartments, as the most distinctive housing model of big metropolis, serve as backdrop for poor people, youthful singles, easy women and terminal bachelors. On the other hand, small communities close to the countryside are represented as the most desirable form of living, with spaces that stimulate face-to-face interactions, family relationships and significant urban milestones that generate places of memory and identity.

The clear dichotomy between the metropolis, linked with negative values, and small communities and suburban neighborhoods, as safe and “appropriate” places for common families, create a remarkable dominant discourse in all the studied film genres. The condemnation of the metropolitan space, and the celebration of those spaces that are articulated around a limited number of people, with a low-density pattern, a relevant presence of nature, and meaningful places, such as the Main Street, the church, and communitarian clubs, is systematically repeated in most of the analyzed films. This common discourse was representing in different ways according to each genre.

During the 1930s, American urban dramas about kids, such as Wild Boys of the Road, Dead End, Boys of the Streets, Boys Town, and Angels with Dirty Faces, portray boys that live in slum’s apartments. Their homes are located in dense zones of the metropolis, especially in New York City, and the streets seem to be the only playground for kids and a bad influence over them. These films necessarily associate urban poverty with juvenile delinquency, dysfunctional families, and reform school. Streets are represented by narrow and dark spaces, surrounded by deteriorated and overcrowding buildings, filled by clotheslines, escape ladders, dense activity, street fights, and criminals, who inhabit the same neighborhoods and became idols for the kids.

The concern about children living in poverty was also the main concern that appeared in American and British documentaries of the 1930s and 1940s, such as the American The City, A Place to Live, and For the Living; and British documentaries, such as Housing Problems, Homes for Workers, Proud City and The Way We Live. These films strongly condemn the slums of big cities, and systematically represent urban poverty by a landscape of clotheslines, smokestacks, small patios, and narrow streets, that seem to be an inappropriate and dangerous space for innocent children. These documentaries also presented the urban solutions for slum dwellers, which range from modernist multistoried buildings surrounded by open spaces and parks, to low-density solutions with townhouses close to nature. All these documentaries reiterate the inclusion of natural landscapes, sunny valleys and parks as the only possible solution to create happy lives.

The representation of slums in documentaries helped to create a sort of visual cliché, which was broadly used also by British fiction films, not only during the same decades when
these documentaries were produced, but also in decades after. The inclusion of smokestacks, clothlines, and children playing in narrow streets were used to portray suffering working-class characters and to condemn industrial cities. British films, such as Love in a Dole, Odd Man Out, The Card, Room at the Top, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, A Taste of Honey, and The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, produced the 1930s-60s, demonstrate that landscapes of poorness had to be necessarily linked with dense urban spaces, lack of greenery, rowhouses and industrial zones, but never with natural landscapes, the countryside, or low-density communities.

American and British crime films produced during the 1940s-50s, such as the American The Street with No Name, The Naked City, Dark City, The Asphalt Jungle, Panic in the Streets, and On the Waterfront; and British films, such as Brighton Rock, Odd Man Out, Night and the City, and The Blue Lamp, use night scenes of urban spaces, isolated sites in industrial zones, empty park lots, abandoned warehouses, docks and alleys as backdrops that serve for persecutions, shootings, killings, or to materialize dealings between gangsters. Crime films portray the metropolis as a dangerous, crowded and impersonal modernity that refuse to support traditional moral values and any establishment of lasting relationships, neither the option to start a family. Metropolitan spaces seem to stimulate criminal behaviors, promoting a moral ambiguity, where everyday people may gradually become criminals.

American comedies produced between the 1930s and 1960s, portray the metropolis as a place to work more than a place to live, except for those that cannot afford a single-family house (the poor people), or for suspected people who do not fix with the lifestyle of decent families. The metropolis is usually presented at the opening of many American films by aerial shots of skyscrapers, where the big city is used to both contextualize where the story will take place, and represent the vertiginous modern world. The city in these films is systematically described as an inappropriate place to raise a healthy family, with examples such as Mr. Blandings Builds his Dream House, and Don’t Eat the Daisies. Both films illustrate how “normal” families cannot live in apartments and have to move to the suburbs. In Father’s Little Dividend, the married daughter that lives in a downtown apartment because “they can’t afford a better place,” moves to an extension of the suburban house of her in-laws, before the birth of her baby. In The More the Merrier, the single lady that decides to share her tinny apartment with two male roommates is involved in serious accusations that have to marry one of them; and in The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer, the bachelor obviously lives in an apartment, while the teenager and her judge sister live in a traditional single-family house.

The apartment, with its blurred boundaries between the public and the private space, appears as an undesirable lifestyle for common people, especially for Americans. Pamela
Robertson notes that the predominance of suburban spaces for the married white, leave the apartment as the only choice for excluded people from the suburban imaginary, such as singles, divorced, African Americans, working-class whites, ethnic minorities and gay people.\(^8\)

The stigmatization of the apartment is illustrated by American films, such as *The Lost Weekend*, in where the apartment is the setting for the emotional crisis of an alcoholic New York writer; *Scarlett Street, The Apartment*, and *Any Wednesday*, in where urban apartments serve for clandestine-extra marital relationships; *Dark Victory* and *Come Blow your Horn* that portray libertine singles who live in apartments but move to the suburbs when they decide to marry and put their life in order; *Pillow Talk, Return to Payton Place, Who is Been Sleeping in My Bed*, and *Sex and the Single Girl* that represent playboys living in downtown apartments. In British films, such as *Room at the Top, Look Back the Anger*, and *Darling*, apartment dwellers are portrayed as irresponsible individuals that reject family commitments.

The stigmatization of the apartment functions as a strong cultural framework that defines and shapes individual identities, creating the differences among the normal and the abnormal, as well as the poor and the middle-class family. In the same way that poverty has been associated with tenement buildings in American fiction films, American and British documentaries strongly represent the relocation of former slum dwellers in high-density modernist buildings, which with their distinctive aspect became in both countries the image of the poor.

On the other hand, films that portray small communities close to the countryside, representing healthy lifestyles and normal people, are illustrated by American and British Family dramas of the 1940s. Examples, such as the American *Our Town, It’s a Wonderful Life*, and *The Magic Town*; and British films, such as *This Happy Breed, Million Like Us*, and *London Belongs To Me*, represent ordinary families as the main social nucleus and the foundation of any healthy society. These films celebrate the decent life, the honesty, and the face-to-face interacción between the community, which only can be produced in small groups of single-family houses or low-density townhouses, in where tree-lined streets, lush parks and closeness to the nature seems to ensure the safeness and the confidence to face all kinds of problems.

In British films, spaces that represent well constituted and middle-class families are systematically portrayed with the inclusion of growing gardens. Gardens seem to be not only an important part of British tastes, but also a differentiation between the middle-class and the poverty of slums, characterized by lack of greenery and overcrowding. As James Maude Richards

\(^8\) Robertson, 2010, p. 18-9.
argues, the Englishman’s passion for gardening may be seen in other places than suburbia, but only suburbia, is where an Englishman can exercise his passion.⁹

In American and British films the bucolic natural landscape seems to function as a symbolic element, and appears as the most recurrent backdrop for romantic encounters and happy moments. In *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, nature functions as a trigger of conscience, as the instance of reflection and deep though. While Colin runs through the open fields analyzing his criminal past and taking decisions for the future, the only moments of happiness that Colin remembers are portrayed by natural landscapes. In *Love in a Dole* the Hardcastles, a struggling working-class family, live in an industrial slum in Salford. Sally, the daughter, falls in love with the socialist agitator Larry, and their romantic encounters are framed in bucolic landscapes, far away from the city. When Sally sees the natural landscape for the first time in her life, she comments, “Here is so lovely, make me see things different; I never want to come back.” Then Larry responds, “Think about these poor people who do not have any chance to a better life... we have to fight.” Here the natural landscape not only is the backdrop for love, but also a reason for the workers struggle. In *A Taste of Honey*, when Jo and Geoffrey go the countryside, is the only time that Geoffrey kisses her and asks Jo to marry him. We see them running in freedom through the open fields, sharing a chocolate, and making plans for the future. In *It Always Rains on Sunday*, the only time that the urban townscape shifts to a natural and bucolic landscape is when Rose’s daughter, Vi, goes with her boyfriend to the countryside to spend a quiet day together. In American films, such as *Our Town, Kings Row, The Magic Town*, and *All That Heaven Allows*, romantic scenes are always framed in natural landscapes.

American and British films produced in the 1930s-60s, systematically linked negative values with dense urban spaces, and promoted low-density solutions, close to the countryside, as the main desirable lifestyle. While poor people were never represented in small towns, neither in low-density suburbs, criminals and people of questionable morality were systematically portrayed in metropolitan spaces and apartments. These discourses, broadly distributed by diverse films genres, not only are the mirror of historical contexts influenced by the Wars, the Great Depression and the boom of suburbanization; the are also rooted in previous cultural discourses, broadly distributed in United States and Britain.

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⁹ The British architectural writer, James Maude Richards, first published the book *The Castles on the Ground* in 1946, which was re-edited in 1973. In the book, Richards explains that the English suburb is the prime example of a style of environment largely created by its inhabitants. In the Chapter entitled “The Englishman’s Home,” Richards argues that the garden is an integral part of the English suburban residence, and the suburban house, each one with its own garden is “the Englishman’s idea of his own home, except for the cosmopolitan rich, a minority of freaks and intellectuals, and the very poor.”
At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, the green argument emerged as a clear discourse that functioned as an opposition to the unhealthy and overcrowded industrial city. The green environment, represented through nature, open spaces, gardens and sun light, became the package of solutions to improve the life conditions of the population. The green argument was installed as a social logic, based on supposed rationalistic and scientific rigor, demonstrated by social studies, statistical surveys, and supported by the expertise of professionals and governmental institutions. Overbuilt and overcrowded settlements with low hygienic conditions helped to propagate physical illness, affecting the health conditions of workers. These conditions became to be associated with other moral behaviors, establishing from a supposed scientific approach, that overcrowding generates crime, vice and perversion. The green ideal as a clear unit of discourse, became a form of knowledge and an unquestionable truth, validated by institutions, such as urban planning areas, sociology departments at universities, political leaders, and influential writers. From this context, is not surprising that the two main urban models developed during the first-half of the twentieth century, the Garden City and the models promoted by the Modern Movement, included the green discourse as a relevant argument. Both models also distributed a group of statements that were systematically repeated, and articulated through precise laws, regulating the use of the space and promoting specific housing models through governmental plans. In America and Britain, the Garden City model was extensively developed in the form of new suburbs, and the “Radiant City” proposed by the Modern Movement was partially used to design specific social housing projects and some New Towns in Britain. America encouraged the single-family house, and apartment buildings were mainly low-price solutions for social housing. In Britain, the townhouse was the main model developed in suburbs, and high-density buildings were promoted for social housing too. The cities of both countries strongly promoted the dispersion of new neighborhoods, rather than the concentration of housing in the inner city, encouraging this process of dispersion through large investments in highways and railways, as well as through the promotion of car ownership, especially in America.

The emergence of similar discourses in different times and countries, such as the American kid’s films of the 1930s, which link poverty with criminality and industrial cities, and British films such as Violent Playground and The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner that also link the same themes and appear two decades after, illustrate that the emergence of genres that portray certain discourses may be explained not only by contextual historical events, such as the Great Depression or slum clearance programs, but by broader discourses that form the historical a priori, which are subject of any interruption or break, demonstrating that the discourse
that gives to the environment the power to shape moral behaviors of its inhabitants is a persistent discourse, and cannot be explained exclusively by historical events that occurred during the time the genre emerged.

An interdisciplinary approach that combines the analysis of the built space with the analysis of the cinematic space, serve to understand that spaces can be seen as the result not only of physical configurations, but also as the result of constructed discourses that function within a process of accumulation.