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The Place of Women's Filmmaking in an Interdisciplinary Architecture Course

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This paper explores the rich pedagogical potential of women's filmmaking for interdisciplinary courses that explore the relations between cinema, architecture, and urbanism. While many courses on this subject tend to focus on white male filmmakers (e.g., Alfred Hitchcock, Jacques Tati, Stanley Kubrick, Fritz Lang), in constructing a new version of this elective, I aimed to extensively incorporate women's filmmaking to the curriculum, especially opting for exemplary films that provide a rich basis to discuss the construction of gender and cinematic space in relation to one other. The course pays sustained, rigorous attention to women as filmmakers, textual subjects, and spectators while discussing topics including domesticity; borders and movement; screening space and spectatorship; cine-museology; national and transnational spaces; animated worldmaking; and digital realisms. Taking the classroom discussions on *The Babadook* (dir. Jennifer Kent, Australia, 2014) and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (dir. Ana Lily Amirpour, US, 2015) as its case studies, this paper considers how the use of women's filmmaking in an interdisciplinary course allows students to explore diverse strategies of cinematic representation that deconstruct and reshape gender in connection to the cinematic fabrications of space.



In 2020, mass-culture magazine *Architectural Digest* published a list titled ‘26 Movies Every Design Lover Should See’, compiling films that foreground the built environment (Martin 2020). Perhaps not surprisingly, the list featured only one film by a female director (*Virgin Suicides*, dir. Sofia Coppola, 1999). Such an omission only reiterates many similar inventories in magazines and on websites such as *Elle Decor*, *Taste of Cinema*, *Architizer*, *Archiol*, and *Dezeen*, an informal canon that helps shape popular imagination about the relationship between cinema and architecture (Fiandaca 2018; Kaisar 2015; Edelson n.d.; Martins 2020; Block 2020). The tendency to ignore or devalue women’s filmmaking parallels the majority of academic studies and syllabi on the subject of cinema and architecture even though women’s filmmaking has become a major focus of attention within cinema studies (see for instance, Froechlich 2018; Koeck 2013; Lu and Penz 2011). Pushing against this habitual erasure of women’s audiovisual conceptualization of space in both mass cultural and academic contexts, I opted instead to focus on women directors in my elective course *The ‘Place’ of Film: Cinematic Spaces, Sites, Settings*, which I have offered in the Department of Architecture at Middle East Technical University (METU) since spring 2018. Mindful of how many existing architecture courses tend to foreground the work of white male filmmakers (including Alfred Hitchcock, Jacques Tati, Stanley Kubrick, and Fritz Lang, among others), I extensively incorporate women’s filmmaking to the curriculum, looking to provide the students with a rich basis to discuss the construction of gender and cinematic space in relation to one other. Focusing on the syllabus design and two case studies, this paper explores the rich pedagogical potential of women’s filmmaking for interdisciplinary courses on the relations between cinema, architecture, and urbanism.

In addition to how women’s filmmaking receives very little attention in the studies on cinema and architecture, until very recently pedagogical practices have not been a favored subject for cinema studies. Indeed, as Marciniak and Bennett (2016: 12-13) underlined, one of the main reasons for this negligence is gender bias:

A persistent trivialization of teaching is also frequently the articulation of a misogynistic gender politics. Teaching is regarded in many contexts as a feminized practice associated with compassion, empathy, and, perhaps, child-rearing. One of the etymological roots of “pedagogy” is the ancient Greek term for the slave who escorted a boy to school, and the profession retains this degraded association with domestic service. Moreover, as a form of domestic labor, pedagogy is gendered, consigned to the culturally degraded status of “women’s work,” and, as such, a disregard for teaching is complemented by the overvaluation of masculine intellectual ambition

and celebrity scholarship. This is the restatement of a familiar, closely related series of binary oppositions between the rational and emotional, the mind and the body, the public and the private, research and teaching (Marciniak and Bennett 2016: 12-13).

If this misogynist gendering of pedagogy constitutes one reason for the hierarchy between teaching and research, as Marciniak and Bennett suggest, another is a prejudice against interdisciplinarity that keeps intact the boundaries between the fields of cinema studies and pedagogy. These hierarchical positionings and territorial attachments make it all the more urgent to consider the pedagogical promises of women's filmmaking as well as its possible intersections with other disciplines within classroom settings.

In designing an interdisciplinary class on architecture and cinema that makes women's cinematic praxis an essential part of its syllabus, Paulo Freire's acclaimed critical pedagogy became an especially important methodology, 'providing a range of theoretical and practical pathways for remaking and reenergizing our classrooms as spaces of resistance' (Bailey and Wilson 2015). Indeed, more than fifty years after its initial publication, the Brazilian pedagogist's critical methodology still remains a formidable resource for teachers who aim to overcome a unidirectional mode of teaching that Freire ([1968] 2000: 71-86) called the 'banking model', by which students are understood to absorb information provided by the teacher as an authority figure. Against this model, Freire ([1968] 2000: 80-86) proposes a more democratic and egalitarian methodology that he calls problem-posing education:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be *on the side* of freedom, not *against* it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are "owned" by the teacher (Freire [1968] 2000: 80).

I would like to argue that Freire's 'cognizable objects', in other words objects of analysis, be they films, buildings, and/or literary texts of the humanities classroom, have the potential to challenge both the banking models of pedagogy as well as relentless consumption. With problem-posing education, it becomes possible for the

instructor and the students to explore the ‘cognizable objects’ as open-ended resources without fixed meanings. This way, we may consistently return to these objects with fresh perspectives to reconsider, subvert, and add to our initial take on them rather than exhausting their rich potential by extracting what we need and moving on to the next item.

Aiming to challenge such a consumption-based analysis, in my own teaching practice I bring together Freire’s critical pedagogy with intersectional feminist concerns. In what follows, I will first outline the main program and procedures of the class and discuss how women’s filmmaking has played a central role in the syllabus design. Situating my own pedagogical approach to women’s filmmaking within the context of a course on the relationship between cinema and the built environment, I will then discuss two particular modules of the class, titled ‘Home’ and ‘The Global City’, to offer concrete examples of the significance of women’s filmmaking practices to the subject at hand. I use *The Babadook* (dir. Jennifer Kent, Australia, 2014) and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (dir. Ana Lily Amirpour, US, 2015), respectively, as case studies in these modules as they are open-ended, cognizable objects that invite a critical pedagogical approach. Accordingly, the sections on these modules will show how diverse representational strategies of these films made possible critical classroom discussions on the constructions of gender in connection to the cinematic fabrications of space. These discussions are important to the extent that they have challenged students’ dominant ideas of space use and experience by allowing them to comprehend that space is experienced and conceptualized as gendered and that spaces are sites of privilege/underprivilege in relation to intersections of gender, race, and class.

The ‘Place’ of Film: Cinematic Spaces, Sites, Settings

The ‘Place’ of Film is an elective offered by the Department of Architecture at METU to a mixed-gender group of 30-40 third- and fourth-year students each semester. While the course is open to all departments, the majority of enrolled students have been architecture majors who have never taken a cinema class before. The main aim of the course is to familiarize students with the necessary tools to critically analyze and historically contextualize cinematic representations of space. Throughout the semester, we consider how cinema defines, reconsiders, and reshapes the notion of space through a wide array of themes, concepts, and theories while also considering the changing dynamics of the viewer’s sense of space in different media environments. Each week of the class is devoted to a particular theme and/or location such as domesticity, urbanism, borders and movement, screening space and spectatorship, cine-museology, national and transnational spaces, animated worldmaking, and digital realisms. The

first half of each class features a wide variety of clips from several films on that week's subject and opens them to students' analysis while making sure to socio-historically contextualize both the key film and the theme at hand. Following this, we have an in-depth discussion of a film that students have watched before coming to class. The course has two main assignments that aim to substantiate the class discussions: The first is a film analysis exercise where students study the stylistic, formal, and technical aspects of a single film of their choosing in relation to its cinematic representations of space. For the second, students make their own film whose format (found or original footage) and organizational mode (narrative, documentary, experimental) is open as long as it relates to subjects we discuss in class. Through this exercise, students gain very basic filmmaking skills by hands-on practice while exploring the idea of space and its representation on film at the same time.

Within this context, I have paid particular attention to extensively incorporate women's filmmaking to the course syllabus in order to challenge the domination of curricula by male representations of cinematic space. Following Alison Butler's (2002: 1) flexible definition of 'women's cinema', we analyze films 'made by, addressed to, or concerned with women, or all three' as they relate to issues of the relation between cinema and built environment. While I especially privilege women's creative praxis as filmmakers, editors, writers, and set designers, we also attend to women's spectatorial practices as they shape and are shaped by the built environment. For instance, during the week on 'Movie Theater', we watch *Those Awful Hats* (1909) and consider how the nickelodeon environment began to discipline women's spectatorial practices by establishing certain rules of socio-cultural conduct (for further discussion, see Hennefeld 2016; Rabinovitz 1990). In a similar vein, the phenomenological relationships films may establish between their own mise-en-scène and the spectatorial space and how this relation might be gendered is one of our topics of rumination.

While selecting examples of women's filmmaking, I especially opt for films that provide the students with a rich basis to discuss the constructions of gender, the concepts of space and place, and the configurations of cinematic space in relation to both. In addition, I assign an assortment of short supplementary readings to substantiate our discussion on the intersections of cinema, space, and gender (for instance, Kern 2020: 87–114; Liggins 2020: 1–39; Massey [1994] 2001: 1–16; Grosz 1992: 241–253). As I have stated above, rather than assigning fixed meanings to our objects of analyses, we approach them via an open-ended analysis. While the discussions remain flexible, what I endeavor for students to derive from the study of women's filmmaking is a manifold and interlaced comprehension of:

- how lived space is not a fixed, essential concept but, as Doreen Massey ([1994] 2001: 3) suggests, is composed “of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism,” which are, in turn, open to transformation;
- how gender and ‘gender relations are socially, culturally and spatially constructed’ (Rendell 2000: 102);
- how certain spaces are socio-historically and culturally gendered, and how this gendering is also open to intersecting challenges, changes, perceptions and antagonisms;
- how relations between space and gender are mediated via cultural representations, and these representations, in turn, construct and alter such relations;
- how cinema is a particularly apt medium to both represent and reconstruct/alter such intricate associations and relationships.

In the following pages, I will focus on the discussions generated by the class in the modules ‘Home’, when we discussed *The Babadook*, and ‘Global City’ with its central feature film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. The goal is to concretize this critical pedagogy through open-ended analysis while aiming to achieve the above set of outcomes. In their ambiguous narrative themes and structure, dense stylistic and aesthetic choices, self-reflexivity, subversion of genre codes, and in-depth involvement with the relationship between gender and space, these two films have proved to be particularly resourceful for my pedagogical purposes. At the same time, both films speak to and deconstruct horror film traditions (namely, haunted house, stalker, and vampire films) that have formulated norms of cinematic space with implications for women especially concerning their vulnerability in certain places. Since students are already familiar with such genre conventions, they tend to more easily grasp these films’ feminist approach to gender-space-cinema relations.

Home and *The Babadook*

The Babadook centers around a single mother, Amelia, and her son, Samuel, showing how their already fraught lives get turned upside down by a monster that emerges from a mysterious pop-up children’s book. Amelia is an ambivalent mother - an ambivalence that seems to stem from a traumatic accident that killed Sam’s father while driving her to the hospital to deliver the baby. The pop-up book with the title *Mr. Babadook* seems to materialize out of nowhere in the bookcase of Sam’s room on the week of his seventh birthday, and its eponymous monster takes over Amelia. One night, she murders

their dog and tries to kill Sam, yet thanks to Sam's resourcefulness and affection, she manages to contain the monster by trapping it in the basement of their house.

The film's subject and its openness to multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations render it an ideal cognizant object for the purposes of a critical feminist pedagogy. The literature on the film attests to this open-ended, ambiguous nature of the film. Scholars have alternatively interpreted the monster Babadook as embodying repressed trauma (Mitchell 2019; Malone 2018), grief (Howell 2018; Quigley 2016; Jacobsen 2016), maternal ambivalence and frustration (Konkle 2019; Briefel 2017; Buerger 2017), intensive mothering (Middleton and Bak 2019; Still 2019), fear (Quigley 2019; Schubart 2018), and rage (Balanzategui 2017); they have categorized its genre as haunted house horror (Konkle 2019; Malone 2018), maternal melodrama (Balanzategui 2017; Briefel 2017), and gothic/Australian gothic (Howell 2018; Quigley 2016). At the same time, some see the film as an example of transnational cinema that thematically and generically exceeds its national context (Balanzategui 2017) while others claim that it specifically addresses its location of production (Howell 2018; Still 2019). In our discussions, we appreciate the validity of each interpretive path while structuring the discussion around issues of gender, domestic space, and domesticity. The key questions focus on how the domestic space functions as a locus of conflicting attachments that transforms during the course of the film; the relationships between the socio-historical context and the built environment; and the cultural representations' role in such connections.

I begin the discussion by asking the students to do a detailed visual analysis of how the film depicts the house using basic cinematic elements: mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing. The dark atmosphere of the setting fueled by the low-key lighting and the cool palette of blue, gray, and white renders the Victorian terrace-style house (where most of the film takes place) a claustrophobic one. We analyze the opening scenes where the house emerges as a living organism inasmuch as we watch Amelia and her son checking the closets and the underside of the bed from the perspective of the house itself. This, in turn, implies a menacing presence lurking within this dark and suffocating setting. Adding to this suggestion of the house's sentient status is how, between action scenes, the film repeatedly inserts a series of shots that linger on the empty spaces of the house. The opening scene of the film, featuring a shot that frames a free-falling Amelia seemingly moving towards the open mouth of Babadook/the House, underlines the oppressive nature of the domestic space (**Figure 1a** and **1b**). That the house seems to map Amelia's psychology transforming itself in relation to her feelings is an especially useful pedagogical tool in communicating how space is not a fixed concept but is open to change and transformation. Indeed, as the film progresses,



Figure 1a: Amelia falls towards her bed, **Figure 1b:** A page from the pop-up book showing the monster. Notice how Amelia seems to move towards the open mouth of Babadook in 1a. Screen grabs from *The Babadook* DVD, Icon Home Entertainment, 2015.

skewed shots of asymmetrical compositions replace the tightly framed and centered shots that symmetrically arrange Amelia and Sam, pointing towards the mutating nature of the setting in relation to the monstrous presence that absorbs Amelia. At the same time, I encourage students to consider how different people approach the same space in different ways: for Sam, the house is a source of endless play and magic tricks, whereas for Amelia's sister and visiting social workers the very same location becomes a yardstick to judge Amelia's mothering capabilities according to their value-laden presuppositions.

At this point, I steer the conversation toward an examination of the public – private divide and gender roles within the current context. To do so, I screen a series of short clips from the film that show Amelia at home and at several public spaces and follow

up by a question as to how these environments influence Amelia's predicament. Even though our current socio-cultural situation has seemingly blurred the divide between work and play and between public and private, this emerges as a class- and gender-based assumption given how as a single working-class mother, employed as an orderly at a nursing home, Amelia is overburdened by the gendered duties of caretaking and maintenance. The oppressive and isolating nature of domestic work and space becomes especially apparent in a scene that aligns our perspective with Amelia's as she manages to sneak a break from her duties. In the scene, a banal mall appears dreamy and magical through the use of slow-motion cinematography and long shots that show Amelia against the background of an airy interior of bright colors. The rest of the public spaces in the film belong to institutions that judge Amelia's capabilities of caretaking: a school, a police station, a nursing home and a hospital. These themes lead to a fruitful discussion on the intersections of class, gender, and race within the public - private space divide in contemporary times and whether for some, including Amelia, all-consuming housework transforms every location into a domestic one. In relation to the latter, we have a conversation about the film's interest in the boundaries between inside and outside. One point that students have invariably mentioned in this context was how the monster first invades the house as an off-screen, external voice and the phrases of 'letting it in' and 'getting it out' are constantly uttered by the characters underlining these boundaries and the crossing thereof. In relation to this particular discussion, I also ask the students to undertake an analysis of the scene where the roaches invade the house through a hole in the kitchen wall, which have prompted them to consider the irony of how this boundary-crossing leads to more housework for Amelia.

Such a relationship between the inside and outside finds its epitome in the pop-up book, a format whose fold-out parts, Lisa Boggiss Boyce (2011: 243) suggests, already tend to blur the distinction between narrative space and actual space. Indeed, in architectural vocabulary, *fold* refers to a structure with no clear definitions of inside or outside. In relation to this, we discuss how, as Amelia gets consumed by the monster, the house begins to mimic the aesthetics of the book itself as well as the films that Amelia watches on TV late at night. Indeed, the TV set broadcasting magic shows, melodramas, horror films, and news of a murderous mother is a significant connection between the isolated house and the outside. We analyze this aspect of the film as a self-reflexive move that points to the phenomenological relation between represented and spectatorial spaces. At the same time, we consider how scenes where the TV and the book both replicate and alter Amelia's world underline the role of cultural mediations in constructing gendered and spatial relations while simultaneously being shaped by these same connections.

The Global City and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*

Ana Lily Amirpour's film takes place in the fictional 'Bad City', and centers around 'The Girl', a vampire who hunts misogynist men at night. In a vein similar to *The Babadook*, the film's genre-bending style and vague narrative has led to diverse scholarly interpretations: a queer utopia (Abdi and Calafell 2017), a diasporic home (Edwards 2017), 'the border zones of a transcultural America' (Mansbridge 2020), and postindustrial Iran (Goodman 2021). Keeping possible narrative implications open, our class dialogue revolves around the construction of gender within public and private spaces in relation to women's transnational filmmaking. Building on the previous week's analysis of *The Babadook* vis-à-vis the socio-culturally gendered nature of the domestic sphere and its potential for transformation, we explore how *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* deconstructs the gendered divide between public and private space altogether.

Our dissection of the film begins with an in-depth analysis of the film's setting: the fictional "Bad City" and particularly its streets. To depict this imaginary place, Amirpour used locations in Taft, California, a significant aspect of the film to which we pay particular attention. What redefines the obvious California locales as a hybrid transnational place is the city's Farsi-speaking inhabitants, their cultural codes, as well as the Farsi-language signage and posters that populate the urban space (Figure 2a and 2b). This is remarkably useful for my pedagogical purposes as the discussion of this hybrid transnational setting that also mixes post-industrial wastelands manifesting a ghost-town feel with huge luxurious mansions helps students understand the socio-culturally constructed and shifting characteristics of space while also making them wary of essentialist conceptualizations. For this specific purpose, I ask the students to read a seminal text on space (Massey [1994] 2001: 1-16) prior to class and ask them to analyze the cinematic spaces in the film in relation to the critical tools provided by the reading.

Following this, I ask the students to consider the film in relation to issues of gender. In a manner reminiscent of Patricia White's (2015: 27) argument that transnational cinema of women filmmakers 'refigur[es] the imaginative public space that might belong to women (women's cinema) and what can be seen in and of the world (world cinema)', the film's hybrid transnational setting suggests the possibility of transforming urban geography and its gendered associations. Students talk about how the protagonist also emerges as a hybrid figure that blends the parts of vampire, super-/anti-hero vigilante, and new wave fangirl, while her hijab becomes a cross between gendered symbol, fashion statement, vampire cloak, and superhero cape. We consider how this hybrid figure signals the possibility of breaking down the gendered



Figures 2a and 2b: Two scenes showing the Bad City. Farsi-language signage and posters that populate the urban space transform Taft, California into a fictional transnational city. Screen grabs from *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* DVD, Kino Lorber, 2014.

boundaries of public and private space, a boundary that is a staple of the vampire genre as the monster cannot cross a domestic threshold unless invited. The character seems equally at home within the streets of Bad City and in her own space, which appears less like a house than a mixture of night club and dilapidated street.

In this context, the film's title that evokes the dangers that might await a girl walking alone at night completely reverses this premise by associating the source of such danger with its female protagonist, who poses a threat to the gendered and socio-culturally oppressive constructions of public space. Building on the previous week's focus on the contemporary economic context that encourages individual growth and leaves women to their own means in coping with domestic work, I ask the students to

consider the implications of an isolated figure fighting misogyny alone. While finding this aspect of the film problematic, students also usually point out how the protagonist seeks human connections and forms a community around herself over the course of the film.

Conclusion

One of the core goals of an architecture department is to provide students with the capabilities of comprehending, critically analyzing, and developing their own approaches to the concepts of space and place. Within this context, shifting students' perspectives into these concepts from essentialist ones that associates certain atemporal and fixed qualities with given spaces/places to ones that grasp their fluid, ever-transforming nature becomes especially vital. To the extent that cinema is a medium capable of displaying the fluid nature of space, a course that explores the intersections between cinema, architecture, and urbanism has the promise of allowing students to investigate various historical, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the construction, deconstruction, and transformation of space and place. The pedagogical use of women's filmmaking within the context of such courses equips students with the skills to understand the protean and socio-historically and culturally constructed nature of both gender and space as well as the intricate relationships between the two. The class discussions on the two case studies that have explored the complex intersections between gender, space, and cinema attest to the rewarding results of focusing on women's filmmaking in an interdisciplinary class on cinema and architecture. As cognizable objects with ambiguous narrative themes and structure, dense stylistic and aesthetic choices, self-reflexivity, and subversion of genre codes, these two films have proved to be particularly helpful to explore the possible diversified readings cinematic texts allow. At the same time, they contributed to the students' comprehension of how different cinematic representations of space and place that are receptive to socio-historical transformations reflect the unpredictably fluctuating processes of the gendering of space. Despite its erasure from relevant studies and syllabi, women's filmmaking, through manifold strategies of cinematic representation, carries a rich pedagogical potential for comprehensive explorations of how the concept of gender is conceived, reconstructed, and transformed in connection to the cinematic fabrications of sense of space.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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