The Mighty Model: Mock-Ups in Close-Up

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If social engineering is associated with control, the model is its ultimate embodiment. The model itself is subject to control and expression of the desire to exercise control in the real world. That is why some architects do not want to produce finished models. They view the model as a testing ground, a catalyst in the design process; they do not want it understood or seen as miniature reality.

With their project 'Mock-ups in Close-up' Gabu Heindl and Drehli Robnik move in another direction, presenting the miniature mock-up in movies as power critique in disguise.

Model Collection

'Mock-ups in Close-up' is an ongoing research and video project which collects architectural models in movies the result being an ever-growing video. Running in chronological order from Fritz Lang´s 1927 'Metropolis' through to 'I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry' (the last of the films released in 2007), the currently 103-minute long video shows feature film scenes (shots or whole sequences rather than scenes in the narrower sense) which include architectural models. Over a period of several years we found architectural models in 97 different films. We are still counting and still gladly accepting tips.

[As an aside, we are quite aware of the degree to which our video can be approached through the perspective of a critique of the 'ethical turn' (Rancière) in art and politics. In one of our talks given at Storefront for Art and Architecture after the premiere screenings of 'Mock-ups in Close-up' we suggested comprehending our video along a critical path leading toward the irreducibility of history to cozy phenomenology, toward a remainder of history. Ethical here refers to localization and habit, to the parading of cinephile memorabilia that would testify to a sense of a shared world in the form of a homely biotope of images; history is understood here as that which thwarts such an understanding by disallowing it to totalize itself.]

Our project involves a method of self-restriction – especially in making the video: 'Mock-ups in Close-up' is a compilation that does not deal with architecture or architects in film, but strictly with analog architectural models in film. This is one aspect of what we would call 'playing dumb', i.e., our stubborn procedure of collecting every movie scene with a model in it we could find and then presenting them chronologically. We quite consciously refrained from producing some kind of 'video essay' which would offer comments on the relationship between cinema and architecture. Also, we did not group the models in any 'meaningful' way, not even according to similarities.

What we refrained from was ordering knowledge such that the perceptible and the 'sayable' would be integrated meaningfully as to allow the video to 'say something about' models or have its audience 'see something' concerning models. And by subjecting ourselves to this compiling with as little epistemology as possible, we tried to avoid the traps of certain subjectivities, especially the subjectivity of the expert, the knowing artist, etc.

Let us move from knowledge to power. Speaking of power in the Foucaultian sense of the term (or rather, in the sense of Deleuze's reconfiguration of the Foucaultian tripartition of the orders of knowledge, power, and subjectivization), one could say that by playing dumb and compiling architectural models in movies chronologically, we remained stubbornly within the order of power, submitting to an implied force that propelled us from one year and model to the next.

Remaining with Foucault for a moment, if we turn from power as a relation of forces subjecting other forces to a neighboring set of practices, namely to the capacity for goal-oriented action upon things, then it can be amusing to see how our 'power game' of self-submission resembled physical model building itself. Obsessively collecting every model from every sort of film can be compared to the building of detailed,

complex physical models – which seems obsessive and redundant in times of fast digital modeling. This quasi-power economy of the model is quite nicely addressed in the 2001 Hollywood 'problem picture' Life As A House, in which a model builder in a big architectural office (Kevin Kline) is accused by a younger, more flexible co-worker of taking too much time to place grass on a model.

Model Extraction

Our video extracts models from their place or non-place (their chance appearance at the edge of the frame or caught during a camera pan) within the narratives of individual movies. We displaced the filmed models. Yet models are always themselves already displacements. Any architectural model is a displacement in space, time and scale; its cinematic imaging is an intensified display of this displacement and its displacement into our video adds another layer to this process.

Models are displaced from the sites of the buildings they represent. Thus regardless of how much of the environment a model may include, it is still the product of purification, an emptying of context. Models – in film as in life – are found in architecture studios or in investment firm offices, in presentation halls or storage facilities. Our video seeks this displacement-out-of-context by isolating the random moment of the model's appearance from its cinematic environment. But of course our quest to extract the model from everything around it produces the inverse effect. Context re-enters through the back door. (Maybe this is what history is about.) Film as an automated recording cannot but register what is around the model – with hierarchies of importance frequently being undone by our editing (in the extracts it is no longer possible to tell whether what you see and hear in connection to the model was significant within the structure of the movie or just audiovisual 'noise' necessary to balance the story and enhance its realism).

So the model finds a new context through extraction and similarities between extracts. A model hardly ever comes all by itself; we do not get to see the 'naked model' in the video. Many movie models come with their architects or commissioners attached to them in scenes which almost ritually start with a door being opened and a model entering the room, as it were, accompanied by its human servo-mechanism, the dynamic architect.

Very often in movies an architectural model is used in preparation for a mission of some kind: a military commando raid or a criminal scheme. This connection of model and mission highlights the quality of the model as a display of architecture displaced in time. We know from architectural practice and teaching that models can serve either a prospective or retrospective function, can be a tool for the design process to continue or a representation of the result. In our movie clips the retrospective function of models is often linked to investigations, such as clarifying the collapse of a bridge, or, more famously, reconstructing the circumstances of JFK´s assassination. In these cases the model's role within a power relation seems to feed directly into the register of knowledge: it serves to control a past situation by rendering it visible and subjecting this perceptibility to the possibility of making statements.

Hands on the City
(Le mani sulla città, 1963),
director Francesco Rosi

More prominent in architecture as in the movies is, of course, the prospective temporality of models. This is about having an overview and control over something that will be: a building yet to be built or a mission yet to be accomplished. This goes for all the Goldfinger-type scenes of someone using a stick to point out what will happen at what time at a certain location displayed in the model. From the 1960s to the 1980s there were a whole class of stick-users vis-à-vis the model of a bank to be robbed or a castle to be raided, of talkative planners who wield their pointing tool like a scepter representing their power over what is to happen in a space displayed in front of them.

If the temporal displacement of the model always involves power – not just a capacity to do something to objects, but a relation between forces and agents in a social field, then this is very clearly highlighted by the model's displacement in scale and by the way the film images interact with this displacement. To take the scene from the beginning of the 1962 Italian film Le mani sulla cittá – Hands Over the City, even if we do not use the DVD's subtitle function to translate the oligarchic Neapolitan city father for a non-Italian speaking audience, the imagery and scale of the scene make evident what the film's title suggests: the all-male group of politicians, city planners and investors really have a grip upon the city whose miniature they surround. The model of Naples´ city expansion which they want to relocate for reasons of profit is a white and purified abstraction from the contingencies, unpredictabilities and dirt of everyday urban life. The scene reveals a power relations in an almost sovereign structure of god-like magnitude, overview and unlimited freedom to act vis-à-vis the miniaturized city. The investors are 'before' the city in every sense of the word: not immersed in it spatially, not co-present with it, but ahead of it with their plans.

Big Men before small houses: men here really means male protagonists – with one of the few female architects in our video compilation, Michelle Pfeiffer in One Fine Day, being shown as an overworked single mother who drops and ruins her model. The Big-Men-Small-Houses-structure figures cinematically as evidence of the degree to which power is seen as monstrous, unbearable, obscene: Peter Ustinov's Nero wallowing in (rather than in front of) his huge panoramic model of a new Rome to be built on the ashes of an old one, or the Hitler figurations in recent German cinema and TV gazing out of the whiteness of Albert Speer's Berlin/Germania model are strong examples here. This structure, however, very quickly reaches the limits of its productivity as a critique of (social, economic, political) power as soon as it crosses the line along which Hands over the City had kept suspended with its sober imaging. Its impetus makes excessive capital power visible and knowable. The extension of the scale into an attempted 'naming of the culprit' produces rather nasty effects of surplus knowledge in the form of resentment. In this manner Gladiator's liberal critique of populist entertainment culture taking over power from republican politics shows us the huge hand and face of another Roman emperor placing toy gladiators in the arena of a physical coliseum model; the scene not only relies on an 'imperial' scale, but is part of a 'self-critical' condemnation of glamorous, unmanly and visibly gay aspects of entertainment culture. When, in a

similar vein, Idi Ami's grinning, oversized face pops up next to what at first appeared as a part of a city (and is retrospectively recognized as the image of a high-rise model) in The Last King of Scotland, the mise-en-scène arguably toys with associations of King Kong's mug next to a modern skyscraper; thus, it is only within the framework of a neo-colonial, racist imaginary that the film achieves its exposure of 'rogue state dictators' as paradigmatic incarnations of 'terrorism' and, at the same time, of the danger of recognizing them too late for what they are within the discourse of post-political consensus.

Model Destruction

If models are so deeply involved in power relations then, some of our movie extracts insinuate, destroying the model is sometimes the only way to change the set-up of control. While this is a rather blunt reaction to the power inherent to the model, we find a more subtle (once we might have said: subversive) approach in two clips from films with and by Jacques Tati: In Playtime Tati shows us that everything might be a miniature model, with a radio in the foreground resembling the modern architecture in the background; in Playtime's short-feature spin-off Cours du soir (Evening Classes), the very same towers in the background are revealed to be actual miniatures in the self-revealing final shot of the film.

Finally, such playing with scale amounts to an outright playing dumb with even more comical effect when the abstraction of the model is refused to be understood. The prospective power of the model is undermined when Fred Flintstone, in the 1994 big-screen version of the stone-age family sitcom, suggests to his new boss at the building company that the house he holds in his hands might be too small for future inhabitants. Even more of a refusal to understand is the way in which a scene in Zoolander extends the taking for 1:1 of a school model into a seemingly never-ending, awkward dialogue (instead of using it as the concluding gag of a comical scene as in the Flintstones example). In the process of unfolding a 'taking literal' of the model which completely ignores its abstraction in scale, the commissioner character played by Ben Stiller even comes up with a solution: what he sees as 'a building for ants' must, he suggests, 'be at least three times bigger than this!'.

This might bring us back, although not neatly, to an idea which we brought up at the start of this article: the potential usefulness of playing dumb when it comes to questioning or undoing the control aspects of knowledge, power and subjectivization. Along these lines, 'Mock-ups in Close-up' tries to avoid some of the traps inherent in a hermeneutics of wanting to show and know what is behind the image of the model, as well as in an ethos of cinephilia that would want to find familiarity and self-awareness in a parade of great film scenes. Stubbornly showing every movie scene which includes a model we could find in an order no more refined than mere chronology, we at least try to keep intact the hope of forcing history and the critique of power back into the picture, through the model's back-door.

**One Fine Day (1996),
director Michael Hoffman**

**Zoolander (2001),
director Ben Stiller**

**The Downfall
(Der Untergang, 2004),
director Oliver Hirschbiegel**