

Spectacles of the Sacred Secular: *A Review of Cathedrals of Culture (2014)*

By Cortland Rankin

Cathedrals of Culture, a six-part omnibus film spearheaded by Wim Wenders, announces itself as a “film project in 3D about the soul of buildings.” Aiming to redefine “cathedral” for a secular age, the buildings showcased serve not religion but the institutions of science, art, and law that form the foundations of modern culture. These iconic structures, located across five countries, represent a medley of architectural styles, from neoclassical to high-tech. Fittingly, each accompanying half-hour film is unique in how it manifests a particular building’s soul and makes use of 3D technology. What follows is a consideration of how each film endows architecture with a “voice” indicative of a “soul” and employs 3D filmmaking to express that essence.

Berlin Philharmonic – Berlin, Germany (Wim Wenders, Germany)

The Berlin Philharmonic is an ideal subject for Wim Wenders not only because its unique architecture provides rich opportunities for 3D filmmaking, but also because the building’s geographic and historical context offers a window into the tumultuous history of Berlin itself. For Wenders the “soul” of the Philharmonic, voiced by Meret Becker, a German actress and singer the same age as the building, lies in the dialectic between past and present, city and building, architect and user.

The Berlin Philharmonic has witnessed several volatile periods of German history. Developed as part of the city’s Kulturforum on land devastated by Allied bombing during World War II, the Philharmonic was under construction when the Berlin Wall was

erected immediately to its east in 1961. Ironically the Philharmonic, designed to encourage unity, opened in 1963 to a divided city and nation. Wenders places the past and present Philharmonic in dialogue through the inclusion of both archival footage and fictional sequences. Several filmmakers use archival footage to visualize a building's past, but Wenders' use of fiction sets him apart. Throughout the film, Wenders inserts black-and-white sequences in which the spirit of the Philharmonic's architect Hans Scharoun comes alive to survey the changed circumstances of his creation. While Wenders' intercutting of black-and-white and color sequences unoriginally recycles a motif from his own *Wings of Desire* (1987), he should be commended for engaging with history and urban context more than any other filmmaker in the series.

The primary subject and narrative structure of Wenders' film is largely dictated by the architecture of the Philharmonic itself. As the conductor stands in the center of the concert hall, Wenders' narrative focuses on the Philharmonic Orchestra as it rehearses and performs. Wenders offsets this top-down perspective by also aligning us with other Philharmonic staff, retired and aspiring musicians, and concert-goers, thus balancing the narrating perspective in a manner that complements the Philharmonic's egalitarian design.

Wenders deploys 3D technology to convey the principles of unity and democracy that informed Scharoun's vision for the Philharmonic. In the film's opening sequence we follow a young boy from the adjacent Tiergarten to the concert hall in an unbroken long take. By tracing the path of the boy through the Philharmonic via Steadicam, Wenders demonstrates how the architecture funnels people into the concert hall and unites their focus on a single point – the orchestra. Scharoun designed the hall with vineyard style seating organized around the stage to guarantee a uniform listening experience, but an

individualized visual perspective for each audience member. Wenders demonstrates the democratic qualities of the design by shooting the orchestra performance from nearly all seating areas. It is this utopian logic based in unity and democracy that made the Philharmonic such a powerful symbol in an era of division.

Wenders stands alone in the series for his use of stereophonic sound alongside 3D imagery. All the music in Wenders' film is diegetic and he often uses sound in addition to 3D cinematography to impart a sense of volume, whether it is through the booming resonance of the full orchestra in the concert hall or the singular notes of piano being tuned in the composer's suite. Both provide the room tone that gives us a sonic sense of place to match the sophistication of the visual one.

National Library – St. Petersburg, Russia (Michael Glawogger, Austria)

In what unfortunately would be his last film, Michael Glawogger chose the National Library of Russia as his subject. Commissioned by Catherine the Great, the Library was designed by Yegor Sokolov and completed in 1801, making it the oldest “cathedral” of the series. For Glawogger, the essence of the National Library derives from the annals of Russian literature which it houses. Accordingly, the voiceover spoken by Gennadi Vengerov shifts between the subjective perspective of the Library and quotations from 19th and 20th century Russian authors, including Dostoevsky, Gogol, Bunin, and Brodsky among others. Enhancing the fluidity of the narrating position, Glawogger complexly layers Russian and its English translation in the voiceover, making it the only film in the series to voice its subject in a language other than English.

Glawogger crafts his cinematography to fit the constraints and scale of the Library's architecture. The segregated chambers of the interior are densely packed with bookcases arranged for maximum storage, not ease of movement. The claustrophobic interior offers few opportunities for crane shots and our views are largely limited to the Steadicam-based pedestrian perspective of the library user, wandering from room to room. As we move deeper into the Library, the sheer size and scope of the collection become visual metaphors for the vastness of Russia itself.

While using digital technologies to create his film of the Library, Glawogger also acknowledges the threat posed to such places by digital technology. In a sequence towards the end of the film he plunges the camera into an e-reader device and uses digital animation to represent the virtually infinite storage capacity of digital technology that threatens to render physical storage sites like the Library obsolete. Glawogger clearly advocates for the preservation of material culture, as evidenced by the loving attention he showers on the books themselves. Instead of utilizing 3D technology to enhance plunging perspectives on a grand scale, Glawogger employs it in intimate close-up so that we can appreciate the decayed textures of the leather-bound volumes and crisp feel of their aged pages. Through such a perspective, we come to appreciate the hand-made beauty of books and assign them iconicity once only reserved for the religious figures they depict. At the same time, the water-damaged and acid eroded tomes also bespeak an ephemerality that begs for preservation, not only of the books, but also the institution and building that houses them.

Halden Prison – Halden, Norway (Michael Madsen, Denmark)

Although a prison is not an obvious choice for a “cathedral of culture” Michael Madsen makes a compelling argument for the prison as a defining element of modern culture in his film on Norway’s innovative Halden Prison. Designed by Erik Møller Architects and opened in 2010, Halden resuscitates the concept of “rehabilitation” long moribund in the penal system. Lauded as “the world’s most humane prison”, the complex seems more like a resort than a penitentiary. The central courtyard is landscaped with small forests interspersed with recreational facilities, cells are filled with light from large unbarred windows, and a model home featuring a kitchen and small garden offers a simulation of normalcy for family visits.

Like the prison design and correctional methodology in place at Halden, Madsen’s film actively subverts the conventional prison film or TV series’ generic affinity for violence and dehumanizing spectacle. We see guards suit up for a riot drill, yet never witness strife. We watch with morbid curiosity as a worker in protective clothing cleans feces smeared on the walls of an isolation cell, yet are not shown the cause. And in one extended sequence that seems too good to be true, two unarmed female guards jovially play a pickup game of basketball with several male inmates.

Madsen chooses the prison’s female psychologist as the voice of Halden, thus aligning us with the authoritative perspective of law and order. Through her narration, we come to understand the prison as panopticon. Opening the film with a quote from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Madsen envisions the architecture of the prison as the ultimate disciplinary apparatus – omnipresent and omniscient. The voiceover is the only empowered voice in the prison. Although we see images of guards talking, we do not

hear them, suggesting that the real authority lies in the architecture itself. The source of the voiceover is not locatable onscreen, but is invested cinematically in every space of the prison, assuring us that we are being watched, but from where we know not. The prison's panoptic architecture not only controls, but also interpellates its subjects, defining them as inmates – a process we watch unfold as we follow the intake of an individual prisoner.

A panopticon must be a closed system to function properly. Madsen therefore uses 3D cinematography to emphasize the segregating capabilities of Halden's fortress-like walls. In both the opening and closing sequences 3D overhead crane shots of the perimeter wall make the barrier seem to thrust towards us. From this perspective we not only register the mass and volume of the wall, but also come to appreciate how it functions as the most basic disciplinary apparatus through its ability to contain and define. Like the prison and the prisoners, we know little of the world beyond the walls – a distant landscape only hinted at through muffled offscreen sounds.

Salk Institute – La Jolla, California, USA (Robert Redford, USA)

The Salk Institute for Biological Sciences, commissioned by Jonas Salk, developer of the polio vaccine, and designed by Louis Kahn epitomized the functionalist tenets of modernist architecture. According to Robert Redford's film, the "soul" of the Salk Institute issues from its creators – Salk and Kahn. Redford makes the presence of the visionaries palpable by using both audio recordings of their voices and archival footage. However, Redford's "great man" approach is overwrought, particularly when he superimposes Salk's face in the sky over Institute's courtyard in a messianic portrait. Amplifying the piece's hagiographic aesthetic are testimonies from the biologists,

neuroscientists, and technicians that work in the Institute. As we follow them on endless walks around the vast compound, they parrot Salk and Kahn with platitudes on architecture's role in creating a *genius loci* conducive to scientific innovation. Coupled with the glossy cinematography and a downtempo electronic musical soundtrack by Moby, Redford's film adopts a "real estate porn" aesthetic more appropriate to Home and Garden Television than any serious reconsideration of the relationship between film and architecture.

Like many films in the series, Redford's cinematography is appropriately dictated by the architecture. The one-point linear perspective of the colonnaded walkways flanking the central courtyard, for example, encourages Redford's use of a continuous forward Steadicam tracking shot. Conversely, the open courtyard facilitates freedom of movement, which Redford exploits through majestic crane shots. The mobile camerawork mimics the symmetry and angularity of the Institute by gliding parallel or perpendicular to structures, retracing Kahn's blueprints.

While professionally executed, the film is unimaginative in its utilization of 3D technology, and in its handling of architecture more generally. Redford repeatedly opts for spaces that feature plunging perspectives, such as the central courtyard which leads the eye to the Pacific horizon, to showcase 3D's strength in conveying negative space. When the camera tracks people in over-the-shoulder following shots, for example, the action seems clearly staged simply to fill certain spaces with bodies for scale or to provide impetus for camera movement. At other points, Redford abandons the 3D aesthetic entirely, such as in a sequence where he superimposes archival footage over 3D shots of the site, destroying the illusion of depth. While this visual layering of past over

present could yield a productive interplay, as it does in Wenders' film, it is not exploited and simply appears messy.

Redford seems uncomfortable with stasis and over compensates through the use of time-lapse cinematography and excessive camera movement. However, the film's 3D cinematography is used to greatest effect when the camera remains static so that we can observe architecture in real time. In these rare instances, we come to appreciate in close-up how both texture and volume are manifested and sculpted by natural light. Kahn held natural light in high regard, giving it preeminent importance in his practice. While Redford's "day in the life of a building" temporal structure surveys the differing qualities of light over a composite day, it is only in scenes in which we have the time to meditate on the effect of light on a three-dimensional space do we fully appreciate Kahn's aesthetic.

Opera House – Oslo, Norway (Margreth Olin, Norway)

Margreth Olin's "cathedral" of choice is the Oslo Opera House, Norway's largest cultural center, designed by Tarald Lundevall for Snøhetta and opened in 2008. Like Wenders, Olin allies "soul" of the Opera House with the people who use it professionally, namely the dancers, musicians, actors and theatrical technicians of the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet. Significantly, Olin voices the Opera House herself, merging her own identity with that of her subject. Using variations on the phrase "I am a house..." Olin's voiceover articulates the building's myriad uses by both performers and the public. Unlike Redford's film, which focuses principally on architecture, Olin's emphasis is less on the "house" than on what it shelters. Accordingly, the rehearsals and performances by

musicians, ballet dancers, and theater actors form the centerpiece of Olin's film. Although strikingly filmed in 3D in both color and black-and-white most of the performances are shot in the building's anonymous interior studios and stages and thus largely ignore the uniqueness of the Opera House's architecture.

The film's most effective sequences are those in which performers engage with the Opera House's design and its relationship to its environment. In the opening scene, a female performer takes a dip in the adjacent fjord before entering the Opera House. The tracking shot that traces the woman's fluid movement from exterior to interior in a single take reinforces the Opera House's seamless integration with its environs. In the film's final moments, a group of costumed performers escape the Opera House through a door in the roof and dance towards the horizon in Fellini-esque fashion. Here the cold northern light of the cloudy sky blends perfectly with the white iceberg-like marble and granite exterior. As the revelers recede into the distance we lose our orientation and the distinction between architecture and landscape collapses. In Olin's film, it is the performer's body, the seat of the Opera House's "soul", that bridges the built and natural environment.

Olin's use of 3D technology stems from her focus on performers. As Wenders did in *Pina* (2011), Olin embraces dance as the ideal art form for investigating the potentials of 3D cinematography. Unlike Wenders' film on the Philharmonic, however, Olin shoots performances largely in conventional frontal presentation, positioning the viewer as an audience member near the stage or in the studio. Olin's use of 3D is most innovative when focused on the surface materiality of the Opera House's exteriors. In one close-up shot, we watch as raindrops stream down the tall glass windows encasing the lobby. The

depth registered in 3D allows us to see the lobby, the reflection of the fjord, and the rain-streaked surface of the glass itself as layered but spatially distinct planes of action, an effect that would be difficult to achieve with conventional cinematography. Such a detail-oriented approach to 3D leaves us wanting more.

Centre Pompidou – Paris, France (Karim Aïnouz, Brazil)

Karim Aïnouz examines the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris as another icon of artistic culture. Deyan Sudjic narrates the complex's experience of a typical day commenting on the activities of those who curate, maintain, and use the Centre's exhibits and resources. The voiceover, spoken with an idiosyncratic British accent, seems far too proper for such a radical structure and the film's conventional narrative structure and visual style do little to enliven it. Beginning in the early morning, we follow curatorial staff and maintenance personnel as they change exhibits and ready the complex for opening. Once visitors arrive, we trace the journey of an unspecified guest through the complex as the narrator provides a virtual walking tour.

In his strict adherence to the "day in the life of a building" format, Aïnouz fails to do justice to the Centre's controversial beginnings. The Centre was built not on vacant land like the Philharmonic but required the destruction of Les Halles, Paris' longstanding central marketplace, which was relocated to the suburbs in 1971. Aïnouz's treatment hints at this legacy of displacement through a brief interlude of archival footage, but does not consider it in any depth as Wenders does for the Philharmonic.

The architectural style of the Centre Pompidou is perhaps the most radical of all the buildings depicted in the series - a departure that Aïnouz fails to exploit. Designed by

Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, and Gianfranco Franchini, the Centre's "high-tech" design was revolutionary when it opened in 1977. Lacking a traditional façade, the complex's structural skeleton and mechanical systems are exposed, making it appear as if the building has been turned inside out. The transparent design of the complex seems to defy gravity at points, giving the occupant the feeling of floating, particularly in the glass walkways and elevators. However, Aïnouz does not embrace the liberating potential of the design and instead restricts our gaze to that of the pedestrian.

Like Olin and Redford, Aïnouz's use of 3D is at its best when he trains his camera on surfaces, particularly glass. In one sequence we look out the side of an ascending glass elevator at the picturesque Parisian skyline, complete with mansard roofs, chimney pots, and Eiffel Tower. Rainwater alongside a few bird droppings and scratches marks the location of the transparent surface in three-dimensional space. Positioned between the camera and the city, the glass exterior functions like a lens, framing and presenting the cityscape. In subtle scenes like this, Aïnouz mobilizes 3D cinematography to create a productive dialogue between interior, exterior, and transparency that encourages the viewer to reflect on how architecture itself can be cinematic.

Ultimately, *Cathedrals of Culture* is an experiment that should be valued as much for what it teaches through its failures as for its innovations. In addition to assessing the film on its own terms, it behooves us to remain skeptical of the project's design and execution. For example, one might ask whose culture these "cathedrals" represent? What is obscured as well as gained through the personification of architecture? And how else

might we conceive of the relationship between architecture and three-dimensional cinematic technologies?

The film creatively reinterprets cathedral for a secular age, but is less successful in revising the traditional geography of cathedrals. A more appropriate title for the collection would be *Cathedrals of Western Culture* as the choice of building sites is largely limited to Europe. The film's Eurocentrism localizes and artificially circumscribes the definition of culture, closing off potentially productive dialogues with non-Western institutions and styles of architecture.

The uncritical way in which filmmakers use anthropomorphic metaphors to personify buildings is also problematic. Although organic analogies for architectural functions are appealing and understandable, they are also ideologically fraught for those very reasons. Comparing a building to a person naturalizes and effectively depoliticizes the social function of the building and the institutions it harbors. Buildings are not people and can be appreciated on their own terms, but such an approach is largely precluded by the centrality of anthropomorphism to the project.

The championing of 3D technology as a new vehicle for representing architecture on screen is the most significant contribution of *Cathedrals of Culture*. Many of the filmmakers repeat and extend already common tropes of 3D cinematography, from an affinity for deep space to the ubiquity of mobile following shots. However, the most innovative uses of the new imaging technology occurred not in dramatic architectural tableaux but close-ups of specific surfaces. These micro-level shots exploit a hitherto ignored facet of 3D cinematography – its ability to render subtle variations in surface

texture and materiality. It is here, in the abstract details rather than in the iconicity of each “cathedral” that Wenders’ experiment offers its most promising results.

The relative novelty of the visual experience of 3D cinema often overwhelms our appreciation of the three-dimensional qualities of stereophonic sound technologies, which have been in use for decades. Although equipped with the resources, the filmmakers of *Cathedrals of Culture*, except for Wenders, virtually ignore the possibilities of marrying a three-dimensional sonic environment to a visual one. In an attempt to answer the query “If buildings could talk, what would they say about us?” each filmmaker relies on voiceover to express the building’s perspective. However, because of this emphasis on voice, environmental sounds are largely relegated to background noise. While we listen to each cathedral speak, we do not often hear the echo of its halls.