

Presence, absence and the activation of architectural space through film
Filmic framing vs. the structural framing of a house
Architecture as theatre

Emily Richardson [ER] The idea of the house as a frame or a framework for narrative, and the relationship between filmic structure and architectural structure have interested me for some time.

Emily Speed [ES] The difference between saying 'frame' and 'framework' is interesting to think about, and the implication of methodology that comes with framework. It's so rich, the change in language around that. I think of all my work as kind of coming from Giotto! which is architecture as a narrative frame. I think that's the crux of it, really: the frame, a fictional picture frame as well as a physical one.

Michaela Nettell [MN] When I watched *Flatland* again yesterday, I was reminded of Beatrice Minger's recent documentary about Eileen Gray, where episodes or vignettes from Gray's life are played out by actors on a sound stage. Her technique is unusual, abstract – this spare, theatrical evocation that merges fact, fiction and imagination. And I was thinking of the expansive, or imaginative potential of the stage. The women in *Flatland* are constructing, fabricating (literally with fabric) the apparatus of the set, they are directing this with their bodies and their movements, and in this theatrical, imaginative space they're able to break free from the structure or framework that might otherwise constrain them.

Then I heard Tacita Dean speaking at Frith Street Gallery last week and she mentioned Peter Brook's 'empty space' – the idea that you don't need all the paraphernalia of the theatre, there is opportunity for theatrical encounter in any space if there is someone watching. In *3 Church Walk*, you encounter this 'empty' space that you could say is then activated, or performed, in a theatrical sense.

ES I guess theatre is a big influence, but with that film it was the first time I'd tried to make something where people were in control of the space. Or they could change it. So there might be other things around it but what we're looking at is the only thing that matters. So there's a kind of spotlighting – which I think you're both doing in your films as well, though I was doing it very literally with spotlights – a highlighting of specific things that are quite ordinary, or quotidian.

ER Cadbury-Brown described architecture as a framework for a dance, so inherent within the architecture there is choreography and movement, which of course could be a theatrical playing out, or a very everyday movement through space.

On one level there's a sense of presence through the objects that have been left in the house. *3 Church Walk* had been empty for about three years when I encountered it – because of an issue with the estate the house hadn't been passed on to the person it had been left to in the will. So it had just been sitting there in a kind of Mary Celeste way. Bringing a camera in activated it again and allowed for some of the 'absent presence' that was inherently there – through things like the Anglepoise lamps, the way they'd been arranged and stood almost like people in the living room – to be articulated through the camera and sound. Everything you hear in the soundtrack has come from the house being played as an instrument. The high-pitched sound like a violin note, is actually a piece of wood being rubbed against the window glass. And you can hear the springs of the Anglepoise, the lamp shade, the glass and the tiles. With all of these elements I was interested in activating the space sonically. Originally, we'd wanted to do a live score from the house but logically and practically that turned out to be very difficult. So we opted for recording.

MN You talk about 'absent presence'. I am interested in this coexistence of presence and absence in the film, or of life and death. The film opens with a shot of fallen pine needles where Jim and Betty's ashes were scattered, so there's this idea that their bodies and their spirit are melded or merged with the site from the very beginning. Then there's a part where you mention Cadbury-Brown's obituary. It feels like there's quite a strong ghostly presence in the house of its former inhabitants. And you talk about decomposition – nature that's growing up around the house, but also decomposing within it. I was interested in how that speaks to these ideas of architecture, inhabitation, what gets erased and what is then remembered, or brought back into the narrative through the making of these pieces. And for me that related to the way we made the soundtrack for *Umbrella House*, in our case the sounds were all made afterwards in post production, they were fictional and didn't come from the house and so it is entirely constructed. But it gives a suggestion, perhaps, of former lives lived.

ER Although it was constructed, you were making sound with the materials you would have found there.

MN Yes were trying to mimic the materials and objects in the image – wooden ladders, carpentry tools...

ER It's interesting you picked up on that because I hadn't thought about it quite in that way before, that there are such strong signals of the death of the inhabitants, with the ashes and the obituary. I was sort of aware of it – the whole premise of the film was that the house was discovered after his death so that was a big part of it, and the chair that sits in the corner of the living

room signified the architect and where he used to sit in the room – there's a wonderful photograph by Eamonn McCabe which went with Cadbury-Brown's obituary in the *Guardian* where he's sitting in that chair. But it's so interesting that you point it out, I didn't really notice myself that I'd started with this idea of this scattering of the ashes. Of course!

MN It all comes back to animation, this idea of bringing the spirit or the life back into the empty architectural shell. And then with *Flatland* it is kind of the opposite, it's a huge celebration of life really and the architecture is a kind of core that expands outwards, rather than a containing shell. One thing I love about watching the films in sequence is how they build up to this joyous crescendo of the dancing; and then you get this sense of the morning after the night before when you loop back to *Umbrella House*.

ES With *Umbrella House*, I don't know how you feel about this, Michaela, because you've actually been inside it, but it feels like as a building it's almost a character in itself, separate from people. It feels quite resistant to people. In Calvino's *Invisible Cities* there's a city that renews itself every day. Obviously people have done that to *Umbrella House*, they've rebuilt it, but it seems to resist any history being imprinted upon it. Because it's so complete, without anyone in it. It's got this characteristic, which I quite like, not quite like a naughty child, but it's funny because it feels like it's saying no! I really enjoy that about the house, that it doesn't need anything else, or there's a refusal somehow.

MN A refusal of life? It might be something about its context in the museum. But it does seem to fit with Shinohara as a personality.

ES Yes it comes from him, and what I've read about him, I'm sure of it. It's like even though people lived in it and filled it, their experience didn't become part of the house, it was more like an overlay. Whereas in your film *Emily*, the furniture, the lights, everything is kind of 'of the house'. I don't feel a sense of absence with the objects that are left in *Umbrella House*, the empty chairs don't feel poignant. It feels like a stage set, it feels blank. It feels like possibility.

ER I think that comes from the restoration process, because in fact *Umbrella House* is fictional now isn't it. Because nobody has sat on those chairs, you're probably not allowed to! So it makes it into a fictional space and the question is whether this has now made it into a piece of sculpture, in the way that Shinohara perhaps wanted his work to be seen, as a work of art? I'm sure it would have felt quite different when it was lived in.

MN He talks about wanting his houses to last forever, to be eternal. That's quite interesting what you said, that the lives and histories have sort of touched it but—

ES they've just skimmed the surface.

MN And it's still there, it's endured.

ES It's a bit male and a bit hubristic I suppose, that idea of legacy. I actually have my grandad's first edition of Peter Brook's *Empty Space*. I kind of adore it but it feels pretentious to use it. It's one of those things that I've consciously tried to not reference. I've been looking at Anna Halprin who was a dancer, and who looked at dance quite spatially. It's difficult isn't it, trying to find other voices when there's such strong voices – that are usually male – attached to ideas around space and making. And I just mentioned Calvino! But that's always allowed.

ER For me, Giuliana Bruno was really the key. When I discovered *Atlas of Emotion* I was like, okay, here we are. This really is a different way of thinking about the articulation of architectural space, and that sense of the voyager traveling through a space rather than the very fixed viewpoint of traditional architectural photography, the wide angle, and everything is very static. It was really when I started to read her work and think about Chantal Akerman's films that I was able, like you say, to find other voices that spoke to how I wanted to articulate the architecture and the experience of inhabiting space.

ES *Atlas of Emotion* is an incredible piece of work.

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