What I saw in Venice – Biennale 2021

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Abstract

François Penz, in his essay titled as "What I saw in Venice – biennale 2021" shared his experiences about workshop in Venice – VENICINEMA, Understanding Cities Through Film – in September 2022 at the European Cultural Academy. To get to know a city though cinema is always an enjoyable and informative task, which varies depending on whether one has a prior knowledge of the city or not. But a prior knowledge of a city through film can only provide a 'theoretical' insight that only gets 'realised' while actually being physically present in time and place. In other words, 'watching a city film can be a three-way process: we see a film and gain a knowledge of a city; we then visit this city and experience a form of déja vu; we then watch the film again and the experience of having seen the place acts as a memory recall that gives a much stronger emotional connection to both the film and the city. Venice offers a layered richness of experience through cinema as a place to be discovered not only for foreigners but even for Italians. The aim of this workshop was to engage the participants' interest in the various facets of the relationship between cinema and Venice, the opportunity to reflect on its characterisation in the movies. The study of Venetian narrative films not only opened the path to an innovative reflection on the complexity of the city as experience but also provide a basic understanding of screen language that equipped participants to make their own short films.

Keywords: Venice Biennale, Venicinema

As I am about to embark in running a second film workshop in Venice – VENICINEMA, Understanding Cities Through Film – in September 2022 at the European Cultural Academy1, it is the opportunity here to reflect on what I saw and did in Venice in September 2021. It constitutes a record of what took place around this event – although it is in no way comprehensive.

Venice is a city that even the Italians visit as if it were a foreign city. As for foreigners...there's every kind of foreigner. Everyone brings their own homage. Their own admiration. Their curiosity. Their anxiety. Their complacency. Their avidity. Wishing to be in Venice. Wishing for having been in Venice. *Voice-over in Giro turistico senza guida* [Unguided Tour aka Letter from Venice] (Susan

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Sontag, USA/Italy, 1983). While in Venice in September 2021 on the occasion of the Venice - Singapore cinematic workshop, part of the Architecture Biennale, I often had the opportunity to reflect on Sontag's remarks for myself but for others around me. Being a city even foreign to Italians, I wondered if Venice could be construed as a form of heterotopia, transcending time and place, and yet a city that belongs to the collective imagination of the world. Clearly what had motivated the students, myself and my colleagues to join the workshop at that particular moment time, was driven by personal motives and a strong desire to be in Venice. This wish transcended any potential risks and other tedious travel restrictions associated with the ongoing pandemic. And yet if we had been re-watching Death in Venice (Visconti, Italy, 1971), as I did, we would have been warned by a poignant scene between Aschenbach - aka *Dirk* Bogarde – and the bank clerk who did not mince his words 'Asiatic cholera has shown a marked tendency to spread beyond its source…but when you consider the vulnerability of Venice, with its lagoons and its scirocco…Do you know that in the hospitals, there's not a single free bed to be had'. In the event the Biennale organisation was impeccably safe, and we were all able to enjoy a time outside time that we will all cherish for a long time.

Figure 1 Venice participants at the start of the workshop (from L to R: Reuben, Angel, François, Shireen, Karolina, Sumaiyah) (https://europeanculturalacademy.com/courses/architecture/venicinema)

And so, I embarked in this workshop, initially teasing out of cinema a reflection on what Venice perhaps was and is. To get to know a city though cinema is always an enjoyable and informative task, which varies depending on whether one has a prior knowledge of the city or not. For example, when I first visited Japan in 2018, I had studied quite a few Japanese films, particularly by Ozu. It gave me an instant sense of familiarity with some urban sights of Tokyo as well as domestic interiors. I experienced the same feeling while visiting New York for the first time. This is what could be described as a sense of déja-vu. But a prior knowledge of a city through film can only provide a 'theoretical' insight that only gets 'realised' while actually being physically present in time and place. In other words 'watching a city film can be a three-way process: we see a film and gain a knowledge of a city; we then visit this city and experience a form of déja vu; we then watch the film again and the experience of having seen the place acts as a memory recall that gives a much stronger emotional connection to both the film and the city' (Penz 2018, 54).

Venice is a city I have visited several times, also my wife being Venetian gives me an added personal bond to the place. So, no sense of déja-vu in this case but as I watched quite a few films while in Venice, and since I have returned to Cambridge, I feel a much closer relationships with the city through the cinematic locations that I could recognize. For example, in *Pane e Tulipani* [Bread and Tulips] (Soldini, Italy, 2000), the characters of *Rosalba* and Constantino were meeting in Campo do Pozzi, a square I became familiar with, being so close to my flat, and a key site in Corto Maltese's Guide to Venice (see below) – ditto for the scenes around the Campiello dei Miracoli. Having gained such a direct bodily experience with a place allows for a set of personal memories to get re-

activated when watching a film. It is no longer a theoretical experience but a heightened involvement with a familiar place.

Figure 2 The walk around the Arsenale in Corto Maltese's Guide to Venice – Below a still from Rosalba and Constantino meeting in Campo do Pozzi in Pane e Tulipani [Bread and Tulips] (Soldini, Italy, 2000)

I still have a long list of Venice films to get through, indeed according to IMDB, it is the second most filmed city in Italy (after Rome), so no shortage of material. Unsurprisingly perhaps the overall picture is quite different from other cities. While for example London emerges as the archetype of the modern civic dystopia (Cunningham and Barber 2007, 177), most Venice films can't resist its picture postcard prettiness. This is why so many foreign films are made in Venice or have scenes set in Venice. It has often been suggested that places are glorified by the presence of film stars but in my view, it doesn't apply to Venice, on the contrary – if you can bear it, watch how Bruce Willis and Michelle Pfeiffer in The Story of Us (Reiner, USA, 1999) are dwarfed by Venice's magnificence. And if you can't compete with Venice, you can call on James Bond (Daniel Craig) to engineer its destruction, with the spectacular collapse of Palazzo Lion Morosini in the Canal Grande in Casino Royale (Campbell, UK, 2006). Of course, there are notable exceptions, for example Don't Look Now (Roeg, UK/Italy, 1973) that eerily exposes the darker side of Venice.

Figure 3 Bruce Willis and Michelle Pfeiffer on the Canal Grande in *The Story of Us* (Reiner, USA, 1999)

Another curious phenomenon that distinguishes Venice, is that its urban fabric has barely changed since the 17th century. As a result, the 'cinematic urban archaeology' methodology, which I employed for London (Penz, Reid, and Thomas 2017), tracking the accumulated layers of moving-image material for key city locations over decades in order to chart the urban transformations, would yield little, if no benefit for Venice. However, the other important component of a cinematic urban archaeology approach, recognising the social and cultural mutations of a city, would prove much more fruitful. For example, in *Anonimo Veneziano* [Anonymous Venetian] (Salerno, Italy, 1970), essentially a long dérive of a couple in the streets of Venice, there are no traces of tourists – vaporetti, piazzas and calli are almost empty. But if we fast forward to the year 2000, the characters in *Pane e Tulipani* struggle to find a room for the night. In the intervening thirty years tourism had increased exponentially, hotels had become saturated, and Airbnb had yet to be founded in 2008.

Cinema has clearly documented this process over time, amongst other social and cultural trends, and so have we during our workshop. Cinema has profoundly shaped our collective imagination. Over the last 125 years, filmmakers have archived, expressed, characterised, interpreted, and portrayed hundreds of thousands of buildings, streets, and cities. As mentioned before Venice is no exception and the first aim of the course was to engage the participants' interest in the various facets of the relationship between cinema and Venice, the opportunity to reflect on its characterisation in the movies. The study of Venetian narrative films not only opened the path to an innovative reflection on the complexity of the city as experience but also provide a basic understanding of screen language that equipped participants to make their own short films.

Over a week, participants working across Venice and Singapore made short films, indexing a chunk of the world duration in the process (see the workshop's briefs in Appendix). This builds on a methodology that has been developed in a range of cities over the last twenty years, a process which has been documented elsewhere (Penz and Thomas 2020). The first observational exercise helped us to understand the world around us and how the moving image constitutes a unique form of spatial ethnography. The second exercise 'City Sinfonietta' asked for the manipulation of screen time and space, using the montage editing tradition. In the process we experimented with creative geographies, recording new topographies, and creating new maps of both cities. The last exercise asked participants to work in teams across Venice and Singapore. This was the opportunity to reflect on the art of future living in the age of globalization, pushing to the limit the notion of 'creative geographies', to imagine new spaces in which 'we might live together' (the theme of the Biennale), however remotely.

This was a fascinating exercise that forced us to confront our cultural similarities and differences – with on one hand, Venice, the ultimate representative of material culture, and on the other, Singapore, as a generic city characterized by its unique hawker culture, recognized as a key intangible cultural heritage of humanity. In the final review of the work, the films we made (available at: https://to-gather.sg/event/cavsworkshop/) acted as a thinking tool for an innovative reflection and insights into complex situations at the global level. It was a novel experiment that brough the two cities temporarily closer. I feel that I have experienced living in Venice though Singapore, a city I do not know – and if one day I have the opportunity to visit it, no doubt it will be associated with my memories of Venice...and a sense of déja-vu.

Figure 4 Final review at the Singapore Pavilion between Venice and Singapore participants on Zoom.

1. Appendix 1 Venice - Singapore Cinematic Workshop Briefs 17th – 24th September 2021

Locations around Venice and Singapore will form the focus of four short exercises in this workshop. Participants will work in teams of three to four. Lectures on Day 1 and 2 will provide the theoretical rationale for the workshop. The final crit will take place on 24th September – there will also be intermediate crits.

1.1. Exercise 1 Observing a Species of Space

This is a three-part exercise. Firstly, based on Georges Perec's practical exercise notes in Species of Spaces, identify and observe a segment of the world around you. First identify a location, then applying yourself and taking your time, start to note, sketch or photograph what you see around you. Setting up the camera on a tripod [if available], shoot a single unedited 2-minute sequence. In part 2, 'observing the observed' note what you can observe from the 2-minute sequence – compare with your original notes/sketches/photos.

Finally in the last phase, draw or animate the narrative layers that compose the urban environment that you have filmed.

1.2. Exercise 2 City Sinfonietta

This is a two-part exercise. You will first experiment with the manipulation of screen time and space, using the montage tradition. Using the concept of an architectonic of cinema, you will first be asked to make a 1- min film to create a taxonomy of key urban spaces that characterizes both cities – alleys, squares, edges, markets etc.

You will then make another 1-min film, composed of several sequences, made of several shots each, a 'City Sinfonietta' – in the great tradition of the city symphonies of the 1920s [Vertov, Ruttmann etc.] – albeit on a much more modest scale. Each team should first identify a theme

before filming – montage is a powerful tool to express concepts, about nature, cities, transportation – it can convey utopia or dystopia – and allow you to create artificial landscapes – storyboarding will prove very helpful.

In the process you will experiment with 'creative geographies'. You will need to consider visual continuities and disruptions; about how you can cut between visual analogies or like motifs, to make the shot-flow smooth; or from pattern to pattern, or from unlike visual element to unlike, if you want to create a sense of discontinuity and new meaning (Kuleshov effect).

1.3. Exercise 3 Mapping exercise

Based on your City Sinfonietta exercise, record on a map the new topographies of inclusion and exclusion. Using scissors and glue, or digital techniques, create a new map according to your film locations.

1.4. Exercise 4 Local versus global

Using the material shot for the previous exercises, you will be able to work across Venice and Singapore to create a new City Sinfonietta made up of shots from both cities. For this last exercise you will work in teams with participants from both cities.

This last exercise will ask you to reflect on the art of future living in the age of globalization, pushing to the limit the notion of 'creative geographies', to imagine new spaces in which we might live together, however remotely.

François Penz

Venice, September 2021

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Resume

François Penz, an architect by training is a Professor of Architecture and the Moving Image in the Faculty of Architecture and History of Art at the University of Cambridge where he directs the Digital Studio for Research in Design, Visualization and Communication. He is also the Director of The Martin Centre for Architectural and Urban Studies -the research arm of the Department of Architecture - and a Fellow of Darwin College. He has written widely on issues of cinema, architecture and the city: 'Cinema & Architecture' (1997), 'Architectures of Illusion' (2003), 'Screen Cities' (2003) and recently co-edited 'Urban Cinematics: Understanding Urban Phenomena Through the Moving Image' (2011). In 2013 he completed a major Arts and Humanities Research Council project – The Cinematic Geographies of Battersea. His monograph on Cinematic Aided Design: the Architecture of Everydayness will be published by Routledge in 2016. He is also co-editing a book on Cinematic Urban Geographies to be published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2016.

Appendix 2 Workshop Flyers

VENICE AND SINGAPORE

Cinematic Architecture: Workshop

JOIN US

Cinematic Architecture: Venice and Singapore is jointly presented by the Singapore Pavilion, curated by the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the University of Cambridge. The workshop invites up to 12 students in each city from Architecture, Art and/or Design to register. Working in small team of 3 to 4 students and using Venice and Singapore as sites of investigation, participants will engage in exercises that utilise moving images and cinematic techniques to uncover key urban and architectural narratives. The simultaneous nature of the workshop across the two cities will ask participants to reflect on the art of future living in the age of globalisation, and pushing to the limit the notion of 'creative geographies', it will be the opportunity to imagine new spaces in which we might live together, however remotely.

No prior knowledge of filmmaking is required, although some experience might prove useful. In terms of equipment, none will be provided by the Biennale or NUS, and the participants will need to bring their own cameras, smartphones and laptops for editing purposes.

WORKSHOP THEMES: observational cinema, city symphonies, montage, everyday street life, spatial ethnography, urban taxonomies, creative geographies, mapping, climate change, local versus global.

The workshop is free to participants and will run concurrently in the two cities from 17 - 24 September 2021.

VENUES: Participants will need to be physically present in either Venice or Singapore for the duration of the workshop. In Venice the workshop will be based in the Singapore Pavilion and at the NUS in Singapore.

HOW TO SIGN UP
Sign up for the workshop at to-gather.sg/event/cavsworkshop by 10th September. You will be notified by 13th September.

As participation is limited, we will be shortlisting applicants based on their responses to the completed form submitted. We regret to inform that only shortlisted applicants will be notified for further communication.

TO GATHER
The Singapore Pavilion,
17th International Architecture Exhibition,
La Biennale Di Venezia

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ABOUT THE SINGAPORE PAVILION

to gather: *The Architecture of Relationships* examines the different ways in which we, residents of Singapore, share space — in our city, with one another, and with the rest of nature.

The 2021 Singapore Pavilion features sixteen projects that represent the cross-section of local cultures and society. Against this cosmopolitan backdrop, spatial typologies such as hawker centres, community centres and housing development void decks are constant fixtures in facilitating and nurturing practices of sociability in the city.

Co-commissioned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore and DesignSingapore Council, the exhibition is curated by the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore.

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ORGANISING TEAM

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KEY DATES AND ACTIVITIES

17 SEP   **Keynote Lecture**
by François Penz,
University of Cambridge

Workshop Briefing

18 SEP   **Lecture Session**
by Deborah Howard,
University of Cambridge
and Imran bin Tajudeen,
National University of Singapore

Crit I
Observing a Species of Space -
Cinematic Spatial Ethnography

21 SEP   **Crit II**
City Sinfonietta - Montage City

24 SEP   **Final Crits!**
Local versus Global

For any further inquiries,
please email vbiae.sg.cavs@gmail.com