

## ***In the Mind of the Architect: Representation and Authorship in Documentary Film***

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Published as Naomi Stead, 'In the Mind of the Architect': Architecture, Representation and Authorship in Documentary Film', in *Architecture and Authorship*, Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner & Rolf Hughes eds., Black Dog Press, London, 2007, pp. 50-59. Note that this is a typescript, hence pagination differs from the published text.

This essay addresses the ways in which architectural authorship has been translated, represented and reconstructed through popular media, including narrative film, architectural awards, and especially through a specific, made-for-television documentary film: *In the Mind of the Architect*. Produced for the Australian Broadcasting Commission and first shown on Australian national television in June and July of 2000, this three-part series and interactive web interface was broadcast to critical acclaim in the local press, won several awards for cinematography and architectural criticism, and is now staple viewing in schools of architecture throughout the country. There is no doubt that it was a milestone in Australian architectural culture, offering as it did a snapshot of national production at the turn of the twenty first century. It is also an extremely well made, visually stylish, thorough and sensitive documentary film. But it raises many important questions about authorship in architecture, in narrative film, in documentary film, in television, and each of these as they are reflected in one another.

*In the Mind of the Architect* is a work of applied criticism, didactic explication and exposition. Undeniably, though, it is also a work of narrative; it is as much the 'story' of a number of architects as it is a description of their buildings. Written and directed by Tim Clark, a non-architect, it is a story in which the many interviewed architects are cast, often somewhat equivocally or reluctantly, as agents, characters, and most pointedly as authors. Through a reading of this film as text, and also of some of the responses to it at the time of its first screening, I will examine the reception of architecture in the popular mind, and the ways in which notions of authorship are produced and maintained there. This reveals a conundrum: even as many architects and theorists might work to deconstruct the pervasive myths of architectural authorship, the world at large appears unwilling to let them go. And while this mythic stereotypical narrative is moderated in documentary film, with its pretensions to objective reportage and truthful representation, the tropes and techniques of filmic story telling remain.

It is often said that film is the only medium that is adequate to the representation of architectural experience, and documentary film seems to offer fascinating possibilities for a unique kind of applied architectural criticism. As 'popular' media, film and television also offer useful vehicles for public education, an exposition and explication that could contribute to architectural culture by increasing the understanding and appreciation of buildings. This is particularly the case for a documentary commissioned by a publicly funded, free-to-air broadcaster such as the ABC, where the audience has a high interest and stake in what 'their' money is used to produce. Likewise, the status of the ABC as a national broadcaster also inevitably opens issues of a specifically or appropriately Australian architectural character.

Film has an established theoretical framework through which to understand authorship, and given the many parallels between film and architectural practice, this makes the lack of such a well-defined framework in architecture surprising. The *politique des auteurs*, as it was known amongst the group of film critics loosely aligned around the Parisian journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s, was famously translated and disseminated in English by the American critic Andrew Sarris, in 1962, as 'Auteur Theory'. His conception of the

theory rested on three premises: ‘the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value’, ‘the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value’, and most nebulously ‘the third and ultimate premise of the auteur theory’, which is

concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director’s personality and his material.<sup>1</sup>

While later critics such as Pauline Kael subjected these three premises (and the third one in particular) to a devastating critique,<sup>2</sup> the notion of an ‘interior meaning’ deriving more or less directly from the ‘director’s personality’ connects powerfully with historically determined notions of originary authorship, of ‘the Romantic notion of the creative genius nurtured by an inner spark of inspiration.’<sup>3</sup> So while disciplinary arguments around *auteur* theory have occupied an enormous amount of theoretical and critical space in film studies over the past fifty years, the concept of the author as an anchor or locus of meaning remains, and remains pervasive.<sup>4</sup> As Peter Wollen writes, ‘the *auteur* theory has survived despite all the hallucinating critical extravaganzas which it has fathered. It has survived because it is indispensable.’<sup>5</sup> Thus it is perhaps not surprising that the shadow of the *auteur* also persists in architecture - or at least in representations of it, as we shall see.

Paradigms of authorship are implicit in many areas of architectural practice and discourse, including the very concept of ‘design’ as conscious, singular intent. But these paradigms have rarely been as thoroughly excavated and examined in architecture as in film theory, and this opens a number of opportunities to draw parallels and contrasts. Of course, as soon as architecture is doubled and compounded by film in this way, one risks falling into a *mise en abyme* of representations of representations of representations. But it should be sufficient to say here that representations of architects in film are mediated, in turn, by film itself, and thus it is necessary to discuss concepts of authorship in both of these mediums together.

A good place to begin, then, is with representations of architects in fictive film. Numerous amusing examples can be found in Nancy Levison’s essay ‘Tall Buildings, Tall Tales: On Architects in the Movies’ where, in a rollicking descriptive trip through the many feature films that include architects as characters, she uncovers a whole range of absurd stereotypes, wishful thoughts, hoary clichés, and melodramatic characterisations of architects, in which Howard Roarke of *The Fountainhead* is only the silliest and most famous example. As Levison writes,

Central to the mystique of architecture – in life and in the movies – is the idea of the architect as a person of marked creativity, creativity so strong it can seem a primal or religious force, allowing the architect to envision what does not yet exist, and so fundamental to his identity that others cannot help but acknowledge it, with various degrees of admiration, awe, envy, and fear. Central to the popularisation of this mystique – architect as artistic messiah – is *The Fountainhead*.<sup>6</sup>

There is not the space here to enter into a detailed discussion of this, King Vidor’s turgid film of 1949, nor Ayn Rand’s novel on which it was based. But despite the many problems with both book and film, the figure of Rourke, arrogant and virile hero architect, casts a long shadow over any discussion of authorship in the discipline. It is easy to see the ‘mystique’ that architecture continues to hold, despite the ugly or just plain banal realities of actual architectural practice. It is also easy to see both the cause and the stake of the mythology: this is the architect framed as artist, and by extension it is architecture licensed and authorised as high art. These are far more alluring and romantic conceptions, and they hold far more dramatic potential, than architecture conceived as a service profession, or architects as competent, organised, careful and risk-averse professionals. And as with all myths, no amount

of demonstrating the 'truth' will completely dispel them. Instead the myth is amplified through popular culture. As Levison writes

That the dream-meisters of Hollywood, and even the more serious devotees of cinema art, should choose to disregard the exigent and adult realities of practice and fasten instead upon this seductive and adolescent mystique is hardly astonishing. One could even say that architecture, without this glamorous aura, would be an unlikely subject or setting for a motion picture. The highs and lows that mark the typically intellectual and sedentary lives of designers... do not percolate with dramatic intensity, and they lack the obvious political and social resonances, not to mention the life-and-death dealings, of courtroom battles, medical heroics, police sleuthworks, or even mobster musciefests. But the architect's mystique does offer filmmakers the chance to present wish-fulfilment fantasies in which charismatic and free-spirited personalities occupy a rarefied zone of high artistic creativity and enviable creature comfort.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while actual architects may be aware of the mythic character of stereotypes about themselves, they may yet have a stake in perpetuating such representations. This brings us to the case of *In the Mind of the Architect*.

The film's publicity declares "this series is about politics, art, history, poetry, philosophy... about dreams and despair. The passions of complex individuals, their colleagues, detractors and admirers. These documentaries aim to trace the spirit and politics of these artists in our predominantly secular Australian culture."<sup>8</sup> This last reference is curious – does it imply that in a secular culture we must fall back on the metaphysics of art, rather than religion? Or does it imply that architects are in fact messianic creative author figures, bringing forth new worlds? The very title of the documentary series reinforces notions of authorship; and the complexities and difficulties of this, its challenge but also its drama, provides the film with its principal narrative thread. The film is loosely structured around four themes: 'Trust Me, I'm An Architect' (Issues of Faith); 'We've Got to Discuss This' (The Politics of Architecture); 'I've Got An Idea' (Inspiration in Design); and 'I'll Make It Work' (Confidence in Their Vision). While the documentary itself is more nuanced and equivocal than these rather corny titles might suggest, each theme opens a different aspect of the first-person author's role.

The vast majority of the documentary is constructed from interview footage, primarily of interviews with architects, but also institutional and domestic clients, building users, developers, politicians, planners, and members of the public. The film opens with a revealing sequence. An interview subject repeats the question he has presumably just been asked: 'A single word to describe architecture...?' What follows is a series of answers to this question, from the interviewees who will feature in the subsequent episodes. But what is most interesting about this somewhat awkward series of responses is that some answer as though the question was about *architects* rather than *architecture*. Thus 'improviser', 'collaborator', 'caretaker' and 'some kind of believer' are offered alongside 'creativity', 'richness', 'celebration of life', and the several descriptive terms that are negative, namely 'painful', 'hard', and 'tough'. This response might have been a misunderstanding of the question, or a variation in the way it was framed, but whatever the cause, the effect is that architecture and architects become interchangeable. The second thing to note about this opening segment is that the only person to describe architecture as 'high art' is not an architect at all, but a politician, in fact a former prime minister of Australia. The fact that a politician is willing to make this claim, when architects are clearly wary of doing so, is deeply revealing. Throughout the three episodes, in fact, it is conspicuous that the architects largely avoid speaking of their work in terms of art at all.

Two things complicate questions of authorship in *In the Mind of the Architect*. The first is the fact that it was made for and first seen on television. Television is often perceived as an 'authorless' or anonymous popular medium, given that '[t]he bulk of its output – news, documentaries, soap-operas, serials, adverts, come to us without any obvious 'organizing

consciousness'.<sup>9</sup> Questions of creative agency and personal expression seem to have little relevance or currency there, even though, as with the earlier history of film, these qualities have been sought and pursued in the quest to elevate television to the status of a higher and more 'serious' art form. Another consequence of being produced for television relates to the imperatives of public broadcast programming: there is a whole branch of public television dedicated to the arts and culture, but much less of a space for general expositions of professional life.<sup>10</sup> The film thus sits within the field of arts magazine programmes, but it is an odd creature there – ostensibly an arts documentary, but where art is rarely explicitly mentioned.

The second complication is the complex relationship between authorship and truth within the filmic genre of documentary. If concepts of authorship revolve around the idea of an author's subjective and particular vision, then this is at odds with documentary's ideal of a transparent, 'pure' and unmediated reflection of the real. As James Naremore points out, 'the very word for the photographic lens in French is *objectif*',<sup>11</sup> and there is an old argument that film, as a result of its technical nature, gives a coldly dispassionate and honest account of the world. But of course this is not the case – documentary films by definition take messy, incoherent, and often contradictory events and situations in life, and transform them into a coherent, ordered, sequential visual narrative. As an inevitable part of this process, certain moments will be emphasised and made to appear more significant, others will be excluded or passed over. Documentary film is always a constructed version of reality, no matter how apparently spontaneous or truthful it might seem – it is always *realism* and never transparently the *real*.

This is of course also an historical issue, of changing understandings of 'truth' and 'objectivity' in the documentation and observation of the world, which has been subject to intensive interrogation through the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. As Allan Feldman writes,

'In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and earlier, "realism" was associated with modes of narration and visualization that presumed an omniscient observer detached from and external to the scenography being presented. It was linked to formal pictorial perspectivism and narrative linearity with all its assumptions about causality, space, and time. Yet during this period, aesthetic and scientific attention gradually detached itself from exclusive concentration on the scene observed in order to dissect and realistically depict the act of observation itself... Once perception itself became one object, among others, of realist representation, the perceiving subject could no longer remain independent from the scene of visualization.'<sup>12</sup>

In this context, and in the case of *In The Mind of the Architect*, this raises the question of how and why a documentary *filmmaker* can efface the position of author so effectively, but in doing so fetishise and amplify the authorship of *architects* as subjects. The relation between the invisible but all-pervasive film maker/author, and the very visible but rather ambivalent authorship of its architect subjects, is of key importance.

Feldman writes that '[w]hen Jean-Luc Godard declared that cinema is truth 24 times a minute, he was not asserting that cinematic content is reducible to pure information so much as noting that cinema makes truth claims 24 frames a minute. More importantly, it is the cinematic film frame that actually makes fast-forward claims to be truthful and real.'<sup>13</sup> These truth claims are made most forcefully in documentary film, partly by an 'absolute insistence ... on cloaking directorial presence in signifiers of neutrality, distance, and objectivity.'<sup>14</sup> This artifice has been explicitly challenged and uncovered, in recent years, in a new genre of documentary which foregrounds the subjectivity and auteur status of the documentary maker, and which blurs distinctions between standards of representation in fiction and non-fiction film.

The argument is that while the documentary genre dictates that the *content* should present unmediated truth, there is still considerable licence available in filmic *form*. Paul Arthur has argued that a 'new breed of non-fiction is edging ever closer to stylistic

prerogatives of fictional cinema,<sup>15</sup> including the use of music to encourage emotional engagement, slow motion and other camera techniques which emphasise parts of the ‘action’, and the use of re-enactment. These are all, in Arthur’s terms, ‘in the process of forming a hybridized film language based not on conventions of factual argument or evidence but on the construction of spatial or temporal unities, suspense, character identification, and clearly-defined climactic action.’<sup>16</sup> While this extreme is clearly not applicable to *In the Mind of the Architect*, with its careful journalistic standards, there is perhaps an inkling even here of a character identification akin to that we would conventionally find in narrative film. Michael Rabinger writes that

In character-driven documentaries, a particular character or group is chosen to generate the basic situation, then followed and perhaps interrogated over time to illustrate the situation’s causes and its consequences. What emerges, after editing, is never actuality but an artfully constructed impression of it<sup>17</sup>

On one level, the attention to architects in the film is not at all surprising. Following the art-historical model, architectural discourse very often uses the names of architect-authors as an organisational or curatorial device, standing as a code-word not only for a particular body of work, but for the historicized set of ideas and techniques associated with it. Given that the subject matter of the documentary is loosely thematic, that it is not organised chronologically or regionally or typologically, then the device of using the speakers’ own pronouncements to guide the arrangement of the material is conventional enough. But what is more unusual in this film is the close and explicit attention on these authors *prior to* or distinct from their work – one sometimes has the impression that the buildings featured are only an excuse or vehicle to hear more from the architects. This begs the question, of course, of whether an author is still an author if seen in isolation from their ‘texts’, and the further question of why anyone would want to make such a separation.

Many of the interviews are filmed with the architects standing, sitting, or walking in their own buildings. As well as the expected images of them sketching, examining models, talking on the telephone and being surrounded by the professional detritus of their offices, there are also a series of more dynamic scenarios. These include architect Barrie Marshall’s black Porsche passing through the Melbourne Gateway project designed by his firm Denton Corker Marshall, architect Richard Lepplastrier rowing his plywood rowboat on Pittwater near where he lives, and architect Kim Crestani at the wheel, discussing suburban mass housing as a succession of brick-veneer ‘McMansions’ glide by out the side window. ‘Talking head’ shots are interspersed with footage of interiors, facades, and spaces in use, and featured buildings are identified by title and architect through on-screen credits. There are also a series of aphoristic quotations interspersed throughout the film as section breaks, many of them also anchored by a canonical author, namely Le Corbusier with the house as a machine for living, Mies with less is more, Venturi with less is a bore, and so on. But aside from these overt structuring devices, the interviewees are very much at the centre of the film, and they speak for themselves. There is never any appearance of a presenter or reporter; an interviewer is never visible in the frame, and prompting questions are never audible. There is a narrator (the voice of the well-known Australian actor David Wenham) who makes a brief commentary between interviews, and this narrator’s script bears some scrutiny, since it undertakes a wide variety of sometimes incongruous tasks. These include summarising and reinforcing what has been said in the preceding interviews, making provocative statements, posing rhetorical questions, making transitions between different buildings or ideas, and placing work in historical context. But in terms of an ‘enunciative presence’ or ‘organizing consciousness’, to use the language of auteur theory, this narration is a very mild intervention indeed. In spite of this, early in the film, the narration comes as close as the film ever does to defining its own set of aims and purposes. After a brief discussion of the utopianism of early modernism, with its ideal that ‘the architect, cast as hero, would create a better life for everyone’, followed by a series of interview snippets where architects discuss some of the problems of the modern movement, the narrator says that

Somewhere people lost faith in modern architecture. Today only three percent of new houses in Australia are designed by architects. Has architecture lost its way? Do architects still care about the big ideas... And do those ideas still have the potential to change our lives?

In fact, it could be said that much of the film is dedicated to mourning the *lost* authorship of the architect in contemporary Australia, the apparent loss of creative agency and autonomous personal expression brought about by current institutional and commercial constraints. Its rhetorical question, 'has architecture lost its way?' could equally be the question of whether architects have lost their authorship, and what is to become of architecture in its absence.

In this context, it is significant that auteur theory in film arose at precisely the time when film was attempting to carve a niche for itself in legitimate academic and philosophical discourse, and that one of the principal techniques for doing so was to distinguish serious, 'authorised', *art* film from the low, mass entertainment and escapism of 'the movies'. As Rosalind Coward writes, film

was regarded as not worthy of serious study before the 1950s. Much of this attitude derived, as in the case of television today, from an unwillingness to treat an industrial, collective and popular medium as likely to be worthy of serious critical attention, and ... it is worth noting here the way in which criticism inscribes the creative individual as the crucial factor, differentiating art from mass entertainment.<sup>18</sup>

The parallel to architecture, with its hierarchical elevation above and within building, is striking. One of the key denominators of architecture is its identification with and by an architect, unlike the anonymous or generic actions of builders. We might say that 'authored' architecture is analogous to 'art' cinema, with all its connotations of elite status and cultural capital, aesthetic inaccessibility, and the licence of art. This claim to singular artistic agency, the pure expression of the self in what appears such a mixed, technical, and collaborative art, is equally a claim to legitimacy as an art form. As Coward notes, 'it is an interesting reflection on the interdependency of the idea of art and the idea of the individual artist, that the higher the valuation of the medium *as an art*, the more likely you are to find the quest to establish an author for the work.'<sup>19</sup>

There are also significant parallels between architecture and film on the level of production – they are both industrialised, collaborative, and thoroughly inculcated within cycles of capitalist profit making. The problems with identifying one individual as the auteur of a film are similar to those of identifying one individual as the author of a building.<sup>20</sup> But curiously, this question of attribution does provide a moment of contrast between the two – while filmic authorship most often rests with the director, it has also been ascribed to others – variously writers, photographers, composers, choreographers, and stars, have all been awarded the term at various times.<sup>21</sup> As Naremore writes, it 'has even described the old-style corporate executives ... who functioned as impresarios and wanted to keep their names before the public.'<sup>22</sup> The equivalent in architecture, of the builder or engineer or client being ascribed authorship, seems unlikely. This is perhaps because of the perceived or actual level of 'creativity' in those professions – while film is widely acknowledged to be an accretion of creative works by several creative individuals, in architecture it is architects who claim, and guard, that privileged quality. Any focus on the authorial qualities of creativity, autonomy, singularity, and originality, will always coincide with the *avant-garde* architectural ideal of always breaking new creative ground.

*In the Mind of the Architect* seems to mediate then, sometimes uneasily, between the romantic mythical stereotype of architectural authorship represented so powerfully in narrative film, and the actualities of a highly equivocal, etiolated and in fact rather sheepish architectural authorship projected by the film's interviewees, as conditioned by actual contemporary practice. But it would be wrong to say that there was no projection or construction of architectural authorship here. Any canny architect knows that the projection

of a stylish and creative persona makes good commercial sense in terms of publicity, and there was much to be read into the participants' manner of speaking and dressing. This was an image not lost on the audience, but it was not always well received,<sup>23</sup> a reaction which extended to the visual style of the documentary itself.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it is an instance of the reputed egalitarian streak in Australian society, but there was considerable audience antagonism directed towards the perceived elitism of the architects portrayed, and towards class and labour divisions in the wider architectural profession.<sup>25</sup>

One of the things that made the production unique was this ability on the part of the audience to respond immediately, in a series of 'web chat' discussions directly following each broadcast, and thus to interact directly with a panel of architects featured in the programme. These discussions, moderated by Janne Ryan the series producer, were then archived, forming a fascinating record of the immediate public reaction to each film. Thus it is not simply a documentary, but also an interactive interface.<sup>26</sup> More than three hundred posts were made in the web chat, which was a lively and immediate, if rather unruly, means of opening discussion on architectural matters amongst the general public. The curious thing was the occasional hostility of the audience reaction, which was particularly marked in its belligerence around issues of authorship – the point at which the architect's wishes take precedence over the client's. It appears that, for all the myth and mystique of architectural authorship in the public mind, it also has a dark side: that of the prima donna aesthete, out of touch with reality and recklessly spending other people's money towards their own self-aggrandisement. Of course, given the limited number and self-selected character of the respondents, there is a limit to the conclusions that can be drawn from this forum – it cannot be regarded as a representative survey. But on an anecdotal level, the discussions are revealing – many pressing issues surrounding the role, audience, and authorship of architecture were raised, in the language and terms of a lay public.

Perhaps less surprising was the reaction from the architectural profession, whose rather snide amusement was notable in the days and weeks after the broadcast. Much of the pleasure, for architects, stemmed from knowing (at least by reputation) the people portrayed, and comparing their mannered self-presentation in the documentary to what was known of them in 'real life'. The hilarity seemed largely *Schadenfreude*, stemming from several revealing moments in the interviews, such as the wife of architect Sean Godsell explaining how, the night after moving into the newly completed family home designed by her husband, she realised that there was no privacy at all and she would have to get changed in the cupboard. Her patience and willingness to accommodate such an uncompromising design strategy in the name of her husband's profession seemed to only make the situation more absurd, and the scenario was also commented on in the public web chat following the episode.<sup>27</sup> But the pertinent thing to note here is the sense, among the architectural audience, that a spotlight had been turned on the profession; there was suddenly a sense that the world (or at least Australia) was watching. The responsibility of these architects as spokespeople for the profession, introducing architecture to a national, popular audience, was keenly felt. Those architects who participated in the online discussion were clearly also aware of this new audience for architecture, and of the potential it held for a new architectural constituency, new clients, and new work. This is far from a trivial or incidental point: in a world where authorship is increasingly commercialised, it takes on a new range of meanings as a specialised mode of interaction and identification with an audience. Discussing the same issue in film, Tim Corrigan has noted that

Since the 1970s, the commercial conditioning of this figure [the author/auteur] has successfully evacuated it of most of its expressive power and textual coherence; simultaneously, this commercial conditioning has called renewed attention to the layered pressures of auteurism as an agency that establishes different modes of identification with its audiences.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, architects self-presentation as authors in documentary film is complicated by commercial concerns, the influence of public relations, and more fundamentally by its being a

means of communicating and connecting with an audience which is also a body of potential clients.

Another direction through which these same issues of authorship and reception might be examined here, in closing, is through the study of architectural awards. It is worthwhile to zoom out for a moment to the more broad discursive context of the Australian architectural scene, and the way that it is viewed internationally. This was neatly emblematised in the awarding of the 2002 Pritzker Architecture Prize to the Australian architect Glenn Murcutt, who famously works alone, designing singular neo-Miesian pavilions in the bush.

As (arguably) the most successful architect in Australian history, Murcutt's influence looms large over the local scene, and his own personal mythology is thoroughly infused with the mystique of the author. He is one of the architects featured in *In the Mind of the Architect*, where he is described as 'the man most often identified with Australian architecture... the marriage broker between the Australian landscape and European occupation... between the old world and the new.' In light of this, it is evident that his work can be located at the centre of debates not only about architectural authorship, but also its imbrication with architectural identity and authenticity. Indeed, it could be argued that the mythology of (lone white male) authorship is particularly strong in Australia, where it is amplified – from the outside, at least – by a kind of frontier exoticism, and a fetishisation of site, climate, and place. This is both manifest and reinforced in the jury citation for Murcutt's Pritzker Prize, where at the same time as Murcutt's solo practice is celebrated for its singularity, his apparent uniqueness and small output is also imbued with a broad significance and applicability, one which seems able to stand for the identity of Australian architecture more generally.

The Pritzker prize was established in 1979, and is awarded annually. With its generous prize money and reputation as the 'Nobel Prize for architecture', it is arguably the most prestigious award for architects in the world today. Its stated purpose is to 'honor annually a living architect whose built work demonstrates a combination of those qualities of talent, vision and commitment, which has produced consistent and significant contributions to humanity and the built environment through the art of architecture.'<sup>29</sup> The fact that the prize is awarded *to an architect* is instructive. It is not presented to a building, as are many other architectural prizes, including the Australian national awards system administered by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. It is the author who is recognised and rewarded by the Pritzker Prize, as much as the works themselves. In the jury citation for Murcutt's 2002 Prize award, J. Carter Brown, the jury chairman, commented that

Glenn Murcutt occupies a unique place in today's architectural firmament. In an age obsessed with celebrity, the glitz of our 'starchitects,' backed by large staffs and copious public relations support, dominate the headlines. As a total contrast, our laureate works in a one-person office on the other side of the world from much of the architectural attention, yet has a waiting list of clients, so intent is he to give each project his personal best.<sup>30</sup>

This is a powerful image: the 'unique' master, working humbly alone, unaided by assistant or by computer, armed only with a pencil and a vision and giving his 'personal best' to the design of elegant pavilions on pristine rural or wilderness sites. There is also an irony here; in Australian circles Murcutt is perhaps the closest thing there is to a 'starchitect', he is certainly the most well known by the general public, and just because he does not have a 'large staff' or 'copious public relations support' does not mean he is not a celebrity. Clearly, though, he is seen by the jury as an *authentic* celebrity rather than one who has been framed and manufactured by spin merchants. Likewise, his marginal location, 'on the other side of the world from much of the architectural attention', is upturned, in a curious dialectical reversal, to position him as a particularly deserving winner. It is as though the Pritzker prize, itself a key instrument in the construction of architectural celebrity, has unearthed an genuine but little-known star, who gleams all the brighter for having been plucked from modest and marginal obscurity at the periphery of the known world. This is perhaps the most interesting irony of all: it is surely the Pritzker Prize, with its populist overtones and international



pretensions, which is partly responsible for ‘dominating the headlines’ with ‘the glitz of our ‘starchitects’’ in the first place. It could also presumably be expected to transform Murcutt, as laureate, into the exact opposite of the (modest, obscure, marginal) qualities he is here applauded for. Carlos Jimenez, another juror and professor of architecture at Rice University, writes of Murcutt’s work

Nurtured by the mystery of place and the continual refinement of the architect’s craft, Glenn Murcutt’s work illustrates the boundless generosity of a timely and timeless vision. The conviction, beauty and optimism so evident in the work of this most singular, yet universal architect remind us that architecture is foremost an ennobling word for humanity.

Here again we see a reference to Murcutt, architect/author, as paradoxically ‘singular, yet universal’, with a ‘timely and timeless vision’. The work appears to be secondary – or at least to be framed as entirely relative to and dependent upon the architect himself. The last line even leaves open the ambiguous possibility that it is the architect’s own ‘humanity’, his ‘conviction’ and ‘optimism’, that infuses his work with such an ‘ennobling’ spirit. Slipping easily backwards and forwards between the characteristics of the built work and those of the architect, between subjective intention and objective form, the passage illustrates a very high level of identification between author and architectural work.

The idea of the architect as lone hero genius requires that the rosette of authorship be pinned on one lapel alone, and in Murcutt’s case that is conveniently emblematised by his being a sole practitioner. This is surely part of the appeal of Murcutt’s work: its scale is such that it *could* conceivably be all the work of one man, or at least its modest size makes it easier to overlook the inevitable industrial collaborative nature of architecture. The work is appealing, then, for the apparent equivalence or interchangeability it offers, between the independent, creatively autonomous designer and the spatially isolated buildings.<sup>31</sup>

On the basis of this case, it can be seen that the Pritzker Prize itself serves to reinforce and reconstruct architectural authorship in the popular mind. And there are no surprises here. The Murcutt citation is, in many ways, a classic projection of the architect as author, one that has often been reflected and refracted through popular culture, and in particular through narrative and documentary film as I have shown. The inference in all of these genres appears to be clear: without authors, architecture is not an art, and if it is not an art, then architecture is far less interesting to a general audience. The question, then, is whether there is anything more significant in this than simple romanticism, the enduring allure of the lone genius artist.

Such a privileging of the architectural author could be seen to instantiate the increasing convergence between non-fiction film and the subjects and techniques of narrative cinema. The special place that architects hold as characters in fiction film seems to support such a hypothesis, attesting as it does to a myth and mystique about architects that continues to subsist, even to thrive, in the world. It could be that casting architects as active and dynamic individual author / characters is a way of making the discipline itself attractive and interesting to a lay audience. Buildings are complex, uncommunicative, and sometimes unlovable. In explicating, describing, and making them engaging for a popular audience, architects are invaluable interlocutors and advocates for their work, this much is clear. What remains uncertain is whether this necessarily also entails taking and reinforcing the position of ‘author’, in the representation of architecture in documentary film.

Roland Barthes’ essay ‘The Death of the Author’ closes with the famous admonition that ‘to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.’<sup>32</sup> But what if the author in architecture never died? Or rather, what if that author’s ghostly shade can be found as a character, stylishly dressed, sensitive, professional and creative, in any number of films past and future? Perhaps, in closing, it is useful to turn the question on its head, and ask why it is that in architecture the reader has refused to be born. And the answer to this must be that popular audiences for architecture, as reflected in awards like the Pritzker prize, in narrative film, and in

documentaries like *In the Mind of the Architect*, continue to perpetuate, reconstruct, and keep alive the mythical stereotype of the architectural author.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sarris, Andrew, 'Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962', first published in *Film Culture*, Winter 1962-63, reprinted in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 512-513.

<sup>2</sup> See Pauline Kael 'Circles and Squares', first published in *Film Quarterly* in 1963, reprinted in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, pp. 516-529.

<sup>3</sup> Wright Wexman, Virginia, 'Introduction', in *Film and Authorship*, Virginia Wright Wexman ed., New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p.9. As Wexman writes, 'During the medieval period... auctors (as authors were then called) were thought to derive their authority from the wisdom of the past and ultimately from God. The modern concept of originary authorship emerged in the early nineteenth century... [and] the auteurists drew on this formulation to position Hollywood directors as part of the pantheon of high culture.'

<sup>4</sup> For an important contemporary discussion of the issues see Virginia Wright Wexman ed., *Film and Authorship*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003, and David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger eds., *Authorship and Film*, New York: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Wollen, Peter, 'The Auteur Theory', excerpt from *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, reprinted in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 532.

<sup>6</sup> Levison, Nancy, 'Tall Buildings, Tall Tales: On Architects in the Movies', in Mark Lamster ed., *Architecture and Film*, New York: Princeton Architecture Press, 2000, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Levison, Nancy, 'Tall Buildings, Tall Tales: On Architects in the Movies', p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/architecture/about.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Coward, Rosalind, 'Dennis Potter and the Question of the Television Author', in Robert Stam and Toby Miller eds., *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> This was evidenced in an amusing exchange in the webchat following the third episode of the documentary, on 05/07/00 as follows: 'marcus', post id: 91: 'When will the ABC do a series about Engineers? We are far more interesting than Architects, Lawyers or Medics.' Followed by Sean Godsell [architect featured on the programme and panellist in the webchat] post id: 101: '... and clearly far more humble too !!!' Followed by 'Babar', post id: 108: 'I'm an accountant and I find myself fascinating too'. The humour in this rests in the knowing reference to and contrast between the stereotypical accountant, with all the connotations of its being an exacting, thorough, and careful, but also somewhat uncreative and rather dull profession, and the stereotypical architect, with many of the opposite traits. <http://www2.abc.net.au/architecture/chat3/default.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Naremore, James, 'Authorship', in Toby Miller and Robert Stam eds., *A Companion to Film Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Feldman, Allen, 'Faux Documentary and the Memory of Realism', *American Anthropologist*, June 1998, vol. 100, no. 2, p.495.

<sup>13</sup> Feldman, Allen, 'Faux Documentary and the Memory of Realism', *American Anthropologist*, June 1998, vol. 100, no. 2, p.494.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur, Paul, 'Extreme Makeover: The Changing Face of Documentary', *Cineaste*, Summer 2005, vol. 30, no. 3, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur, Paul, 'Extreme Makeover: The Changing Face of Documentary', *Cineaste*, Summer 2005, vol. 30, no. 3, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur, Paul, 'Extreme Makeover: The Changing Face of Documentary', *Cineaste*, Summer 2005, vol. 30, no. 3, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Rabiger, Michael, 'Documentary Filmmakers Decide How to Present Compelling Evidence', *Nieman Reports*, Fall 2001, pp. 63-64.

<sup>18</sup> Coward, Rosalind, 'Dennis Potter and the Question of the Television Author', in Robert Stam and Toby Miller eds., *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2000, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Coward, Rosalind, 'Dennis Potter and the Question of the Television Author', in Robert Stam and Toby Miller eds., *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2000, p. 7.

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<sup>20</sup> The French auteurs were able to reconcile the fundamentally collaborative practice of filmmaking with their singular concept of authorship by recourse to the philosophy of existentialism. Jean-Luc Godard, for instance, wrote regarding Ingmar Bergman that “[t]he cinema is not a craft. It is an art. It does not mean teamwork. One is always alone on the set as before the blank page.” Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard*, Jean Narboni and Tom Milne eds., New York: The Viking Press, 1972, p.76; quoted by James Naremore, ‘Authorship’, in Toby Miller and Robert Stam eds., *A Companion to Film Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Naremore, James, ‘Authorship’, in Toby Miller and Robert Stam eds., *A Companion to Film Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Naremore, James, ‘Authorship’, in Toby Miller and Robert Stam eds., *A Companion to Film Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> This can be seen in the transcript of the ‘webchat’ discussion, for instance ‘peter’, on 21/06/00 at 22:02:28, post id: 178: ‘Please tell me why most architects shown tonight wore black and spoke in calm, almost hypnotic tones. Does this assist [sic] in persuading clients to follow their leads, or is it just a fashion thing, after all isn’t architecture purely a fashion thing[?]’ and ‘Meryl’, on 21/06/00 at 21:36:12, post id: 32: ‘Is there a particular requirement that architects speak in a language [sic] of such density and artificial construction that mere mortals are left stunned and reaching for a nail gun or ...did you just get lucky?’

<sup>24</sup> ‘Lisa’, on 8/07/00, at 11:19:20, post id: 265: ‘I thought [the documentary] was pretty slow moving and kind of trance like, as though we were being lulled into a receptive and compliant state of mind. As though we were supposed to be in awe of these architects. It was art documentary as anaesthetic.’

<sup>25</sup> For instance ‘Mike’, on 22/06/00, at 17:19:36, post id: 358: ‘Talk about footballers talking rubbish! Let the buildings speak for themselves - basta! Anyone who watched the show would realise what a bunch of rubbish comes out of architects mouths - perhaps they should get agents to do the talking for them! Anyway architects just seem to get in the way of the real people involved in the architectural professions - builders, tradesmen, producers of the materials and the occupiers - if you know what I mean?’ and ‘Steve Grey’ on 21/06/00, at 22:33:15, post id: 319: ‘[...] This profession must come down to earth off their pedestals and make buildings for people to live in and stop making inappropriate [sic] "Art Galleries" to live out their fantasies at the community's [sic] expense. Perhaps then they might be asked to design more than 3% of our habitat.’

<sup>26</sup> In addition to this real-time feedback, there was an opportunity for guests to leave comments (‘your stories’) in an online guest book.

<sup>27</sup> For instance ‘Julia’, on 22/06/00, at 9:26:23, post id: 346: ‘Can modern domestic architectural [sic] design permit disorder? After seeing the homes last night, it strikes me that it can’t. Everything we saw was so squeaky clean and ordered. Was this just for the filming and everyone rushed around beforehand stuffing strewn clothes in cupboards, books on shelves, old newspapers in the recycle bin etc? After learning that in Godsell’s building you are actually obliged to ‘tidy’ yourself by going into a cupboard to undress! - I fear there is no room for disorder in this modern world.’ Interestingly, the cupboard incident also galvanised the late Harry Seidler, one of the architects featured on the programme, who appeared to turn against the producer in the webchat discussions: ‘To portray [sic] modern architecture [sic] as a place where you have to get dressed in a cupboard is libelous [sic] to the last eighty years of brilliant buildings in the Western World, of which we have hardly any in this, what is now confirmed as a provincial back water, of the western civilised world.’ Harry Seidler, on 5/07/00, at 22:11:39, post id: 170.

<sup>28</sup> Corrigan, Tim, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991, p. 135.

<sup>29</sup> See the Pritzker Prize website: <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/2002annc.htm#about>

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.pritzkerprize.com/2002annc.htm#about>

<sup>31</sup> Even in those cases where Murcutt does not work alone, for example in the recent Arthur and Yvonne Boyd Education Centre, this is either conveniently forgotten, or framed in terms of a collaboration of equals; of a group of privileged authors coming together, rather than anything so mundane as an employee.

<sup>32</sup> Barthes, Roland, ‘The Death of the Author’, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans Stephen Heath London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1977, p. 148.