The symbolism of architecture in the "Cube" motion picture by Vincenzo Natali

Karol Wysznacki
Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Environmental Engineering, Lodz University of Technology, 6 Al. Politechniki, 90-924, Lodz, Poland
E-mail address: wyszeq@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

There is no other area of human interest in which immaterial ideas, feelings and storytelling problems meet material world as closely as in the area of set-design. This is where philosophical questions and religious references suddenly start to 'take shape'. In my article I will analyse this process and show how many different contexts can be taken into consideration even if we choose as simple and minimalistic architecture as the one from the famous science-fiction movie Cube, directed by Vincenzo Natali. On a few pages we will discuss interfaith symbolism of the form of square with the focus on four main religious systems - Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Surprisingly all of these have linked the square with very similar meanings. We will analyse teleological concepts of Aristotle (particularly the 'final cause' theory), which are defined in one of his most famous works, the 'metaphysics'. The most important aspect of this thesis ('purposefulness' as an obligatory attribute of existence) can be easily connected with the plot of the movie, where characters are compliant with the mathematical system in which they appeared. In the conclusion we will try to understand how symbolic meanings can influence our understanding of the final message of the movie and at the very ending we will refer to the etymology of the word 'cosmos'. The chapter will hopefully prove that Cube can offer careful viewers much more than a large amount of suspense or thrill and can be read as a large metaphor. However, to find an exit from the labyrinth of interpretations we will have to – paraphrasing the words of Quentin, one of the main characters – find a place from which we can see 'the big picture'.

Keywords: set design, symbol, movie, cube, religion, Aristotle, teleology, architecture, philosophy
1. INTRODUCTION

Science-fiction cinema is nowadays often regarded as a new medium for architectural discussion, as the set-design in the movies often, even unconsciously, becomes an inspiration for modern architects. As A. Gajewski stated in his book: “Architecture is best inspired by architecture, (...) the built architecture gives an impulse to cinematic architecture, and to the contrary: film architects create their objects in relation to and in continuation of (classic) architecture”. [1] P. Saramowicz is even more enthusiastic about the role cinematography can play in the world of architecture. After analysing in his PHD work, among others, the way in which the set-design of German expressionist cinema influence the contemporary deconstructive buildings, he stated, that the set-design could be perceived as a kind of "testing phase" for the real world building construction. [2]

Moreover, analysing the worlds created within science-fiction cinematography could be very valuable. Through their structure and symbolism we may learn about the times, in which they were created. According to Zbigniew Konopacki - Maciuk "A SF film, as a work created in a specific civilisational and cultural context, placed in its time, speaks of a vision of the future which arises on the grounds of its contemporaneity." [3] Moreover, we can say that the architectural examples shown on the silver screen represent the "Genius Loci" of their time much better, than the projects, which were actually build, as the set designers do not have to take into consideration any functional, economical and social factors and can fully concentrate on the artistic power of the design.

In the article I will try to show, how the set-design in the movie "Cube" reflected the ideas and philosophy of the present, minimalistic sacral architecture. The article will explore the area of meanings, which could be created by the set design. It will also try to show, how architecture on the silver screen may influence our understanding of the plot of the movie.

2. GENERAL INFORMATION

Let's start with a brief description of the mysterious labyrinth, which was brought to life by production designer Jasna Stefanovic and computer artists from CORE Digital Pictures on the basis of the vision of Dr David W. Pravic, the professional mathematician. The construction consists of approximately $26^3$ cubes, which have dimensions $472 \times 472 \times 472$ cm. Each of these is marked by three coordinates, containing not only the information about its current location, but also about the potential movement and - most importantly - the possibility of containing the trap. [4] Each block has a steel structure, and its sides are divided into nine identical square modules, 8 of which are covered with frosted glass and abstract, constructivistic pattern, beneath which the light sources are located. The central square on each side is a door to the next module.

In this strange, nightmarish world six strangers wake up and begin searching for an exit. To find it, they have to understand mathematical rules, which define the new reality. We also learn, that each character has some special skills needed to solve a multitude of puzzles. In the idea of 'deliberate' selection of the key characters we can seek for metaphorical meaning. The screenwriters, V. Natali, André Bijelic and Graeme Manson not only followed the famous 'Chekhov's rifle' principle ('If in the first act rifle is hanging on the wall, in the second or third one someone has to shoot it. Otherwise, the gun should not be there'), but also gave us an
interesting clue about how to interpret the plot. All the characters from the beginning of the story feel that their education and skills are somehow compliant with the mathematical system in which they appeared. Therefore we can say that they are the subjects of the Aristotelian 'potentiality' to solve the puzzles.

3. POTENTIALITY AND THE FINAL CAUSE

The Final Cause theory is nowadays still a subject of debate and vast criticism of philosophers and humanists alike and this chapter will not join the discussion if this theory can be applied to the world which surrounds us. What I am trying to state is that, in my opinion, it definitely has a lot in common with the world created in the movie Cube. In the following chapter I will try to explain the concept in the simplest possible way.

Imagine a plant. A cause that it lives is for example, that a gardener waters it every day. The purpose for its living is that it produces sweet fruits, which are gardeners favourite. This is not discussable. However, if we say, that the cause it lives is that it produces sweet fruit we will give a philosophical thought. We will state that it exists because of its specific purpose in the world. Aristotle called it 'The final cause'.

This idea was later developed and gave the origin to the definition of 'development', which states that this term means 'updating potentialities, which are stored in every being'. [5] In my opinion this rule of 'potentiality' can be applied to all movie characters.

'Why do I happen to live here and now?', 'Am I a small cog in a perfectly precise and well-programmed machine of the world?' - these may be our reflections after watching the movie. At this point, I will refrain from further analysis of these philosophical questions, to come back to them later in the chapter, in the context of a much more pessimistic view of the world taken from final scenes of the movie. However, now let's take a look at the symbolic meanings of square in various religions, which, in my opinion, are the key to understand the meanings of architecture presented in Cube.

4. SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF THE SQUARE IN THE MAIN RELIGIONS

It seems to me fascinating that the four major religions of the world, i.e. Christianity (33.43%), Islam (24.35%), Hinduism (13.78%) and Buddhism (7.13%) have linked the square with very similar meanings. [6] Of course I do not exclude the possibility of the culture codes influencing each other.

In the Christian religions the square was associated with the human element, the circle with the divine. An interesting proof for this thesis can be found in the methods of presenting aureole in early Christianity. Square halos, which appear in some paintings, are intended to symbolize that the portrayed person lived at the time of creating the work of art (so the painters could not be sure that he or she will become a saint, despite the decent life of the models) while the circular ones were reserved for the already acclaimed saints. [7] Although in later centuries this custom began to fade, square halos can still be admired, for example in the ninth century mosaic in a chapel of the St. Zeno in the Basilica of St. Praxedis in Rome.

The square inscribed in a circle also appears as a decorative motif in many Gothic cathedrals, among others, on the rosette of the Cathedral of Lausanne. There is also a vast
number of cases in which, though invisible, square inscribed in a circle served as a main construction for Gothic decorative patterns. Many interesting examples can be found in an article – 'From the darkness to the light - a mystical geometry of the Gothic cathedrals.' written by Elżbieta Stróżecka. [8]

Islamic tradition also associates the motif of the square with 'earth' or 'matter'. In the Islamic decorative patterns it is a symbol of the four equal elements, which make up the material world – fire, earth, air and water. This idea is probably inspired by the 'platonic solids' – among which, by the way, cube is said to be the shape of the particle of the earth.

Moreover, we should take into consideration that Kaaba - which in Arabic means 'square house', the holiest place in Islam is also connected with sin, earth and matter. In a small cubical building we can find the Black Stone, which - as followers of Islam believe - was brought by the archangel Gabriel to Abraham. According to Islamic tradition, the stone originally had been spotlessly white, but because of the sins of Adam's descendants it changed colour to black. [9]

The square as a symbol of material world is most explicit and visible in the geometrical diagrams called 'mandalas', which are characteristic of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. [10] A model that shows the 'earthly' square surrounded by a circle symbolizing transcendence is even more powerful when the monks create it with grains of sand during the meditation practice. A demonstration of temporariness and transience of life is in this case extremely perceptible. [11] Moreover, similar religious practices can also be seen in the culture of the Navajo Indians and Aborigines.

The above mentioned symbolism is still continued in the works created by contemporary architects, even if they deny that their work convey any relation to the past architectural styles. In the "Chiesa Madre" church in Nuova Gibellina, which was designed by Ludovico Quaroni a giant, white sphere is levitating in the centre of square shaped building, symbolising the existence of God's perfection within the world of people.

What is the link between the cross-cultural meaning of the square and the scenography of the movie Cube, and how does it influence our interpretation of the plot?

5. MESSAGE OF THE MOVIE

As proven in the previous sections, space created in the movie Cube can metaphorically refer to humanity, with its frailty, imperfection, sinfulness. However, we have also discussed the 'potentiality' of solving the mystery which characterized the dramatis personae.

At this point clearly emerges the main problem of the film, which is the juxtaposition of human abilities, talents and experience with the selfishness, pride and anger which prevent people from taking full advantage of the former. The labyrinth appears to us as an abstract place of trial for intellect, strength, interaction skills and, as the story progresses, also, and perhaps above all, morality.

Heroes unfortunately do not come out victorious, gradually emerging conflicts distract their attention from the mathematical research. As a result, the group loses its struggle for freedom at the very end of their dangerous trip. The only person that manages to leave the trap is the only one truly innocent - intellectually disabled boy.

The ending is very distressing. Don't we also lose our chances driven by negative emotions; anger, pride and selfishness?
6. THE SACRED SPACE

As stated in the previous paragraph, the space design in the movie "Cube" could be regarded as a testing facility for the human character. In my opinion the idea could be a reflection of a wider trend that was born in the world of architecture. [12]

In 1989 Tadao Ando has erected his most remarkable building, "The church of the light" in Ibaraki. Controversial idea of removing all the decorations and forcing the people to look for the God within their hearts was only one aspect of the construction. The other was the design of an entrance; unlike any other Christians places of worship to enter the building it was necessary to pass a long corridor, which was not functionally justified.

Both concepts were probably taken from the Buddhist culture, in which the famous architect was raised. It seems even more probable if we take into consideration other famous Ando's work, "the temple of water" (1991), in which the process of entering the minimalistic area of sacrum is even more complicated.

A symbolism of both physical and spiritual effort, which has to be undertaken in order to get closer to God was something completely new in western culture. As Francesco Dal Co states in Ando's monography "(...) the conception of space as a purely spiritual dimension that is not shared in the West and which is given physical characteristics - a difference that Nishida Kitarō helps to understand. It is easier and perhaps more productive, he says, to to recognise the roots of the cult of the void in this "metaphysical" version of space (...)" [13]

Created by Ando ideas of church design quickly become extremely popular and other contemporary architects started to explore and develop them. One of the highly discussed examples of the successors of the "Church of the light" could be found in Foligno, Italy. San Giacomo Church by Massimiliano e Doriana Fuksas Studio apparently has a form of a giant cube. Not only the building has a form which does not provide visitors with any information about the function of the building, it also carry very little catholic signs. "in extreme abstraction, it presents itself as one side of the cube that is the shape of the building, in plain concrete and without any ornamentation or prominent Christian symbolism. The entrance to the church, which is marked by a front of glass doors and windows on the ground floor and includes a relatively small cross, is reached by means of a large ramp" - states Uwe Michael Lang in his article "What makes architecture sacred". [14]

There are many other examples of churches in which we have to search for our faith, which metaphorically show us that our individual struggle to find God is uneasy. However, what is particularly important - this idea was born (or at least imported from Japan) in 1989, 8 years before the first screening of "Cube". We never know if the theological and architectural concepts may have inspired the screenwriters of the movie, however we can definitely say that the set-design and the message of the movie are somehow in tune with what was happening in the world of architecture.

7. SUMMARY

To sum up, the topic of internal struggle, as well as the idea of creating a space, which will test the strength of character, matches both the motion picture "Cube" and the symbolism of minimalistic churches, which become popular at the time of the movie.
Moreover, the scenography in "Cube" is something more than just the background. The 'Earthly' or 'material' symbols stand in opposition to the views of 'purposefulness' of existence that the movie, in my opinion, took from the philosophy of Aristotle.

The strength of our will decides whether we can fulfil our potential development by - as suggested by the plot of the film - exploring the rules of the world around us. Yet, our universe is as precise, mathematical and perfect as the mysterious labyrinth of the movie Cube. Not without a reason representatives of other ancient Greek school of philosophy - the Pythagoreans - called it the 'cosmos', which literally means 'order'. [15]

Biography

Karol Wysznacki – PhD student at the Technical University of Łódź, independent director, screenwriter, photographer, currently working on his dissertation about architectural visions in science – fiction movies.

References


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