

Form is All We May Ever Need

Rojia Forouhar Abadeh

Mark Cousins

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'As I descended into impassable rivers/ I no longer felt guided by the ferrymen'<sup>1</sup>, the opening Rimbaud quote of the film *Limits of Control*<sup>2</sup> tells us where we are about to go; a journey or descent into the unknown, a place to surrender where the boat takes control. But the boat is drunken of course and the impassable rivers are forceful. The force of film is that it may draw you into the rapids of another reality. What creates that draw? What are the limits of control? Do we need a plot, a narrative to steer us through the film? What are the impassable rivers that make the ferryman redundant?

In an airport lounge, the hit man is briefed on a mission. 'Ud. no habla español, verdad?' is what he is first asked; a sentence that becomes a recognition code throughout the film, as with his later contacts too, always delivered in Spanish regardless of their native tongue. They exchange matchboxes, alternately red and green, from a brand called Le Boxeur, except the one time that the matchbox contains diamonds; they always contain a small encrypted message on paper, which the hit man reads, chews and then swallows. He flies to Madrid, takes a train to Seville and another train to rural Almeria where a heavily guarded fortress stands. Possibly a residence of an organisation connected to the helicopters that hover everywhere throughout the film. All recognisable objects of a thriller film are present for us to recognise, but have either been made empty and void of meaning or have acquired an out of place bend; a surplus hidden meaning. The narrative is being fed and stripped at the same time by ways of absence and nonsense. The cool collected detached hit man, in a tailored suit, is chased by kids who ask him if he's an American gangster. We come to understand neither the meaning of the codes that he gathers, nor his business with the diamonds and matchboxes. We don't even know his name. No character has a name in the film every character is just a familiar type and is assigned a label that appears in the film credits; Lone man- is our hit man, French, Violin, Nude, Blonde, Molecules, Guitar, Mexican, and American. Many references are made which trick a strange familiarity that is out of place.

A Bourne movie and a Bond movie unfold within the space and span of the film. Every thriller film you know is replayed but without action or drama. *Limits of Control* is an action movie with no action, and a suspense movie with no drama. Lone man is mostly seen doing tai chi, lying awake in bed or walking towards the next strategic position of his mission. Eventually when time comes for him to take final position at the heavily guarded fortress to complete his task, we only see him once he is already inside, on a sofa, calm and collected. The American asks him the same question, which preys on our

minds 'How the fuck did you get in here?' Lone man simply responds in a colourless voice, familiar to us by this point in the film 'I used my imagination'. According to Jarmusch 'The twenty-five pages didn't really have any dialogue, but they were a map of the story.' he points out the screen play, ' was very, very minimally written on purpose. I even tried to make the language very minimal, not very descriptive at all. So I started with that'. The dialogues are indeed minimal, kept to a minimum and even meaningless, or perhaps containing a hidden message. They are reminiscent of one of *Last Year in Marienbad's*<sup>3</sup> enigmatic monologues 'Conversation flowed in a void, apparently meaningless or, at any rate, not meant to mean anything. A phrase hung in mid-air, as though frozen, though doubtless taken up again later. No matter. The same conversations were always repeated, by the same colourless voices'.

*Limits of Control* is announced as a Point Blank Production. Jarmusch clearly pays homage to Boorman's *Point Blank*<sup>4</sup>. The overwhelming trace of *Point Blank* is atmospheric and created by a heightened awareness of the abstract qualities of people, objects and environments in a strangely depopulated world. Characters and their surroundings almost become one, through similar shades of colour and emptiness; cinematic types are coined. But as Jarmusch indicates, there are other elements within the film that are indicative of a plot; *Point Blank* is 'a lone guy on a mission, he's angry and out for revenge, we drained all that from this story.' What Jarmusch strips further are the motives of Walker the equivalent of Lone Man, and also the sense of place present in *Point Blank*. San Francisco, Los Angeles and the Rock of Alcatraz are important; you could even go as far as to say the film is a portrayal of those places. Whereas in *Limits of Control* spaces are emptied to such an extent that even with references to landmark building, images of the city and Spanish art, it all seems as it truly is; an artificial film set. The addition of de-contextualised characters makes the places even less believable. Lone Man is black, the only black person in the land and his contacts range from Japanese to Palestinian. As an aftereffect of content having been purged at different layers and scales in the film, Lone man appears as an even stronger centre. He is a lone wolf in the empty landscape of the film.

In effect what Jarmusch does is creation by means of decreation. This mode of reduction goes as far as arriving at a module whose elements can be replaced to create variations. Jarmusch indicates 'the film's certainly constructed, to a large degree, in the editing. In the shooting, scenes were kind of modular. We tried to put them in different orders in the editing and found the musical rhythm of the storyline.' The module of the reduced form is repeated in the hit man's many encounters. The repetition of these variations plus the ending; the completion of a task, produces the film in mere form. All meaning is

absent and this is not kept from us; we are made aware of the fact that we do not need meaning to enjoy the film. 'The ending is kind of a convention because he [...] completes his mission. But even that, what does it mean?'. We know no more about the plot at the end of the film than we knew initially in the beginning, but we have experienced the suspense and have been drawn into its familiar yet strange world and followed it through its form. 'Point blank' is an expression in gunnery meaning, 'aimed directly to the mark, not having, or allowing for an appreciable curve in trajectory'. Is this trajectory the form of a thriller that need not be deviated by ways of narrative and content and can generate the plot or lack thereof, in the film?

Also subject to redoing, made through selective destruction and reduction, *House*<sup>5</sup> (Rachel Whiteread, 1993) gives us the opportunity to speculate about content and form in an altogether different medium and dimension. In this house, form and content become one. Whiteread inverts content into form. *House* is the inverse of a house. When first approached it is recognised as a building. However once you climb the front stairs there is nowhere to go. It is impassable. In that close proximity you are encouraged to inspect the walls, where you recognise wallpaper patterns and light switches as tiny recessed spaces. There is a sudden shift you realise that you are in fact facing the interior. The interior becomes a barrier that keeps you out. What seemed known is suddenly unfamiliar and unknown. This happens regardless of the fact that you had approached the house with prior knowledge to it being a 'Rachel Whiteread', and a cast of the interior space of a building. *House* can be read in two entirely different ways: an object with volume and indeed mass or a more intellectual reading as the representation of the internal space of a house, a house inside a house or outside it perhaps we are confronted with form, but where is the content? Can a reading of *House* guide us to make speculation about what content in architecture or even a contentless architecture could be, an architecture created through loss?

We are disoriented not unlike in *Limits of Control*, we are going nowhere, and even so there are familiarities to guide us. These familiarities become a source of understanding but also act as points that draw us through the experience and not abandon the route we have set off on, even if there is no content or meaning to be disclosed. We cannot even be sure whether we are standing against a solid object or an interior turned exterior guarding a mystical interior that we will never have permission to penetrate. The familiarities and their repetition are what creates form and what suggest a nonexistent content. The familiar is seductive and makes it difficult to remember that what you encounter is a representation of space.

A cartoon published in Time Out, depicts Turner Prize jurors standing outside *House*, in the first frame, one tells the others that as a work of art there is one thing that spoils the experience. In the next frame we see, arms, legs and asses cast into the windows of the *House*; the squatters of course. Could we then perhaps conclude that people are in fact the content of architecture? Is that what draws a line between sculpture and architecture between object and space? *House* offers no way in 'when we'd finished casting' Whiteread emphasises, 'we got out through a four-foot square in the roof. The construction people said that it could just be patched over with wood, but I insisted that it had to be cast so that it would be a completely sealed space'.

Italo Calvino tells us about a similarly sealed space 'What makes Argia different from other cities is that it has earth instead of air<sup>6</sup>, solidity, mass and weight replace air, space and motion. 'The streets are completely filled with dirt, clay packs the rooms to the ceiling, on every stair another stairway is set in negative'. Here the doubling as redoing has happened but without the reduction. 'Over the roofs of houses hang layers of rocky terrain like skies with clouds'. Here things happen on another scale we have a collection of *Houses*. 'The dampness destroys people's bodies and they have scant strength, everyone is better off remaining still, prone, anyway, it is dark'. People and all other things come to halt, content is frozen if not removed. Dynamic space is solidified into an object, an object of pure form. Whiteread and Calvino capitalise on mass and weight. A presence is indicated by mass and weight, the presence of an object. 'Nothing of Argia can be seen; some say, 'it's below there' and we can only believe them'. The distinction between inside and outside is what is at stake. Architecture always has an inside; inside is where the content is. What does content consist of besides people?

Supposing you could somehow get into the fort of the *House*, 'We do not know if the inhabitants [of Argia] can move about in the city, widening the worm tunnels and the crevices where roots twist' How would it be different than any other house? If the director of the thriller manages to sustain identification for the duration of the film we live the lives of the characters and they are the agents of our desires, we can project our desires on the pure form of the plot without a narrative. Can the form of space do the same? Could we identify the same way with space, with building? Is that how we experience space? As Wolflin would say, 'If I understand architecture it's because I have a body'. Through carving ourselves within and through space we project onto it ourselves. For better or for worse we are not let into *House* but the traces on the exterior that was interior not long ago, lead our imagination to the possible many tunnels and crevices shaped within the interior space. Content is what can be projected onto space.

It is often said as opposed to a sculpture, architecture has use. What this truly means is that there are people inside architecture, as opposed to a sculpture where people are outside, otherwise use implies a very utilitarian quality that does not concern the performance of a building. This utilitarian quality is referred to as the architectural 'programme'. Programme is a building's manual, almost a dictation of use and for the architect a tool for design with the empty promise of meaning. An escape from the fear of the tabula rasa, the blank canvas of an empty site. It wouldn't be a far assumption if we were to say for example that at the London Olympic site the first thing done was to plot the circulation; The circulation of what and to where? None of these questions seem to matter when the logic of programme rules. The circulation will be the constraint that instructs where to insert things like buildings, or other programmes. As if before that arbitrary line was drawn all senses had been paralysed by the sight of the blank piece of paper. It is a prescriptive narrative; content that eliminates possibilities of other projections. Adrian Forty's *Words and Buildings*<sup>7</sup> is a serious account of terms used in architecture discussion; art, form, ornament etc. It does not include programme. The word is thrown about within the profession, mostly acting as a smokescreen; it stands in for justifications for configuration, even for design or simply when there is no design. It seems impossible to say anything coherent about it.

One of the startling effects of the twentieth century had to be the experience of seeing the corpus of architecture destroyed. Architecture was taken apart and stripped of ornamentation, and the increasing clutter, before being reassembled. We could go as far as to say modernism was an attempt to rescue space from architecture, at least that aspect of modernism where emptying becomes the process of creation, rather than filling. The performance of a building and therefore its form gained significance in a way that content no longer did. At this liberation front stood of course, Mies.

In the Barcelona Pavilion<sup>8</sup> the elements of architecture are reduced to their bare minimum, but are still recognisable to us as what constitutes the form of architecture. Walls are purely perceived as walls, separators, we see them both in length and section. Columns are free standing, never imbedded, and their purpose is merely to hold up the ceiling. The ground plane is indicated as a podium, detaching the floors from the site it is built on. A statue's hands shade her eyes and face from the sun, this space is for you to position yourself; scale is not forgotten. Every element remains separate and a point of reference and recognition but at the same time slips, and even altogether disappears.

On encountering inside and out, one recognises them at the same time as distinct yet united spaces. The area of the flat, reflecting, surface of the large pool is comparable to that of the interior space. The unbound space of the sky; that which is reflected and undesigned, and the designed space of the interior are given equal weight. The interior is exteriorised just as the exterior is interiorised: One single space of non-programme; a Pavilion.

Content, event and desire can be projected onto this space. Once you enter the grounds of the Pavilion it is as if you are within the space of a garden. Wonder. You are invited to stop, stay, linger, and shift, or is it the wall that shifts. Architecture steers you but then escapes you. Movement through this space is not unlike the film. Form creates suspense; there is a meaning that does not exist. Form will guide you through recognition and identification, only not to reveal meaning. This loss and less lends weight to the experience of space. Mies reaches out into the abyss in this 'destitute time' of less. He is Heidegger's poet<sup>9</sup>; the one who 'must gather in poetry the nature of poetry' who must 'attend [...] to the trace of the fugitive gods'. At the base of Montjuïc Mies gathers in architecture the nature of architecture. At the core of the pavilion lies an elusive hidden space of six meters by one; It stands at the centre but understated, perhaps it is only the broom room; an impassable wall that encloses a source of light from the heavens above. It is the trace of meaning we may never need enter again.

#### References in Order Appearance

1. Verse from *Drunken Boat*, Arthur Rimbaud, 1871
2. *Limits of Control*, Jim Jarmusch, 2009
3. *Last Year in Marienbad*, Alain Renais, 1961
4. *Point Blank*, John Boorman, 1967
5. *House*, Rachel Whiteread, 1993
6. *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino, 1972
7. *Words and Buildings: a vocabulary of modern architecture*, Adrian Forty, 2000
8. *Barcelona Pavilion*, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1929
9. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Martin Heidegger, 1971