Making effective films about architecture is a difficult task. Such films may illuminate murkier stages of the design process, provide insights into the experience of buildings and furniture in a way that cannot be achieved through still photographs, or revive interest in a designer whose contributions have been overlooked historically. Jörg Bundschuh’s film about the life and accomplishments of architect and designer Eileen Gray, a notoriously shy and modest personality, focuses on the latter two aspects of architectural filmmaking. The difficulty is compounded because the primary buildings cited in the film are either in a ruined state (Brownswood, Gray’s family home in Ireland, and E.1027, the house in southern France that she designed in 1926–29 for and with architect Jean Badovici) or difficult to access (Tempe à Pailla, the house she subsequently designed for her own use). A claim on the film website, “Eileen Gray passed away on October 31, 1976, in Paris—alone and virtually forgotten,” is contradicted by the closing sequence (“Rediscovery”) but provides a telling indication of the director’s aim. Structured as a chronological narrative, the film highlights Gray’s unconventional and independent character in a blatant effort to heroize the designer and her accomplishments.

The film opens with a quotation from Charles Baudelaire’s tone poem “L’Invitation au Voyage” (1869), which describes the longing for a far-off place. The narrator (presumably speaking for Bundschuh) states that Gray “definitely was one of the most interesting women of the last century, always far beyond her time.” In similarly clichéd terms he deems E.1027, Gray’s most publicized architectural accomplishment, “one of the most important private homes in modern architectural history.” It is left to the viewer to discern the historic significance of E.1027, built on a secluded site overlooking the Mediterranean in Roquebrune Cap-Martin, or the relevance of Baudelaire’s poem, the title of which Gray cited in its living room mural.

Born into an aristocratic Anglo-Irish family, Gray inherited a spirit of independence from her artist father and the financial means to support her inquisitive spirit from her mother. After attending art academies in London and Paris, she established her reputation among avant-garde artistic circles by adapting traditional Asian lacquer techniques to contemporary furniture designs. These efforts brought her work to the attention of Badovici, who became her lover and facilitated Gray’s transition to architecture. Yet, such biographical details are insufficient to explain the significance of Gray’s creative output. Once viewed as “derivative,” her originality is now understood to lie in her critical approach to the work of her peers as well as the relationship between her early lacquer work, her furniture and carpet designs, and her architecture. Neither theme is developed in this film.

Despite its stress on the unconventional aspects of Gray’s life and work, the film employs conventional documentary means. Bundschuh combines historic still photographs with images of Gray’s furniture and carpets currently in production as well as relevant historic film footage interspersed with new footage recorded on the sites where she lived, studied, and worked. As in traditional documentary practice, Bundschuh uncritically assumes the role of the omniscient male voice-over, framing, guiding, shaping, and controlling the narrative. The narration borrows heavily from Gray’s private letters and diaries, previously in the collection of her biographer Peter Adam and now held in the National Museum of Ireland, but makes no reference to recent historical studies of her work. Thus, the film neither presents received views of Gray’s designs nor proposes a new interpretation.

The historic accuracy of the narrative is frequently questionable. In support of the film’s hagiographic impulse certain dates are exaggerated: Gray met Badovici in 1921, not 1924; E.1027 was completed in 1929, not 1926. The narrator claims that “the apartment in the rue de Lota was a huge success.” While this may be true from the perspective of Gray’s Dutch contemporaries, who published the apartment interior in Wendingen (1924), or in retrospect, because it launched Gray on a more spatial understanding of the role of her furniture designs, the rue de Lota apartment was not regarded as a success by the Parisian press, who frequently castigated her early interiors, or even by the client, Madame Mathieu-Lévy, who hired architect Paul Ruaud to modify the apartment during the early 1930s. To elevate Gray’s stature the narrator invokes Le Corbusier, who he claims “was so smitten by the house [E.1027] that he never stopped thinking about it for the rest of his life.” Although Le Corbusier built his own holiday cabin...
on an adjoining property in 1950 and died of a heart attack while swimming in front of the villa, such hyperbole, unsupported by visual or narrative evidence, remains unconvincing.

The audience for Bundschuh's film remains unclear. Much of the content relies on the viewer's prior in-depth knowledge of Gray's work. Themes such as the conflict with Le Corbusier over the murals he painted at E.1027 are introduced in a suggestive manner but remain undeveloped. The cinematic device of placing small copies of Gray's historic photographs of E.1027 in the rooms in their current damaged state is ineffective; the images are too small and visible on screen for such a short time that the effect of the comparison is evident only to cognoscenti.

More effective are the interviews with two individuals who knew Gray personally and who offer significant insights into her personality and work. They are Philippe Garner, an expert on Gray's furnishings and author of a monograph on her work published in 1993, and Zeev Arum, a furniture dealer licensed to reproduce certain of Gray's designs shortly before she died in 1976. Highlighting the nuances of her designs, Arum marvels that, at the age of ninety-two, she negotiated dimensional adjustments of millimeters for her furniture reproductions, and he elaborates on her asymmetrical design for the “Nonconformist Chair”: “You don’t need to sit like an emperor to be comfortable.”

A brief segment panning across Gray's lacquer screen Le Destin (1913) does more than reveal the textured surface and material richness of her early lacquer work; it suggests that transcoding spatial experience to film could be more convincingly accomplished by relying less on still photographs and more on filming her extant furnishings and carpets. Items from the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and from private collections are missing from the film. Other significant omissions include the interviews with Gray filmed during the latter years of her life, which were used to great effect in an exhibition at London's Design Museum in 2005, and the portfolios she assembled to document her work, now in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland. Owing to her highly reclusive personality, such items—inaccessible online or not incorporated in other documentaries—convey an impression of Gray's inquisitive sensibilities more powerfully than photographs from her early life.

Gray's independent persona and the originality of her creative work are no longer in doubt, yet in a heavy-handed effort to canonize her, the film only briefly mentions her collaborative undertakings with Japanese lacquer master Seijo Sugawara and Evelyn Wyld, her partner in a weaving enterprise, and completely overlooks the most significant of such partnerships—that with Badovici, with whom Gray collaborated from 1922 to 1932. Perhaps Bundschuh believes that the act of collaboration undermines the significance of an individual's work, but collaboration is an essential aspect of the practice of architecture and should not be overlooked as a historical phenomenon. In this light, it is noteworthy that, following their period of collaboration, Badovici never designed buildings of comparable historic significance. Indeed, he so misunderstood Gray's aims for E.1027 (its name is a cipher of their intertwined initials) that he failed to recognize the contradictions between the spatiality of Gray's architectural approach and that of Le Corbusier's murals, which he not only entertained but encouraged.

Although Gray despised the murals, they contributed directly to the preservation of E.1027, initially through Le Corbusier's efforts to control the villa's ownership, and ultimately through their very presence, as they comprise the largest collection of in situ paintings by the Swiss architect. After vandals moved into the villa following the murder of its owner, the town of Roquebrune Cap-Martin bought E.1027 in 1999, purportedly to preserve the murals as much as Gray's design. Restoration efforts, delayed by bureaucratic red tape, are slated to begin this spring, and with luck the villa soon will open to visitors.

Gray may have been “among the most fascinating and influential [women] of the twentieth century,” as the film’s narration concludes, yet Badovici’s efforts, however misguided, were indispensable to her architectural enterprise. He facilitated her ability to transmute the sensuality of her early lacquer work to the scale of architecture. Much like the imaginary destination that Baudelaire conjured in “L'Invitation au voyage,” one could say of E.1027 or Tempe à Pailla: “it is there we must go to breathe, to dream, and to prolong the hours in an infinity of sensations.”

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Modern architecture, like the Greek ruins in a painting by Nicolas Poussin or Claude Lorrain, has challenged contemporary artists to hone their metaphors and ways of looking. Thomas Demand's Bauhaus steps or Christopher Williams's Arts Club stairway evoke the now receding “appropriationist” moment in art of the 1970s and 1980s when the practice of ringing variations on Old Masters was commonplace. Yet, the importation by conceptual artists of examples from one art form into another is peculiar, and that this has largely involved classic modern architecture is very peculiar indeed. Perhaps the most baffling resurgence of this tendency is the current rage to adopt the crispest of iconic modern monuments—those by Mies van der Rohe in particular—as subjects for studying their seemingly opposite qualities: imprecision, vague effect, shimmer, atmosphere, and afterimage.

While the relationship of these art works to the intent of the architecture