

# RE-SPATIALIZATION OF FILMIC REPRESENTATION: CONNECTED SPACES

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This paper deals with the hypothesis that some forms of representation of contemporary cinema are working on the concept of *re-spatialization*, reshaping the space of the image in light of the spectator's new visual attitudes. The basic elements I consider as conditions which influence the emergence of a re-spatialization are: the presence of new visual devices in the urban space and the relationship between the spectator's gaze and the spatial proliferation of these devices.

The space to which I will refer to is the *social space*, as defined by Henry Lefebvre in *La Production de l'espace*. Here, the social space is a social production, composed by *objects* which are things and relationships as well. He uses this basic concept to figure out how the social practices are able to influence space itself and its forms of representation<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time I will explore space as a territory of visual experience: on the one hand a subject moving, wandering, stopping, crossing the urban space meeting frames of vision during his experience of the city; on the other hand the spectator of a cinema which is conscious of its technological device's nature and ready to play with its own image. It deals with a cinema able to move outside from its specific spaces, ready to colonize other places, and at the same time, aware of being itself a place that can be colonized by other devices. The spaces change, the experiences change.

In the essay *Zooming Out: The End of Offscreen Space*, Scott Bukatman says that «physical and spectacular spaces commingle»<sup>2</sup>, meaning how today the medial culture can absorb and expand the film experience when it takes place in spaces originally not created for cinema. Bukatman is talking about processes of production of narrative worlds which escape from the space of cinema, through the technology, in order to place themselves in new spaces: «The film and its narrative project a world. But while cinema remains the initial round for this world projection, there is now a global multimedia culture in place to absorb and extend that experience»<sup>3</sup>.

The idea of a *medial space* is also emerging from the last research conducted by Francesco Casetti about the *re-location*<sup>4</sup> of cinema. We could say that the process of displacement scatters pieces of cinema all over the everyday space, by turning this place into something different, and changing its own functions. In this way cinema is overflowing of its specific space, by moving towards the urban space, scattering as pieces of fiction, exhibition and narration. Spaces, invaded by a multiplicity of screens, different points of attention, change their functions and modify the relationships between the elements inside them. Since de Certeau states that space is a system of uttering words<sup>5</sup>, the possibilities of transforming its inner relationships are unlimited. Spaces and architectures change and they are crossed by new kinds of connections, they become something like «moving landscapes»<sup>6</sup>. Therefore they are invaded by movement: the screen creates space, because of the moving pictures and at the same time the images act like reciprocal accelerations

among bodies. So the landscape produced is composed of spaces within spaces, frames within frames.

At the same time the escape of cinema implies an escape of the rules of its symbolic system as well. Consequently the rules become now effective, not within a single screen space, as usual, but inside a new space, a multiplicity of screens, that is a net of screens. This space consists of many attention points spreading everywhere and relationships, like junctures, continually moving and transforming. The landscape becomes a sort of hybrid split screen, an architecture of displays, losing its own spatial dimensions, absorbed into a time of instantaneous diffusion<sup>7</sup>.

The concept of re-spatialization is applicable to the transformation of urban experience, as well as to the transformation of film experience, as they both produce a different construction of the spectator's gaze, through a different organization of space. It is necessary to create a relationship between the multiplication and fragmentation of screens in the space and the space of a multiple and fragmented screen. In other words it is necessary to connect the space of representation with the space of what is represented.

The basic idea is that the re-spatialization is a consequence of the need to re-organize the screen space according to the inter-action of devices into a new visual landscape or rather into the space of the subject. I speak about a system of reciprocity between spaces, because as cinema escapes from its own space, in order to invade other places, at the same time, it increasingly shows the opposite process. That is, many devices attempt to colonize the screen space as well. Therefore the struggle between devices is fought in front of our eyes, inside the image. The idea is to consider the device as a producer of space which, inside the movie screen, activates processes of permeation and overlaps with other devices, producing a whole space without edges.

As a result the device multiplies and re-produces itself, the image re-creates its own space and the gaze regulates the passages from one to the other, by giving a coherence.

I will analyze a re-spatialization working through the multiplication of devices, a process that articulates a networked, solid and organized architecture of the image. It is about the mutual combinations of the device, the image and the gaze. Here, once again, it is the gaze, like in an urban experience, that weaves the web, by holding together the representation. In the case of the image I will try to show that the space is composed and re-organized with the aim of controlling the pushes of the other technological devices.

I am going to analyze just three forms of re-spatialization, which will allow to focus on the processes, rather than the effects. These are images in which the devices re-produce themselves, alter the space-time dimensions, and multiply the possibility of sight. In order to identify the processes of transformation, it is necessary to observe and analyze what is changing in the relationship between image and gaze, or rather between the space of image and spectator's gaze. I would define some different *behaviours of the gaze*, that can be seen as consequences of the reciprocal movement between urban space and screen space.

The three forms of re-spatialization that will be analyzed, are three attitudes of the gaze:

- 1) the *mise-en-abyme* of devices within devices;
- 2) the dissemination of devices inside the screen space;
- 3) the construction of devices' trajectories.

The first scene is taken from *Diary of the Dead*, by George Romero, 2007.

In *Diary of the Dead*, Romero creates a film, which is entirely shot with two camcorders, by two of the characters. They are shooting a horror movie, but suddenly they have to fight against real zombies and decide to document what is happening. At that moment, we are watching a movie edited by the protagonist, Debra, titled *The Death of the Death*.

The characters are escaping from a zombie, they are in a shack, and there is a computer. On the screen they can watch a video about an attack of a zombie during a party in a hospital for children. The camera is getting closer to the monitor and twice the images are coincident.

In this scene we are in front of a multiple gaze, due to the presence of a device within device, an image within an image. In this case the main device is an anthropomorphic camcorder which is focused on the pictures on the monitor (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 – *Diary of the Dead* (George Romero, 2007).

My first remark is that the whole film is pervaded by the presence of devices in unusual places: for example, these images are taken in a shack where Amish people live, despite the fact that they culturally reject technology. Then it is interesting to analyze the intersections of the camcorder, the monitor and that of camcorder shooting the party (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 – *Diary of the Dead* (George Romero, 2007).

The approaching movement to the monitor stops suddenly, transferring the gaze to another witness: that camcorder whose lens is dirty because of the clown-zombie's blood (Fig. 3). Now, the devices are overlapped and when the blood hits the surface, it smashes the screen, it crosses the surfaces. Therefore, the original source of that shot is no longer important, because when the blood strikes the screen surface, what is touched is the off-screen, whereas the spectator usually should be protected. Breaking the fiction barrier, Romero is not only unveiling the metalinguistic game that he is playing, but he also succeeds in crossing the screens, making the space an



Fig. 3 – *Diary of the Dead* (George Romero, 2007).

homogeneous one. If the devices duplicate themselves by moving the gaze from one to another and images construct their own space on the shadow of the next screen, the space gets forced and closed. Therefore with the *mise-en-abyme* of devices within devices, the off-screen leaves definitely the represented world to offer itself as a place for the spectator. Thus the gaze comes from the off-screen and there it works to join together the parts of a networked vision, focusing essentially on the spaces of action, on what must be seen, stopped, recorded, making the camera movements meaningful.

It also happens in the second scene where the visual web is larger and more complicated, due to the dissemination of devices into the screen space.

Here, we have seen that the computer screen is split: Jason is editing the materials coming from their camcorders, and from a surveillance camera (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 – *Diary of the Dead* (George Romero, 2007).

These are images that the spectator has just seen a few minutes before. The whole situation is observed by one of those camcorders. Therefore the gaze is not only multiplied, but it is split and iterated many times, in many frames. And when the figure of Debra is reflected onto the computer screen, well now the technological transfiguration is complete: the human gaze has become a technological one, hence the subject becomes a device as well (Fig. 5). Even if the multiplicity of screens can increase the possibility of the off-screen to be present, the particular procedures to produce the space of the image changes its functions, in order to place the spectator's gaze. The



Fig. 5 – *Diary of the Dead* (George Romero, 2007).

crucial consequence is that the viewer, from an in-between space (the off-screen) is the unique able to exchange gazes that could not otherwise be exchanged, employing the device's properties.

The last scene is taken from *Elephant*, by Gus Van Sant, 2003. The scene I chose represents a sort of crossroad of trajectories, into the whole film. It is about the meeting between John and Elias in the corridors of the school. Actually we can see the same meeting three times during the whole movie, but each time the scene is taken by a different point of view: John's one, Elias' and Michelle's (Figs. 6-7).



Figs. 6-7 – *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003).

So we will be placed in this precise moment for three times, but from three different perspectives (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8 – *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003).

The crossing of John, Elias and Michelle is the crossing of three gazes, as well as the crossing of three devices. Here the re-spatialization works on the device's mobility, following the subject, trailed by him, dependent on his own movement. In this way the construction of space is the construction of a journey, a trajectory crossing other trajectories. The subject is the device, the device is the body. They are combined. The properties of the device become the properties of the human body, as we can see when the image becomes a slow motion. Or rather when the body is a technological entity, it is by its movement that manipulates the time.

The subject shifts in space and time: he tracks down the first and manipulates the second. He moves the device into the space of the screen, by structuring it according to the crossing trajectories, intercepting them, exchanging looks.

Thus, the place of the spectator is set in the fractures between the trajectories, situated in a multiplicity of displaced points in the fiction. Therefore, every long take can be considered as trailed by the character and the long take can be seen as a new device. All this is a web of devices all around a subject, whose gaze is blended and confused with a technological one, in the urban space as well as in the screen space. Therefore, it is by virtue of the transfiguration of the technological gaze, that we can define the visual space as a media space.

Inside a space consisting of multiform visions, the subject becomes the activator of movement. He is the missing link of a chain of devices, because he is the one who gazes, the viewer. The subject wanders and promenades in the spatial net of screens, he activates the gaze and works as the pivot that connects visual, disjointed spaces in motion.

In conclusion, if today some of the contemporary cinema works on the re-spatialization of its own image, it is because it perceives the transformation of the space where the subject moves. So it adapts its forms of representation not only to the positions, movements, pauses in time and space, of the subject, but it tries to interpret the interferences between the subject and the devices.

On one hand, the tale exists thanks to the device, on the other hand, it is just inside cinema that reality tries to survive through the device. Cinema gives answers to the new spatial experience reconsidering the rules of its own experience of the space, making it no longer a film experience, but a media experience.

What cinema tries to represent is a continually changing space, static, limited, forced, articulated, in order to recreate the conditions of the subject in his vision space. In this way cinema opposes itself to the trend according to which pieces of fiction are disseminated in the real space, producing traces of spaces, perceived as real, in the fiction world.

The connection between fragments is established by a gaze that comes from the liminal spaces between devices. That is the off-screen removed by the represented world, the differential between fiction and reality. It is a heterotopic<sup>8</sup> space where the spectator is placed, and it allows him/her to join space of vision and space of fiction. Today the spectator is a part of the screens web, he is inside it, he moves among the fractures of visual space, between the devices, in the off-screen.

1 I am dealing with the triple procedure of the composition of the space argued by Henri Lefebvre: practices; representations of space; spaces of representation. These are the basic elements according to which Lefebvre analyzes the construction of the social space. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space (La Production de l'espace)*, Anthropos, Paris 1974), Blackwell, Oxford 1991.

2 Scott Bukatman, *The End of Offscreen Space*, in Jon Lewis (ed.), *The New American Cinema*, Duke University, Durham NC 1998, p. 267.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 266.

- 4 The main point of reference is Francesco Casetti, “L’esperienza filmica e la ri-locazione del cinema”, in *Fata Morgana, Esperienza*, no. 4, January-April 2008, pp. 23-40.
- 5 Michel de Certeau makes a distinction between place and space: «A place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationship of coexistence. A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. [...] *Space is a practiced place*». Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life (L’Invention du quotidien*, Union générale d’éditions, Paris 1980), University of California, Los Angeles 1984, p. 117.
- 6 Giuliana Bruno, *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*, MIT, Boston 2007.
- 7 Here the reference point is Virilio when he speaks about the contemporary space where the spatial diffusion of vision devices determines an instantaneous time diffusion: to dispersion in space corresponds concentration in time. Paul Virilio, *L’Espace critique*, Christian Bourgois, Paris 1984.
- 8 «Des sortes de lieux qui sont hors de tous les lieux, bien que pourtant ils soient effectivement localisables. Ces lieux, parce qu’ils sont absolument autres que tous les emplacements qu’ils reflètent et dont ils parlent, je les appellerai, par opposition aux utopies, les heterotopias». Michel Foucault, “Des espaces autres” (Conférence au Cercle d’Etudes Architecturales, 14 mars 1967), in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no. 5, October 1984, pp. 46-49.