

HYBRID SPACES.

FILM WORLDS AND THE AESTHETICS OF REPRESENTATION

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The depiction of space has always been a key feature in cinema. The aesthetics of its representation, however, changed through film history, varies from genre to genre, and is essentially linked to the style of certain filmmakers or movements like Italian Neorealism or New Hollywood. Nowadays, since the 1990s an increasing number of films not only follow experimental narrative strategies, but also tend to use space as a central aspect of filmic artificiality, representing impossible spatio-temporal worlds as in *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), non-linear narrative space as in *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), and highly artificial image spaces as in *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001). My hypothetical starting point is that although today's Hollywood cinema is still largely consistent with the classical studio era, certain films seem to bring new aesthetics to the screen, which could be described as deconstructed, synthetic, or better: hybrid spaces. Analysing space in recent cinema therefore does not merely mean interpreting the story of a film. Rather, it also involves the conditions of story representation, more precisely, as David Bordwell² puts it, the strategies of world-making, plot architecture and visual style that govern the films' design.

Hence, one aim of my research is to determine what exactly the notion of space in cinema refers to, focussing on textual structures of films as well as on cognitive activities of the spectator. This question is closely linked to recent debates in social science and humanities on the so called *spatial turn*, with a particular focus on two defining terms: topology and topography. Both may be considered crucial aspects of the comprehension of film, that is to say, constructing topological frames (*logic of space*) and topographical networks (*structures in space*) on different textual levels. As a working hypothesis, I distinguish three basic levels of spatial relationships in film: *diegetic space*, *narrative space* and *image space*. Each of these is considered to establish independent spatial frames and networks, which are more or less consistent and more or less conventionalised. But all of them are regarded as contributing to the ontology of the film world.

The second aim of my research is to analyse how movies since the early 1990s and especially since the year 2000 play with these conventions of cinematic space construction in order to provide the audience with experiences which decisively differ from experiencing common Hollywood-films. The focus is set on the laws that govern diegetic, narrative and visual spaces, their ontological limitations and the dissolution of space boundaries.

David Lynch's *Inland Empire* (2006) seems to be the prototype film that shows an almost complete breakup of diegetic space: the actress Niki Grace (Laura Dern) gradually loses her sense of reality and steps into the world of the film she is working on. What follows is an odyssey through fragmented diegetic spaces, whereby not only the status of story space is kept floating – is it part of the real film world, or part of the fictional world of her film project? – but also her identity

which is in permanent transgression. Despite the fact that *Inland Empire*'s story is a variation of the haunted house motif, it brings up the question of the conditions and possibilities of constructing diegetic space in cinema, and in so doing it differs significantly from our experience of conventionalised film worlds. Here it seems to be a lack of discourse relations between single diegetic spaces that causes a fragmentation of story space on the whole. In this respect, *Inland Empire* resembles films like *Vanilla Sky* (Cameron Crowe, 2001), *eXistenZ* (David Cronenberg, 1999) or even *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), where the status of reality is kept ambiguous, and thus hybrid.

There are other quite different concepts of narrative space put forward by Stephen Heath, Umberto Eco, Michail Bachtin or Edward Branigan. Regardless of any ideological implications, all these approaches emphasize the act of narrating which significantly shapes the appearance of the fictional world. In this respect, narrative space becomes an optional space for the story characters, limiting their possibilities of acting and the probability of events. *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006), for instance, pretends to continue the diegetic world of James Bond, but at the same time represents a narrative space that is governed by laws quite different to those already known from the James Bond film series. For the first time, Bond seems to move through a story space where his narrative supremacy is no longer valid, and where his physical integrity is existentially threatened. Given the fact that we are watching a James Bond movie set in a typically diegetic world, we are experiencing a different narrative space which modifies the aesthetic configuration of the film world and makes it in a way incompatible with the preceding Bond films.

A different mode of representation is also made possible by image space, which is similarly governed by laws of (audiovisual) representation, such as the permanent split screen in Mike Figgis' *Timecode* (2000) or, for example, the artificial environments in Zack Snyder's *300* (2006), which clearly distinguish the film from other sword and sandal movies such as *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) or the prior *Spartacus* (Stanley Kubrick, 1960). Image space and also sonic space therefore constitute the look and the feel of the story world on the level of depiction, and as such they contribute to the basic character of the film world as well.

This interpretation of diegesis, narration and image as aspects of the *spatial style* of filmic world-making opens up the perspective to the question of identity, modulation and compatibility of film worlds in a historical process, and to the cinematic experience these films provide as "high concept breakouts" (Bordwell) in relation to the audience's expectations, cognitive activities and their prior knowledge.

- 1 Thesis in progress at the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. Advisors: Prof. Dr. Irmbert Schenk and Prof. Dr. Rainer Stollmann.
- 2 David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It. Story and Style in Modern Movies*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 2006.