

Cinematic Time-Space

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Abstract

Time and space have a unique application in cinema. The rules of common sense do not necessarily apply, and to some extent, the laws of physics are transgressed. Cinematic narratives frequently employ non-linear constructions, exploring and manipulating the connection between storytelling and chronology, to distort the perception of time. On the other hand, place offers a space for the story to develop. Locations in film can figure a character, support plot development, or be entirely fictitious. Additionally, a closer look at the notion of chronology and meaning finds a broader sense in the notion of the time-image by philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose premise is the infusion of time within a picture. Furthermore, based on the principles of physics, time and space are intricately linked. In this study, the examination of cinematic space and time through a selection of independent and mainstream movies aims to identify creative possibilities of storytelling for film.

Keywords: Cinema, Time, Space, Narrative, Storytelling, Film

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1. Place in Film

1.1. Place

Some films could not exist without the attributes and traits of the location where they were made. Some, such as Wender's movie *Wings of desire*, were written with a specific place in mind (Wenders 2005). In fact, with the conventional approach to writing a script and finding a location afterward, place can become impersonal, and have no direct connection with it in the story (Avery 2014, p. 83). What remains for the narrative to be built is the action, the plot, and the characters.

In independent cinema, location can be an integral part of the script. For instance, the movie *Winds* finds meaning in the exploration of the island of Gökçeada in Turkey, where the protagonist records the sound of wind and conversations with local people (*Winds* 2013). Director Selim Evci chose to only suggest this characteristic in his movie, leaving the audience with a personal experience of discovery through sound and images, but the notion appears more and more clearly as the story progresses.

On that note, director Wong Kar-Wai states that space can create drama, because of the emotional characteristics it possesses (*In the mood for Doyle* 2007).

1.2. Place and People

This notion of location and its meaning is also addressed in the fields of geography, anthropology, landscape architecture, history, and environmental psychology (Cross 2001). The importance and the role of place are described by Fritz Steele as the personality that people lend to a location by association with its characteristics (Steele 1981, p. 158).

Poetics of cinema by David Bordwell presents three dimensions of film narrative: the first dimension is the "story world" with the characters, situations and environments in which the narrative takes place; the second is the "story structure", with the elemental construction of the plot; the third is "the moment-by-moment flow of information about the story world" (Bordwell 2007, p. 6). The latter represents the importance of place as a component of the narrative. And it became the focal point of this research. From this new element, a hybrid methodology emerged and was subsequently used in the research as a fundamental concept. In addition, Bordwell states that narration in art-cinema aims to "maximize ambiguity" (Bordwell 1985, p. 222). This feature transgresses some principles of storytelling but opens the possibilities of interpretation, because it creates interest and curiosity about the place, as unorthodox mechanisms that are used and participate in the originality of the film (Bordwell 1985, p. 213). In the film project, it is not exactly the site itself that is the focus of the narrative, but the emotional investigation of the area: the audience discovers the place, more specifically, selected isolated elements of it. With these details, the viewer can perceive the location's ambience, and apprehend its characteristics, as with the different components of a personality when making the acquaintance of a new person.

This approach is reinforced by studies in sociology that describe the emotional response and interpretation of the surrounding environment as a "sense of place" (Hummon 1992, p. 254). With this new perspective on the relation of humans with space, the film project refocused on communicating sensations about place, presenting a subjective perspective on the city. There is a parallel with interpersonal relationships that appear in the story.

The method can be observed in the movie *Gummo*, in which Harmony Korine follows a group of eccentric teenagers in a small American town devastated by a tornado (*Gummo* 1997). The story itself is a secondary instrument; the intensity of the film relies on its atmosphere and the succession of unique and awkward scenes, with no logical connection. There was no script per se (Korine 1999); the film was a spontaneous response to

situations and places, a succession of etiquettes without a logical narrative construction, using the camera as a witness, to communicate sensations (Korine 2003). This method is a psychological approach to translating the sense of space into filmmaking.

1.3. Sense of Place

The notion of place in film leads to a closer look at the work of Wim Wenders and what he defines as a “sense of place” (Wenders 2005, p. 2). As an illustration, his movie *Wings of Desire* is a depiction of an atmosphere around the city of Berlin, it is driven by moods and sensations that follow instinctive choices, rather than the structure of a script per se (*Wings of Desire* 1987). In fact, Wenders indicated that there was no script for the project. He described his approach to filmmaking as based on location and the sensations resulting from the surrounding (Wenders 2005). In his view, inspiration emerges from the place itself: it drives the story, as opposed to the plot leading the film. What happened after the original release of the movie is worth explanation: Hollywood studios offered to buy the rights to an American remake of the film. The director, at first puzzled for having no written words, decided to put the story on paper for the deal (Wenders 2005). The result was an entirely different version, entitled *City of angels*, produced by Warner Brothers Pictures, shot in Los Angeles eleven years after the German film in Berlin (*City of Angels* 1998). It became a romantic fantasy movie that follows two characters in a rather sensible plot, with no particular connection to the place. This demonstrates the importance of place to capture location and time specifics in film. This is also a fundamental concept for the film project.

The latter also demonstrate that a movie does not solely rely on the script to deliver its narrative: the possibility of repositioning elements of space and location open new territories for filmmaking. But this approach needs to be addressed and acknowledged to fully reach its creative potential.

2. Place and Characterization

Place in film can figure a character (Lloyd 1980, p. 93). It can also represent thematic ideas: the essence of the work. In Paterson, for example, Jim Jarmusch uses the location as a connection between the main character, named Paterson, his love for poetry, and the town of Paterson in New Jersey, where American poet William Carlos Williams lived and worked (Paterson 2016). The story is directly influenced by the author’s poems, but reflected in the everyday life of a young bus driver, writing about his existence and perspective on it. The audience follows the routine of the character and discovers the beauty of the place in mundane details of the monotonous days of his week. It is a response to William Carlos Williams’ work, which suggests that, in order to find beauty, “make a start, out of particulars and make them general” (Von Hallberg 1978, p. 225). The story unfolds in the film with the poet's idea that addresses “the resemblance between the mind of modern man and the city” (Beach 2003, p. 110). Because the film is based on everyday life in the town of Paterson, it focuses on the interiority of its main character and his creativity that stems from his surrounding environment.

3. Cinematic Time

3.1. Time and Chronology

From the narrative theories, it appears undeniable that time is the basis of the unfolding of the story. In linear and non-linear narratives, the aspect of temporal development is central. On this idea, Paul Ricoeur’s three volumes of *Time and narrative* present storytelling as tied to the notion of time in literature (Ricoeur 1990, p. 12). But instead of simply linking plot and chronology, Ricoeur argues that narrative is the human relation to time (Ricoeur 1990, p. 1052). His theory is rooted in the examination of the elements of a story, as they originate from one to another in a cause-and-effect configuration and, therefore, must be encountered in time (Dowling 2011, p. 8). The plot becomes closely dependent on the experience of duration. However, unlike the succession of events that occur in life with no evident associations, the author stresses that the reader connects the separate elements of the story by firstly being aware of their occurrence, remembering the incident, and then expecting the next development. In his view, articulating a narrative is rooted in the correlation of time and plot development (Laitinen 2002). This explanation stresses the importance of the perception of duration and memory, to be able to make connections between the parts of the story, with logical relations. Interpretation becomes the modality of the narrative through time, by recognizing, understanding and anticipating.

For instance, in *Memento*, director Christopher Nolan manipulates this conception of chronology and interpretation, in a non-linear editing style, with time jumps and flashbacks, following a man who lost his memory and tries to understand his past, little by little (*Memento* 2000). The viewer recomposes the story of the movie in the same way the character solves the mystery during the course of his investigation. The audience is involved by having to work the different segments together, to make sense of the plot. This exercise is predominantly a cognitive one.

Moreover, the approach of time in storytelling is one that manipulates chronology and duration. An influential cinematic practice has been developed by Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, who distorts the experience of time by using extended long shots with slow movements. The majority of his movies address the notions of

duration and chronology in a philosophical view, with the frame at the center of the technique. The director states that “the dominant, all-powerful factor of the film image is rhythm, expressing the course of time within the frame” (Tarkovsky & Hunter-Blair 1987, p. 113).

3.2. The Time-Image

A closer look at the notion of contemplation is explored in “Cinema II: The Time-Image”, by philosopher Gilles Deleuze, which examines movies from the aspects of time and movement. His study examines image and sound in film, with their interaction and how they operate in relation to the viewer. The author states that two aspects are present in visual and sound situations: objective and subjective, or real and imaginary. He puts forward the notions of “virtual”: the potential and “actual”: the real (Deleuze 1989, p. 9). In Deleuze’s view, a “time-image” is an image that contains present, past and future, as part of its attributes (Deleuze 1989, p. 17). The image can bring back memories, or connect to the future in an anticipating thought. It contains time but also “is time in its pure state” (Deleuze 1989, p. 17). Additionally, the author clarifies that narrative is not composed of an organization of images, but is actually a consequence of the images themselves, as they are perceived (Deleuze 1989, p. 27). This notion repositions time and space in respect to their roles in the narrative composition. If an image is infused with time, space can be used to access it: to decipher a picture becomes a travel in time, similar to a journey in the story. Narratives can operate through visual analogy (Deleuze 1989, p. 27). Films do not depict only characters involved in actions, but also exhibit the subject’s individuality, its intrinsic existence, which is present outside of the story. Images can be self-sufficient in their meaning. They create connections with other times, other places, other people, or other ideas.

3.3. The Movement-Image

Further to the notion of image infused with time, the concept of “movement-image” is equally significant: according to Gilles Deleuze, “movement expresses a change in duration” (Deleuze 1986, p. 8). This is essential in the study of time and space in film, with their interrelation. There is an abstract existence of movement within the image, which does not relate to video editing, but instead resides in the properties of the picture. It can be observed in silent movies, for instance in “The Cameraman”, when narratives had limited ways of communicating their message, but were based on sophisticated choreographies (The Cameraman 1928). This idea of movement, according to Gilles Deleuze, is intrinsic to the image, and creates a passage of time as well as a motion in the brain of the audience. In fact, the notion implies the existence of an inner dimension of narrative that is already existent in the image, even if it does not externally display any motion. On that note, according to Henri Bergson, “a passage is a movement and a halt is an immobility” (Bergson, Paul & Palmer 1991, p. 247). Cinematography does not necessarily need to use moving images, because they could interrupt the narrative on the level of interaction with the visuals.

In this perspective, movement is use of cinematic space and creates the space in which the story can happen. But this story focuses—not on what happens— but where it happens.

4. Time-Space

Some elements of physics can be considered in the understanding of the relation between time and space, with a consideration of publications on quantum field theory and curved spacetime (DeWitt 1975, p. 297). But this approach remains in the conception of the project, and does not appear in the final result, as a deliberate choice. To summarize the concept that influenced the preparation of the film, the “quantum field theory” the “theory of special relativity” and the “theory of general relativity”, considered together led to the conclusion that time is relative to the observer (DeWitt 1975, p. 322).

In connection to this idea, creating a story can be associated with some methods of improvisation and free storytelling techniques. Scholar Steven Maras terms this practice “scripting” in *Screenwriting: history, theory and practice* (Maras 2009, p. 184). The author explains how the camera can replace screenwriting in the filming process; the story is elaborated while the camera operates, with no support of a written piece (Maras 2009, p. 180). The cinematographer becomes writer and director. This approach emerged from independent movies with directors who came from a background other than cinematographic. It can be assimilated with the work of painters, sculptors or improvisation music performers (Maras 2009, p. 182). In this practice, there is a correlation between place, surrounding environment, actors, and uncontrollable elements of the situation and circumstances. A natural practice of filmmaking can surface, a mode that is praised to be singularly creative (Berliner 2009, p. 221). This idea repositions the narrative importance in relation to the film. The context is re-imagined in consideration of the place.

5. Filmmaking Practice

When choosing to film in specific environments, components of the space, details, or elements of the surrounding can become expressive, and infused with meaning. The city can metamorphose into a character. This method gives the story a unique personality. It can become the basis of the narrative method. In order to achieve this, the scenes

need to provide an atypical point of view. This can be achieved with the help of camera angles, closeup shots, or framing—for instance, leaving an area out of the picture that remains open to interpretation. It could be choosing to display only a part of a building, a street, a stairway, a window, a clock, or a door knob. The poetry of the place—and by extension, the space—emerges from contemplation.

This notion echoes the concept of time-image, described by Gilles Deleuze, as opposed to the “cinematographic image” (Deleuze 1989, p. 39). The viewer re-localizes the purpose and the role of the image by pure observation (Deleuze 1989, p. 41). It is also a way of transmuting the “real” into the “potential” (Deleuze 1989, p. 9). The film visuals carry an additional meaning that is inherent, but implied as opposed to the cause-and-effect configuration of the plot, in which the meaning comes from the consideration of the movie as a whole (Bordwell, Thompson & Ashton 1997). In this case, it is the responsibility and decision of the audience to activate the interpretation mechanism and give sense to the images, sound and editing of the work through the utilization of space and time. In order to offer this choice to the viewer, the sequences selected to appear in the narrative must be carefully chosen, in consideration of:

- a. The singularity of the use of space—the image’s particular attributes, its symbolism and meaning;
- b. The manner in which the subject is depicted: the framing of an element that might be deemed unsubstantial, but influences the spirit of the story; and
- c. The duration of the scene: slow camera shots can indicate that onscreen images are of importance and deserve to be examined, but there must be sufficient *time* to observe *space*.

6. Conclusion

With the consideration of time and space in cinema as intertwined, interdependent and correlated element, and their importance in narrative construction, a new filmic instrument emerges. It allows the director to manipulate two basic elements of common reality to generate a story-world that possesses its own rules and logic. That process relies less on the script than on the physical properties of the filming location and the cinematographic use of space. Potential future research could develop from this study, and explore the possibilities of manipulating time, space, and time-space, as essential elements of the narrative composition, as opposed to a cause-and-effect configuration. With the distortion of chronology, a metaphorical connection can be established between the elements that constitute the space and time of the story world.

With this novel perspective, it is not exactly space that plays a role in the work, but more specifically the process of looking at space—images of the movie—and giving the audience extended time and space to be able to transform what is seen to thoughts and emotions. It can be through the use of metaphors, or by offering a fresh perspective on particular elements of the location. This method also re-orchestrates stereotypes and suggests new ways of looking at space. It also points to new ways of considering space in relation to time in film—the dimension of time-space transforms into a powerful mechanism of storytelling.

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