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Thoughts on Film Set Design

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Abstract
Set design, in Wimmer's view, is the visual background to the action of a drama or film, to which the character in his action gives energy and determines its function. The key elements of this background are: space, its architectural layout, and the objects that fill it. Theatrical space was static. It was Gordon Craig who dynamized it using the play of light. The film uses a dynamic and variable space, but it is not the set design that the viewer is dealing with here, but its photography. Wimmer pays attention to how the viewer perceives the film space by engaging the senses, sensibility, emotions, associations, and the intellect. Wimmer identifies the eye of the viewer with the eye of the camera. The focal point is the protagonist and his actions in the environment that contains much more information (of social and psychological nature) than the background in the theatre. As he states, spatial landscapes and actors come together in the movement of the action by way of harmony or contrast. From this point of view and referring to specific examples, Wimmer analyses such factors as plot, moving image, frame composition, editing, and their relationship to set design and space construction. He invokes Aldous Huxley's metaphor describing film drama as a wide river full of whirlpools. It is the film space that forms the basis of its continuity. **(Non-reviewed material; originally published in *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 1963, no. 52, pp. 3-15).**

The only really important things during a film presentation are the image glowing on the screen and the viewer's impressions. Everything that happens in a film serves to generate an impression. Information and impression – these are the two functional layers of a film. Here, we shall limit ourselves to analysing the film image from the point of view of the role played by its set design.

Set design – this is a visual representation of man's arrangement of physical surroundings constituting the background for his activities in the course of a drama; this is the world of inanimate objects whose coexistence with man, nevertheless, provides them with a life of their own, an expression of their own, whose very existence helps or hinders man's actions. Set design is, therefore, a static arrangement of things at least partly existing before the action of the drama begins, connecting the present time of the action with the past.

Marcel Marceau, the great mime, during one of his performances would create two characters: David and Goliath. The set design for this piece consisted in a tall rock placed in the middle of the stage. Marceau would walk around the rock, appearing alternately as David or Goliath. It was the 'rock of transformation.'

Every set design is in some way a 'rock of transformation' – it changes the people entering it, it represents the powerful force with which the environment impacts the human being.

The set design may create an absurd image of the world. If in Chaplin's *Modern Times* a machine for feeding workers quickly begins to malfunction, shoving screws into the mouth of the fed person and carefully, at lightning speed, wiping his lips, the image becomes a caricature of a world built upon technology gone wrong. If in B. Nowicki's film *Poligon* [*Training Ground*] we can see a soldier walking along a row of tanks and cutting off parts of their barrels with a bayonet mounted on a rifle, this is a comic image of a reality in which the properties of objects have changed; the laws governing them are suspended. Thus, between the reality and absurdity stretch the boundaries of the world of illusions created by the set designer.

Before a character appears on stage, we are introduced into the mood of the action by the set design. It tells us what kind of world will make up the background of the events: mountains or seashore; day or night; what kind of people, what kind of world of things and affairs, what kind of social class. It also answers the question about the style of drama presentation the set designer will choose, whether he will try to portray a concrete reality, or whether he will shroud it in a romantic fog blurring the reality of the details, or whether he will choose an intellectual abstraction as the backdrop of human actions.

Let us establish certain categories of questions to which the set design must provide answers. This will help present its aspects in a certain order.

Set design depicts man's relationship to his environment of objects. It existed in every drama well before film.

The environment – all man-made objects – have something of the human in them. The hammer, the axe, the sickle have been formed by certain activities. They are linked to them in a way so powerful that when one sees a sickle, one sees rows of people rhythmically leaning over a field of ripe grain. Actions emanate from objects: objects suggest specific actions. If, in the course of the film's action,

Modern Times, dir. Charlie Chaplin (1936)

someone picks up an axe, they are going to chop down a tree or kill somebody. We are led to expect this by the atmosphere of work or crime, suggested by the preceding scenes. The axe, foreshadowing the approach of the deed, is the result of this atmosphere and, at the same time, creates it itself, it is its concentrate. In such a way, the tool, the object, linked by action to the man, becomes with him an actor in the drama.

Human thought and human hand have modelled objects, made them factors of life and reflected themselves in their form. The tool compels certain movements – the axe for the sweep of the hand – and thus moulds life. We can observe this close relationship between the shaping of the environment and man even more clearly in architecture. The building is a concentrate of activities. It has resulted from the purposeful allocation of space for a specific set of activities and contains the dynamics of action – it enables, suggests, and represents this action. Through the selection of forms, through the means of architectural art, this role of architecture representative for certain social functions is one of the main factors shaping the image of cities.

Thus, architecture is not a neutral background. At its core, it has the dynamics of the function of which it is the determinant.

The perception of this dynamic depends to a great extent on the sensitivity of the viewer and on the shaping of architecture, on its forms. Therefore, there are three spheres of the phenomenon: the thing shaped by life, alive by its functions, the looking, the observing, and feeling human being, and the intermediate layer, the properties of things impacting the viewer, their forms and their dynamics.

The first and fundamental element of the set design background is space. From what we can see, we build in ourselves its internal reflection, its internal model, which is the equivalent of the external space. When we enter an unfamiliar interior, we look around. The views merge into a spatial whole that we have not seen in its entirety at once. Even the part of the space remaining behind us has entered our imagination. We can close our eyes: we know how to move through it. In this first phase of vision, we have created our movement space.

The second phase is the individualisation of the objects in this space. The homogeneous image, enriched with new waves of visual information, differentiates itself, breaks down into parts, into objects among which it will be possible to move.

These two basic acts are joined by a third one: the perception and feeling of the 'orders' in this space, of harmony and contrasts, of the connections of proportions, shapes, and colours.

The intellectual part of perception leads to the juxtaposition of similar parts, to their comparison with each other and with our former perceptions stored in memory, to their classification into a specific group of phenomena, to their verification by real measurement. It may lead to the formation of a spatial plan and model in the imagination. The emotional part evokes associations, expands the impression with related feelings, sometimes very distant in space and time, becomes reinforced by them, transfers them to the objects seen, creates a specific atmosphere, which, in turn, becomes a reinforcing resonator that, referring to events sometimes long gone, resting at the bottom of experiences, brings to life the feelings associated with them.

Set design is the architecture of the stage and as architecture it has two objectives. Firstly, to create a division of space that directs movement on stage, i.e., to erect walls, create passageways, set fixed points and anticipate the paths for movement. It has to be composed in such a way as to express the mental thesis of the play, just as the layout of the walls expresses its material movement content.

Set design is older than dramatic art. Before the actor was placed in front of the chorus, which was the beginning of the drama form, there was the issue of the chorus and its background, there were stagings of ceremonial offerings to the gods and sporting competitions. Staging was not born in the theatre and is not confined to the theatre play.[1] These links with life enhance its expressive power. Here, we cannot discuss set design so extensively. Let us limit ourselves to stage set design. Film did not immediately introduce changes to it, therefore we must look at the question of the theatre stage architecture in the late 19th century, at the time of the onset of cinema.

The immobility of theatrical set design in relation to the viewer makes its presentation static. Even its mechanical movement (e.g., on a revolving stage) is not a dynamizing factor. It remains an arrangement of objects among which the action takes place. The viewer cannot enter the interior he sees, he cannot walk around the table at which the actors sit, his relation to this arrangement is essentially external – he is outside of it. However much we try to reduce the distance between the play and the viewer, however much we try to bind the auditorium to the stage, blurring the distinction and reducing the viewer's distance, the viewer's immobility, caused by his unchanging relation to the arrangement, is the essential aspect of staging. The stage is built in front of the viewer as a composition where the actor is going to move; only at the raising of the curtain is there an exploratory wandering of the eye, that creative moment in which the viewer generates for himself his emotional equivalent of the stage arrangement. After this moment, one can admire this stage arrangement, one may be delighted by it, but not surprised by it; the viewer knows it and could move on stage. The 'spatial-creative' part of the vision is over. The viewer will not receive any more information about its construction.

This state of affairs causes the entire tension of vision to focus on the actor. The gaze attaches itself to him, follows him, traces his movements and every feature of his figure and face; it creates this inner mimetic movement thanks to which the viewer gets involved and reads the course of the character's mental adventures. The viewer takes an imaginary part in them. Thus, the two phases of vision operate in the theatre alternately – the construction of the movement space and later, within its framework, the reflection of the actions of the persons of the drama.

This is the state of affairs when the architecture of the stage is fully visible. This was, for example, the case on the Greek stage, where visibility and clarity of proportion was the basis of composition.

It was not until modern times that light was introduced as a powerful factor in the construction of set design. Gordon Craig, the great actor and set designer of the early 20th century, revolutionized the stage by introducing light as a fundamental artistic element. He stripped set design of trifles and insignificant details that were a theatrical reflection of the bourgeois overload of 'opulence' in

the salon of the time. He operated with curtains and architecture understood as a play of forms and light. He reduced everything to aspects of proportion of man and his environment. By bringing out the monumentality of stage architecture, he achieved impressive results. He was a pioneer in the use of light as an element of drama. He arrived, his critics believed, at the 'principle of drama' in nature – a type of equivalent of music and architecture. In order to demonstrate it, he built a model in which the curtains changed and parted before the eyes of the audience. The stage without actors was dramatic in itself. There was no coloured surface on it – everything was created by light. Thus, three elements of staging were established: space, man, and light. The light departs from its 'biological' role, the natural role of illumination. The spotlight wanders across the stage, bringing out ever new groups of objects from the darkness. It reveals ever new details to the viewer's eyes or plunges people and events into darkness. The light itself can be an actor. This is happening at a time when the question of light, creatively discovered by Impressionism, fascinates people. Scientific achievements make their way into art (such as light splitting), finding artistic execution, for example in pointillism.

At the same time, the spread of electric light and the construction of reflector lamps made it possible to operate light more extensively and precisely.

Light was conquered for theatre and film.

For the viewer, the entry of light changed the relationship to space. It could now be shown in snippets, uncovered as the dramatic need arose. Anyone who remembers the use of light in V. De Sica's *Miracle in Milan*, a horrific sight of a crowd of freezing paupers chasing a patch of sunlight, should consider this an example of the powerful force and infinite possibilities of light in drama. Facial illumination has also ceased to be a mechanical thing. The infinite variety of nuances of illumination made it possible to change expressions, to soften or emphasize their hardness or harshness.

But even this powerful factor does not change the essence of our relationship to vision. It is a matter of our mental organisation: first of all, we build a space around us in a series of consecutive eye movements, we establish the possibilities of movement, and then, by linking ourselves with the characters through our eyes, we read them through a mimetic, internal feeling – empathy, and from this we build events in time.

One can distinguish between many types of mimetic empathy depending on the object in question.[2] Let us consider three possibilities here. It can be about direct mimicry, that is, behaviour in which the viewer accompanies, interacts on a more or less profound level. T h i s i s t h e m e c h a n i s m o f i n d u c t i o n .

There can also be involvement in a situation, without any necessary reference to the behaviour of the characters in the film: when the viewer is aware of an imminent danger of which the characters on the screen are unaware, he reacts on his own account in this situation.

In the third case, the two elements of complicity we have distinguished are combined: the viewer participates simultaneously in the situation and in the behaviour of the characters in this situation – h e i n t e r a c t s . This case is the most common and it is the essence of complicity both in the actions and in the film characters. This is the basic process of empathy – empathizing.

We have stated that the phenomenon of cinematic complicity involves a constant dialectic of two opposing movements: projection, that is, the tendency to understand the other person in relation to our own reactions to the situation, and identification, that is, the tendency of understanding that involves the instinctive mimetism (*mimétisme instinctif*) of a character's felt reaction.

According to A. Burlond, automatic imitation is not a normal adult response. The norm appropriate to a perception is a mental or motor reaction.[3]

A. E. Delacroix writes: *it is a case where perception has stopped in its development towards action or reflection; it is the monstrous development of a certain moment of perception*.[4]

We know to what great extent it is precisely the conditions of reception of a filmic representation that cause the normal course from perception to reflection and action to stop.

The film introduces the following changes: the eye does not look for images of things on its own, but receives these images ready in a fixed arrangement and sequence. The movement of the eye takes place within the boundaries of the image and is determined by this image by means of visual ways, linearity, light and so on. The conscious guidance of the viewer's eye is a matter of cinematography and editing, which we will not deal with here. The viewer himself has to build up from the pictorial suggestions a certain imaginary equivalent of the space in which the persons of the drama move. Even a completely oblique display of perspectives does not deform the space imagined in them.

In the cinematic image, the first phase of vision – the build-up of spatial awareness – also takes place differently. The viewer's eye, i.e., the camera lens, is in motion, with changing distances and angles of vision. The viewer looks through the eyes of the persons of the drama, he is and he lives in their surroundings. He enters the gates of the houses, he moves around inside them. His gaze can change its place among the spatial planes, he can create a plastic model of space in his imagination. As Bolesław W. Lewicki says, the architecture of the stage provides then the basis for the actions of the movement element.[5]

The contrast of the statics of set design and the movement of the characters creates the category of the arrangement of the relationship between man and his environment, but this does not exhaust the subject.

A film image can create an impression shorthand of what it depicts. A protagonist may appear in juxtaposition with characteristic moments of the environment. Recall the hero of De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* in search of a stolen bicycle. The stalls of an antique market, the individual tables, the piles of things, the rows of bicycles do not bind together into a material spatial model of the market, they only demonstrate its character. But the whole spatial issue can be shifted more towards abstraction. The characters of the drama can appear in close-ups with small parts of the background, which do not bind together into a spatial concrete. All our attention is then focused on the characters of the drama, on reading their experiences, on feeling their inner life. A background drawn in this way can be related to the action in various ways:

1. It can be self-sufficient, self-contained, indifferent to the action. Such, for example, is the powerful volcano in A. Kurosawa's *The Bad Sleep Well*. The actions of the people: the run towards death of the official forced to commit suicide and

his rescue, in the mists, fumes, and rumble of the active crater – themselves grow in significance in the face of the power of the phenomenon.

2. The relationship of the background to the action, even if it is architecture or nature, can be very vivid. It can be a force: a) harmonizing with the action of the drama, friendly; b) or hostile to the action.

In film, the role of the background is much more important and the background itself is much broader than in theatre. The liveliness of film, the ease of movement, means that much more information is transferred into the film image.

The contribution of a scene's architecture to the action, how they are related, is a fundamental issue. This leads to the question of whether the action is concentrated or whether the shot is a fragment of a wide off-screen space.

The justification for the existence of these two spatial categories of drama is found in the division of drama itself. Here are some of Aldous Huxley's thoughts on the subject.

To make a tragedy the artist must isolate a single element out of the totality of human experience and use that exclusively as his material. Tragedy is something that is separated out from the Whole Truth, distilled from it, so to speak, as an essence is distilled from the living flower. Tragedy is chemically pure. Hence its power to act quickly and intensely on our feelings. All chemically pure art has this power to act upon us quickly and intensely. … It is because of its chemical purity that tragedy so effectively performs its function of catharsis. It refines and corrects and gives a style to our emotional life, and does so swiftly, with power. Brought into contact with tragedy, the elements of our being fall, for the moment at any rate, into an ordered and beautiful pattern, as the iron filings arrange themselves under the influence of the magnet …

Wholly-Truthful art overflows the limits of tragedy and shows us, if only by hints and implications, what happened before the tragic story began, what will happen after it is over, what is happening simultaneously elsewhere. … Tragedy is an arbitrarily isolated eddy on the surface of a vast river that flows on majestically, irresistibly, around, beneath, and to either side of it. Wholly-Truthful art contrives to imply the existence of the entire river as well as of the eddy. It is quite different from tragedy … [6]

Thus, in its very essence, dramatic art is divided into two categories. Of course, space by its very nature is one of the essential formative factors of this difference.

The isolation of the events of a tragedy finds its expression in the isolation of the spatial composition, in its concentration and confinement, the drama of the Whole Truth in the 'excision' of the stage, in its relationship to the off-stage world.

These are the two categories of spatial composition of a performance in a theatre play. The more dynamic composition is privileged. Thus, in Greek tragedy, the drama proper is concentrated, the chorus scenes create contrasting, broad, pathos-oriented connections with the audience.

In the play scene in *Hamlet*, the author operates with two simultaneously 'enclosed' spaces: the space of the royal hall and the space of the stage in the theatre.

In contemporary plays, e.g., in *Waiting for Godot*, the strictly closed waiting scene is a metaphor for another space, for ideas, for broader issues.

In another area of theatre, e.g., ballet, we find, next to closed, visually concentrated compositions, Joost's ballet, where the cross-sectional scenes of the street are a balletic reworking of street traffic, current, without concentration.

Miracle in Milan, dir. Vittorio De Sica (1951)

Bicycle Thieves, dir. Vittorio De Sica (1948)

In film, this great river is much more visible than in theatre. The changing backgrounds, the switching of the action, owing to the editing and the movement of the lens, give much more abundant and more detailed information about the people and things surrounding the action, as well as about the world outside the action. The buildings and objects were made by people for people. They have a social significance; the architecture of the stage together with the people is like an ancient chorus speaking volumes about the action of the drama. One only has to look back to any of Clair's films to see the social significance of stage architecture.

Thus, the social importance of stage architecture enters into the significance of set design as one more voice in the chorus.

The reflection of a focused or scattered action is its stage design. It is through the arrangement of the building blocks and walls that it creates the spatial closure that binds the events together. However, it does not have to be a walled closure. For example, doesn't the scaffold in W. Dieterle's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* focus the whole stage arrangement better than the walls would?

So, we note again two categories: open and closed arrangements.

Dynamic presupposes the existence of a force in the form and arrangement of the visual elements, directing the viewer's gaze and spatial sensation in a certain direction, towards some intended goal. The suggestion of this movement may lie in the proper formation of the goal of the movement (e.g., an altarpiece in a Romanesque church), or it may flow from the form leading towards the goal of the path.

So a static, balanced aesthetics of arrangements, or a dynamized, taut enunciation of line and shape are again two categories.

Light can play a significant role in the final expression of a shape. It can fluctuate between even, concrete lighting, a more or less artful static aesthetic, or it can be deliberately used to bring out movement and its dynamics.

Theatre and film do not tolerate rules. Every play is different, depending on the time when it was written and staged. A play from the 17th century staged today, with strenuous attention to the 'purity' of style, will be a twentieth-century spectacle.

The categories we are trying to outline are inherent to any stage architecture, but they give complete freedom of form and expression, although they do influence its shape.

We are not tempted to complete the categories, but we must discuss one more group. It concerns precisely the construction of shapes, aesthetic structures.

Contrasts and harmonies rule here too, as in all plastic arts. Whether an actor emerges from the greyness of the walls, grey and inconspicuous himself, as if he were part of them, or whether he stands out from them like a visitor from another world – this can determine the expression of a shot.

The linearity of the roads in the landscape, or the seamless plane of the steppe or sea, the non-directional wilderness of the desert also provide a wide range of categories. The colourfulness and greyness or the dramatic contrasts in the lighting can express the harmony of man with his environment or his struggle against it. Everything here depends on proportions, relations of dimensions, on what is hidden in all details of the measurement and number, not only measured, but also felt. In his essay *The Artists of the Theatre of the Future*, Craig wrote: …

remember that on a sheet of paper which is but two inches square you can make a line which seems to tower miles in the air, and you can do the same on your stage, for it is all a matter of proportion and nothing to do with actuality.[7]

This is how we have broken down the issue of the background in the film image into a series of problems and tried to categorize the extremes between which these problems develop.

The film is a synthesis that binds all the discussed phenomena into one. Spatial landscapes and actors unite in a single action movement. Eisenstein writes of this in *Film Form*:

The screen need not adapt itself to the abstractions of Craig in order to make man and his environment commensurate. Not satisfied with the mere reality of the setting, the screen compels reality itself to participate in the action. "Our woods and hills will dance" – this is no longer merely an amusing line from a Krylov fable, but the orchestral part played by the landscape, which plays as much of a part in the film as does everything else. In a single cinematographic act, the film fuses people and a single individual, town and country. It fuses them with dizzying change and transfer. With an all-embracing compass of whole countries or of any single character. With its ability to follow watchfully not only the clouds gathering in the hills, but also the swelling of a tear from beneath an eyelash.[8]

Here emerges the question of the forces binding the film together.

The elements of visual compositions (linearity, colour, etc.) create spatial structures, internal images that give the impression of binding the whole. These structures are the skeletons of the forms making up the viewer's vision. In the image of the world projected onto the retina, a number of spatial and temporal structures can be found at the same time, being interconnected in a very complex way. Art in the form of paintings, prints, and drawings uses the same structures, consciously controlling them. It is the structures that are sometimes the essential subject of a painting in the art of our century.

The film image on the screen has only two dimensions. The two images on the retinas in a two-eyed visual system are different; the difference in images that occurs here, caused by the spacing of the eyes, is a structural element that is felt as depth. This difference of images on the screen is not there – there is only one image. There is not all the work of processing the image difference into an impression of depth. The film, then, lacks a 'physiological' basis for the sensation of depth. To some extent it is replaced by the geometrical consequences of the perspective system, namely the relative shortening of the dimensions of objects as they become distanced and the aerial perspective, i.e., the diminishing sharpness of the image, the loss of vividness of colour and its bleaching. However, the impression of depth on screen is weaker. It needs to be intensified by lighting, by the introduction of strong foregrounds that provide a point of reflection into the depths of the image, by the marking of paths leading into depth, by the placement of elements that act as if they were a scale in the image, orienting the viewer to the diminishing dimensions and therefore to the distance.

Despite these measures, the screen image is flatter, the blacks and whites are felt as graphic flat spots.

This has compositional consequences: for example, all the graphic-type structures that bind the image work more strongly. The effect of these structures

is weakened by movement and spatial depth. The structures of the individual layers of the film, i.e., spatial, visual, acoustic, must be subordinated to overarching structures: the structures of proportion and rhythm.

The forces that are here referred to are the elements of a work of art impacting the viewer. They occur in ensembles that are linked in a certain way and work together.

The first such ensemble is the action of the film. The structure of the action involves the build-up of the conflict between the forces that motivate the actions of the *dramatis personae*. The classic elements of this conflict are: preparation – build-up – catastrophe and resolution of the conflict, and we find these in almost every drama, although their succession may be reversed. One may refer here to C. Reed's *Odd Man Out*, as an example of a reversal of order. After a very short preparation – the catastrophe occurs right at the beginning. The entire film is a march towards the death of the characters. This is the dramatic structure of the film in the semantic layer of the drama. The viewer suffers a defeat, sympathizing with the weaker characters, doomed to death, whom he nevertheless agrees with. But action is not the only form of semantic structures present in the drama. The forces of conflict are represented by people and events. People are certain personality structures – their actions form the structure of the action. Thus, the dramaturgical structure is a macro-structure – an overarching arrangement that determines the representation of the acts performed by the persons of the drama.

The representation of these events is the film image. But the film image is also an arrangement and sequence of forms, lines, and patches in black and white or in colour. They form a separate whole and are linked to each other by their own structural laws within the closed frame of the screen. They are in equilibrium or possess a dynamics of movement precisely as visual forms. They are airy and changeable with the image, but they guide the viewer's gaze. Through them there occurs an encounter with the content of the drama, and they also have a great influence on the expression of the whole. They govern the visible shape and light. They themselves are subordinated to movement, which is derived from the action. But along with movement comes the element of time – and it too has its own structure. The rhythm of the changes in the image, the shortness or duration of the visible forms – the direction and speed of the movement – all of this can be observed in some isolation as an overarching structure, in some way ordering the incident shown. It is this structure of time that the music picks up and complements it with its own rhythms and emotional content.

Set design remains within the group of visual structures. It creates its own structural systems. They are usually less variable than the other visual groups and create bonds between them.

Before it reaches the viewer, the cinematic set design passes through yet another compositional filter. This is the composition of the film frame. The rectangular screen frame with a fixed ratio of 3:4 is itself part of this arrangement. Its bottom line is the 'earth,' its top line the 'sky.' What appears at the intersection of its diagonals, at the strong points of the arrangement, is important by this alone – whether it be a person, a building or an empty space for future action. Depending on how much of the image connects to the bottom line and how much to the top

Odd Man Out, dir. Carol Reed (1947)

line, the image is material, heavy, earthy, or light, aerial. The frame of the screen is the ultimate verification of proportion, it is the zero point of departure of the sight, it is the foreground from which the journey of the sight leaves into the depths.

It is of far greater importance than one might think. The introduction of the wide screen, the struggle for the 'cine-frame' and the 'circo-frame' is an attempt to free oneself from the limits of the screen. With the new techniques, we do not cover the whole screen with our eyes. And this movement we have to make is our movement in action. It incorporates us more strongly and connects us to the world beyond the line of the screen. The 'playing' background has become much wider, the composition more open. Set design can create a greater number of centres of possible action; the overall arrangement of the image moves towards visual 'polyphony,' towards the simultaneity of multiple actions.

The composition of film architecture reaches the viewer through the composition of the film frame or the composition of the shot. It is only through appropriate camera movements and editing that larger architectural ensembles can be shown. Thus, the cinematographer and his lens are the interpreters of the set design. He is the one who brings it to the fore with lighting and ultimately determines its role in the palette of the film's means of expression. Just as an orchestra conductor can lower the sound of a group of instruments, he, too, by controlling the power of the image, dividing it between the *dramatis personae* and the architecture of their surroundings, can bring out this or that part of the frame's 'actions' and put it in the foreground. This is very subtle work. It is necessary to operate with the structures of two images: a moving one of the living groups and a static one of the predominantly architectural object groups. Static in relation to the persons in the drama, but not necessarily in relation to the viewer. However, the image in its entirety must be well-composed, which means that both of the above-mentioned structures are subject to a third structure – that of the whole image.

The structures of the film set must take into account the fact that the importance of the film is not the set design, but its photographic image. Therefore, deformations of shape and colour, contrast, the strength of black and white, the appearance of material structures in the photographic image, etc. must be taken into consideration.

Possible optical deformations have to be taken into account, therefore space has to be provided for camera movement and its distance from the subject of the photography.

Composition is subject to the laws of perspective foreshortening, which are one of the main ways of expressing the depth of space – the laws of perspective can be widely used to create spatial illusions.

The perceptual reading of the frame begins from the 'key of composition,' i.e., from the focal point of strong forms and contrasts. From there, the gaze jumps to a weaker focus. The movement of the gaze takes place along continuous lines, insofar as there are such lines connecting the keys to each other. Every object in motion pulls the viewer's gaze towards it, plays the role of a key.

What we see in the set design is the visible part of the drama, it connects as closely as possible to its characters and spatially forms the course of its events.

Once an idea of the spatial character of the place of action has been created in the viewer – one can briefly allude to it, leaving the viewer to complete and connect it.

Having shown, for example, the mountains as a place of action, a suggestion of a mountain spruce or a highland cottage is then enough to allude to this space.

In the first films, the 'live photographs,' one is struck by the new, non-theatrical approach to space. There is no plot, just the hum of the great river of life – just background of events. But already here the social significance of the background, the colour of time, comes to the fore. *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* – these were the subjects of the first documentaries. It is against the backdrop of such shots that the first action scenes are deliberately introduced. The Lumières' *The Gardener* already differentiates between a photographic background of a garden and a small comedy action (1895). But already in 1903, in E. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* we see an enhancement of the staging. The stage setting and the scale of the shots are changed several times.

The tranquillity of the interior is emphasized by the flags hanging from the ceiling, looking like decorations left over from some celebrations. Thus, the contrast between the background and the action highlights its extraordinary nature.

At almost the same time, Zecca's film *Alcohol and Its Victims* is made. Here, the shabby interior of the room, dilapidated, with holes in the plaster, a broken cupboard and a drunk leaning against the door – form a harmonized whole. A woman embracing a child dramatically counters this sight, creating a contrast through her posture and clothing.

In film history we find a group of bizarre films that are also very interesting because of their set design: these are the films of Méliès. This magician-illusionist by profession, a visual artist by temperament, rapidly assessed and exploited the possibilities of creating 'miracles' through film. He opened up a new world of film fantasy. Stylistically, it revolves between the world of concrete, enlarged floral forms (e.g., *The Brahmin and the Butterfly*) and the I technique of *A Trip to the Moon*. However, one can already admire the breadth of the staging here, the ability to handle size scales. Méliès made over 500 films, mostly in the convention of suburban folk art, with a penchant for lavish decorativeness, often with an Art Nouveau touch.

Film d'Art, which builds its repertoire on filming theatrical productions, maintains this theatricality in the construction of the background as well. It operates with typical early 20th century theatre decorations – painted backdrops and flats.

Slowly, with difficulty, the film will break away from theatrical decorative conventions and acquire its own means of expression. Constructed architectural decoration will begin to replace painted screens. At the same time, the size of the decoration will necessitate the abandonment of the shooting studios and carrying out construction in the open air. The Italians will pave the way. The huge sets for E. Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis* pointed out new ways in film architecture. So the open air, from which the film started, will enter the drama. Hannibal's march through the Alps with the use of a camera dolly in G. Pastrone's *Cabiria* is the first example of a change in the treatment of film space. Nature's background enters feature film not only in Italy; it is in the north (in Sweden) that nature and landscape come to the fore most forcefully. The artistic unity of a real background and real acting will give a high profile to the whole. This is only a step away from using nature as a depiction of the character's feelings. The shots of the bleak landscape or the littered shabby streets are like overtures to the scenes of the film itself.

The Cabinet of Dr Caligari, dir. Robert Wiene (1919)

Rashomon, dir. Akira Kurosawa (1950)

At the same time, another discipline of film is developing rapidly in America, in competing studios. D. W. Griffith, following in Porter's footsteps, shows that the scene is a function of the whole and that to a great extent it changes its meaning depending on its neighbourhood. Impressionism in painting proved that the retina can be a palette on which neighbouring colours can be combined and put into a new action. Spots of pure colours, placed next to each other, will merge into a new mixed colour, unlike the original colours. What is more, the colour obtained in this way will have advantages, it will be vibrant, alive. There is something similar in editing. The impression of a shot does not pass with its fade-out on the screen. It carries over to the next shot – it evokes associations, gives the shot a new colour. At the same time, the individual elements of the shot interlock. Movement seeks continuity, or one acutely feels its change, otherness, and contrast. On the retina, the image lasts for 1/10 of a second; the frame changes in 1/16 to 1/24 of a second. After all, the prerequisite for the impression of continuous movement is this difference in which the film frame moves to a new position. But in the editing, this continuity of shape movement is interrupted. The image on the retina (afterimage) and the new frame arrangement overlap. The shape contrasts occur in full focus, evoking an internal commentary from the viewer.

Even more slowly changes the mental superstructure of the image. Given its extension into the depths of mental organisation, its anchoring in the layers of reflexion and movement – and even its links to physiological life, glandular reactions (e.g., the secretion of adrenaline under irritation as a symptom of mobilisation to a motor response) – we can see that the switching of images actually constitutes a shock to the viewer. The image is the signal that triggers the mobilisation and activation of the entire response system.

But in the editing, there is another powerful working factor. This is the rhythm of the images. Their very succession, the length of their duration, introduces a ripple of sensations that rocks the entire mental system. A similar effect can be exerted by the sound wave of an organ and cause glass or even walls to crack.

It was with the greatest difficulty that film broke away from theatrical traditions. One of these was the still eye of the viewer. The editing found a way of tying together images of the background and the actor in a way quite different from theatricality. Any arrangements of the forms of the stage architecture are bound in parts or wholes to the actor. Once acquired, the means of expression are exploited in a variety of ways. Suffice it to recall the architectural spatial rhythm in Olivier's *Hamlet*, when the knights of Fortinbras carry Hamlet's body away and, with the funeral march playing, the procession walking down the semi-dark staircase passes the brightly lit clearances of the terrace where the cannons are set up, giving funeral salutes. The procession, the darkness of the turns of the staircase, the rhythm of the passing clearances to the sunny terrace, the music and the roar of the salvos form, fused in synthesis, the powerful 'coda' of the film.

Another experience of set design – R. Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* – often cited as an example, but important as one of the manifestations of a cultural breakthrough, should be discussed as well.

The struggle against the remnants of the Baroque and Rococo in the 20th century led to the emergence of purist trends that shunned all decorativeness. They

were represented by A. Loos, the great architectural artist and one of those who sought and relied on strict proportions in the orgy of Art Nouveau decoration. This austerity and simplicity of operation, limiting the effect to a minimum, can also be found in some film productions such as Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

We can also see a number of other efforts. They focus on expression through shape, movement, and colour. This direction revolutionized the poster, influenced the press through caricature (*Simplicissimus* remains an example of this influence on the shape of satire at the time). In film set design, it is *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* that exemplifies its formative principles. The artificiality of the shape, the contrived scale of the architecture also made the plot seem artificial.

We have gone, in a nutshell, through the history of the development of the expressive means of film set design from the simplicity of Lumière's first documentaries to the complex links with modern painting. Alongside the development of film, the demands on the viewer also grew: from semi-automatic motor and mental reactions to the difficult reading of very subtle metaphors.[9]

The ending of the film, in particular, is the moment when the viewer comes to the fore again. Just as at the beginning, in his first glimpses, he had to create for himself the space of the drama, the imagined inner equivalent of the outer space (as if to lift the curtain in this inner theatre of the imagination, in which he himself is the only viewer), so now comes the second creative moment, the summing up of the drama in the context of his whole world – the world of the viewer. If the film was good, the viewer experienced its events as his own, he saw the world through the character's eyes and the events of the drama overlapped with his own. He must therefore have a moment of comparison, juxtaposition, and conclusion. The play becomes a symbol, the adventures – metaphors.

And here again we can see two categories of staging and set design. It either suggests and emphasizes the reality of the world of the drama, or it prepares and suggests its symbolism, its metaphorical character. Italian realism, for example, uses the first method – one sometimes has to struggle to detect the general sense inherent in these works. One has to cut through the realism of the set design, the density of details and facts, in order to arrive at the truths that turn the individual course of events into a general symbol.

But the 'unreality' of the set design does not settle the matter. How much more powerful, in its symbolic meaning, is the image of the hero's death in A. Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds*, amidst a horrible metropolitan rubbish dump, than the image of the dancing straw-wraps symbolizing the social class at the end of its existence. In both sequences, the emotional impact of the set design is very high. However, the strength of their metaphorical significance differs.

We can see how the awareness of the importance of the background of the drama's action grew, how interiors, objects, landscape, and finally nature as a whole were drawn into the chorus of storytelling voices. As the complications of the plot grew, as the multithreading of the film developed, the issue of tying the individual sequences of action into a whole and these wholes into the unity of the film, the importance of continuity – the continuity of the film – also grew. The film space is one of the foundations of continuity. Not the forms of this space, but the space itself. We are somewhere – in the desert or at sea. The awareness of this connects the images and conditions them – forms the basis of other connectors.

The architecture of the stage creates the division of this space and determines the paths of movement – it spatially determines the action. This is its primary role.

For example, in A. Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, three contrasting spaces play off each other. The space where the half-destroyed temple stands, the space of the forest, and the space of the court. The mighty shapes of the temple are shown in the pouring rain and return several times as the caesura of the story. It is a place of reflection – a sort of commenting ancient chorus. The forest and clearing, with its intricate forms of paths, clearances, and tree branches – this is the site of a complex action. The court, where the space is marked by a few horizontal, abstract lines, stark and rigid – this is a place of searching for uncompromising and absolute truth. There are no investigators or judges. We are the judges and each of the characters in the event unfolds their truth before us. There is something of the atmosphere of a Franz Kafka novel in this abstract tribunal.

Three such spaces could also be created in the theatre, but their materialisation could only be created in film. The two versions of the fight between the robber Tajomaru and his victim so strongly link the terrain, the unevenness of the ground, the roots, the pits and the steepness of the hill with the action, with the movements of the fighters – the background is so closely connected with the action that it is this essential feature of film set design that becomes clearly apparent. It also reveals itself only in the movement of the *dramatis personae*. This is why film set design cannot be shown in its essential action either in a drawing, a photograph, or a model. Just as objects, such as a hammer or an axe, can only be revealed in motion as tools of actions whose possibility they somehow concentrate, so film set design also develops before our eyes only in the development of events of which it is a part and which it conditions in its shape.

Transl. Artur Piskorz

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[1] It would be wrong to suppose that the need for decoration and adornment is the result of civilisation and culture. A. M. Hocart supposes that almost certainly body decoration and purely symbolic costume occurred earlier than the making of clothing as protection from the weather (L. Mumford, *The City in History*, New York 1961, p. 11). M. W. Köhler, director of an anthropoid station on Tenerife, observed how chimpanzees danced rhythmically by running around a tree, and *saw them add to the marching around a rotation around their own axis. For dances of this kind, the chimpanzee likes to adorn itself with a variety of objects, above all vines, yarn or pieces of cloth that twitch and move* (L. Vaillat, *Histoire de la danse*, Paris 1942, p. 7).

[2] G. Cohen-Séat, *Problèmes du Cinéma et de l'information visuelle*, Paris 1961, pp. 163-178.

[3] As quoted in Cohen-Séat, op. cit.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Personal communication with B. W. Lewicki.

[6] A. Huxley, "Tragedy and the Whole Truth", in: idem, *On Art and Artist*, London 1960, pp. 65-66 [bibliographical entry completed by the editors].

[7] E. G. Craig, "The Artists of the Theatre of the Future", in: idem, *On the Art of the Theatre*, New York 1956, p. 23 [bibliographical entry completed by the editors].

[8] S. Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. J. Leyda, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1949, p. 182 [bibliographical entry completed by the editors].

[9] Historical reflections based on: J. Toeplitz, *Historia sztuki filmowej* and L. Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film*.

Marian Wimmer

Architect, artist, art education organiser, art theorist. He was born in 1897 in Kolomyia (present-day western Ukraine). Wimmer's father earned a considerable fortune in the construction business and made sure that his children received a thorough education. Marian took his matriculation examinations in Vienna and went on to study architecture at the Lviv Polytechnic and, at the same time, piano at the Music Society. Later, he also took painting and drawing at the Lviv Industrial School. In the mid-1920s, due to the risk of tuberculosis, Wimmer settled with his wife, also an architect, in the city of Zakopane, where he took up design and teaching work. After the war (much of which he spent in Lviv), Wimmer settled permanently in Łódź. He switched from his former activities and took part in the setting up of the Łódź Film School as well as the Textile Design Department at the Academy of Fine Arts. After 1957, probably due to health issues, Wimmer retired from his functions there. Although he did not give up on his participation in the artistic life of the city, he focused primarily on his own academic work. He died in 1970. His unpublished articles were collected in the volume *Marian Wimmer. Przestrzeń jako tworzywo sztuki* [*Marian Wimmer: Space as the Material of Art*], published by the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź in 2021.

Słowa kluczowe:
scenografia;
architektura;
przestrzeń;
film;
teatr

Abstrakt

Marian Wimmer

Myśli o scenografii filmowej

W ujęciu Wimmera scenografia jest plastycznym tłem akcji dramatu teatralnego lub filmu. Bohater w działaniu nadaje jej energię i określa jej funkcje. Przestrzeń teatralna była niegdyś nieruchoma, zdynamizował ją dopiero Gordon Craig, wykorzystując grę świateł. W filmie natomiast zostaje wykorzystana przestrzeń dynamiczna, ale to nie ze scenografią ma tu do czynienia widz, lecz z jej fotografią. Wimmer zwraca uwagę na to, jak odbiorca percypuje przestrzeń filmową, angażując zmysły, wrażliwość, emocje, grę skojarzeń i intelekt. Punktem centralnym są według niego bohater i jego działania w środowisku, które zawiera znacznie więcej informacji, niż dzieje się to w przypadku teatru. Jak pisze badacz – krajobrazy i aktorzy łączą się w akcji na zasadzie harmonii lub kontrastu. Wimmer analizuje ponadto takie czynniki jak: fabuła, ruchomy obraz, kompozycja kadru, montaż oraz ich związek ze scenografią i konstrukcją przestrzeni. **(Materiał nierecenzowany; pierwodruk: „Kwartalnik Filmowy" 1963, nr 52, s. 3-15).**