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The literary embodiment of a film as phenomenological world-building

Abstract:

This article is based on my work as a screenwriting teacher and my growing frustration with the hegemony of classical dramaturgy, which lays like a wet blanket over creative writing and, not least, reduces film writing to a narrative process without regard or humility for the multimodal qualities and capabilities of film to create sensual experiences for an entangled audience. This article wants to propose another, artistic, method that I call cinematic world-building. The purpose of the method is to give the students a greater understanding of the audiovisual elements' ability - as units and as cooperating constellations - to build moods, content, and themes without support from narrative and to develop their stories from cinematic spaces. After a few years of research to make it consistent, I tried the screenwriting method's first steps in a course with a very good reception from the students. Some shortcomings were discovered, but above all, the method was felt to have good potential for further development.

In an introductory critical examination of the ordinary dramaturgical template, I show how it has come to be a compelling method in writing screenplays, how it has created a multibillion-dollar industry with claims that it is based on Aristotelian ideals, that it demonstrates a "natural" way to tell and that all stories through the ages are based on this dramaturgical principle. I will examine the structural template's built-in, hidden values that inevitably color the film's narrative, the values that reflect old patriarchal ideals leading to the American dream and Hollywood heroism. Here I rely on the writer and essayist Jane Alisonⁱ and the filmmaker and writer Paul Ruizⁱⁱ, among others.

The template that is used today became "state of the art" in 1979 and had a huge impact in the Western world. In a few years it became standard in Hollywood and in TV fiction. This coincided with the expansion of TV in Europe and the development of public technologies such as VHS and cable TV. Over time, the techniques have developed and refined, and the audience has grown in numbers. In recent years, with the breakthrough of streaming services, the production of TV fiction has literally exploded. Slot TV's one episode per week has been replaced by binge watching and the young viewers have become gourmands of genres and/or series.

But... This intense viewing has also brought with it the classic narrative structure becoming even more apparent, as it takes the story through obligatory points and always uses an individual perspective, a hero's journey, a goal, and a main conflict, and so narrows down the number of unique stories that can be built according to this template. Cinemas worldwide suffered large audience losses during the pandemic, and today that reduction seems very difficult to reverse. The streaming services' weak results for younger viewing groups ⁱⁱⁱindicate declining interest and the major media companies are looking for new expressions to satisfy new generations. The major European festivals might sense a turning point and prize films that don't care so much about a logical narrative but soar out into what might be called cinematic flesh, the presence of an encompassing audiovisual event, a sensuous existential experience. Leos Carax' *Annette* (2021), Julia Ducournaus' *Titane*, (2020), Ruben Östlund's "Triangle of Sadness" (2022), Jude Radu's "Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn" (2021) and Robert Eggers' "The Lighthouse" (2019) are examples.^{iv}

If film is to survive as an independent medium, it must adapt to audiences who have lived their entire lives digitally connected: the digital being, who takes for granted that cultural consumption of any kind is only a click away to view, download, mix, frame, process, manipulate and distribute, have you a computer/tablet and some software programs.

In what follows, the article deals with the alternative proposal *Cinematic world-building*. It is not a new concept. A film, anyone, can be said to constitute its own world where the choice of location, era and character's habitus form the basis, where *mise-en-scène* and sound atmosphere create ambience, and hierarchies and orders identify the film's social, economic, and political domicile. Although the film has a realistic setting, it is always a construction, a world of its own. But the film is not a self-referential entity, instead - as Daniel Yacavone (*Film Worlds*, 2014) points out - the cinematic world consists of other, already existing, film, art, literature, or authentic worlds from which it draws quotes and/or references.^v

Yacavone borrows his analytical model from the artistic method of the American philosopher and semiotician Nelson Goodman, presented in *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978). Goodman claims that a work of art is never a new creation, but uses colors, textures, shapes, signs, borrowings, and quotes that the artist draws from different sources. It is the merging, the reshaping that is the art.^{vi}

His method is in five steps, and I intend to present it (in an adaptation set up for screenwriters), as one of the cornerstones of the world building method that I want to develop. With the first three steps of the adapted method, the screenwriter builds the world into a seamless, stylistic audiovisual unit with its attributes, rules, values, and hierarchies, as well as references to other worlds. With the last two steps, the aesthetic uniqueness of the world is reinforced, and a self-critical attitude is added.

Another cornerstone is the phenomenological understanding of the existential encounter with a world. Mikel Dufrenne believes that the subject's experience of an (objective) world gives rise to thoughts about the world that cannot be conditioned or rationally controlled. Since each subject has its own sensory experience, augmented by that of its own imagination, each world generates a myriad of subjective, existential experiences of it. The world does not change, it does not become a subject but remains what it is, which is why Dufrenne calls the

experienced world "the aesthetic object".^{vii} The world of a work of art likewise invites a sensual experience and makes the viewer a co-creator of the world that has been transcended into an aesthetic object. Paintings such as Hans Holbein's "Ambassadors" (1533) with its anamorphic skull and Diego Velázquez's "Las Meninas" (1600) where the viewer occupies a place in the space of the artwork, demonstrate the phenomenological idea that active participation (engagement and imagination) is required for to deeply understand the world one finds oneself in. The communicative goal of the artwork is thus to invite the audience to a co-creative interpretation, which also becomes the goal of the screenwriter.

A third leg on which this proposal rests is hermeneutic analysis, in the form represented by Hans-Georg Gadamer. The artist/writer oscillates between the immersion of the creative process to a distanced investigation of the future work of art's relationship to the outside world, of the idea of the work of art and of the artist's own traditional pre-understanding of the work's content and meaning. The work of art, when it is interpreted by an audience, is only to be understood through itself and the references it is built on.^{viii}

To clarify the distinction between similar concepts, I will present another world-building application, *transmedia storytelling*, where an existing (mostly) literary world is adapted for other platforms such as film, games, and other products. This is a commercial strategy that big media publishers use to keep the fans immersed in buying and interacting with the adapted products.

One well-known transmedia representative, Alex MacDowell, also runs a non-profit organization, the World Building Institute, where, in collaborative projects with people from widely different professional fields, they try to audio-visualize the future and the media narrative of the future. World-building of different sorts are a collaborative opportunity for many future markets and purposes^{ix}.

The article reports on the knowledges done in the course with the world-building method. Through written reflections, recorded discussions and some in-depth interviews, the students' experiences are captured. They depict their immediate insights into the potential content of selected audiovisual elements and their spatial relationship to each other. The students state that they had to think in different ways when they were forced to abandon the narrative development process. Challenging for all, very difficult for some. Joint discussions around the interpretation of the worlds provided interesting input and deepened understanding of the power of audiovisual design already at the script stage.

Criticism was directed at the obstacle to directly writing or thinking stories and that it became difficult to balance the references in the room against each other so that the "wrong" object did not weigh the most. As for the latter, it is a difficulty that I see as part of the process: to explore how the audiovisual elements take place in and create the order and value hierarchy of the room and how they reflect each other in a holistic spirit. For the former, I believe that a pre-formulated delimiting theme, or an object of inquiry, can give students the support needed in the audiovisual content creation.

At the end of the course, students were introduced to other possible story structures to see different alternatives to narrative development. Associative (dream) structures, Bakhtin's (2002) polyphonic structure^x, the

Chinese/Japanese/Korean kishotenketsu non-conflict structure, Peter Greenaway's ceremonial and theatrical structures^{xi} and others.

Some of the students wrote scripts based on their "rooms" and the article will follow them up.

In conclusion, I evaluate the experiment and suggest, based on the students' comments and own observations, how the method can be processed and further developed to include the entire script process, from idea to finished script. The story's harmonic or dissonant resonance with the room and the character's encounter with, adaptation to and release from the room's conventions will become important steps in the next stage. Which soon to be tried, hopefully.

ⁱ Alison, Jane, "Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative", Catapult (2019)

ⁱⁱ Ruiz, Raul "Poetics of Cinema", översättning Brian Holmes, Dis Voir (2015) Original 1995

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/411775/average-daily-time-watching-tv-us-by-age/>

^{iv} Leos Carax: *Annette* (France, Germany, Belgium, United States, Japan, Mexico, Switzerland, 2021), Julia Ducournaus: *Titane*, (France, Belgium 2020), Ruben Östlund: "Triangle of Sadness" (France, Germany, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, 2022), Robert Eggers: "The Lighthouse" (United States, Canada, 2019), Jude Radu, "Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn" (Romania, Luxembourg, Czech Republic, Croatia, Switzerland, United Kingdom, 2021)

^v Yacavone, Daniel, "Film worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema" Columbia University Press (2014)

^{vi} Goodman, Nelson, "Ways of Worldmaking", Hackett Publishing (1978)

^{vii} Dufrenne, Mikel, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, chapter 5 II d*. Translation Casey, Anderson, Domingo, Jacobsen. (Northwestern University Press, 1973) Original was published 1953

^{viii} Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Sanning och Metod i urval*, Swedish edition, translation Arne Melberg, (Daidalos, Sweden, 1997) Original title "Wahrheit und Methode" (1960)

^{ix} <https://worldbuilding.institute/> 09/25/22

^x Bachtin, Michail, "Dostovjevskijs poetik" Translation Lars Fyhr and Johan Öberg, Swedish edition, Anthropos (2010)

^{xi} Elliot, Bridget, Purdy, Anthony, "Peter Greenaway Architecture and Allegory", *Interview with Peter Greenaway*, Academy Edition (1997)