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| Cinema – the Non-represented World|

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CINEMA – THE NON-REPRESENTED WORLD

IMPOSSIBLE SPACES IN SCIENCE FICTION FILM

The introduction of computer-based techniques has changed the ontological status of the cinema. Many contemporary films simulate reality, rather than represent it. Non-existing objects with no real prototype appear on the screen. Films reflect semi-real worlds, but the ontological foundation of film representation changes. Hence, the question: Can we still use the traditional concepts of film theory?

Cultural Studies can support future studies providing the background for speculations based on the assumption that any kind of truth (also about the future) is relative. From this perspective, the goal is not to predict things to come, but to provide insight into the human condition. Another goal is to explain the way in which we perceive the future now, and how we will see it tomorrow. Traditional film theory needs to be redefined to describe the changing nature of film and media apparatuses. However, it can still be useful because the "future strategies of representation" are often related to the old ones.

Key words: *cultural studies, science fiction film*

Кино — нерепрезентируемый мир. Невозможные пространства в научно-популярном фильме

Появление компьютерных технологий изменило онтологический статус кино. Многие современные фильмы скорее симулируют реальность, чем репрезентируют ее. Не имеющие реального прототипа, несуществующие объекты заполняют экран. Фильмы отражают наполовину выдуманные миры, что изменяет онтологические основания кинорепрезентации. Подобная ситуация провоцирует вопрос: можем ли мы все еще использовать понятия традиционной теории кино?

Исследования культуры (cultural studies) могут оказать поддержку кинотеории, обеспечив основания рассуждениям, основанным на утверждении о том, что любой вид истины или реальности относителен. Исходя из этой перспективы, целью исследований становится не предсказание грядущего положения вещей, но обеспечение понимания условий человеческого существования, а также объяснение того, каким мы видим будущее сейчас и каким мы будем видеть его в дальнейшем. Традиционная теория кино нуждается в переопределении с тем, чтобы получить возможность описания изменений природы фильма и новых аппаратов медиа, но не стоит сбрасывать ее со счетов, поскольку стратегии будущего как правило полагаются на находки и изобретения, сделанные в прошлом.

Ключевые слова: *cultural studies, кинотеория, научно-популярный фильм, медиа, виртуалистика*

The assumption that any object represented on the screen has to have its material existence in the real world, has always been a basis for the theories of film representation. The theoreticians discussed the problem, if the representation is a simple reproduction of reality or a process of signification. Yet, only the relation between real objects and represented objects was an issue. The idea of film itself as a medium of representation was not in any way questioned.

On the other hand, the fundamental problem of the incoherent status of the film world emerged. The situation in which objects were just filmed by an artist, who followed his or her intuition was considered to be the basic model for cinema. The films representing pro-filmic realities (e.g. world created entirely in the studio or, later, with CGI techniques) were more problematic. In both cases we are dealing with worlds that do not exist in reality. But the status of the

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Международный журнал исследований культуры
International Journal of Cultural Research
www.culturalresearch.ru

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film representation is fundamentally different. The introduction of the computer based techniques changed the ontological status of the cinema itself. Before, it was based on the principles of the discourse of photography. In fact, we no longer deal with the tradition formed by the painters of renaissance and adopted by the cinema. Many contemporary films rather simulate reality than represent it. Non-exiting objects with no real prototype appear on the screen. Films reflect semi-real worlds, but the ontological foundation of the film representation changes. Hence the question: can we still use the traditional concepts of film theory?

Many contemporary film theoreticians, especially those inspired by cognitive psychology, insist that the role of the viewer in the re-creation of the represented world is crucial. On the other hand, the authors inspired by Marxism and ideology studies, claim that the viewer is passive rather than active, and his role in the process is strictly pre-defined. His is task is to decode the meanings inscribed in the mechanisms of the filmic medium itself.

No matter if we decide to follow the cognitivists or the Marxists, we must agree that the representation of the world in cinema is somehow limited by the medium. The difference between the two ways of thinking is not related to the space itself. It rather concerns the ways this space is "filled" with meanings. The distinction between "depicting" and "representing" seems quite useful. We can easily notice that a film depicts the space (or "presents" it) but also re-presents. In this context, the process of re-presentation is much more than just "showing", "depicting" or "presenting" the real world. The cinema not only "looks" at reality but also employs its own technology to create something that looks real but is not real at all.

Marianna Micha owska — in her book on the representation in photography[1] — claims that what we see in a frame (in film or still photography) is mostly a "metaphor of the reality, memory and trace"[2]. The image is not reality, but it certainly relates to it with the help of the viewer's experience, memory and competence. This allows to re-construct the non-existing worlds represented in films. Vilem Flusser[3] writes about the "technological images" of contemporary media, which seem to be the depictions of the reality, but are predominantly the images of themselves. The medium not only encourages us to use the knowledge about the world but also the knowledge about the medium.

Film does not have to portray things that do exist. Even a film about aliens from outer space may seem "realistic". The stories about non-existing creatures can be told within the boundaries of well known narrative strategies (eg. in genre film), they also may deform or extend the things we know.

Here's the example. Pohl Anderson in his short story "The Helping Hand" uses two neologisms describing mental activities of an alien. The reader is unable to understand their actual meaning. Yet, knowing the structure of the language, he figures out that the creature "does" something in a special and unique way. The non-existing space of the science fiction genre may be represented in a similar manner.

Still, we need to remember of a significant shift in film representation caused by the use of numerous CGI techniques. Today, many movies are produced entirely in the film studio. Some of them without traditional props or sets. Actors — performing against green-tinted walls — are later placed in a non-existing space. The use of computers allows to create the paradoxical spaces, which not only represent the places that do not exist, but also challenge the spatial expectations of the viewers.

Science fiction genre not only tries to depict new settings but also looks for the new ways of representing the space. Although its abilities are limited by the frame itself (the film image to some extent continues the tradition of renaissance painting), there are some interesting attempts to overcome the traditional boundaries of the film space.

Two films, *Minority Report* by Steven Spielberg and *The Matrix* by Wachowski Brothers, are excellent examples of how the new spaces in film can be created. Both movies are visions of future. In *Minority Report* we enter the world in which a crime can be detected and punished before it is committed. In *Matrix* we visit — together with the protagonist of the movie — an alternative reality created by a computer system.

In *Minority Report*, Tom Cruise plays detective John Anderton who, with the help of psychic "prophets"[4], follows the people who are to become criminals in the future. Using the powers of their minds combined with technology, he is able not only to enforce the law but also to prevent crime and punish future murderers even before they think about killing anybody. In one of the opening sequences we see him using an interface of the future. The technology is computer-based, yet, it crosses the boundaries between the represented, the simulated and the real. John does not use the typical devices to interact with the computer. Instead he "enters" the interface, and "acts" within it. The three-dimensional "displays" allow him to move the data around — not in a traditional way in which we are unaware of the actual place the data is stored in, and we use a symbolic simulation of its structure (the catalogues and files in a computer environment). Detective Anderton creates a structure that is both the computer-generated simulation and a part of a real space. The images, showing the crimes to be committed and the police records of the future criminals, appear as three-dimensional projections and also on transparent panels combining the functions of the data-storage devices and displays. This new technology creates unified space in which data is not "represented" but instead can be accessed directly. In a traditional computer system, files contain the sequences of digits which are "translated" by the software into words, images and sounds. The interface in *Minority Report* equates the codes of the technology and the visual codes understood by the humans. The transparency of the displays used in the system creates a metaphor: there is nothing beneath the surface of the interface, its language is legible both for machines and the users of the interface.

The technological images invade the real space and become the part of the experience of the protagonists. This can be observed in a different context in a scene in which Anderton is shown in his apartment. John tries to relax after a busy day watching videos of his son who died a couple years ago. The boy is shown in a home video made with the use of a new three-dimensional technology. The

1   Marianna Michałowska, *Niepewność przedstawienia. Od kamery obskury do współczesnej fotografii,* Kraków: Rabid 2004.
2   Ibidem. P. 10.
3   Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion Books 2000.

4   They are called "pre-cogs" in the film.

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images are not projected onto screen but they overlap with the real space of Anderton's place. John is not only watching them, he also interacts with the recording lip-syncing the lines of the dialogue. Yet, the appearance of video he plays back reveals its technological origins. The recording is made with up-to-date technology, but the images are distorted as if they were made with the use of analogue equipment. The "tape" (actually John uses transparent data storage devices to play the video) is worn out in a way denoting the features of a VHS medium. The images are blurred due to the degradation of magnetic layer of the tape, the colours are faded. There are also distortions resulting from the physical damage of the "cassette".

The confrontation of the features of new digital technology with the ones that denote VHS tape allows the director to create a certain tension between the real and the world of technological images. John uses the technology in a private and intimate space. The technological images are incorporated in his experience but — at the same time: they are just the images. Blurring the boundaries between the real world and the world of technology is thus the result of a certain use of computerised forms of representation/simulation. *Minority Report* brings the message about the dangers of an improper use of new forms of communication in which seeing with "one's own eyes" is replaced with the seeing with the use of technologies.

The idea of the movie is presented in a scene in which John prepares for his mission to deconstruct the system. In order to become "invisible" he has to get rid of his eyes — a proof of his real identity: miniaturised robots are able to trace any individual and identify him or her analysing the specific patters of the retina. John's eyeballs are then surgically removed and stored to be temporarily replaced with the new organs — the ones that are unrecognisable to the computer system. This situation is a part of narrative structure and the semantic dynamics of a science fiction genre. Yet, at the same time it forms a metaphor: in order to infiltrate the system the protagonist has to reject his human identity and accept new one. He becomes a form of cyborg whose vision is shaped by the use of technology.

There are numerous similarities between *Minority Report* and *The Matrix*. Yet, there are also important differences. Spielberg's movie in a way follows the ideas of Bill Nichols[5], who notices that the "new media" replace representation with simulation. The cybernetic interfaces are no longer the depiction of any reality. Instead they create new realities, which include elements of older media (television, film, printed word), but also combine them in an unique way. The protagonists of the film use the interfaces, which change their perception of the world. The interfaces shape their experience, and interfere with it. In *Matrix,* the space is also shaped by the interface. The difference is that in *The Matrix* we are unable to see the interface itself. Instead, we enter the world in which the space is determined by technology, and thus does not resemble the world as we know it.

One of the crucial scenes of the brothers Wachowski's science fiction epic shows how Noe's decision to enter the Matrix is made. Morpheus, who is his guide in the new world, informs Neo that the world he lives in is a computer generated simulation created by the revolting machines feeding on the energy produced by the bodies of

human beings. Neo has to decide if he wants to learn about the true structure of the world. To do so, he is asked to swallow one of two pills. The red one lets him know the truth, the blue one allows him to remain in the dreamy semi-reality. Neo — in order to participate in the narration — has to "wake up". The pill he takes is a "sleeping pill" *a rebours*. The interface of the system is not represented because the protagonist is actually a part of it.

The Matrix seems to introduce the idea of anti-cinema in which a person who wishes to participate, has to awake instead of "falling asleep". Edgar Morin[6], trying to describe the nature of cinematic event, used the metaphor of a dream. In the concept of a French theoretician the viewer is confronted with a situation in which the images he or she watches on the screen are both "real" and "material". We know that the cinematic illusion is a product of a certain technology, but we believe that what we see is real. The movies reflect actual material reality, but at the same time create imaginary space of the unreal. In traditional cinema we need to accept the technology, in *The Matrix* we — together with the protagonist — we are forced to incorporate it. Wachowskis' movie of course uses the framework of cinema — it includes the elements of "cinematic language" and selected features of the system of cinematic representation. It is also meant to be shown in cinemas, and thus implies traditional forms of experiencing it by the audience. Yet, in many aspects, the movie seems to be closer to post-cinematic forms of audiovisuality.

The relationship between the "real" and the imaginary world of computerised semi-reality is established in a scene in which Neo enters the simulated world. The protagonist is shown in front of a mirror. At first we see its broken surface, then it turns into liquid reflective metal. Neo touches it with his hand and is covered by the fluid, that comes "alive" when he reaches for it. He is not a "reflection" anymore. He becomes a mirror himself and the image merges with reality.

The mirror has been used as a metaphor of cinema by numerous authors. Yet, the image reflected by cinema is not like the images reflected by real mirrors. Jacques Aumont, follows E. Gombrich to explain it:

First, all forms of representation are bound by convention, even the most analogical ones. Even in photography, for example, one can alter optical settings such as lenses, light filters, and so on, or the chemical variants such as types of film stock. Secondly, despite this, some conventions — those which play with the properties of our visual system — are more natural than others: perspective, in particular. In other words, for Gombrich, the image's analogical role (or iconic analogy in general) always has a double aspect:

as mirror — analogy copies some parts of visual reality, and the technique of figurative imagery may even be an imitation of the kind of image we perceive in nature, for instance on a lake, through a window or on polished metal;

as map — the imitation of nature is mediated through several cultural conventions, which are like mental maps linked to universal which aim to clarify representation through simplification, such as customs, artistic conventions arising from and fixed by tradition, and so on.[7]

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[5] Bill Nichols, *The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems*, „Screen" 1988, No. 1. P. 22–46.

[6] Edgar Morin, *Le cinĉma ou l'homme imaginaire*, Paris: Editions de minuit 1958.

[7] Jacques Aumont, *The Image*, translated by Claire Pajackowska, London: BFI Publishing 1997. P. 149.

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The cinematic mirror is an external device, which not only reflects reality but also transforms it within the boundaries of the cinematic system of representation. The metaphor has also been adopted by the psychoanalytical theory of film. In this context, the mirror is not only a reflective surface. It also brings the fascination with the image itself, based on the "mirror stage" — a primal process of individuation experienced by children and re-experienced — in cinema — by adults identifying with the presentation of the spectacle on the screen. Christian Metz explains it in his famous book:

As he identifies with himself as look, the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera too which has looked before him at what he is now looking at and whose stationing (=framing) determines the vanishing point. During the projection this camera is absent, but it has a representative consisting of another apparatus called precisely a "projector". An apparatus the spectator has behind him, *at the back of his head*, that is, where fantasy locates the "focus" of all vision[8].

In *The Matrix* we also experience the cinematic apparatus: the movie, despite of its content and attempts to cross the boundaries of traditional representation, is still based on it. Yet, it also brings a metaphor of the technological images replacing those we were used to in the past. The reflective substance covering Neo's body becomes a new kind of apparatus — the internal one. The spectacle is no longer an external event perceived by the senses. It becomes a feature of a human body, linked directly to the new kind of interface.

The Matrix also deconstructs film representation on a different level. Not only it creates the illusion of a real world with CGI techniques, but also reveals the mechanisms of its creation. Wachowskis' movie is substantially new kind of cinematic experience. Unlike traditionally produced films, its imagery is created with the use of computer technology which does not "portray" reality but rather simulates it. Yet, to some extent, the viewer is made believe that simulated images are representations of the real. At the same time certain scenes give him insight in the process of simulating reality.

The traditional filmic representation is a process of transforming real objects into their screen presences. In "Concepts in Film Theory" Dudley Andrew writes:

Now the first elements of cinematic representation are perceptual. Earlier we discussed the tension of belief and unbelief in cinema as equivalent to the oscillation between looking and seeing and seeing and recognizing which is the integral structure of perception in general. It is this equivalence that permits the casual, though philosophically naive, claim that "reality" is rendered in cinematic perception. More accurately we should say that the structure of cinematic perception is readily translated into that of natural perception, so much so that we can rely on information we construct in viewing films to supplement our common perceptual knowledge. (…)

To some degree the tension between belief and doubt operates in every iconic sign system: the cinema, still photography, drawing, painting, and so on. In each of these an image strives to produce the *effects* of natural perception through a *process* quite different from natural perception. We *effectively* recognize our friend in an image *processed* by Kodak[9].

The world of *The Matrix* also lets us effectively recognize the elements of both — world in film and film world. We know that Neo is a human being with certain physical appearance and features. We also can recognize the actor Keanu Reeves playing the role. But on the other hand, our belief is undermined a couple of times. In the scene in which Neo enters the simulated world, we see the film world being created from scratch. At first only two protagonists — Neo and Morpheus — are shown against white background. Then elements of set design and props are introduced one by one. The physical appearance of the protagonist also changes: his clothes are different, he has a new hairdo. Thus the movie produces the effect of natural perception and — at the same time — creates new dimension of cognitive distance. The impression of natural perception is achieved thanks to the use of traditional concept of the filmic space, based on the strategies derived from renaissance painting. The distance is built upon the strategies giving us knowledge on how this "natural" perspective is being built with the use of special techniques.

The traditional concept of film space is not present in all scenes and sequences of the movie. In some cases the features of a traditional filmic spectacle are replaced with the new ones. While traditional cinema encourages us to see beyond the surface of the screen, *The Matrix* makes it visible.

One of the principal kinds of information that differential angular velocities produce is spatial. I suggested earlier that the conventional viewing situation works to block our perception of the screen as surface. What enters to fill that blocked perception is an extensive system of cues for reading the represented space as possessing depth. Within this system, the moving camera becomes a powerful tool for rendering a static visual array as three-dimensional. A still picture — a photograph, or a painting, or a single frame of film-yields a great number of perceptual objects, shadows attached to objects, cast shadows, detail perspective, aerial perspective, linear perspective, color, and others[10].

According to David Bordwell it is movement that makes film a "three dimensional" experience:

The ability of subjective movement to endow static arrays with depth is usually called the "kinetic depth effect". As camera movement, the kinetic depth effect operates to some degree in panning, tilting, and all other rotational movements around the axis of the camera itself[11].

Perhaps it is not by coincidence that the scenes deconstructing the traditional approach to filmic space are full of movement. The Wachowskis produce the space that is not only fictional (in a special way as *The Matrix*, being a science fiction feature, shows the spaces that do not exist in the present), but also "impossible" in a certain way. The traditional perspective is replaced with the new one — a combination of two images "observed" from two different points. Thanks to CGI techniques, the filmmakers were able to establish

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[8] Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, translated by Alfred Guzzetti et al, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1981. P. 49.

[9] Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory*, Oxford — New York — Toronto — Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1984. P. 41.

[10] David Bordwell, *Camera Movement and Cinematic Space* [in:] Ron Burnett (editor), *Explorations in Film Theory*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press1991. P. 232.

[11] David Bordwell. P. 233.

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two different perspectives within one frame. What's more: the two perspectives were built upon different sets of camera movements.

The strategy is used in fight scenes, in which the protagonists are shown against background added to the frame during the computerized processing of the movie. The camera moves around the battling people, making them an axis of the movement, the background also "moves" — thanks to the representation of the changing position of the camera — but the perspective we adopt does not correspond to the one that is established by the point we observe the protagonists from.

The introduction of the new filmic spaces has several purposes. It is supposed to depict "the worlds to come" — not only by depicting new settings and props, but also by creating spaces challenging the expectations of the viewer. It also makes us ask the question, if the traditional theory of the film space is still able to explain the features of the film apparatus. In the context of the ideology studies, the spaces of the science fiction genre deconstruct the ideology inscribed in the filmic medium. The new spaces no longer offer the impression of the "continuity". The image is diversified, and the position of the viewer is not pre-defined in traditional way. Yet, it seems possible that the "old ideology" of the film medium is being replaced with the new one.

An explanation of this transition can be found in a book by Slavoj Zizek "Enjoy Your Symptom!":

Why does the matrix need human energy? The purely energetic solution is, of course, meaningless: the matrix could have easily found another, more reliable, source of energy that would have not demanded the extremely complex arrangement of the virtual reality coordinated for millions of human units (Another inconsistency is discernible here: Why does the matrix not immerse each individual into her own solipsistic artificial universe? Why complicate matters with coordinating the programs so that the entire humanity inhabits one and the same virtual universe?) The only consistent answer is: the matrix feeds on the human *jouissance* — so we are here back at the fundamental Lacanian thesis that the big Other itself, far from being an anonymous machine, needs the constant influx of *jouissance*[12].

Attempts to construct future worlds are — in case of *Minority Report, The Matrix* and many other science fiction films — also attempts to foresee the new ways of representing it. This is done in the process of speculation — based not on the concepts of science, but rather on intuitions of the artists. History of art and society teaches us that in many cases the discourses precede things which constitute them. Sohail Inayatullah interprets Foucault in this context:

There are alternatives to the predictive-empirical and the cultural-interpretative. Among the possible grammars available in situating this alternative future is a *critical* futures studies. This is, how-

ever, radically different from the critical futurism Richard Slaughter has argued for.

(…)

Rather it comes from the works of Michel Foucault and by post-structuralists such as Michael Shapiro (theory of political theory) and Richard Ashley (international relations). While they speak from an epistemological position that argues that the real is a social construction and thus they seek to relativize culture, they anchor their approach in a commitment to the deconstruction, the analysis, of power.[13]

From this perspective, we can learn about the future studying possible ways of representing in. The films interpreted in this article are not "future visions". Rather they are "visions of future visions", thanks to speculations about the interfaces, ways of representation and features of the apparatuses of the media to come. Yet, they are still based in the context of traditional representation, and that enables them to communicate with the present viewer. The art does give us answers about future scenarios, but it is certainly able to foresee possible ways of making "future worlds" "future discourses".

The Foucauldian perspective argues for a politics of the real; for a planning and futures studies which attempts to see how language creates intentionality and subjecthood, that is a perspective of grammar that is not innocent but complicit in our politics, in our futurising. Language is then not representative of things, it is not *about* things but things are constitutive of discourse. Thus, the future is no longer a transcendental in spiritual or material space, but a social construction complicit with various power interpretations. This critical view also attempts to make peculiar the present and to show how it has come about, and the various discourses used to create the present. It is not a history of ideas but a history of epistemes; a history of the victory of certain interpretations (futures) over others[14].

Cultural Studies can support Future Studies providing the background for speculations based on the assumption that any kind of truth (also about the future) is relative. From this perspective the goal is not to predict things to come, but provide insight into human condition. Also — to explain the ways we see the future now, and will see it tomorrow. The traditional film theory needs to be redefined to describe changing nature of film and media apparatuses. But it still can be useful, because the "future strategies of representation"[15] are often — as in *Minority Report* and *The Matrix* — related to the old ones. They transgress them, deconstruct them, explain their mechanisms. Once again — understanding the past helps us understand the future.

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[12] Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom. Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, New York and London: Routledge 2001.

[13] Sohail Inayatullah, *Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Future*, Futures (Vol.22, No2, 1990). P. 33.

[14] Sohail Inayatullah. P. 38.

[15] In the context of new media the idea of „representation" is often replaced with "simulation".