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Movies as Environments

Most of us struggle to think of stage-plays executed without human performers. But cinematic drama can exist without performers in “a leaf in the wind” or “waves beating on the shore,”¹ as in some nature documentaries. Likewise, while stage-plays normally have sets, they can be effectively mounted without them. There seems to be no parallel of this in movies: it’s difficult to imagine them bereft of environments. Taken together, this suggests that environments have priority in movies—that we encounter movies as environments with events occurring in them.

The environments of movies are not only aesthetically central; they are directly perceived. This is not to say that cinema invariably shows events that really occurred, nor to deny that we can imaginatively register dancers in Len Lye’s scratch films. It is rather to assert that even the preposterous settings of sci-fi fantasies are delivered directly to our eyes and ears.² By contrast, the environment of Aeschylus’s play *Agamemnon*—an ancient palace in Argos—is rarely facsimiled in full detail on stage, with rugged hills and sea in the background; it more typically appears as a suggestive outline. In this sense the environment is not visible on stage, yet actions and *especially words of performers* help us make-believe it is, in much the same way that the text of a story does. Without advancing a literary understanding that completely reduces theatre to “dramatized literature, texts and words,”³ and while granting that theatrical productions occasionally have convincing sets, it remains the case that poignant plays have been

¹ Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 102.

² Nicoll, 169; also see Crippen, “Digital Fabrication and Its Meaning for Film.”

³ Sontag, “Film and Theater,” 27.

staged in front of brick walls, but never without performers. It's almost impossible to come up with movie scenes without environments, but easy to find ones lacking performers.

The relative place of performers and settings in cinema and theater is not difficult to grasp, but it supplies a better understanding of both. In theatre, audiences need not witness actions other than the articulations of performers. Even if a script dictates, say, a gruesome act, the director can place the event offstage, conveying details through description. Friedrich Nietzsche remarks that ancients went to the theater to hear beautiful words,⁴ which goes some way explaining why plays have been effectively staged without sets: because the articulated words are the vehicles through which audiences *imagine* worlds. Theater, of course, usually has sets, but as André Bazin explains, the difference between theatre and film “lies not in the décor itself but in its use and function.”⁵ He argues that décor in the theatre augments the imaginative space created by performers.⁶ By contrast, in film the décor more centrally shapes acting by creating an environment for the performers, rooting and immersing them in it.

Bazin accordingly concludes that in “theater the drama proceeds from the actor, in cinema it goes from the décor to man.”⁷ In film “the décor that surrounds [the performer] is part of the solidity of the world,”⁸ and it naturalizes acting. Bazin goes further, observing that “some film masterpieces use man only as an accessory” and “in counterpoint to nature which is the true leading character.”⁹ The great Russian director

⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §80.

⁵ Bazin, 103

⁶ Bazin, 105.

⁷ Bazin, 102.

⁸ Bazin, 106.

⁹ Bazin, 102.

and theorist Vsevolod Pudovkin repeats the basic point: “All action of any scenario is immersed in some environment that provides, as it were, the general colour of the film. This environment may, for example, be a special mode of life.”¹⁰

The original *Star Wars* movies (1977, 1980, 1983) demonstrate the leading role of environments in cinema. Let’s consider *Empire Strikes Back* (1980), widely regarded as the best in the franchise. Early on, the climate of the ice planet Hoth—which was filmed in Norway—proves almost as dangerous as the troops hunting the rebels. That the movie’s opening is dedicated to the rebels’ struggle against the planet highlights Bazin’s suggestion that nature is often a leading character. The planet’s environment affects all aspects of life: characters dwell in caverns burrowed in ice; they bundle in warm clothing; their “speeders” won’t adjust to the cold, so that Han travels on the back of an animal; a wild beast and frigid temperatures almost kill Luke.

The environments in *Empire Strikes Back*, then, are more than exotic backdrops: they shape the characters’ actions. During the duel in the Cloud City, Luke and Vader use the environment to their advantage. Luke knocks damaged conduits towards Vader, blasting him with escaping vapors. Vader, using “the force,” wrenches a metal panel from the wall, launching it at Luke. When one of Vader’s missiles shatters a window, the chamber depressurizes, sucking Luke out. Luke later relinquishes his grip on a column, plummeting and thereby escaping into a chasm below. All of these happenings are contingent on this particular environment, and would unfold differently had the duel occurred in an open desert.

¹⁰ Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, 124.

Though “serious” filmgoers are wont to dismiss the *Star Wars* movies, *Empire Strikes Back* is remarkable, for example, insofar as audiences are inclined to take a puppet such as Yoda seriously. The rich environments contribute to this outcome. By way of contrast, consider *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), a film with two-dimensional, expressionist sets that never caught on in cinema. Though artistically stunning, the film violated “the reality of space,” which Bazin maintained is difficult to construct “devoid of all reference to nature.”¹¹ One might say, then, that the photographic appearance of environments—which *Dr. Caligari* lacks—centrally contribute to the credibility of *Empire Strikes Back*. An easy way to create “realistic” environments is to film in actual locales, a practice also helping performers convincingly respond to settings. This practice was generally followed in *Empire Strikes Back*, unlike the widely condemned *Star Wars* prequels (1999, 2002, 2005), where the filmmakers digitally generated environments, and quite a few characters besides. Perhaps the fact that performers were often denied environments to immerse themselves in and therefore respond naturally against, along with the visual fakeness of digitally constructed worlds, partly explains why these movies failed.

Not all movies have environmental engagements as energetically robust as *Empire Strikes Back*, yet locales nonetheless remain critical. The dialogue in Ingmar Bergman’s *Winter Light* (1963), for instance, frequently has a soliloquized flavor. At one point, the lead female character, Märta, stares straight at the camera as she pontificates in front of what is little more than a grey background. Another character, Tomas, also pontificates alone. Standing before a relief sculpture of a crucifixion, he remarks, “what

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

an absurd image.” Isolated again in the vestry, he begins to read a letter from Märta aloud. Still alone later on, he asks: “God... Why have you deserted me?” Historically, soliloquies have worked poorly in film, yet in *Winter Light* they are credible. One reason is that the principle characters have occupations inclining them towards monologues. Tomas is a church minister, and regularly recites sermons and prayers, which are types of monologue. He’s additionally feverish and contemplating a recent suicide, justifying his existential ramblings. Märta is a teacher, and thus trained to deliver lessons, meaning she’s likewise accustomed to monologue. But environments are also key to naturalizing characters, who in turn naturalize environments, with the bulk of soliloquies occurring in a church or schoolhouse—in other words, places where verbalizations resembling monologues are common.

Indeed, the film opens in the church, and the first shot is of Tomas facing the camera as he conducts the service. Early on, therefore, the audience is reminded that a church is a natural setting for monologues. And before Märta and Tomas break into a quasi-soliloquized dialogue in the schoolhouse, a student happens by, re-emphasizing that Märta is a teacher situated in a locale disposed to receive monologues. The TV series *Deadwood* (2004-2006) offers a comparable example of soliloquies working well. Here, too, care is taken to environmentally embed the monologues of the flamboyant saloon manager, Al. For instance, numerous scenes justify his monologues by having him ostensibly discoursing with a box containing a severed head, or else with an offscreen prostitute performing oral sex on him.

Evan Cameron, a cinema and philosophy scholar, used to tell his students that film is a metaphysical research laboratory,¹² and the account so far emphasizes the metaphysical codependence of humans with environments. Expressing comparable ideas, Martin Heidegger observed that “it is not the case that a human being ‘is,’ and then on top of that has the relation of being to the ‘world’ which it sometimes takes upon itself.”¹³ By this Heidegger meant that we are not merely in an environment as marbles are in a box, but that our situatedness defines our being. Understood in this light, credible performances do not equate to mimicking everyday behavior, but interacting within the character defining constraints and possibilities of cinematic environments. Because movie worlds depart from everyday life, so too can performers’ responses.¹⁴ Such holds for the soliloquies in *Winter Light* and *Deadwood*. It also holds in the serious but lightly comedic world of *Empire Strikes Back*, where battles do not lead to PTSD, an outcome that would make it difficult to take the movie seriously.

Heidegger’s fellow phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty elaborated on the concept of being-in-the-world, detailing how worldly contours define human existence and hence psychic life,¹⁵ echoing the pragmatist John Dewey.¹⁶ Thus when the hand explores a bottle, fingers coordinate around cylindrical form that does not bite flesh, bringing out smoothness and roundness as properties, which simultaneously show up in experience.¹⁷ This is a basic example, but agent-defining engagements with environments pervade human life,¹⁸ as when students’ entire comportment changes

¹² Cameron, “Pudovkin’s Precept, Part 3,” p. 7.

¹³ See Crippen and Schulkin, *Mind Ecologies*.

¹⁴ Crippen, “Screen Performers Playing Themselves.”

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

¹⁶ For example, Dewey, *Experience and Nature*.

¹⁷ See Crippen, “Embodied Cognition and Perception”; “Body Politics.”

¹⁸ See Crippen and Schulkin, *Mind Ecologies*.

depending on whether they are at a party or in a class; or when the cultural, industrial and farming arrangements of a beer-making community organize around the environment that produces that commodity. As Pudovkin put it, “every action, in so far as it takes place in the real world, is always involved in general conditions—that is, the nature of the environment.”¹⁹

Gene Kelly’s title number in *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) typifies the behavior-shaping power of environments, and hence the identity between characters and their being-in-the-world. Kelly dances into rainwater, sliding and sweeping his feet through it. Some of his kicks elicit flowering bursts of water, others causing cascading arches. Here, Kelly’s being-in-the-world is equivalent to his dancing-in-the-rain, and around the contours of his locale. Interactions with water also produce a variety of aural effects, which join the overall ensemble. Other environmental features shape the choreography—for example, the street-side curb becomes an apparatus for sequences of footwork, some incorporating an up-and-down scooping motion that slings water vertically. In these ways, Kelly integrates with his world.

Many consider this scene to be *the* signature piece of the American musical, and the environment is essential. Certain dance sequences would be as impossible without the curbside as a gymnast’s bar routine is without equipment. Absent rainwater nothing would be the same: not Kelly’s soaked appearance; nor the aural-visual qualities; nor Kelly’s dancing; nor the way his surroundings respond like a dance partner. The water fosters movements by facilitating sliding, or changing the rhythm of feet meeting the resistance of deeper pools. It invites comportment styles—for example, playful

¹⁹ Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, 126.

splashing. The environment, therefore, is not merely an accessory. Were Kelly to perform on an empty stage, the number would not be the same routine minus a few effects. The watery environment affords certain possibilities of action and introduces constraints, without which this signature scene would not exist. The scene's credence depends on Kelly not taking the environment as a background set, but letting it shape what he does. Kelly is singing *in* the rain.

Singin' in the Rain, *Winter Light* and *Empire Strikes Back* all suggest that compelling screen performances necessitate being-in-environments—interacting with locales as if they are leading characters. This differs from plays, which are not enacted in “a world” but on a stage. Thus, in reading a stage-play, we can get its essential core because the dialogue is not a reaction to an environment, but to lines that came before and which help us envisage characters, events, things and environments. Theatre, in short, is largely a means by which we imagine a world; film a means through which we see and hear one. It is a truism that theatre is to be seen, not read. But stage-plays are widely read, whereas this is almost never the case with screenplays, despite film having reached the status of serious art. This is because when reading a screenplay, we miss something important: the environment.

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