

How can a Theory of
Non-Spatial Composition
be applied to
Filmic Practices?

nonspace (*countable and uncountable, plural nonspaces*)

1. That which is not a social or physical **space**, or lacks the traditional attributes of spaces.

-WordSense Online Dictionary, Accessed 4th Jan., 2022

The idea that led me to focus my research on *nonspaces*, was a dialogue I had written for my Master's project. The framework of the dialogue was inspired by "Another Autointerview" (Lucas Samaras¹, 1971), and included heavy influences from Samuel Beckett². Much like a lot of Samuel Beckett's work, the dialogue I had written was created independent of its surroundings, which posed many questions as to how and where it would be filmed. Uncertain of how I would present it as a visual experience, I concluded to base my research on a topic that would encourage the development of the script in terms of spatial composition. This includes elements such as the lighting, framing, montage and colour coordination.

Some may argue that a spiritual understanding of spatial composition could hardly improve understanding of filmmaking. Through my research, I intend to prove otherwise.

1 Lucas Samaras (born 1936) is a Greek multimedia artist. His work often revolves around self image and identity.

2 Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was an Irish writer. He is typically known for his absurdist play *Waiting for Godot* (1948-'49).

1. Introduction
 - 1.1 Methodology

This essay uses a combination of primary source literature from those considered pioneers of certain schools of thought, and secondary source literature, developing on those ideas. Concluding my thesis, I have adapted said theories to physical aspects of filmic practice and analyzed the use of nonspace in film, using my understanding of contemporary artists.

Due to a limited amount of space, this paper will analyze only the visual experience, excluding the auditory aspect.

- 1.2 A Chapter on Ethics

As you may have noticed, a mention of Taosim (See 2.1) is neglected in the research question. Though the roots of this essay lie in the ancient Chinese philosophy, it is streaked with other thinkers' and my own interpretations of nonspace³. Not wanting to disrespect the nature of Tao by interpreting my own ideas onto it, which would be inevitable if I were to develop it further into filmic practices, I refuse the responsibility of such, by choosing to incorporate its core ideas into my work without identifying my own deductions as Taoist. Rather, Taoism has acted as a springboard for this paper to develop its own theories on space and nonspace.

³ Not to be confused with *Non-lieux* [Engl.: Non-Places], a term coined by Marc Augé in order to identify transitory places, typically in an urban or suburban context. See Bibliography.

1.3 A Poetic Study

The Ineffable Tao
Emulates the Wordless Infant,
It resembles
The Unhatched Egg,
The Bright Pearl within the Oyster,
The Ineffable Tao
Emulates the Wordless Infant,
The Beauteous Jade amongst Pebbles.
It cannot be Named.
(Lao-Tzu⁴, 400 BC, ch. 1)⁵

When researching philosophical theories, we find the use of words to be of utmost importance. And yet, ironically, words are never enough to describe the 'ineffable'. A fitting example of this is the word, *Love*. Contemporary thinkers, such as Paolo Coelho⁶, believe it to be a sin to attempt to describe *Love*. *Love* cannot be put into words. We may create analogies, metaphors and comparisons in order to convey our understanding of *Love* to one another, but its true essence will forever be veiled to the human tongue, only to be understood through experience itself.

Similarly, Taoism⁷ finds its hypocrisy when trying to explain itself. The Book of Tao, also known as the Tao Te Ching (Lao Tzu, 400 BC) declares its teachings to be 'unnameable', 'elusive' and 'ineffable'. For this reason, this paper, though an intricate study, can only remain as ineffable as the topic itself.

The Tao circumnavigates the obstacle of the inefficiency of words by using poetry. Through use of metaphors and comparisons Lao Tzu is able to bring the reader closer to the core essence of Tao. Following by example, this paper adopts a means of poetry to communicate the theory of nonspace.

4 Lao-Tzu: transliteration using the Wade Giles system. Alternatively known as *Laozi*.

5 English translation by John Minford, 2018. See Bibliography

6 Paolo Coelho (born 1947) is a Brazilian writer. His most famous works include the *Alchemist*, *Veronica decides to die* and *Eleven Minutes*. One of his lesser known works, *Brida* (1990), exhibits the idea of love as an indescribable concept.

7 Taoism is an ancient philosophical teaching, said to have dated back to around 500B.C. The *Daodejing*, assumed to be written by Chinese mystic, Lao-Tzu, is arguably the base of all of Taoism.

2. Nonspace
 - 2.1 Taoism

The Root of the Tao
Proceeds from Void,
From Non-Being,
It is the Origin,
The Source of Heaven and Earth,
Mother of the Myriad Things,
Nurturing All-under-Heaven,
As a Mother Nurtures her Children.

(Lao Tzu, 400 BC., ch. 1)

One of the central ideas of the Tao, includes a universal construction in which Being is created out of Non-Being. The Yin and Yang, which has become a well-known symbol throughout the Western world, depicts this wholesome idea of duality. It represents the framework of the universe. We see this duality in Life and Death, Mother and Father, Good and Bad, Day and Night, Up and Down, etc.

Where Yang represents all that is positive, Yin represents all that is negative. Regardless of the connotation of the words, no half is seen as less than the other. Both are equally important. The two work together to create a universal whole. They compliment each other. One without the other could not exist.

2.2 Definition of Nonspace

Form a Wheel.
The Emptiness between,
The Non-Being,
Makes the Carriage Useful.
Clay kneaded
Forms a Pot.
The Emptiness within,
The Non-Being,
Makes the Pot Useful.
Windows and doors chiseled
Create a House;
The Emptiness within,
The Non-Being,
Makes the House Useful.
Being and Substance
Bring Benefit.
Non-Being and Emptiness
Make things Useful.

(Lao-Tzu, 400 BC, ch.11)

There are many dissonances when it comes to the naming of a "space that is not". What is described as a 'Void' or 'Non-Being' in the *Tao Te Ching*, the birth mother of Taoism, is described as 'Negative Space' in *The Tao of Architecture*. In keeping with the wording of primary source literature, we may translate the concept of 'Non-Being' into spatial terms, turning 'Non-Being' into 'Nonspace'. In other words, Yang is all that is space (Being), whilst Yin is all that is nonspace (Non-Being). To understand the meaning of nonspace, we may refer to concrete examples. As demonstrated in an excerpt from the Book of Tao, the pot, made of clay, finds its use in its void. A house made of brick is not useful for its brick alone, but the void that the bricks create within itself. We find its use in the nonspace, in which we create rooms, meanings and lives. Space cannot exist without nonspace. The same can also be said the other way around. A void only becomes a void when we have space surrounding the void. In other words, space brings nonspace into existence, just as life (space) only becomes meaningful with death (nonspace). Looking at these examples, we see space not only as physical space but also as an idea of an abstract.

2.3 Origin

Space could not exist without "space that is not", its counterpart, out of which it is born. By studying nonspace, we are essentially starting out from Zero Point, working our way up from the bottom. We can argue that Nonspace is the womb, the creatrix of all life. It is the mother of all things. Just as a being is born out of the womb of the mother, so is space born out of the womb of nonspace. Like so, we can hopefully understand space in a more wholesome manner, rendering our filmic practices more purposeful.

3. Applied to Filmic Practices
 - 3.1 Space-Time

Space⁶

\ 'spās \

- 4a : a boundless three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction
- b : physical space independent of what occupies it

-Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Accessed 4th Jan. 2022.

When speaking of space we cannot fail to mention time, its counterpart, of which space is never independent.

Time is the methodology in which space is organized. In other words, space is our physical reality, and time, our human experience of it.

If we understand space as the physical realm and time as the psychological, the same can be applied to filmic practices. The storytelling would be the time in which we experience the film, and the visual, the space in which we experience it. Thus, the concept of nonspaces can be applied to everything that adds to the makeup of spatial composition, including lighting, colour coordination, framing, montage, and even the metaphorical space within the film.

3.2 Light, Colour & Framing

In film, we understand light as the primary component by which visuals are transmitted, thus it is most vital we understand where this light comes from and how it is received.

As human organisms, we receive the light best through its negative form; as prismatic refractions and reflections off of other materials. Through the directing of these refractions and reflections, we create our visual reality by dictating what we see and what we don't see.

By understanding the value of light and nonlight (negative light), the balance, and interplay between the two, we are able to compose an image more intentionally.

Our experience of colour is also dependent on light, the material on which it is portrayed, and the tones of greyness within the colour. A certain amount of nonspace, of greyness, is always present within colour. Without greys we would be looking at a blinding whiteness or blinding darkness. It is through the addition of greys (noncolour), that we allow various shades of colour to form. Through this greyness, clarity is born.

The same concept of using light and nonlight, colour and noncolour to highlight certain aspects of an image can just as well be applied to framing and montage. By composing a picture we are quintessentially selecting what enters the frame and what doesn't. We are extracting a singular moment in space-time to be projected onto a screen. I

In the art of montage, we learn to be selective by adjusting the length and juxtaposition of shots in order to manipulate the viewer.

3.5 Metaphorical Nonspace

Film as an art form allows for yet another dimension, non-existent in our current reality, to form. We understand these as 'metaphorical nonspaces'. They often have a clarification factor, adding to a deeper level of consciousness, and may form as alternate realms within our dream world.

David Lynch⁸ takes advantage of metaphorical nonspace, e.g. Diane Selwyn's dream world in *Mulholland Drive*⁹, to further develop the plot. With so much space for interpretation, Lynch encourages viewers to reflect and to question our existing reality (or rather, our interpretation of reality). The mystery of his films makes for a strange attraction and the metaphysical dimensions only add to its appeal.

Arguably, this co-existing world is the space-time fabric out of which films are woven. Depleted of nonspace, films would become empty vessels. They would lack the storytelling aspect and become merely pointless visuals on a screen.

Alternatively, films containing nonspace in excess, may lack narrative and become just as empty. A careful study of space and nonspace within film can balance narrative and interpretation, the result of which is what we call 'Art'.

⁸ David Lynch (born 1946) is an American artist, best known for his surrealist films. His unique cinematic style has earned him

⁹ Diane Selwyn's dream is one interpretation of many. Alternative interpretations include parallel story lines and a visual metaphor, all of which are to some degree true.

4. Conclusion

The theory of space and nonspace, being and nonbeing, exists not only in Taoism, but is a subject that has been analyzed and rewritten in different words by many philosophers throughout the years. It is the existential phenomenology that describes the material of human consciousness.

It is an art form that cannot be taught through words, but through experience alone. What words can do, which experience cannot, is have a memory, that we may pass down to generations to come. And the elusive idea of 'What is Art' may, in fact, become more graspable than before.

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