CINEMATIC OPEN SPACES OF FLANDERS : SPATIAL PLANNING AND THE IMAGINATION OF FLEMISH OPEN SPACE IN THE FICTION FILMS *BULLHEAD* AND *KID*

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THE QUEST FOR A NARRATIVE ON OPEN SPACE

Who does not know *An Inconvenient Truth (Guggenheim & Gore, 2006)*? Most people remember this as the title of a documentary film about global warming. Even people who did not see one image of it, know the film raised international public awareness on the subject. In fact, according to various studies (Butts, 2007; Jacobsen, 2011), awareness of climate change translates into behavioral change and in carbon offsets after watching the documentary. In any case, the film and its narrative concerning climate change and its consequences set things in motion.

When coping with the effects of climate change in Flanders (northern region of Belgium), open space is considered to be primordial. In a densely populated and highly urbanized region such as Flanders, open spaces are crucial to retain water in the event of drought or sudden rains, to provide biodiversity and natural resources, raw materials, food production, and more. Although open space is of vital importance, it lacks a strong narrative.

The concept or definition of open space remains often as diffuse and fragmented as its appearance in this so-called 'rurban' area, the blurred zone of urban and rural. Morphological differentiation with open spaces as the opposite of the city determined traditional planning discourses of the last 45 years (Leinfelder, 2007). However, this dichotomous planning model, urban development versus conservation of open space, has lost its relevance as the Flemish countryside is also characterized by urban sprawl. The building pattern takes 33% of the total land cover and is scattered over the area without concentration in big metropoles, leaving the remaining open spaces fragmented between the built-up plots. For a long time, open space was considered as the unbuilt area or residual space, which remained after all other developments and served as potential ground for agriculture or residential expansion.

Similarly, comprehension of open space based on functional frameworks in terms of land use and land cover is equally incomplete and does not fully grasp the complex spatial mix of functions. The basic principle for open space is then the unsealed or non-built condition of land units by any unnatural cover. Consequently and according to this interpretation, open space coincides almost exclusively with nature and/or agriculture, the two major conventional land use categories. The increase of newcomers in land use and the transformation into hybrid 'rurban' spaces with mixed and multifunctional uses as urban agriculture, private gardens, horse meadows, etc., abolishes this categorization. (Brandt & Vejre, 2004; Dewaelheyns, Vanempten, Bomans, Verhoeve, & Gulinck, 2014; Wilson, 2007)

Moreover, these transformations consolidate the inefficient spatial organization which is accompanied with economic and ecological problems. Prices for farmlands rise as the non-agricultural functions increase in agricultural areas, the cost for construction and maintenance of road and utility infrastructure is seven times more in a dispersed settlement pattern compared to concentrated city centers (VITO, (Vermeiren et al., 2019), traffic jams on these roads as a result of high frequency of daily commuting movements, are only a few examples of economical damage. Furthermore, this spatial organization, with amongst others this high amount of road infrastructure and traffic jams, also generates an ecological impact. Spaces for nature disappear as paved areas provide further development.

Even within open space, there is a historical conflict between agriculture and natural environment. Forests, moorland and wastelands disappeared during the nineteenth and twentieth century to make way for agricultural production. In the quest for land, agricultural and natural activities and objectives were strictly divided from each other and land was only used for its purpose (agriculture fields or natural landscapes). As a result of this tradition of land sparing, only 3% of the Flemish area is reserved for nature reserves and natural landscape conservation (Claeys & Windekens, 2021, p.21) , while professional agriculture and horticulture covers almost half of the land in Flanders (about 45%)[1]. As major operator in and manager of open space, agriculture thus shaped open space.

However, structural evolutions in Flemish agriculture weaken this position of agriculture. First, the number of agricultural holdings shows a declining trend. Since 2001, an average of 936 Flemish farmers cease their activities each year. From the 39.276 holdings in agriculture and horticulture in 2001, only 23.361 were still active in 2019. (Claeys & Windekens, 2021, pp., p.22) This decrease of 40% is mainly due to an aging population of farmers that retire and stop their activities on predominantly small farms. Simultaneously, the remaining farms are getting bigger and scale up. Additionally, scaling up goes hand in hand with technological developments to increase production, which means further mechanization, industrialization and specialization. Eventually this evolution results in further urbanization of the countryside along with fewer farmers to defend their interests.

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[1] https://statbel.fgov.be/nl/themas/landbouw-visserij/land-en-tuinbouwbedrijven#figures. 31.05.2022

Secondly, relatively recent public attention for climate raised the awareness of biodiversity loss by agricultural production and initiated a shift to land sharing. In a land sharing system agricultural land and natural elements are no longer regarded as opposites but function together in an integrated system. More organic and agroforestry land-sharing-based farms shift away from the use of chemicals (fertilizers, pesticides, etc.) with plots of land that are much higher in diversity. In terms of agricultural output, however, a bigger plot of land is required to obtain the level of productivity and profit of a land-sparing farm. Therefore, a transformation is needed to reconcile agriculture and food production within the boundaries of the environment.

Finally, crises such as foot-and-mouth disease, dioxin, swine fever, bird flu, droughts, etc. and recently the nitrogen issue expose the vulnerability of the sector and raise new questions on the future of agriculture.

Although open space often appears as a straightforward concept, often envisaged as the idyllic countryside to preserve, open space is also very much urbanized and differentiated. Moreover, there is no common narrative that comprehends this multifunctional mixture of housing, commercial activities, nature, large-scale and industrialized agriculture, woods, recreational areas, etc. As a consequence, knowledge of everyday dynamics and realities is hardly generated by the existing approach of open space. To be able to read, understand and conceptualize open space in Flanders, planners need to go beyond the commonplace of open space.

It is exactly in this regard that cinematic narratives can add different meanings, merits and valuations. Doreen Massey (1997, 2005) stressed that systematic narratives suppress the full impact of space as the sphere of multiplicities and pincushions of story lines. This paper explores if film, as an instrument, can provide a glimpse of these everyday multiplicities. Also Mark Tewdwr-Jones (Tewdwr-Jones, 2011, p.29) argued that the camera lens is well positioned to provide such a multiple, holistic interpretation of the built environment. For Tewdwr-Jones film often provides a unique sense of space, unavailable through other explorations of space. Consequently, film can assist to reinterpret places and understand emotional attachments to them.

 The central aim of this paper is to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of open space in the strongly urbanized context of Flanders and its perception by focusing on cinematic imagination. To get to know the opportunities and problems in open space, we assume that spatial representations in film provide a unique instrument. Film can assist to reinterpret places and understand emotional attachments. Therefore, the cinematic imagination can clarify meaning and value of open spaces in ways that traditional planning tools fall short. Hence, the research question of this paper: *is the moving image able to contribute to the meaning and knowledge of open space in the context of urbanization in general, and the Flemish urbanized landscape in particular?*

FILM AS A MEDIATOR

Cinema and urban landscapes are closely intertwined. Since the very beginning of cinema, cities and urban landscapes have been a subject of interest for amateur and professional cinematographers. Furthermore, many authors (for example AlSayyad, 2006; Barber, 2002; Clarke & McArthur, 1997; Koeck & Roberts, 2010; Mennel, 2008; Penz & Lu, 2011; Pratt, 2014; Shiel, 2001; Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2003) have demonstrated different aspects of the relationship between cinema and urban space. They expose thematic as well as formal aspects related to social, cultural, economic, geographical and political aspects of spatial perceptions. These insights pronounce that our understanding of contemporary (urban) space cannot be viewed independently of cinematic experience. Consequently, this research assumes that cinematic perceptions, in particular the depiction of spatial environments in films, have the capacity to represent, reflect and interact with evolutions of spaces. This threefold quality of the cinematic image facilitates film to mediate between realities and theories on contemporary landscapes.

Cinematic representation: a reading device

Firstly, film distances itself as an adequate reading instrument. The moving image combines filmic characteristics – it is spatio-temporal, narrative, camera position, mise-en-scène, soundtrack, ... – with the attention for the everyday. Film can function as a mirror to the world, appropriate to represent the lifeworld, the everyday. Film thus can serve as a (cultural) lens to gain insight in the everyday experience of places.

Cinematic reflection: a social construct of imaginaries

Second, films are – just like plans – social constructs, they articulate a certain perspective on the 'real' world. These constructions, cultural concepts in the sphere of the everyday, are caught in narratives. These narratives, the stories that are told to us and by us, structure the practices of our everyday life and can give us insight in the lived space. As a part of the totality of space as a product, lived space is defined by Henri Lefebvre in *The production of space* (1974) as the spatial imaginary of time. Not only the environment (perceived space) and its representation and perception (conceived space), but also the experience of living in this environment mediated through the expectations of its representation (lived space) should be incorporated. While the conceived space, the space of scientists, urbanists and architects, is subjected to the process of rationalization, the lived space is out of the planners gaze. To discover the sense and meaning of a place implies that this investigation of spatial environments in the moving image cannot be limited to film as a representation.

Cinematic Interaction: a mediator

Thirdly, the visualizations in films can also contribute to the social debate on how to deal with space. AlSayyad describes how 'movies influence the way we construct images of the world, and in many instances they influence how we operate within it.' (AlSayyad, 2006, p.1) He argues that our understanding of the city cannot be viewed independently of cinematic

experience. Moreover, since film is a very common and easily accessible medium, public opinion and behavior can also be influenced by film.[2]

Film thus has the capacity to interact, to function as a 'language', between the professional experts, or 'the system' as defined by Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), and the everyday, 'the lifeworld'. The cinematic image provides a certain message (normative action), esthetically packed in a visual presentation (dramaturgic action) by means of narratives (communicative action). The subjective expressions of films can thus provide a more comprehensive perspective on the lifeworld, or everyday reality and introduce knowledge in the systemworld of spatial professionals. By focusing on film, another way of thinking can be implemented and eventually the moving image can function as a medium to bridge the gap between system and lifeworld.

A CINEMATIC APPROACH FOR OPEN SPACE
Selection

In order to address the research question, we have selected two contemporary Flemish fiction films which provide, amongst others, a specific example of a cinematic perspective on the Flemish rural and agricultural context. Although Flanders has had a tradition in so-called 'peasant-films'[3], historical country-side films, mainstream contemporary Flemish feature films are mostly set in city centers or villages. However, *Bullhead* (Michaël R.Roskam, 2011b) and *Kid* (Fien Troch, 2012) are very much embedded in an agricultural setting. Both films exhibit special attention for, and a fresh eye on open spaces in Flanders.

The crime film *Bullhead* tells the story of Jacky Vanmarsenille, a young cow farmer involved in growth hormones traffic. He injects his cattle with hormones but also himself to safeguard his masculinity after being castrated as a kid during a skirmish with youngsters. A chain of events is set into motion after Jacky is pressured to make a deal with a notorious beef trader. But Jacky is hesitant. Next to the recent murder of a cop investigating the hormone mafia, also the hormone trafficker's assistant, an estranged friend from childhood, makes him suspicious. On top of that, the re-encounter with the sister of his childhood enemy brings Jacky's every day struggle with his own past even more to the fore and will finally determine his destiny.

Kid portrays the emotional lifeworld of seven-year-old boy Kid, who lives with his single mother and brother Billy on a farm. The mother apparently has financial problems, although it is not clear what exactly is going on because the events are shown through the eyes of the brothers. A fixed frontal camera, placed at the children's eye-level, registers how animals

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[2] Many authors from different disciplines have investigated the influence of movies on attitudes and behavior, for example the' Payne Fund Studies' (1933), a series of monographs already published in 1933 by a number of sociologists and psychologists or, more recently, Michelle C. Pautz (2015), …
[3] *Films like The Conscript (Roland Verhavert, 1974), Pallieter (Roland Verhavert, 1975), De Witte Van Sichem (Robbe De Hert, 1980), Flaxfield (Jan Gruyaert, 1983), The Van Paemel Family (Paul Cammermans, 1986), Boerenpsalm (Roland Verhavert, 1989),* portrayed a rural community of hard-working, often oppressed people. This genre was based on famous literary works and consists of a nostalgic impression of the countryside in which nature was glorified and the contrast with the modernity of the city was stressed.

are deported, bits and pieces of telephone conversations with creditors, or other conversations just out of earshot. When the mother is shot dead by creditors, the brothers have to move to live with their aunt and uncle. The film shows the boys grief and pain, who each deal with the situation and new environment in their own way.

Methodology

The cinematic analysis focusses on discovering the meaning and experience value of open space. The analysis is structured according to the three filmic actions: representation, reflection and interaction. The first section thus embodies film as a representation and examines the filmic depiction and particular composition of defining spatial elements visualized in these films, such as farms, streets, open fields, forest, parking lots, squares, buildings and other specific areas. In a second phase the directors were interviewed to reveal the social construction and reflection. In the process of filmmaking, directors decide on a wide range of aspects that create impressions and subtexts that reflect the director's subjective experience. Finally, the third part describes a general cinematographic construction of Flemish open space in film, hence film as interaction. Based on the analysis of the spatial structures in combination with the choices of the director, thematic structural patterns will be distilled in order to trace the communication and interaction through spatial concepts.

PRELIMINARY CINEMATIC NARRATIVES ON OPEN SPACE

The general set-up of both *Bullhead* and *Kid* is that of a farmer family on the Flemish countryside. This setting, together with the atmosphere of each movie, is introduced by completely different opening sequences.

Bullhead starts with an ominous voiceover accompanying a misty long shot of a meadow fringed by dark woods. *(figure 1)* After that this image turns lighter and the warning about buried secrets is spoken, the protagonist and the central theme are introduced. Jacky threatens a farmer to keep doing business with him. After that, Bullhead unfolds in a non-linear storytelling with jumps between present day and the drastic event of Jacky's childhood. Images of open fields are used to mark the transitions between different sequences. These images draw attention by their low horizon and oppressive amount of clouded skies. *(figure 2)* Other transition images show Jacky driving his car over long roads cutting through the fields. The represented open space in Bullhead is in general characterized by the urban fringe. With impressive aesthetic camerawork of cinematographer Nicolas Karakatsanis, the film portrays shady car dealers, meadows facing brothels and a mob meeting at an empty horse race track.

Although similar in setting, the Flemish countryside, *Kid* depicts the environment with an overall subdued ambiance. The movie takes off with four consecutive static shots of objects in the farmhouse followed by a tractor riding towards the farm. *(figure 3)* The whole opening is supported by dramatic music. The point of view is that of the children, their world and experiences are recorded in a linear storyline. Kid, the boy as well as the movie, spends a lot of time in the open spaces. His territory consists of the farm and its fields, the football field, the parking lot of the supermarket and especially the forest. *(figure 4)* These are the places where Kid passes on his way from school, plays with friends, and hangs around

according to his own intuition and desire. The forest is also the place where he connects with his mother. Before the death of his mother, Kid spends a lot of time alone in the forest. However, after the fatal shootout, Kid seems to have lost not only his mother but also this freedom. From that occasion onwards, he is accompanied in the forest: by classmates during gym course, by his uncle or his brother and even his father turned up and spends an afternoon with the boys in and around the wood.

As a social construct of (rurban) imaginaries, the reflection of both directors in different interviews reveal their intentions and connotations to these open spaces. Michaël R. Roskam explained how he uses the landscape as a dramatic concept with inspiration from Flemish painters. He employs the landscape as a container of stories, of the numerous events that took place in it, that is able to communicate. Moreover, Roskam, educated as a painter himself, evokes in Bullhead also references to ancient mythology. Obviously, the protagonist Bullhead refers to a Minotaur, a classic character with literally the head of a bull and body of a man from Greek and Roman mythology. In a more subtle way, Roskam implemented this aspect of mythology also in the composition of the film's landscape-portrayal:

> *'I tried to create a Flanders with a slight mythological layer. A mythology which emerges from a poetic, literary, artistic and pictorial tradition from our past* (…) *I've captured present-day Flanders with a traditional eye, an eye that is connected to my cultural past.'[4]*

Whereas Roskam indicates mythological inspiration, Fien Troch assigned symbolic value to the places linked with nature in her film:

> *'That was the plan, I'm not saying that it's one hundred percent clear in the film, but the plan was to show that nature could create a kind of freedom, which he had less in those other places. I also wanted to treat nature a bit like uhm, … almost like in fairy tales. Where the forest can be such a bright and lovely place but also a dark and sinister place. So that it blends a bit with that.'[5]*

Especially the forest is imagined as a place of big and intense emotions, as well harmony and happiness (in a quiet family moment or when Kid plays in the wood) as fear (when Kid is afraid he lost his mother). This contrasts with the insensitive, chilly atmosphere of urban places, as the supermarket, bank office, and even the living rooms in this movie. These places are clean and organized but devoid of warmth.

As a mediator, the investigation of spatial representation and reflection in *Bullhead* and *Kid* brings three thematic connotations to the fore which determine the cinematographic interaction. Firstly, open spaces always contain traces of urbanization. In morphological terms urbanization is visible in the background-buildings or roads cutting through the fields. Sociocultural aspects of urbanization are linked with urban issues and problems that appear on the countryside. For instance, illegal trafficking, mobs, prostitution and violence in *Bullhead* or debts an murder in *Kid*, which are considered as

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[4] Interview with Michaël R. Roskam (2011a)
[5] Interview with Fien Troch (2021)

typically urban phenomena. Nevertheless, the forest in *Kid* takes a special place in this matter. Almost entirely portrayed as pure nature, the forest is initially not linked in any way to urbanization. However, the trodden path on which gym class runs through the trees betrays cultivation. *(figure 5)*

Secondly, both movies connect freedom with open space. Moreover, freedom is experienced by (innocent) children. These environments do not impose rules or obligations, there are no expectations like silence in the church, purchase in the supermarket or behave and obey at school and at home. The scene in *Bullhead* when young Jacky and his friend discuss girls, love and sex in front of a large meadow, illustrates the freedom of these kids. *(figure 6)* When Jacky asks his friend a favor, and thus imposes expectations, the camera shifts perspective and shows how the two boys were leering at prostitutes in the brothels on the other side of the road. *(figure 7)* In the case of *Kid*, one can say that together with Kid's mother, the boy's innocence dies. From that moment, he is no longer free in the wood, even on the parking lot bound he is now bound to stay in the car of his uncle and aunt.

Thirdly, open spaces are situated on the borderline. They literally mark transitions in the narrative of Bullhead while the activities in these spaces more figuratively balance on a border. The border of legal and illegal when it concerns the criminal activities, or the mythodologic and symbolic borderline in the climax of the films. In the final scene of *Kid*, the forest is the place where the boy is re-united with his mother after both of them have died. *(figure 8)* They crossed the border of life and turned the wood into a symbolic transition between life and death.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper cinematographic perceptions in two contemporary fiction films were investigated as a case study to discover, whether film is able to operationally contribute to the meaning and knowledge of open space in the context of the Flemish 'rurban' landscape. The results make clear that film unarguably has the potential to go beyond the commonplace of open space as the idyllic countryside.

First of all, cinematic representations in the selection of films reveal locations that are experienced as open spaces but cannot be categorized as such according the definition of unbuilt, non-sealed land. Places on the urban fringe, like the parking lot of the supermarket in *Kid* or the horse track in *Bullhead*, offer recreation and freedom that characterize open spaces. Moreover, urban elements have intruded all open spaces.

Secondly films might also add to the knowledge about the socio-cultural construction of place. The cinematic reflection of the films is not linked to the idyllic, as it used to be in the traditional Flemish 'peasant' movies. In contrast, the cinematic analysis highlights the dramatic and symbolic layer added to these places.

Finally, the possible mediating role of film helps to understand emotional attachments to places. Especially the impact on people became clear. Freedom is reserved for children in open spaces, of which the wood has a special symbolic place as predominant natural space. Adults are bound by illegal structures (hormone traffic, debts) and struggle to survive. They inhabit urbanized spaces.

This method of analyzing cinematic images through its three different acting roles definitely forms an addition to regular research on the matter. Filmic narratives succeed in adjusting a very selective perspective on open space (monofunctional, nature or agriculture) into an multiple layered image. Open spaces thus differ from their first appearance: what at first glance is a harmonious pastoral environment, happens to be dark and mysterious. In correspondence with international findings (Massey, 2005; Tewdwr-Jones, 2011), film has proven to be able to clarify these everyday multiplicities and provides insight in the lifeworld.

However, the implementation of film as an interdisciplinary tool for spatial planning requires future research. Incorporating cinematic narratives in problematization and analytical phases of planning processes, might give new insights and redirect the focus on what is at stake in the everyday experience. And although this first and modest selection of two contemporary fiction films, both set in an agricultural atmosphere, is very much restricted, a strong narrative on open space came to the fore: open space is urbanized, not as much on the morphological level, but socio-cultural urbanization of open space determines the everyday experience.

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FIGURES

Figure 1 : Bullhead : Opening scene (still 0:00:58)

Figure 2 : Bullhead : Transition image of field (still 0:07:31)

Figure 3 : Kid : Tractor riding towards the farm (still 0:02:38)

Figure 4 : Kid : Kid at the parking lot of the supermarket (still 0:48:02)

Figure 5 : Kid : the trodden path in the forest (still 1:08:42)

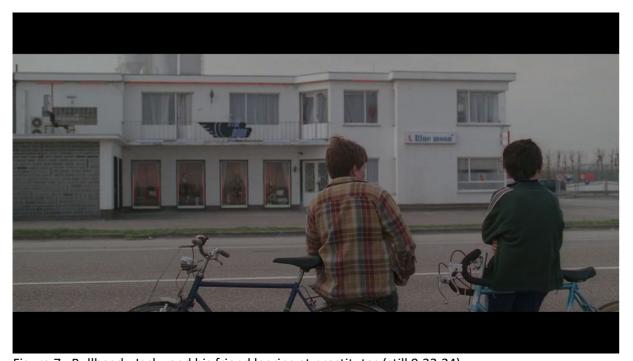Figure 6 : Bullhead : Jacky and his friend before a meadow (still 0:33:15)

Figure 7 : Bullhead : Jacky and his friend leering at prostitutes (still 0:33:24)

Figure 8 : Kid : final scene (still 1:27:47)