

Double Happiness and The Pin: Landscapes of Cultural Change and Spatial Instability

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Abstract

This article uses Carol O’Sullivan’s aural and visual storytelling and Northrop Frye’s “obliterated environment” to relate how the language within the landscape problematizes the transference of cultural spaces through the medium of film. *Mise-en-scène* is used as an overarching term to stand in for the directors’ focus on lighting, space, film-stock, acting, and camera composition. This article breaks down aural and visual representation of Chinese and Jewish cultures within the films to define the cultures’ spaces of existence and question how they are transmitted within a Canadian context. Through Frye’s question “Where is here?”, this paper is positioned to break down the space of storytelling to determine how the characters negotiate their hybridized identities beyond their homelands.

1. Introduction

The medium of film offers a complex space to negotiate techniques in which culture is transmitted to the next generation. What is most challenging about analyzing film is the multi-layered dimension behind visual and aural storytelling. Film continually prompts the senses as the viewer is immersed in the imaginary world of the director. For the purpose of this paper, the term *mise-en-scène* will be used as an overarching term to define the directors’ focus on lighting, space, film-stock, acting, and camera composition. Through the development of these elements within the films, a varying degree of power is presented by means of a wide range of camera angles and editing techniques. The director uses the camera to show differing notions of power in order to homogenize cultural transmission as a mode of entertainment. Through analyzing cinematic renditions of cultural tension, one will inevitably discover problems with authenticity and it is from

there that one can delve into the layers of the film to find a deeper level of understanding. This paper will address key concepts used to analyze the films, confront film reviews and question them, and then focus on the problematic representation of cultures in the landscapes of Mina Shum's *Double Happiness* (1994) and Naomi Jaye's *The Pin* (2013).

In Jim Leach's article "The Landscapes of Canada's Features: Articulating Nation and Nature," he outlines the search for a Canadian national identity within cinematographic spaces. He defines Northrop Frye's term 'obliterated environment' under two distinct headings of identity. First Frye argued that "the Canadian sensibility... is less perplexed by the question 'Who am I?' than by some such riddle as 'Where is here?'" (qtd. in Leach 271). In this sense, the ability to understand Canada is beyond "the capacity of the human imagination and thus resists framing, becoming what he termed an 'obliterated environment'" (Leach 271). This term was used again later in his life to represent the affects of modernization and globalization on other countries that similarly dealt with "the same kind of disorientation that has long shaped Canadian cultural traditions" (Leach 271). In essence, the cultural environments that Jade and Jacob are positioned in are obliterated by the ensuing globalizing principles that dominate and cause cultural tension in their cinematic spheres. As consequence, I will branch off Frye's term in order to not only deal with 'obliterated environments' in terms of modernization and globalization, but to incorporate how these environments obliterate cultural continuity as the mother culture breaks down and changes when exposed to Western society. By applying a mix of Frye's "obliterated environment" and Carol O'Sullivan's theories about language discourse and their place within cinema, one will be shown the complexity behind *mise-en-scène* within *Double Happiness* and *The Pin* which questions

‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where is here?’ O’Sullivan’s terms are necessary to relate how language adds to the aural storytelling to frame and deconstruct the directors’ landscape choices. The terms aural and visual storytelling will be applied to sections of the films to question imagery and audio cues in the films in order to make sense of the proceeding narratives.

Through looking at a multitude of film reviews, it is interesting to look at the lack of representation and questioning of landscape outside the home environment of the films. *Double Happiness* outlines the story of Jade, an aspiring actress that is held back by her father’s will for her to become a housewife in order to achieve economical security. One review states that Jade’s lifestyle outside the Li family home is “freewheeling, liberated and ambitious” whereas “she finds herself reverting to the dutiful traditional Chinese daughter role...” in the presence of her family (Thomas). The review outlines the necessity of analyzing the space of representation inside and outside the home, as the fluidity of Jade’s identity comically causes cultural clashes and exposes the absurdity of following outdated cultural values in a modern Canadian context. Another review points out that this “[coming-of-age film] marvels at the distance between Jade’s expectations and those of her parents, inviting her to take the next steps toward finding an identity of her own” (Maslin). This distance Jade creates is not due to parental expectations, but to a difference in cultural values that no longer apply to her within the urban environment of Vancouver. The city creates a man-made divide that obliterates the Chinese cultural identity by turning it into a piece of Canada’s cultural mosaic. In contrast, *The Pin* offers another coming-of-age story through the narrative of two Holocaust survivors, Jacob and Leah, which is set within and outside Canada yet

uses only Canadian landscapes as a backdrop. The protagonist, Jacob, collapses temporal spaces between the past and the present to bring about closure to his physical and emotional trauma from the Holocaust and his loss of two lovers, Rosa and Leah. What is truly profound is what lies beyond the narrative in relation to elements of mise-en-scène. Reviewers have stated that “Jaye’s camera establishes a languid, sensual rhythm, punctuated by moments of high tension” (Rinn) or that it is “an intimate art house film with languid pacing and a deliberate style...” (Ghert-Zand). Yet, these questions still remain: What are the points in the film that generate high tension? How are they created? What is the purpose of presenting a film in such a way? It is difficult to compare films that are relatively different on a narrative level. That is why this paper will use mise-en-scène as a connecting point for both directors as a way to compare and contrast methods of creating tension and storytelling beyond the space of the films. Through analyzing these diverse spaces of internal versus external or natural versus industrial, one can see a problematic portrayal of both narratives that undermines notions of authenticity and leads to a homogenizing effect on the audience. This paper will use O’Sullivan’s aural and visual storytelling and Frye’s “obliterated environment” to relate how the language within the landscape problematizes the transference of cultural spaces through the medium of film.

2. Spatial Security in Double Happiness: Cantonese, the Monologue, and the Garden

The numerous environments in *Double Happiness* reflect the idea of the destruction of the Chinese identity through the modern industrial landscape of Vancouver. The heavy play on the industrial aspects adds to the degeneration of the Li family identity towards their mother country, China. Jade must maneuver around

differing expectations of her family, society, and her friends, in order to find a balance in her identity. By the end of the film, she chooses to leave her family and embrace her Western identity. How does it come to this point and why does her father create a space in the home that seems threatening to Jade's way of life? First, one will need to look at the place of Cantonese in the film within certain social settings and then look at why Jade's removal from her family is necessary for her external growth in Canadian society.

For many audience members, Cantonese is not a first or second language and it relates to a limited range of viewers. This distancing effect not only is felt by the audience, but Jade as well as she experiences varying perspectives of her ethnic identity in the film. The first audition for Jade outlines the place for a Chinese identity in Canada as something to be stereotyped and consumed by a white audience (Shum 8:54-10:13). The scene is set up to have dark lighting that only partially reveals everyone's faces and the sounds of the harbour, trains, and cars play in the background while the reel is filming. This scene demonstrates the clouding of identity and the use of the Chinese accent for stereotypical reasons of reducing Asian actors to limited roles. Accent, in this instance, "is called upon to generate [a] type of transposition" that acts to differentiate English accents..." from Jade's ethnic group (O'Sullivan 28). When she shows her sister and mother the part later on, her head is cut off from the film making her faceless and only recognizable through her accent (Shum 1:08:10-1:08:52). This approach has an homogenizing influence on Jade's Chinese identity, which is obliterated by Hollywood's demand to consume identities by casting an ignorant shadow on the reality of her cultural background. When Jade auditions for a second time for a Cantonese role under a Chinese director, she is met with hostility and further questioning of her ethnic identity (Shum

1:04:00-1:06:48). The scene starts with Jade looking at her reflection which slowly blurs and fades into her audition. Industrial sounds play in the background again while the scene transfers to the present audition. If one looks at the costume designs of Jade, the director and the scouting agent, one notices a great deal of difference in colour scheme. Jade wears a dark pant suit with a floral undershirt while the director and scouting agent wear white business attire and skirts. The difference in dress sets a hierarchical division between Jade's place versus the place of the director and scouting agent. The environment is enclosed in the industrial space with peeling walls while the director quizzes Jade on her ability to speak Cantonese. The fact that the director is also smoking a cigarette stands in for the smell of modernization and consumerism within Western culture. The director, after finding out Jade cannot read hànzi script, questions her identity as a Chinese woman. The varying degrees in which identity is treated leads to a confusion of what actually is a Chinese identity and how is it located in Canada. Is it something that is solely a stereotype represented with an accent or is it something that is lost through cultural hybridization?

There are many conflicting notions on which identity Jade should fit into and this identity is further conflicted by her father's set standards of what an ideal Chinese woman should be. This is best shown in Quo Li's monologue and the environment of the garden as the viewer perceives his interest/relation to his daughter as well as his difficult upbringing in China during the Cultural Revolution. Part of his monologue is as follows:

Quo Li (subtitled): ... My father would take me for walks in the garden. I remember my father did not have to work in his garden. We had servants to do almost everything... This was harder after the revolution. We lost absolutely

everything. But my father continued to uphold and live by the Li family values. For this he had our undying respect. And those values were unshakeable and could never change. But here, my children are completely different... (Shum 28:06-29:40)

Here, one can see that his values are from a traditional family home though with conflicting influence of the West. His effort to enforce the same value system on his children successfully pushes his family further from him. His narrow view is exemplified by the backdrop as he stands outside the green picture, which is much larger than the shot with a rake and his gardening gear. His attempt to master the garden is represented as fruitless and unknowledgeable as the green backdrop is limited in space while the remainder of the blue background is shadowy and only partly lit. His domineering nature ultimately works against him as he destroys the inner values of his culture by embodying negative aspects from it. This idea is furthered by the limited space of Quo Li's garden as it is fenced in and small in comparison to the rest of his land (Shum 10:34-11:14). This mimics his father's garden though it reveals how the Li family values have degenerated and are limited to a way of thought that will never change. The distancing effect of language is also presented in the garden as Quo and the mother are crouched speaking Cantonese while Jade stands over them and responds in English while wearing Western business attire. Quo Li also lacks interest in his daughter's life and is only concerned that she is not doing something disreputable which could jeopardize the family image within the Chinese community. One can see the difference of Jade's and Quo's world-views which creates a space for cultural miscommunication and a sense of cultural loss, since Jade is unable to change her father's ideals. Instead, Jade leaves, to the dismay of her

father, to discover herself in her own space at the end of the film where she is no longer controlled by the confines of her father's boundaries.

3. Spatial Security in *The Pin*: Yiddish, the Barn, and the Morgue

Memory is the key space of existence for the shomer, Jacob, as his remembering process temporally deconstructs and mixes moments of the past and present. Through various *mise-en-scène* devices, one is exposed to Jacob's process of mental degeneration. The frame of the camera and the audible aspects are a distortion of a past that cannot truly be captured by the camera.

The usage of Yiddish in the film is a dangerous sphere that exists communally between Jacob and Leah in the film. The choice of Yiddish language was used by director Naomi Jaye for "vehicular matching" purposes to authenticate the film even though her the actors, Milda Gecaite and Grisha Pasternak, were not native speakers (Margolis 11 and 13). The film uses a standardized version of Yiddish in order to follow "Naomi Jaye's artistic vision: dialogue in an idealized Yiddish to match the fact that the film never states where it takes place in order to augment the overall sense of displacement" (qtd. in Margolis 14). The silencing of the Yiddish language in the film represents a silencing of the Jewish identity which is presented as dead in the present and fading in the past. This can be seen through Jacob's silent acceptance to stay after a colleague does not show up (Jaye 3:23-3:30) or Jacob and Leah's use of Russian over Yiddish to hide their identities in the barn (Jaye 9:17-10:00; 1:09:16-1:11:00). Though the language is used to vehicular match, one can argue that the imperfection of the Yiddish intonations verifies the notion that Jewish cultural environments are being obliterated by society as Jacob

must presently contest with an English secular society in Canada. The space for Yiddish turns from a dangerous sphere of existence into something sterile that lacks religious meaning. Jacob's skewed mental capacities for remembering Yiddish also artistically account for the imperfect Yiddish translation Jacob gives through his trail of remembrance in the film.

The visual appearance of the barn is a place that is exposed to the elements and is framed by the shroud of the forest (Jaye 6:29-6:46). In both frames of the barn, one can see the danger of the barn as an open space structurally and geographically. The barn creates a claustrophobic and intimate sphere for the developing love story. The characters are frequently stuck hiding with each other in silence as a survival tactic until there is a means for escaping their situation. The space is mostly dark and the features of the characters are obscured by the varying degree of natural light from the environment outside the barn (Jaye 21:01-22:14). Thunderstorms sound in the background, black out the screen and cause a temporal passage into further darkness. The dialogue the couple launches into discusses the worst lie they have ever told. This discussion sets up the barn as a moral testing ground that challenges the darkness of Jacob's present state. The natural turbulence allows for a sense of pathetic fallacy in which the environment of the memory uses natural sounds outside the barn to represent Jacob's internal emotional turmoil of remembrance. The barn, then, is associated with the constricting and open recesses of Jacob's mind that crosses boundaries and merges with the space of the morgue (Jaye 43:47-44:59). The crossing of landscapes demonstrates his preoccupation with past trauma as the claustrophobia of the barn unites with the sterility of the morgue. Both settings are used to reveal Jacob's mental landscape which stimulates all his senses

to kinesthetically propel the past into the present (Spencer-Wood and Baugher 464). The cinematic landscape, though composed of framing, also acts as “conduits to memories, and a form of time, that transcends the cinema itself” (Harper and Rayner 19). It acts to morally check Jacob’s actions and to test the outer limits of his faith. It opens up the reading of landscape in *The Pin* beyond a simple material space into a psychological space that calls for “group or cultural comprehension” (Harper and Rayner 20).

The audience is shown that Jacob’s spacial security lies within the urban setting of the West. The final image of Jacob leaving the morgue is a tragic scene filmed outside the dirty windows of the morgue (Jaye 1:21:16-1:22:40). The visual aspect of this scene speaks louder than words as it shows the lifelessness of his Jewish faith. The medium of film was originally used as a mode that “could proved a transparent ‘window’ on to the real world” though Jaye transforms this view into a dirty window which critiques a broader sense of cultural representation (qtd. in Aitken and Dixon 327). The frame is divided into three spaces of existence: the left side with the candle, the middle with Leah’s body on the steel table, and the darkest side which frames the cupboard, jackets, and door. Slowly through the scene, Jacob moves from the light side to the darkness of the door. When he exits the room, he leaves the boundaries of the camera’s frame. His moving from light to darkness is representative of his cultural obliteration and the sterility of his faith within the industrial context of Toronto. The movie ends on an eerie note in which Jacob successfully breaks cultural traditions in order to reveal a problematic side to the urban environment in which he exists. In the unproductive sphere of his Jewish tradition, he has lost faith while attending to a sacred duty within Judaism. This breaking with tradition is best seen through his association of Leah’s body as a

living memory rather than a body being prepared for internment. “This process called tahara (purification), involves the ritual cleaning of the corpse, by men for males and by women for females” (Telushkin 703). Telushkin offers a story in describing the work of the Chevra Kadisha (Holy Society) stating that “they [tend] the corpse gently and reverently, yet [do] not pretend it [is anything] other than a corpse” (703). With this in mind, one can see a skewing of Jacob’s cultural practices as he desecrates Leah’s body with his memory of her. The positioning of the camera behind the dirty window demonstrates a grainy film-stock that represents a blurred vision of reality clouded by the urban environment he exists in. Even through interactions with the memory of the barn, Jacob cannot overcome his stasis and sterility in Toronto’s urban environment.

4. A Direct Comparison: Cinematography and Landscapes

The landscapes in the films are presented in direct relation to the character which represents their need to escape from distorted versions of their cultural rites of passage. *Double Happiness* and *The Pin* follow a line of crisis of the male figures that leads to eventual separation from loved ones. An unwillingness to communicate causes the break down of Quo Li’s family values and Jacob’s Jewish practices. The next section will show a comparison of the plight of women when they try to escape the framing of their male counter parts. What I call “The Search for Freedom” scenes are present in both films as the main female lead attempts to escape her current fear in order to find a sense of freedom outside the enclosure and within the landscape (Shum 1:14:15-1:15:18 and *Jaye* 45:47-47:33). There are many differences in these scenes in terms of the aural and the visual especially with the enunciation of language, the way music and the natural landscape resonate in the background, and the outcome of the female lead’s quest. First,

this article will look at the language and musical elements to determine the stance of the aural and then situate the visual through cinematic framing techniques. Finally, it will look at the dynamic of the industrial versus the natural to determine the female lead's connection/disconnection to the landscape. This will help shape how the cultural landscape is being shifted and how it is shaped by the devices of *mise-en-scène*.

In *Double Happiness*, Jade runs from her final date in a harbour and slowly gets deeper into the industrial scene. One can pick up the inaudible state of her voice as the hard rock music progresses with the scene. The rock music changes at the end of the scene to deep breathing which initiates a return to a primal state of existence. The scene has no use of language and yet it conveys so much about Jade's frustration within her current situation. The audience literally feels the silence Jade feels about her identity through the overdubbing of rock music over her crying screams. This point in the movie allows for Jade's transformation into an independent woman away from her father's tyranny. In comparison, *The Pin* does something similar, however Leah progresses into a separate space of trauma. Leah is awoken by muffled Russian being spoken outside barn and she is paralyzed with fear. The Russian dialogue is left untranslated to the audience to mimic a dangerous "undifferentiated noise" that adds to the soundscape which "[triggers] reduced rather than semantic listening" (O'Sullivan 72). This feeling of reduced listening creates tension not only in the scene with Leah, but in the viewer as well since one cannot understand what is being spoken. The Russian is further convoluted by the chaotic noises of the birds chirping and ends with the firing of gunshots. Leah has a sensory overload that causes her to shut down and run from the barn to the upward space of the hill. This upward camera angle creates a sense of hierarchy that Leah is

unable to surmount. It is only through her capture and Jacob's dialogue that she is forced to return to the barn.

Jacob (subtitled): You are alive. You must live. You are alive. We are alive. You will dance at your granddaughter's wedding. We must go back.

The audience, aware of the dangerous landscape, uses 'causal' listening and is soothed by Jacob's calm emotional state (O'Sullivan 73). The lack of other languages than Yiddish creates an aural space which is safe but the return to the chaotic is a temporal necessity until a safe opportunity for escape presents itself. This idea exists within both contexts of *Double Happiness* and *The Pin* as both female leads must return to the restrictive environments of their temporary home to become free from their oppressive landscapes.

The framing of each film is different which allows for a development of their relation to the setting devoid of sound. Shum's film uses a panning shot of Jade running through the harbour, yet she never gets anywhere beyond the frame. The space of the shot literally represents Jade's lack of momentum as there is no satisfactory end to her suffering without pain. Through this break down, she is able to gain the courage to challenge her father's intentions and embrace an identity beyond her father's framing. Contrary to Northrop Frye's idea of "obliterated environment," Jade does not resist the framing of the environment, only the cultural practices of her father (qtd. in Leach 271). This lack of resistance to the urban exemplifies her feelings of stasis and her inability to discover her identity beyond the limited scope of her father's image. This filming technique is completely different than Jaye's which frames the characters in the barn and

the camera literally chases after Leah until Jacob enters the frame to stop her. The characters are represented in a medium shot that shakes and cuts them off the edge of the frame. The space outside the film seeks to engulf their lives as they struggle to survive within the confines of the camera lens. In essence, their story can never truly be captured by the camera as it can only chase after their story since it lacks control over their escapist attempt to reach beyond the boundaries of the frame. This resistance plays into Frye's "obliterated environment" as the capacity of the human imagination resists the framing of the pastoral environment as the pastoral is chaotic rather than a soothing visual representation. Within both scenes, the framing requires close attention in order to situate Jade and Leah's relationship to the setting as they are silenced by their social and physical environments. The landscape takes on the role of the characters' emotional foil as the space moving forward is either clear without movement or an uphill struggle.

The industrial versus the natural landscape is a prominent feature in both films and comparatively represents similar stances towards their relationship to the landscape. This article has demonstrated how the female lead's are silenced by oppressive cultural landscapes and either submit to framing or are pulled back into the frame. How does each character relate to the natural surroundings and what are their views towards the natural? If one looks at the scene of the garden mentioned earlier in this essay (Shum 10:34-11:14), one can see Jade's disconnect from the natural environment. The natural, to Jade, is an oppressive state which seeks to conform Jade to her father's Chinese ideal way life, whereas the industrial offers an escape and a potential area for growth beyond the garden fence. This idea runs contrary to the Taoist framing of people in landscape paintings as "human beings appear as small figures, like dots, in this broad and borderless natural

world. They seem to merge with nature” (Jingfū 118). Though painting is a different medium than film, the style is still used within Chinese cinema when filming extreme wide shots. Rather than finding solitude in the natural, Jade stands forefront in a medium shot and is not fully immersed in the landscape, but stands apart from it. Jade runs away from the conformity of her father’s garden and embraces the industrial with arms stretched open as a means for escape. Similarly, Leah seeks to escape the enclosure of the Jewish pastoral environment. Her attempt to run beyond the barn and her inevitable return to it by being captured by Jacob reveals the oppressiveness of agriculture and the space in which the rural exists. The rural setting is not an idyllic space of existence but rather a “collective malaise” as one is left to recognize the harshness of the rural landscape in a time of war and general upheaval of humanity (Leach 272). In this sense, both characters must return to the framing of the house or the barn in order to be free from the landscape through their immersion into the industrial, which causes a disconnect from their cultural practices and homeland. The natural is a confining chaotic place that seeks to domineer rather than provide a space for internal growth.

5. Conclusion

The representation of space in the film is a problematic one that requires a suspension of disbelief in certain instances. Within the confines of *Double Happiness* and *The Pin*, a contested environment is created to challenge notions of cultural transmission within Hollywood and to promote new ways of thinking about ethnic representation. Many items were only briefly touched on in this paper and could offer more insight into the scope of how Shum and Jaye represent Chinese and Jewish culture within the confines of the frame. This could be taken further by a closer analysis of gender in

landscape by looking at how gender performativity is shaped by culture in these select landscapes. There is also an avenue for further development of the importance of the industrial especially in relation to the technical editing processes of film. Trains, boats and other forms of transportation take on key roles in representing Canadian identity that also could not be fully developed in this paper. The next step would be to acknowledge the decimation of cultural spaces within cinematography and to question why these dynamics are closely tied to Canadian cinema and the immigrant experience. The use of language enhances the interpretation of landscape as it negotiates identities within a highly audio-visual environment in order to stimulate action against cultural appropriation and cultural miscommunication on a global scale. Fry's questions of 'Who am I?' and 'Where is here?' is still debatable as these films have shown that Canadian identity reaches beyond the boundaries of cinematographic framing.

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