

Lucid Dreaming in the Film Theater

A Trans-Spatial Approach to *Long Day's Journey into Night*

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ABSTRACT

In the current arthouse film scene, viewers often find themselves in cinematic encounters between their own and culturally different conceptual frameworks when watching foreign films. In the immersive case of Bi Gan's film *Long Day's Journey into Night* (2018), the technology of 3D film reinforces the enthralling representation of a Chinese dreamscape, which is to a large extent unfamiliar to Western audiences. In this paper, I will propose a trans-spatial approach to conceptualize this special kind of 3D dream experience, that crosses borders between cultures, spaces, and sensory dimensions. In this approach, I combine the theories of comparative film scholar Zhang Yingjin in regard to 'traveling' between cultures with the theories of film scholar Thomas Elsaesser on the potential of 3D to engage a viewer in the filmic world. The analysis of the film in the light of these theories then allows for the conceptualization of the viewer as 'traveling' or 'floating' through different mental spaces and as actively participating in the creation of the filmic space. Such a trans-spatial approach can then engender a new way of engaging with the spatiality of media forms that conceptualizes them as contact zones between different spaces and cultures.

KEYWORDS

Viewership, 3D, film, trans-spatial, dream

INTRODUCTION

[...] it is worth remembering that film has been, since its inception, a *transcultural* phenomenon, having as it does the capacity to transcend 'culture'—to create modes of fascination which are readily accessible and which engage audiences in ways independent of their linguistic and cultural specificities. (Chow 1998, 171; original emphasis).

Today, films are increasingly being distributed outside the filmmakers' cultural and/or linguistic place of origin in an interconnected and expanding international film system. Large arthouse film festivals, such as the Cannes Film Festival or the International Film Festival Rotterdam, form important central nodes in these film networks, which have long since facilitated the international distribution of films from marginal countries inside the film industry. This has led to a growing emphasis on the transcultural potential of film as traveling objects, that particularly manifests

itself in the case of the Chinese arthouse film. These films, according to Chinese film scholar Gong Haomin (2011, 110–11), have to please European audiences abroad to gain artistic capital in order to be taken ‘serious’ as art films back in China. In other words, a large amount of Chinese arthouse films take as their mission to cater to different cultural audiences and to ‘transcend’ their own situatedness. Instead of perceiving this kind of distribution strategy as something negative, I would argue that the interaction between film and audience from different cultures and places of origin can form productive contact zones of mutual intercultural understanding. This kind of cinematic encounter can be reinforced by the innovative usage of new film technologies, as is the case in Bi Gan’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (2018).

The subject of this Chinese film noir correlates with a transcultural human experience: the representation of the dream world. This internationally distributed arthouse film consists of two main parts: an a-chronological ensemble of scenes that mixes past, present, and fantasy, followed by a one-hour 3D long take, in which the protagonist Luo Hongwu (Jue Hang) travels through a surreal, enthralling dreamscape. As Bi Gan says in one of his interviews about the film: ‘in order for me to somehow express the essence of memories and dreams I needed 3D’ (Cronk 2019). The technology of 3D film thus forms an essential aspect of the film in the construction of a filmic space, that can also be experienced by both Chinese and Western viewers as an ‘otherworldly’ dream.

The representation of the universally shared phenomenon of the dream experience, however, stands in contrast with the visual and narrative content of the film, which is heavily reliant on the landscape and culture of China. Without exoticizing its content, the Chinese film manages to engage national and international audiences in the experience of dreaming, albeit in an ‘other’ way for foreign audiences with little cultural knowledge about the place of production. The film’s immersive qualities are complemented by technological innovations such as the 3D long take and improved camera mobility, involving the viewer to a large extent with a natural and cultural environment one might not be familiar with. This interplay between the local and the global is one of the transcultural appeals of film, which facilitates easier access to films depicting other cultures. However, it problematizes the idea of a universally shared dream as well. Do all the diversified international audiences share the same dream when they watch the film? Did everybody sitting next to me in the film theater share the same dream? When I watch the film again, will I have the same dream?

The film summons filmic spaces, or dreamscapes, in which audiences with different cultural backgrounds alike can experience a dream, although they might not experience it in a similar way.

This film, then, does not ask for a coherent or universal interpretation of this dream space, but, rather, invites its divergent viewers to engage exploratively and actively with its contents in ways that are open to varying kinds of audiences. In this paper, I will examine the successful application of new film technologies in *Long Day's Journey into Night* to form immersive, transcultural spaces that can address a multiplicity of audiences. As I will show in my analysis, the film positions its viewers in such a way that intercultural contact is facilitated in a unique and engaging way through encounters with and between different spaces, or, in other words, through the trans-spatiality of the film.

For such a spatial approach, several issues should be taken into account. For example, the different cultural referential frameworks of the places of production and consumption should be acknowledged. Also, the additional value of 3D for the film in its creation of a three-dimensional, audiovisual and immersive space should not be forgotten. As such, the film makes the traversing between different spaces for the viewer more tangible through the usage of 3D to create opportunities for intercultural contact, which is why I will take a trans-spatial approach to this film. To substantiate this approach, I will first start with an introduction of the normative conception of the link between film and dream through the apparatus theory of Jean-Louis Baudry. His influential theory has laid a foundation in film studies, but has also been frequently criticized, which is why I will use this theory as a departure point to show how Bi Gan's film resists Baudry's conception of the filmic space.

I will illustrate this resistance then through the works of comparative film scholar Zhang Yingjin and film scholar Thomas Elsaesser. Zhang offers comparative frameworks to approach films in respect of their situatedness in many sorts of spaces. I borrow the term 'trans-spatial' from his work, which refers to the interaction between the spaces of the 'dream-world' the film conjures. Then, I will connect the trans-spatial with Elsaesser's conception of the viewer in relation to 3D and the creation of a three-dimensional space in the film theater. Using the combination of these two theories on comparative film and new media as my main theoretical framework, I continue with an analysis of *Long Day's Journey into Night* in relation to the representation of dreams and the creation of new transcultural spaces. Throughout my analysis, I aim to avoid an essentializing relation between Chinese and Western audiences, and instead, attempt to expand this perceived relation to a larger framework of spaces coming into contact through the traveling character of film, both in terms of its origin, destination, and narrative. In my conclusion, I will reflect upon my trans-spatial approach to the film and expand it to other media forms that engage with different (cultural) spaces and with audiences with culturally divergent backgrounds.

A TRANS-SPATIAL APPROACH TO FILM

Baudry (1974) was one of the key figures in the 1970s who formulated a highly influential theory on cinema as an ideological tool, that has left its imprint on film theory to conceive the viewer as passive and the film theater as a closed space. Many theorists and films have defied his (often Eurocentric) assumptions, but I will nonetheless treat his theories as foundational texts to theorize how *Long Day's Journey into Night* resists normative conceptions of the film experience as dream and how the film creates alternative spaces and positions for its viewers. Baudry's apparatus theory argues that cinema, which I define as a situated form of the umbrella term of film, imposes certain ideological structures on its viewers inside a 'cinematic apparatus.' The film projector restores the continuity of movement of the images on the filmstrip through projection onto the screen, which obscures the distinction between the filmic world and objective reality for the viewers in the film theater. The passive viewer perceives these images as a voyeur in an isolated, dream-like state, interpreting the film with all its ideological implications world as reality. The film theater then forms a closed space, where the viewers find themselves 'chained, captured, or captivated' (Baudry 1974, 44). Basing itself in the monocular vision of Renaissance painting, cinema is only regarded by Baudry in a Western visual tradition through its attempt of offering an ideal, totalizing vision that forces the viewer into an immobile position in an enclosed space.

Apparatus theory has set certain norms in approaching cinema ideologically and in directing attention to the material circumstances of the viewer, but it has also brought a certain image of the viewer that does not correspond with many forms of viewing experiences that film has to offer, such as the one afforded by *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The correlation between Baudry's conception of film as dream and Bi Gan's filmic representation of dreams is particularly interesting through its layering of dream experiences in both a material (inside the film theater) and conceptual (inside the film itself) way. However, Bi Gan radically departs from Baudry's conception of the viewer as passive and recipient and of the filmic space as singular and enclosed, which I will discuss further through the theories of Zhang and Elsaesser, who respond to several normative implications film theory inherited partly from apparatus theory. Where Zhang addresses the exclusion of other reproduced ideologies than the Western one, Elsaesser focusses on alternative genealogies of film, apart from cinema in the film theater.

Zhang Yingjin is one of several Chinese film scholars that address Eurocentric inclinations in film studies. As a response, Zhang (2010, 28) proposes a comparative film methodology to approach film through a spatial lens. He takes into account all kinds of spaces related to film, such as the spaces of production, distribution, exhibition, consumption and theorization. This allows scholars to think beyond questions relating to representations of a singular culture or nation and towards

questions relating to a multiplicity of spaces, where film is the contact zone of many interacting spaces. This can be the case when filmmakers from differing countries work together on several locations, but also when a film travels to many different contexts to find different audiences.

For the production of space in the act of watching a film, Zhang uses the term ‘trans-spatial’ (2010, 12), which goes beyond the co-existence and interaction between spaces and shifts our attention to mental spaces the viewers find themselves in:

[Cinema’s] trans-spatiality is embodied first and foremost in the multi-dimensional space created by the screen’s projection, so the viewer’s attention can easily travel from one space to another, from the image-track (for example, the sets the costumes, the mise-en-scène) to the sound track (both diegetic and non-diegetic sound), from the space of narrative to that of performance from physical to symbolic and imaginary space on and off screen - in short, from the material to the dream world.

Thus, Zhang defines the space one encounters during a film experience not as isolated and singular, as Baudry does, but as a multi-dimensional space that encompasses many spaces of different senses, locations, concepts and so on. His formulation of cinema’s trans-spatial potential seems reminiscent of the constellation between viewer and projection in apparatus theory, but the active ‘traveling’ attention of a viewer crudely breaks with Baudry’s imposition of ideology upon a passive viewer. The viewer is not ‘captivated’ by the enclosed space of the film theater, but engages with the many dimensions that are part of the viewing experience and actively ‘travels’ between them in Zhang’s described ‘multi-dimensional’ space.

Although Zhang (2010, 12) himself names the term ‘trans-spatial’ as superfluous in the light of Massey’s conception of space as being inherently multiple and relational, I would like to shift attention to this term and use it in the case of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* to conceptualize the viewing experience of the film as a trans-spatial, wandering practice. The active and ‘traveling’ viewing experience as proposed by Zhang fits the position that the viewer occupies during Bi Gan’s film, in my view, much better than Baudry’s notion of the viewer as passive and recipient. The usage of 3D in the film, constructing the sense of a geometrical space, aids this approach further in the way viewers are invited to immerse themselves even deeper into the multi-dimensional space evoked by the film. In this respect, the crossing of both a cultural boundary and the boundary between screen and viewer, from 2D separation to 3D participation, complement each other in the film by situating viewers in unknown spaces.

Siding with Zhang in his shared resistance to normative film theories, Elsaesser provides alternative genealogies of film which explore the different manifestations of the medium. In the case of 3D, Elsaesser (2013, 228) argues against the conception of 3D cinema as a new phenomenon and unfolds its history as ‘never having been away or as the return of the repressed’. Elsaesser (2013, 229) turns to older traditions in film such as 3D cinema in the 1950s, and, even earlier, to stereoscopic traditions from the 19th century that co-existed with monocular perspective, which became the dominant tradition through cinema in the 20th century. Through his diversification of film history and its definitions, Elsaesser invalidates pervasive dominant trends in film thought and attempts to formulate new ways of thinking about film in times of its expansion to 3D and VR. In the case of VR, Elsaesser sees how the new digital form disconnects itself from any indexical or referential relation to reality, and depends upon a system of conventions or a language of vision. This has radical implications for the way we understand and ‘believe’ digital cinema. As Elsaesser puts it, ‘[t]he fundamental computation is not: is it real or is it imagined (virtual), but what alternatives/possibilities (virtualities) can we extract or extrapolate from the real – understood as data and information?’ (2014, 200). In other words, the question becomes what *can* be true, with multiple possible answers, instead of what *is* true, with only one definite and superior answer.

Elsaesser, then, theorizes 3D not as a mere continuation of older forms of cinema, but instead sees it as a new form of embodiment of the viewer in an audiovisual space. The camera becomes ‘unchained’ (which can be contrasted with Baudry’s earlier-mentioned ‘chaining’ of the viewer), disassembling the basic cinematic apparatus, and allowing 3D to become the vanguard of a cinema that ‘[produces] a particular kind of spectator; to the ideal image without a horizon corresponds the ideal spectator—floating, gliding, or suspended’ (2013, 237–38). This ideal position of the viewer during a 3D film experience does not imply full ‘mastery’ of the filmic world, but rather enables the viewer, according to media scholar Nanna Verhoeff (2016, 81), to engage in explorative and dialogical encounters with the different spaces and temporalities of the film.

The spatialization of cinema’s definition, thus, invites a more active and explorative approach to the dreaming subject in cinema, given that the viewer is no longer passively undergoing an imposition of ideological structures but is instead actively engaging with the different spaces the film conjures. To analyze the role of the viewer during *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, I will combine Elsaesser’s spatialization of 3D cinema and his idea of the ‘floating’ viewer with Zhang’s trans-spatial conceptualization of cinema and his idea of the ‘traveling’ viewer. Not only do these theories provide a position for the viewer as an active participant in the cinematic

encounter, but they also maintain a framework that includes all sort of spaces that international film has to offer, whether they are familiar to a viewer or not. Combined, these theories allow for a conceptualization of the viewer, who exists in a multi-dimensional space, and also participates in the filmic space they encounter. In the case of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, I will elaborate upon dreaming in the film as an act of co-creation with special attention to the viewing experience of a culturally 'other' viewer, who comes into contact with culturally unfamiliar material that they can henceforth familiarize themselves with.

FALLING ASLEEP IN THE FILM THEATER

The film starts with a voice-over, saying: 'Any time I saw her, I knew I was in a dream again. And once you know you're dreaming, it's an out-of-body experience'. Immediately, the theme of dreams is introduced and remains in the film as a dominant factor. The protagonist Luo Hongwu returns to the city of Kaili for his father's funeral and is confronted with memories about a mysterious woman, Wan Qiwen (Wei Tang), whom he once loved. Past and present slowly fuse when Luo delves deeper into his past during his desperate search for Wan, whilst he simultaneously keeps questioning the reliability of his own memories and the existence of this femme fatale. The viewer accompanies Luo in his quest that crosses time and space through dark, rainy landscapes and vague memories. The unreliability of Luo as a narrator and the a-chronological order of the scenes obscure their ontological status, leaving open the possibility of them either being flashbacks, fantasies, or memories.

Bi Gan appears to refer to an international arthouse tradition, with sources of inspiration being time-and-space defying films by Alain Resnais and Andrei Tarkovsky, even including an explicit reference to *Stalker* (1979) in the form of a glass trembling off a table. However, he also takes inspiration from Chinese culture, for example, in his reference to Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi's parable of the butterfly. According to the parable, Zhuangzi once dreamed of being a butterfly. After awakening, he considered if he was a conscious man dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly, dreaming that he was a man. This showcase of relativism and intersubjectivity alludes to a conception of dreams in the Chinese philosophical tradition. This would fit the case of Luo's dream far better in the sense that it signifies the co-existence of both worlds instead of merely seeing the dreamworld as a reflection of the real world.

This stance towards the ontological status of the dream can be seen in the second part of the film when Luo has fallen asleep in a film theater and wakes up in a dreamworld from which he tries to escape; from this point onwards the film is displayed through a one-hour long 3D long take.

Although the interchangeability of dream and reality was already present in the first half of the film, it is greatly enhanced when the viewers have to put on their 3D glasses halfway through the film and the ‘real dream’ begins with the 3D long take. In this ‘real dream,’ the first half of the film is retold as Luo encounters motives and characters from his earlier search that help him find the way out of the dream. One of these characters is a young boy, who Luo has to defeat in a game of ping-pong to win his help. After defeating the child, Luo is taken to a valley where the boy gives him directions on how to escape. Upon saying goodbye, the boy reveals that he has no name, after which Luo names him Wildcat. Their encounter seems rather absurd and insignificant, but the meaning of the relation between Luo and the boy changes radically if the viewer sees them in the light of a scene from the first half of the film, where Wan in a flashback reveals to Luo that she is pregnant. After gladly saying that he will teach his child ping-pong, Wan tells Luo that she had an abortion. If the viewer associates the two scenes, both the status of the boy and of the dreamworld shift in meaning: the boy can be read as Luo’s dead son, which can mark the ‘otherworldly’ dreamworld as a space to encounter the ‘other,’ may they be real, dead, or dreamed.

During his way out of the dream, Luo also meets Kaizhen, Wan Qiwen’s alter ego. Although Kaizhen denies that she is the woman Luo thinks she is, she tells details of her life that show many similarities with the life of Wan. Upon their goodbye, Luo abandons his initial plan to leave and decides to stay a while longer in the dreamworld. He talks to Kaizhen as if she is Wan, which leads to Kaizhen’s question if Luo thinks that all she had said were true. Instead of answering with a claim of truth or falsity, Luo lights a piece of firework, which he had just deemed as a ‘symbol of the transitory’. Afterwards, the couple goes to the ‘house of lovers’, introduced as something from a storybook by a friend of Wan in the first half of the film. When Luo repeats the magic spell from the book out loud, the house starts spinning, just as the storybook foretold it would, which then leads to their final kiss. The camera retreats and returns to the burning piece of firework, which should have died out after one minute but is still burning after its estimated lifetime. Through defying its transitory status, I would read this as a symbol of Luo’s renouncement of reality and his retreat into dreams, where he can still be together with the woman of his dreams.

The uninterrupted 3D sequence, during which the camera is mounted on a driving vehicle, a zipline, and even on a drone, intensifies the experience of real-time, while the experience of place is enhanced by the use of 3D (which was applied in post-production) through positioning the viewer in a three-dimensional, audiovisual space. However, this intensification of time and space, and with it, the experience of the dreamworld, is accompanied by a very slow pace, interchanged

with musical intermezzos and voice-overs during transitions between places. The combination of slow cinema, serving as an anti-spectacle, and immersive techniques makes us return to the opening voice-over: 'And once you know you're dreaming, it's an out-of-body experience'. The viewer is made aware of the fact that they are present in a dreamworld. Instead of being lulled to sleep, the viewer is actively registering and interpreting Luo's dream, connecting earlier scenes, or memories, of the film with events inside Luo's dream.

Through the initial proposal in the film to watch it as if it were a dream and by using techniques to make the viewer aware of this, *Long Day's Journey into Night* serves as an invitation to wonder about dreams and the role of the subject within them. The viewer joins Luo on his journey across different temporalities and spaces and is asked to question the ontological status of what is seen. Throughout the film, the scenes maintain a speculative and associative character as a result of the intersections and interplay of different spaces in the film, such as sound, music, visuals, montage, and so on. In one particular long take at the beginning of the film, the concept of real-time during a long take is even subverted, and multiple spaces and temporalities are established without using montage. In this scene, the camera is slowly moving backwards while showing Luo's car in a dark tunnel, accompanied by Luo's voice-over telling that he was taking Wan to a restaurant. After raindrops have streamed across the screen, the long take shifts to a parallel tunnel and starts moving forward, showing Wan walking away from the camera. Windscreen wipers appear all of a sudden, revealing the position of the camera in a car. Seeming to be the moment of Luo abducting Wan in the tunnel, the following dialogue between Luo and Wan shows that he has actually been following her after they had dinner at the restaurant. Thus, this long take captures multiple temporalities and spaces, confusing the viewer where and when the scene takes place.

This scene showcases how the viewer can only identify and 'travel' along with Luo by actively making connections between these different spaces with often different ontological statuses. Especially during the 3D long take, the viewer 'floats' along with Luo and makes connections between what happens during the dreams and Luo's/the viewer's own memories. When taking Zhang's trans-spatial perspective into account, the viewer travels between soundscapes and visuals, past and present, reality and dream. This traveling and interpreting then take place in a contact zone between viewer and film, which, according to Elsaesser, is reinforced by 3D through the perception of bodily presence in the filmic spaces on the part of the viewer. In Elsaesser's words, an 'ideal spectator' is born.

CONCLUSION

Throughout my analysis, I have attempted to show how *Long Day's Journey into Night* invites its viewers to engage in a nonconventional way with cinema by means of the concept of transpatiality. In contrast with earlier apparatus theory that perceives the viewer as a passive recipient of the film's ideology, the proposed methodological combination of Zhang Yingjin's and Thomas Elsaesser's theories prove themselves extremely useful in providing alternative vocabulary for a spatial conceptualization of this viewing experience. The viewer is seen as engaged and active when watching the film, which is more suitable to the open and speculative nature of the dream film. Building upon active engagement of the viewer in orientating themselves in the spaces conjured in the film theater, the film asks for a new conceptualization of the role of the viewer, especially in the light of the different audiences the film had following its international distribution.

The movements of 'traveling' and 'floating' proposed by Zhang and Elsaesser are an important part of the activities the viewer must engage in during this film: 3D establishes a new sort of audiovisual space that makes the filmic spaces more accessible for a 'floating' viewer, which makes it easier to 'travel' through these spaces. As I have shown in my analysis, the viewer is confronted with scenes and motives, which are in first instance hard to interpret and with which the viewers must engage actively in order to give them a proper place in the narrative. Because of its open-endedness, the film leaves the responsibility to connect scenes and draw conclusions with the viewer, which simultaneously brings the symbols and cultural references closer to the viewer's own referential framework. In the spirit of Zhang, different networks of references become visible and accessible for the viewer and open up a broader range of interpretations, which, for example, calls upon references to an international arthouse scene but also to classic Chinese philosophy. The Chinese and Western viewer alike engage with these abstract materials and deal with them in their own ways without a supposed hierarchy between viewers, established by cultural knowledge or place of origin.

The dissolution of the difference between the real and the dreamworld within the fictional space invites the viewer to explore alternative connotations that extend beyond the plausible to the possible without the ultimate goal of a 'correct' interpretation or mastery of the film. In other words, by letting go of the still dominant indexical relation between cinema and reality, the viewer obtains a new position: one of participation and presence in the construction of the filmic world. Other films have similarly accomplished this explication of the active role for their viewers, but *Long Day's Journey into Night* stands out because of its clever usage of the 3D long take to convey a bodily sense of presence in the audiovisual, multi-dimensional space that film conjures.

The innovative combination of 3D technologies and multi-interpretable combinations of filmic spaces in Bi Gan's film dismisses the viewer of the task of finding a singular, 'true' interpretation and allows them to 'travel' and 'float' through the film for the sake of curious exploration of the human psyche, possibly making it one of the most accurate representations of the act of dreaming in film yet.

In conclusion, I have attempted to show how *Long Day's Journey into Night* can serve as an intercultural contact zone, and how a trans-spatial approach can emphasize the different facets of the several spaces that can meet there. I am aware of the decline of 3D cinema in mainstream film theaters, and of the fact that many 3D films also find distribution in 2D, but I would nevertheless like to advocate for the usage of 3D, in the sense that the immersive qualities of 'floating,' enabled by 3D, grants the viewer much easier access to filmic spaces, as portrayed by *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The participation of the viewer in film is also possible without the addition of 3D, but the 3D space does make the contact zone between viewer and screen theoretically and sensibly more tangible.

Outside the case study of the 3D film, I would also like to stress an approach to films through a trans-spatial lens, that sees the viewer as integrated in the film space. I believe such a theoretical project would be very productive, while watching films that have traveled from an 'other' space of production to the screen of the individual viewer/consumer, to theorize these films' attempts to facilitate intercultural contact through a cinematic encounter. The participation of the individual viewer in the filmic space, optionally enhanced by new media such as 3D, focusses attention on personal interpretations, based on individual characteristics of a viewer, such as cultural background, gender, ethnicity, and so on. Instead of creating a 'mass' inside the film theater, the film audience is individualized and can be thought of as all having very different experiences, connotations, associations, and interpretations they bring to their viewing experience. The concept of trans-spatiality does not allow for the treatment of the film audience as a uniform collective, but rather sees them as a collective with different individual backgrounds, experiences, and trajectories they take along on the journey the film offers. A multiplicity of audiences can, in this theoretical approach, be respected, while new exhibition technologies can constantly supply viewers new vehicles to 'travel' through the conjured filmic spaces.

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