The Narrative Potential of Spaces Devoid of Purpose

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1. An antagonistic constellation

We will start with the description of a little film sequence, which most recipients – at least the ones who grew up in Western Germany – surely know: We are watching a little dandelion-plant, which first cambers a road's surface with its full strength, finally breaking through, growing bit by bit through the little self-created hole and opening its big yellow blossom. Then the camera angle slowly widens and gives us an impression of the surroundings in which this little dandelion-plant is trying to defend its existence: We see an urban street with skyscrapers in the background and two cars and many stores along both sides. Then – suddenly – there are more and more dandelion-plants popping up in this picture: They are growing on the road, on the window sills, on top of the skyscrapers and even on the bonnet of a car. They are in a way recapturing the city space.

This image is part of the lead of the children's TV series *Löwenzahn,* which is broadcasted since 1981 and focuses in the majority of cases on ecological issues. The picture can also be seen as one very impressive visual illustration of an antagonistic constellation or relationship, which is increasingly being used as a topic also in works of art of the recent years. It is about the story of nature which recaptures the city space often after man has left, that means after he has been forced in one way or another to leave his former home.

In this article we will discover that a very special form of visual narration is often connected with typical stagings of this topic: First we will have a look at some examples of how the topic is used as a form of visual illustration – especially in filmic mise-en-scènes of spaces devoid of purpose. Then we will explore how these images

hide in their structure the "imagination of disaster"[1] (to use a term from Susan Sontag) and how – to go one step further – they gain a special narrative potential without explicitly narrating something. And to sum it up in the end: We will have a look at the fact that these images in their special appearance reformulate the question concerning the affiliation of mankind to nature or culture. At the end of this article we will examine some examples from performance art which are also dealing with this topic.

2. Spaces devoid of purpose

Let us first clarify what is meant by the term *spaces devoid of purpose* and how it is connected with the just described antagonistic relationship:

The historian Günther Oetzel has developed a model of the so called "technotope Räume"[2], which could perhaps be translated as spaces which are shaped for and by technological means. The term "Technotop"[3] originally comes from the philosopher and engineer Günter Ropohl, who has developed it as an opposite to 'biotope' – and here we reencounter the antagonistic constellation mentioned before in form of a natural space facing a technological space. Furthermore the development of the "technotope Räume" is connected with the development of society and culture, so for Günther Oetzel the modern age could be understood as the expansion of technological spaces at the expense of natural spaces.[4] As an example he refers to the construction of the railway lines and stations which were not just intersecting landscapes and connecting lines between cities, but which were also reshaping the city space, because the train stations where often placed in the city centre like for example in Frankfurt/Main.[5]

1   Sontag 1965.
2   Oetzel 2012.
3   Ropohl 2009, 17.
4   See Oetzel 2012, 72 seq.
5   See Oetzel 2012, 70 seq.

But to come to a definition of *spaces devoid of purpose* we have to go one step further concerning the model of Günther Oetzel. He is arguing that the super-modern age (*Übermoderne*) is producing three kinds of spaces: First the 'non-places', a term which he takes from Marc Augé and uses for very technological spaces, because they could be seen as a negation of everything space ever meant to man before.[6] For Marc Augé the term "non-lieux" describes spaces which are no longer anthropological spaces, like for example shopping malls, train stations, airports or highways.[7] They are marked by the absence of history, relation and identity and are characterised only by one special function, for which the space was created and which also characterises the relationship of the individual to the space.[8] But to bring it back to Günther Oetzel, the super-modern age is not only producing non-places but also non-functional spaces and forbidden spaces.[9]

The non-functional spaces emerge either if the space is decaying, because the material is too old or if the technological spaces are given a new function, for example if former factory spaces are becoming party locations.[10] You can see that for example in Bochum or Duisburg, where the former buildings of the coal-processing industry are now used for concerts, theatrical productions and performances. There is even a festival organized around it – the so called *Ruhrtriennale.* The forbidden spaces – to complete the list – emerge if the technological spaces are formed by an overexploitation of technological means, so that society has to give up this space (like for example the former *Chemiekombinat* in Bitterfeld).[11] Special forms of these forbidden spaces are the so called "Katastrophenräume"[12] – or disaster spaces – like for example the evacuation zone around Chernobyl. Günther Oetzel argues furthermore that the described forbidden

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6   Oetzel 2012, 76–77.
7   Augé 2014, 83.
8   Augé 2014, 96.
9   See Oetzel 2012, 78 seq.
10   See Oetzel 2012, 78.
11   See Oetzel 2012, 78 seq.
12   Oetzel 2012, 79.

spaces evade the assignment of a new function for society, so he calls them "entfunktionalisierte Nicht-Orte"[13], which could be more or less translated with the term *spaces devoid of purpose*. And once a technological space has become a forbidden space and man has left, it will slowly return to being a natural space again, but then some kind of a secondary, human-made natural space.[14]

So if we talk about *spaces devoid of purpose*, we mean technologically highly equipped human-made spaces, which were left because of an overexploitation of technological means or a kind of disaster scenario and which are marked by an absence of function and are on their way to be natural spaces again.

We will now examine two examples of spaces devoid of purpose which are presented in filmic narrations: Let us first have a look at the science fiction film *I am Legend*, which was directed by Francis Lawrence, released in 2007 and is based on a novel of the same name written by Richard Matheson. The story takes place in the New York City of the year 2012 (five years in the future from the release of the film) where Dr. Robert Neville seems to be the last man alive. A mutation of the measles virus – which was re-engineered on a genetic level to fight cancer – has killed nearly every person on earth.

We are first introduced to this city space by very static pictures: We see a picture of abandoned cars and busses in a flooded underpass and the deserted skyscrapers of New York City. We see streets overgrown with grass and moss. We see forlorn churches and subway stations and all these pictures are accompanied by a silence very untypical – nearly creepy – for this metropolis as we know it. How can this city be described as a *space devoid of purpose*? The introduction makes this explicitly clear as soon as we notice the single red car which is driving through the abandoned streets at high speed: Not only that the driver Neville doesn't have to stop at the traffic lights, he is also using the pavement as a highway with driving under a scaf-

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13   Oetzel 2012, 78.
14   See Oetzel 2012, 81. 83.

folding as an extra challenge. That this city is not a city anymore becomes even more obvious when Neville's car nearly crashes into a deer crossing the street followed by a whole herd. Later in the film we will also see some lions capturing a deer in the former city space and Neville playing golf on an abandoned aircraft carrier.

The second example are the spaces devoid of purpose in the German short film *Seven Years of Winter*, directed by Marcus Schwenzel and released in 2011. The film tells the story of the ten-year-old Andrej, who is regularly sent to the evacuation zone around Chernobyl by his so-called brother Artjom to plunder the derelict houses and look for passports and other things to make money with. As mentioned before, the historian Günther Oetzel especially characterizes the zone around Chernobyl as a forbidden, or more precisely, a disaster zone[15]: It is categorically also a space devoid of purpose, because the people may not enter it anymore and so the space does not serve the needs of the society, it does not have any function. Corresponding to this fact at the beginning of *Seven Years of Winter* we see a barrier with a sign warning of radioactivity and we learn that Artjom has to bribe the security guard to let Andrej enter the forbidden zone. With Andrej we visit the decrepit apartments of Prypjat, obviously decaying because of the passing of time: The plaster is crumbling from the walls, the windows are battered, broken toys are lying on the floor, and the letterboxes are all open and empty with papers and letters lying all around them. Accompanying Andrej through the ghost town we also notice an abandoned Ferris wheel, an empty swimming pool and more spaces which are not used anymore in the meaning of their former function. Here nature is not represented by plants or animals as it was in *I am Legend*, but by the obvious decay of the technological material.

15   See Oetzel 2012, 79 seq.

3. Hidden "imagination of disaster"

As we can see by examining these pictures of spaces devoid of purpose they all display the past and the present at the same time. That is because the former function of the space is still recognisable and definable for us (the viewers), but it is also obvious that the spaces are not defined any longer by this former function. What is very important now is the fact that all these pictures also contain kind of what the literary scholar Wolfgang Iser has called "Leerstelle"[16] or vacancy. The film scholar Fabienne Liptay has – besides others – applied the theory of vacancies to the analysis of films and made clear that the application of vacancies can be interpreted as an aesthetic strategy to for example confuse the viewer or to draw his attention to a certain point of interest.[17]

And that is exactly what happens in our examples of the spaces devoid of purpose: The pictures we examined display the past and the present at the same time, as I argued before, but they are also hiding entirely the moment of change, the process of destruction that has made spaces devoid of purpose out of technological spaces. To speak with Susan Sontag it is in fact the "imagination of disaster"[18], which is hidden while watching these pictures, and that is remarkable especially because Sontag has described the "imagination of disaster" as the core of the science fiction film in the 1950s and 1960s[19]:

> We may, if we are lucky, be treated to a panorama of melting tanks, flying bodies, crashing walls, awesome craters and fissures in the earth, plummeting spacecraft, colorful deadly rays; and to a symphony of screams, weird electronic signals, the noisiest military hardware going, and the leaden tones of the laconic denizens of alien planets and their subjugated earthlings.[20]

So if we follow Susan Sontag we can say that the most essential pictures of the science fiction film – which illustrate the "imagination of

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16   Iser 1979, S. 235.
17   See Liptay 2006, 110.
18   Sontag 1965.
19   Sontag 1965, 213: "Thus, the science fiction film [...] is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess. And it is in the imagery of destruction that the core of a good science fiction film lies."
20   Sontag 1965.

disaster" – are blanked out in our examples of the spaces devoid of purpose and replaced by pictures which are simultaneously representing the before and the aftermath of the disaster.

4. Narrating that there is no narration

Having said that, we can now go one step further and argue that the visual representations of those spaces devoid of purpose are explicitly referring to the fact that the pictures are not showing what happened before. By that the visual representations are narrating that they are not narrating, only presenting the aftermath but not the plot. Relating to Werner Wolfs intermedial narration theory, in which narration is thought of as being constructed by the recipient, it can be shown that the omission of the destructive process in the pictures produces specific "Narreme"[21], that means factors of narrativity, which encourage the recipient to understand the visual material as narration.

For example: in *Seven Years of Winter* several "Narreme" can be found in the objects that the former inhabitants of the city Prypjat near Chernobyl have left behind. Together with Andrej the viewer discovers old photographic portraits, children's toys, a math exercise book of a third grader and also propaganda material from the government. What kind of narrativity lies in these objects becomes especially clear when referring to the little porcelain figurine, whose head is broken off. Andrej is taking the figurine home with him and tries to fix it – an act, which reflects the attempts of the viewers to fix the narration, to find out what happened to the former owners of the objects and also what will happen next to Andrej, who is obviously already suffering from radiation sickness.

In *I am Legend* it is especially the combination of setting and action which produces specific "Narreme": it is highly uncommon to the viewer and extremely unusual in the modern world to go hunting in the streets of a big city like Manhattan – in particular with a red sports

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21   Wolf 2002, 96.

car. So the viewer wonders how this obvious shift of function is possible and what has happened to his world so that it turned into this new version. By showing the very famous streets of Manhattan – with which the viewer is visually familiar – overgrown by moss and grass, the pictures are also pointing to the passing of time and are by this referring to the vacancy in the narration, to the fact that there is no narration of the "imagination of disaster".

In summary it can be said that visualisations of spaces devoid of purpose contain a certain narrative potential, namely that they are narrating that they are not narrating, that they are only presenting a certain end state but not the previous history.

5. Being of nature or being of culture

Against this background it is now also possible to understand the fascination of the images which are showing the triumph of nature versus city space, because they are referring to the question if man should be understood as a being of nature or a being of culture and if the recapture of city space by nature should be understood as a challenge to mankind or as an expression of its pursuit of nativeness. We have to take into consideration here that there are various ways to draw the distinction between the concept of nature and the concept of culture and that it is not even clear if there is any difference at all.[22]

To take a look at both of our examples, we can see that in those cases the disaster takes place because man as a cultural/technological being has changed natural conditions according to his needs but has gone one step too far. In the exposition of *I am Legend* we follow a television interview with Dr. Alice Krippin, who has found a cure for cancer by genetically changing the measles virus. Literally she explains her approach the following way: "The premise is quite simple. Take something designed by nature and reprogram it to make it work for the body rather than against it." The first pictures following this

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22   See in respect to the nature/culture-differentiation Koschorke 2012, 365.

television interview are the images of the empty streets of New York City overgrown by grass that means recaptured by nature. This way the film makes it very clear that nature and culture are seen here as oppositional states. In *Seven Years of Winter* it is also a natural process – radioactivity – which is exploited on a technological level by man and by this becomes so dangerous that it is slowly killing little Andrej.

Last but not least we can state that the alternate worlds presented in the pictures of these films can also be seen as kinds of the so called "natures-cultures"[23], which Bruno Latour has described in his "anthropology of science"[24]. In that case we no longer follow the idea of a distinction between nature and culture, but are looking at a kind of "networks"[25] built by humans, things and nature.[26] The presented worlds in our examples are no longer cultural or technological spaces, but they are not yet natural spaces either and when they will be natural spaces again they will be only some kind of secondary human-made natural spaces as Günther Oetzel has pointed out. The task of the single human subjects in these films – Dr. Robert Neville and Andrej – is to find their new positions and roles in these "natures-cultures".

Coming to an end we could take a look at new forms of art installations and theatrical performances and recognize that they are also integrating visualizations of "natures-cultures". Take for example the installation *Village Green* of the artist Vaughn Bell: Here the visitor is invited to put his head into little biospheres growing in transparent little plastic houses hanging from the ceiling. As the theatre scholar Daniela Hahn has pointed out the visitor can – having his head in the tiny plastic house – concentrate on the one hand on the biospheric nature surrounding his head or he can focus on the outside and concentrate on the artificial – we may also say cultural – context, in which this nature is presented.[27] In her *Artificial Nature Project* the

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23   Latour 1993, 96.
24   Latour 1993, 25.
25   Latour 1993, 11.
26   See Reckwitz 2008, 117.
27   Hahn 2014.

Danish choreographer and dancer Mette Ingvartsen is staging "perceptions and sensations of nature"[28], to quote from the website. But nature is here represented by artificial or cultural material like confetti and safety blankets, the natural aspect shows itself only in the movement of the material:

> The emerging choreography is partly performed by human, partly by non-human performers set in motion. The movement mutates the appearance and perception of these materials in many forms: from an abstract sculpture, a swarm of animals, to a sandstorm overwhelming the humans who get stuck inside it. One image is replaced by another, rapidly altering our perception of a glittering landscape.[29]

The performative presentation of these hybrids built from natural and cultural elements are confronting the viewer with a special kind of question concerning his own position in his personal environment: He has to figure out for himself if he sees himself as an element of nature or an element of culture. And this will also fundamentally affect the way he reacts to the performance and to the presentation of art in general. Just like the visual illustrations of the spaces devoid of purpose, which are gaining their special narrative potential out of the mentioned vacancies, the attention of the viewers of the films and performances is focused on the fact that they also have a momentous vacancy in their self-perceptions.

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28   <http://metteingvartsen.net/2012/05/the-artificial-nature-project/> (04.11.2014).
29   <http://metteingvartsen.net/2012/05/the-artificial-nature-project/> (04.11.2014).

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