Umwelt and the Paradoxes of Landscape in Lupu Pick’s Sylvester and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Teorema

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Introduction

Writing in 1996, Matthew Gandy pointed out that landscape was an underrepresented area in cinema studies.\(^1\) By 2012, it can be said that this situation has altered somewhat. For example, since the mid-2000s a number of books have been published on the topic. These include Landscape and Film (2006), Landscape Allegory in Cinema: From Wilderness to Wasteland (2010), and Cinema and Landscape: Film, Nation and Cultural Geography (2010).

Among these titles, one of the most interesting works is the anthology Landscape and Film, edited by Martin Lefebvre. In the chapter ‘Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema’ Lefebvre says that, arguably, there is a conceptual distinction in narrative films between setting and landscape. He suggests that the latter only appears when the spectator accesses ‘the images (and sounds) of the cinematographic spectacle “on their own” and “for their own sake”’.\(^2\) In other words, landscape is dependent upon a particular mode of spectatorship occurring; landscape cannot emerge unless spectators read an image of space as having aesthetic autonomy from setting. Lefebvre calls this mode of spectatorship ‘spectacular’. He contrasts this mode with another one he calls ‘narrative’, a mode that refers to the spectator’s investment in the actions and events of the story. This latter mode is partly defined by the role that setting plays in creating a space which either subordinates exterior locations or treats them as accessories to the needs of the drama. However, Lefebvre also argues that while it is not possible for a spectator to apprehend an image through ‘both modes absolutely simultaneously’\(^3\) it is also the case that: ‘When I contemplate a piece of film, I stop following the story for a moment, even if the narrative does not completely disappear from my consciousness – to which I may add that it is precisely because the narrative does not disappear from my consciousness that I can easily pick it up again’.\(^4\) In other words, even

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\(^3\) Ibid, 29.

\(^4\) Ibid, 29.
though landscape exists independently and for the sake of itself when viewed through the ‘spectacular’ mode, its narrative status never entirely fades away.

In this article, I will take these ideas of Lefebvre’s as a starting point for thinking about some of the complex ways landscape can function in film. I will specifically draw on the concept of *Umwelt* (surrounding-world), which the German film historian Lotte H. Eisner (1896-1983) uses to analyse films from the Weimar period. Particularly focusing on Lupu Pick’s *Kammerspielfilm* Sylvester (1924), Eisner shows how images of the surrounding-world in the film are not directly part of the narrative yet, at the same time, symbolically function to enhance or enlarge what is occurring in the drama. One of the aims in undertaking such an analysis is to respond to Lefebvre’s claim that there are not always fixed boundaries between setting and landscape or between ‘narrational’ and ‘spectacular’ modes of spectatorship. Part of my response to Lefebvre’s claim involves teasing out and developing one of the paradoxes that is implicit in his analysis of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Teorema (1968). This paradox has to do with the repeated images of the desert landscape in the film. On the one hand, these images are presented as isolated, fragmentary spectacles divorced from the narrative. On the other hand, these images give indirect expression to the film’s diegetic representation of bourgeois alienation and individual atomisation. In order to illustrate how this paradox relates to the concept of *Umwelt* I will apply it to Sylvester.

**Landscape and Aesthetic Autonomy**

Lefebvre says that in the case of narrative cinema an argument can be put forward that there is a conceptual distinction between setting and landscape. Drawing on the work of art historians such as Anne Cauquelin, Lefebvre says that setting can be defined as ‘the space of story and event’. This means that when the natural world is presented as a setting it functions as an ‘invisible’ background which supports narrative actions or provides a framework within which themes and motifs can be expressed. However, Lefebvre notes that

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5 *Kammerspielfilme* refers to a specific genre of silent films made in Germany during the early 1920s. Apart from *Sylvester* the key films include Pick’s *Shattered* (*Scherben*, 1921) and F.W. Murnau’s *The Last Laugh* (*Der letzte Mann*, 1924). All these films were written by the screenwriter Carl Mayer who is considered to have created the genre’s narrative form. The *Kammerspielfilme* drew on the conventions of the chamber play, a type of theatre first staged in Germany in the early 1900s. While the leading exponent in Germany of the chamber play was the Austrian born theatre director Max Reinhardt, other European figures such as Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg also influenced the conventions of this theatrical form. The *kammerspielfilme* is often associated with ‘realist’ psychological drama and intimate, naturalistic settings. Hence, it is often labeled anti-expressionistic. However, as Lotte H. Eisner (1973) points out in *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, in films such as *Shattered* and *Sylvester* there are aspects of the shot composition and acting that reflect the stylistic aims of expressionism.

6 Lefebvre, 20.
providing a precise definition of setting is not as straightforward as it might seem. For example, while a film may contain a number of visual and aural cues which suggest that a particular space has a specific discursive function – namely, to provide a setting for the story – this space rarely, if ever, has stable meaning. For instance, it is possible for a spectator to infer from the spatial features on screen that there are other settings apart from the one the film intends to present. These other settings might be suggested by off-screen diegetic sounds or the perspective of characters looking off-screen or they might involve abstract notions of space that the spectator extrapolates from what the film offers. In this latter sense, a particular location may, at any moment, be considered part of a general location i.e. a city may be read as existing within a larger setting such as a nation. As such, setting is less a fixed, given property of pictorial space and more a ‘variable conceptual construction’. Lefebvre suggests that the existence of landscape in film is also related to mental operations such as inference. In fact, he argues that experiences of space in cinema are predicted upon interpretation. The consciousness and gaze of the spectator responding to images in a certain manner is the ‘principle “cause”’ of the conception of landscape. Yet, this should not be taken as meaning that the spectator has absolute subjective freedom. Firstly, the spectator’s consciousness and gaze is shaped by the history of visual representation in art and culture; indeed, inherent to the notion of the gaze is the existence of a subject who has ‘cultural knowledge’ and a particular kind of modern ‘sensibility’. Within the context of Western society, this knowledge and sensibility is the result not only of the history of the pictorial depiction of landscape since the Renaissance period, when the first autonomous landscapes paintings were made, but also the discourse created by critics, collectors and commentators.

7 It is possible for a spectator to be responsible for associating a particular city with a nation regardless of whether the film employs narrative devices to encourage such an interpretation. However, it is also reasonable to suggest, that if a film does employ such narrative devices than the task of reaching such an interpretation is made much easier for the spectator.

8 Lefebvre, 21.

9 Ibid, 51.

10 Ibid, 51.

11 As Lefebvre puts it in the ‘Introduction’ to Landscape and Film: ‘The first autonomous landscape paintings in Europe were produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries at the hands of artists such as El Greco, Joachim Patinir, Albrecht Altdorfer, Annibale Carracci, Jan Joseph van Goyen, Jacob von Ruisdael, and Claude Lorrain’ (xiii). Lefebvre notes that there are a number of possible historical reasons why, after centuries of representing nature as background setting or scenery, artists started painting independent landscapes. These reasons include the formation of humanist education during the Renaissance which not only placed a new emphasis upon individual experiences of the world but also, through the translation and interpretation of Ancient Greek and Roman texts, led to a revival in pastoral literature; the impact of the Reformation on Christianity which created a different concept of the relationship between the secular and the spiritual; and ‘new practices of management and use of land that appear in Europe with the birth of capitalism, especially those that concern the changing relationships between the city and
who over the centuries have discussed the existence of independent landscapes in works of art (and in some cases have discovered independent landscapes retrospectively). In this latter sense, it is the history of how pictorial space in visual media has been interpreted over the past 500 years that has also contributed to the construction of the modern gaze.¹²

The second reason spectators do not have absolute subjective freedom when viewing landscapes in cinema is because a film may use formal devices to encourage them to read space as detached from narrative and setting. These formal devices include the use of long shots, non-diegetic inserts, transitional shots (by which Lefebvre means ‘shots which indicate in the narrative spatio-temporal change in the action’),¹³ and temps morts (or dead time; time that is outside of narrative continuity and development). Lefebvre cautions that the use of such formal devices is not a sufficient reason in and of itself for the existence of landscapes in film. For example, he says there is nothing inherent in a long shot that produces space as spectacle; an image of the natural world framed in long shot does not automatically create a natural landscape. Nonetheless, in combination with the spectator’s interpretative apparatus such formal devices can work to direct the spectator’s gaze toward contemplating the objects on screen in their own right. In other words, the spectator may respond to the formal strategies that are employed in a film in a manner that allows an autonomous landscape to emerge within their consciousness. This suggests a spectator’s subjective viewing experience can be affected by how a filmmaker has selected and arranged material; in other words, can be affected by factors external to subjectivity. As Lefebvre argues, spectators may even be aware of the strategies employed to direct their attention toward space and, as a result, impute to the filmmaker the intention to present independent landscape imagery. Lefebvre calls such landscapes ‘intentional landscapes’. Part of the spectator’s experience of landscape then may involve the impression they have that what they are seeing is reflective of authorial intent and, hence, reflective of an agency external to their own subjectivity.

It is particularly in the context of thinking about the interaction between spectatorship interpretation and the formal devices employed by a filmmaker to direct the spectator’s gaze toward space that I would like to address the concept of Umwelt in cinema. For what the

¹² Of course, a number of other cultural, economic and scientific factors come into play in relation to depictions of autonomous landscape in the medium of cinema. Moreover, it is also important to think about what kind of impact film may have upon the concept and experience of landscape. As Tom Gunning (2010) puts it in Cinema and Landscape, when examining how film relates to the tradition of landscape art, it is necessary to consider the ‘ways cinema [has] transformed the possibilities of landscape, both as a form of imagery and as a way of representing nature’ (35-36).

¹³ Lefebvre, 33.

¹⁴ I mean by ‘interpretive apparatus’ the configuration or arrangement of the spectator’s knowledge (cognition) and sensibility (perception) which derives out of cultural and artistic habit. It is this ‘interpretive apparatus’ that gives the spectator the capacity to see landscapes in the first place.
concept of Umwelt can help us appreciate is the number of ways landscape can relate to the narrative even when the spectator is apprehending autonomous landscape imagery which temporarily stops the flow of the story. As I will demonstrate, drawing on Lefebvre’s reading of Teorema, these relations between independent landscape and narrative can be paradoxical and ambiguous. Part of my aim in using the concept of Umwelt is to specifically respond to Lefebvre’s claim that narrative never completely disappears from the ‘spectacular mode’, a mode that involves the spectator accessing images of space “‘on their own’” and “‘for their own sake’”. For what I would like to suggest about this claim is that it not only refers to the idea that narrative never entirely fades away from the spectator’s consciousness during the period they encounter a spectacle of landscape. This claim also contains within it the proposition that while the spectator contemplates space on screen the narrative continues to be developed and enriched, sometimes in complex and layered ways.16

Eisner and Umwelt

As Urmas Sutrop points out, the word Umwelt has had different meanings and functions since its inception in Germany in 1800. In the first part of the nineteenth century, for example, it tended to refer to the surrounding world, including the natural environment, and by the latter part of the nineteenth century Umwelt commonly substituted for the French term milieu. However, by the early part of the twentieth century Umwelt had also started to acquire scientific and philosophical meanings. In this latter sense, Umwelt related to claims made about subjective human and animal experiences of the surrounding world. One of the central thinkers who developed and popularised this definition of Umwelt was the influential zoologist and ‘father of ethnology’ Jakob Von Uexküll (1864-1944). Uexküll argued that every animal species, including Homo sapiens, has its own unique cognitive and sensory experience of space that determines not only how it perceives the external world but also how it acts in it. Moreover, every animal acts in the world ‘meaningfully’ insofar as it experiences elements of its physical environment as part of a larger, species-specific ‘phenomenal world’ or ‘self-world’.17 Sutrop suggests that these different ‘meanings of the term Umwelt – common

15 Lefebvre, 56.
16 I do not wish to discuss here the issue of whether a spectator in the ‘spectacular mode’ can be in any way conscious of the multiple ways landscape may relate to narrative. While Lefebvre’s insistence that the narrative mode cannot be entered into absolutely at the same time as the spectacular mode makes logical sense – after all, what is absolute is non-relative and unconditional i.e. not related to or conditioned by anything else – there are still are a number of questions worth investigating in respect to his claim. For example, do spectators always enter one mode or the other absolutely or can they experience degrees of both modes simultaneously? I leave such questions aside for now in order to focus on the paradoxical and ambiguous ways independent landscapes can relate to narrative.
sense meaning (surrounding nature or world) and philosophical meanings (subjective world and milieu) – co-existed in German until the late sixties.  

Eisner does not specify where her use of the term Umwelt stems from. However, it is clear that the way she applies it to some of the films of classic Weimar cinema reflects the meaning of subjective world and milieu. In other words, Eisner’s Umwelt involves philosophical ideas. For example, in her book Murnau Eisner defines the Umwelt as ‘the immaterial world which surrounds the characters without their knowledge’. By using the word immaterial it could be implied that the Umwelt is an inconsequential or irrelevant world that surrounds the characters. However, what she is trying to convey is that the Umwelt is a disinterested world which, nonetheless, still symbolically expresses meanings and emotions to do with the dramatic narrative. This is clear in another passage in the book where in the context of talking about the mobile or unbounded camera – synonymous with the work of Murnau but also used by other filmmakers in the Weimar period – she briefly refers to Lupu Pick’s film Sylvester. She says that Pick only used this kind of camera ‘for the symbolic Umwelt at its most expressively abstract’. This suggests that Umweltian images have a symbolic function.

It is in her most famous book The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt (originally published in 1952) that Eisner uses Sylvester to specifically illustrate what is meant by Umwelt. Set on New Year’s Eve during the last hour before midnight, the story of Sylvester concerns a relationship that exists between three unnamed characters: a tavern-owner, his wife and his mother. The action involving these three characters occurs in the tavern-owner’s parlour. Over the course of the hour leading up to midnight, the film reveals the mother’s raging passions against the wife, the wife’s desires to have the mother sent away from the tavern, and the tavern-owner’s feelings of being torn apart by the conflict between his wife and his mother. As a result of having these feelings, the tavern-owner experiences self-pity and impulses toward self-destruction, which lead him to commit suicide. Interspersed with these scenes involving the three characters are Umweltian shots of different crowds celebrating New Year’s Eve: merry-revellers in the tavern itself, in a nearby restaurant, and on the street. On brief occasions there are also Umweltian images of the natural world, such as the sea, which, as will be discussed shortly, abstractly relate to the other shots and sequences in the film.

Eisner says that in Sylvester the Umwelt is comprised of interior spaces that are inhabited by people – such as homes, taverns, and churches – and various kinds of exterior locations. These latter locations may have no human presence at all or only a very minimal one. For example, Eisner says that the Umweltian images in Sylvester include:

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20 Ibid, 155.
“the eternal, infinite sea, the limitless sky, a cemetery in which skeletal branches and harshly lit crosses stand out against a black sky, a vast deserted heath stretching as far as the eye can see, a forest in which the bole of every tree looms up as a black shadow in the stifling gloom; and all this seems to become still more limitless when the camera tracks back to reveal the whole landscape”.

In order to express what is at stake with the concept of Umwelt Eisner quotes comments made by both Pick and Ernst Angel, the editor of Sylvester. For Pick the action gives:

“a major role to Umwelt without involving it in the action proper, which would be banal. The Umwelt must constitute the base and symphonic background of a particular destiny, and thus become the emblem of a principal idea”.

Angel says that:

“The Umwelt, varied by a simple incident...is interpolated not as accessory action or reaction, but as secondary rhythm, in or out of tempo, as a symbol reinforcing and amplifying the given facts of the drama: it is introduced in such a manner that in places, at certain decisive moments, the action is apparently halted and can only continue passively, almost secretively, by means of an intensification of the Umwelt, which is not really independent but disinterested, so to speak, and which withdraws as the action is taken up again”.

Pick is basically suggesting that Umweltian images symbolically represent the ‘particular destiny’ or ‘principle idea’ of the drama. This symbolic function of Umwelt is reinforced by what Angel says: the environment found in interior or external spaces must be introduced or inserted into a film as a symbolic expression which fills out or fortifies what is occurring in the dramatic narrative. Such expressions function as ‘secondary rhythm(s)’ which are ‘in or out of tempo’ with the action. Thus while the Umwelt is not a direct part of, or simple addition to, the events that occur in the drama it still serves to symbolically present the ‘particular destiny’ or ‘principle idea’ that is a primary element of the drama. In other words, the role that Umweltian images play in the narrative is not always reducible to the story or plot and is not always a direct factor in the drama. The Umwelt can function as an accompaniment to the diegesis, not directly participating in the action but at the same time enhancing or enlarging what is occurring in the fiction. Moreover, at first the spectator does not necessarily realise that the dramatic action is being carried forward through Umweltian images. For at those moments where the action has effectively come to a halt the story secretly continues through the way the surrounding world is presented on screen.

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22 Ibid, 186.

23 Ibid, 187-188.

24 Ibid. 188.
The work of Siegfried Kracauer offers one way of understanding the ‘particular destiny’ or ‘principle idea’ that Umweltian images give symbolic expression to in Sylvester. In his most famous book, From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film (originally published in 1947), Kracauer labels Sylvester an ‘impulse film’ by which he means a film that shows ‘the surge of disorderly lusts and impulses in a chaotic world’. Kracauer argues that there are three spheres represented in Sylvester. A lower, middle class social world, illustrated by the tavern-owner, his wife and his mother and by the boisterous denizens in the tavern-owner’s establishment; another social world represented by people celebrating out on the street and in a nearby upmarket restaurant; and a third sphere, the world of nature. Kracauer says that the three spheres are shown as contrasted and estranged from one another. Moreover, he suggests that the two social spheres are presented as in an overall state of chaos; Sylvester shows a disintegrated society made-up of people who are possessed by unruly passions and who have regressed to a child-like state where instinct holds sway. The ‘particular destiny’ or ‘principle idea’ that Umweltian images give symbolic expression to in Sylvester involves the relations between these three spheres and the disorder manifested in the two social worlds.

This symbolism is illustrated in one sequence near the end of the film. The camera tracks forward through a throng of New Year’s Eve revellers partying on the street toward a town square clock tower. The camera continues to get closer and closer to the clock until the clock’s face fills the frame. Its hands read six minutes to midnight. The image then abruptly cuts to a 30 second non-diegetic insert which shows a stormy coastal scene. While in the top part of the frame there is a distant horizon line and a portion of sky filling with nimbus clouds, the

25 Kracauer, Siegfried (1974) From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. p.96. It is important to note that, for Kracauer, ‘impulse films’ were one example of the kind of films that not only expressed the collective mentality of the German people between 1918 and 1933 but also revealed the urges and tendencies of the broad middle class strata which, he argued, influenced the course of events that unfolded in Germany during Hitler's ascent and ascendency. As many film historians have pointed out, there are a number of issues with Kracauer’s thesis (for an overview of these issues see Dietrich Scheunemann’s (2003) ‘Preface’ in Expressionist Film: New Perspectives). However, Kracauer’s formal reading of Sylvester’s aesthetic and narrative motifs is insightful regarding how the film’s Umweltian images are meant to ideally function. Hence, it is still possible to draw on elements of Kracauer’s’ reading of the film without having to agree with him that these elements reflect the collective dispositions of the German people. It is also equally true to say that Eisner’s reading of films such as Sylvester can be used to illustrate certain points about image construction in the cinema of the Weimar period even though her overall thesis in The Haunted Screen is problematic. For Eisner suggests that through an historical and largely stylistic analysis of such films as Robert Wiene’s (1873-1938) The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari, 1919) and F.W. Murnau's (1888-1931) Nosferatu: A Symphony of Terror (Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens, 1922) and Faust (1926), the unconscious drives of the German people can be revealed. For a discussion of the problems with Eisner’s argument see Thomas Elsaesser’s (2000) Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary.
space of the frame is largely taken-up with tumultuous ocean waves churning and splashing; indeed, in the immediate foreground of the frame ocean spray occasionally blocks the middle and background planes of the image. The film then cuts back to the New Year’s Eve crowd on the street, with the mobile camera now heading away from the clock tower.

On the one hand, the rough, tumbling waves and other visual elements within the frame symbolically express the restlessness and unruly conduct occurring in the two social spheres, manifested particularly by the mother and her son who both struggle to sublimate their destructive impulses. The aim of such shots is to convey a metaphysical mood (Stimmung) that suggests the characters’ fate exists in some kind of singular, psychical accord with the cosmos. On the other hand, the insertion of the coastal scene symbolises the overall state of contrast and estrangement that characterises the relationship between the three spheres in the film. The reasons for this will be elaborated upon shortly. Suffice it to note for now that because the coastal scene is presented as strikingly indifferent to the two social spheres in the film, two spheres which are also contrasted from and indifferent to one another, the coastal scene is able to give particular expression to the division that constitutes the narrative structure of the film.

The Paradox of Umweltian Images

I would like to suggest that Eisner’s use of the concept of Umwelt brings out a paradox that Lefebvre touches on in his work. This paradox has to do with the diegetic role that autonomous landscapes play. For example, Lefebvre talks about the different formal qualities that encourage the spectator to view the landscape as autonomous in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s experimental narrative film Teorema (1968). Set in the home of a bourgeois Milanese family, Teorema shows what happens after a mysterious stranger (played by Terrance Stamp) introduces himself into the home, seduces and arouses each of the family members, and then abruptly leaves. The stranger’s actions unleash in each of the family members repressed desires and other states of anxiety and disorder. In the words of one critic, Teorema ‘sets out to demonstrate poetically the spiritual squalor of the bourgeoisie’. The images of landscape that Lefebvre refers to are non-diegetic inserts and long shots of a volcanic desert terrain that repeatedly disrupt the story flow. In combination with the spectator’s own cognitive

26 In The Haunted Screen, Eisner says that Stimmung is a difficult word to translate into English. While it has to do with mood and atmosphere these terms do not adequately cover its complex meanings. She says of Sylvester and Shattered that ‘Mayer and Pick succeed in creating a Stimmung vibrant with wild poetry, the intensity of which appears to vary proportionately with the ill-fortune falling upon the characters’ (182). For additional thoughts on how light and other visual elements are used to create a mood and atmosphere in Sylvester that conveys the character’s situation see Marion Faber’s (1978) ‘Carl Mayer’s “Sylvester”: The Screenplay as Literature’. For a discussion of the history of the term Stimmung and how it designates a relationship between individual will and cosmic will see Leo Spitzer’s (1944) Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word Stimmung.

knowledge and perceptual sensibilities regarding visual depictions of nature (which, as stated earlier, are formed out of artistic and cultural habit), it is possible that these qualities internal to the film itself will be read by the spectator as indicating Pasolini’s intention to present independent landscape imagery.

However, Lefebvre adds that the emergence of autonomous landscape in such situations is paradoxical insofar as it is on account of the fact that the desert is experienced as radically detached from the diegesis that it achieves a ““symbolic” status’ that connects it to the narrative.\(^{28}\) I understand this paradox in two senses. Firstly, because the editing isolates the desert landscape from the rest of the narrative the spectator is required to work out how the landscape relates to the diegesis. In other words, the very thing about the desert landscape which momentarily overwhelms the narrative – its status as an autonomous object of contemplation – is the same thing that motivates the spectator to reflect on how the landscape relates to story elements in the film.

The second paradox regarding the relationship between landscape and narrative is a paradox that I believe is implicit in Lefebvre’s analysis of Teorema but which needs to be teased out and developed more fully. This paradox has to do not only with the landscape’s isolation from the rest of the narrative but also its fragmentary form. The landscape shots are presented as fragments that cut into the narrative, in the sense that they are quick inserts that break up the continuity of the story. In other words, the landscape exists as an atomised spectacle that segments the narrative. I would suggest that this element of form gives indirect expression to the plight of the family members who function not as a family but as ‘a collection of atoms, each going on its own anguished path alone and apart from the others’.\(^{29}\) In other words, the fragmentary form of the shots, which not only sets the landscape apart from the narrative but also presents the landscape in an atomised fashion that ruptures the diegesis, is the same fragmentary form that says something about ‘the (modern) thematic of bourgeois alienation elaborated by the film’s narrative’.\(^{30}\)

In Sylvester this double paradox is also evident. To begin with, given the editing isolates the coastal scene from the rest of the diegesis the spectator has to work out how the coastal scene relates to the narrative. It is important to note here that there are at least two things that might motivate the spectator to undertake this interpretative activity. Firstly, because the film tells a story that the landscape imagery periodically interrupts it is likely that the spectator will be inclined to want to relate the disruptive spectacles to the story they have been following. This is an assumption that is also implicit in Lefebvre’s assessment of Teorema. Secondly, the coastal scene is both referred to and also shown in the beginning of the film. In the credit title sequence it is mentioned as one of the surroundings in the film, along with the churchyard and the street. The first shot of the film which follows the credit sequence is then of the coastal scene. As is well known, openings to films (including credit title

\(^{28}\) Lefebvre, 38.
\(^{29}\) Chappetta, 25.
\(^{30}\) Lefebvre, 37
sequences) can perform a range of functions, including communicating narrative information to spectators, emphasising certain characters, locations, or events, or setting a film’s tone, feel and/or look. In the case of *Sylvester*, one of the things that the mentioning of the sea in the credit titles may emphasise to the spectator is that the surroundings are as important as the players in the film. Hence, from the film’s opening the spectator may be altered to the landscape’s importance, which might then motivate them to relate the images they see of the sea later on in the film to the narrative.\(^{31}\)

The second paradox that characterises the *Umweltian* images of nature in *Sylvester* relates to the division of the film’s plot into three spheres. It is not only because the coastal scene is isolated from the narrative that it paradoxically achieves symbolic meaning related to the diegesis. It is also because, in this state of isolation, the coastal scene is presented as indifferent to the other two spheres within which the narrative action takes place. In this condition of indifference the sea conveys a sense of not only being disinterested but also uninvolved with the other spheres in the film. Yet, it is on the basis of this disinterestedness and disassociation that the sea indirectly expresses the overall state of contrast that underlies the narrative. This indifference and detachment that the sea has is the result of a number of factors. These include the following. Firstly, the shot is not motivated diegetically i.e. not motivated by a character’s subjective perspective or by the need to establish causal links within a chain of events. Secondly, there is a striking division in space and *mise-en-scéne* between the images of the coast and the images of the tavern, restaurant and street; among other things, there is no graphic match between the tower clock and the sea and no sense of

\(^{31}\) As mentioned, a brief image of the coastal scene also comprises the first shot of the film. There is then a cut to a title card which contains a quote from the Tower of Babel story; specifically, from Genesis 11.7 where it says: ‘Let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech’. The film then shows a shot of the street outside the tavern-owner’s establishment. Hence, in addition to being mentioned in the credit sequence the coastal scene is also initially contextualized in terms of other elements in the film. The spectator, for instance, may read the relationship between the image of nature and the Tower of Babel quote as referring to the film’s (or the author’s) intention to provide a critique of speech and emphasise visual experience. This would be certainly be consistent with Mayer and Pick’s stated aims to want to tell a story largely through images with as few inter-titles as possible, an approach Murnau would adopt in *The Last Laugh* (which was, of course, written by Mayer). The point is that the beginning of the film may indicate to the spectator that particular meanings and/or authorial intentions are attached to the coastal scene. A similar situation applies to *Teorema* given the desert terrain appears in the opening title sequence. This is not to suggest that when images of nature later disrupt the narrative in *Sylvester* or *Teorema* the spectator is prepared for such disruptions. Rather, that there are ways a film may help the spectator to see space as symbolic, even if the spectator only apprehends this symbolism retrospectively after first viewing the autonomous landscape imagery that is presented during the course of the narrative.
transition from one space to the other. Thirdly, the temporality of the editing is also distinct. As noted by Angel, the editor of *Sylvester*, Umweltian images can create a secondary rhythm either in or out of tempo with the action. For instance, the shot of the coastal scene functions as a staccato-like insertion that breaks up the fluidic continuity of the two tracking shots that come before and after it. As a result of such factors, the shot of the coastal scene does not supplement the main action of the story, in the sense that it does not simply or directly contribute to any effects that the drama is trying to achieve. Moreover, it does not simply or directly react to what is occurring in the story world. Yet, paradoxically, this state of disinterestedness and separation indirectly gives expression to the general state of discord and segmentation that characterises the film’s narrative structure.

**Conclusion**

I have demonstrated that the concept of *Umwelt* can help us appreciate the number of ways landscape can relate to narrative even when the spectator is contemplating space on screen. I have also drawn on the concept of *Umwelt* in order to discuss the paradoxes that Lefebvre touches on in his work. These paradoxes indicate the following about the relationship between landscape and narrative in fiction film. It can be on the basis of the fact that landscape is autonomous – in the sense of being independent of, and indifferent to, the story world – that landscape is integrated into the diegesis. It may even be on account of the fact that autonomous landscape imagery breaks up or segments narrative form that additional symbolic meaning to do with the story is indirectly expressed by the landscape. What this further suggests is that landscape can be ambiguous. For it is not only that landscape can be symbolically connected to the narrative on the basis of being detached from the diegesis, it is also that landscape can be simultaneously independent of yet also part of the story world. For landscape that is disjoined from the action and the setting only achieves symbolic meaning by being interdependent on other images in a film. For example, the coastal scene in *Sylvester* represents a distinct and independent element in the film. Yet, at the same time, it reinforces and completes meanings and emotions that are occurring in the narrative. In this sense it is intricately (if secretly) part of the story world. For such reasons it can be said that narrative may be carried forward and amplified in complex and layered ways during moments when the spectator is apprehending autonomous landscape imagery.