

Cinematically inspired cognitive (experience-based) maps:

How feature films influence our perception of the world

"Yet this pervasive human desire to reminisce, to explore, to visit, to fantasize, and to learn about places all over the world is more than the idle curiosity [...] it reflects, and is part of, a fundamental human need: the need to know about the world around us." (Downs and Stea 1977: 21)

In their monograph published in 1977 under the title "Maps in minds. Reflections on cognitive mapping", DOWNS and STEA focused on this fundamental need described above by theoretically reflecting on and empirically examining random examples. They were interested in how people perceive the world, organize or assign what they know about the world and thus find their own place in the world. According to the authors, people's need to find out about the world they live in is met by discovering and exploring places, where it is possible to find people or things that are important to them or which satisfy their imagination and sense of creativity. Doing so allows for recalling (topographical and geographical) knowledge about the nature of these *places*, their significance for the satisfaction of the fundamental need and their distance to one's own location (DOWNS and STEA 1977: 41, 54). People develop in this manner cognitive, mental maps that are based on an increasingly dense network of places.

Unfortunately, the authors do not reflect on the differences of cognitive mapping based on a media-oriented exploration of places in contrast to the experiences primarily made (at the given locations). Their analysis also concentrates too much on the cognitive dimension of exploring the world, thereby ignoring the role of affective maps (DÖRING-SEIPEL 2008: 542) and a phenomenological perspective and thus the role the body plays in perceiving environments. The paper "Cinematically inspired cognitive (experience-based) maps" aims to discuss these aspects. Based on the findings reached in two empirical studies, the role that feature films have for the experience with places and thus for cognitive mapping shall be analyzed. In this context, the affective dimension of environmental perception shall moreover be

presented and to some extent a phenomenological perspective shall be taken.

The first study involves a qualitative research project, which examined the impact cinematic narrations have on imaginary geographies of youth (with 13 and 16 year olds students). With the aid of GLASER'S and STRAUSS'S *Grounded Theory* research design (³2010) (and Theory Triangulation), a model was developed inductively to highlight both the influence of the perceived cinematic landscapes and the cinematic experiences on the mental representation of *places* (cf. Fig. 1) as is briefly outlined below:

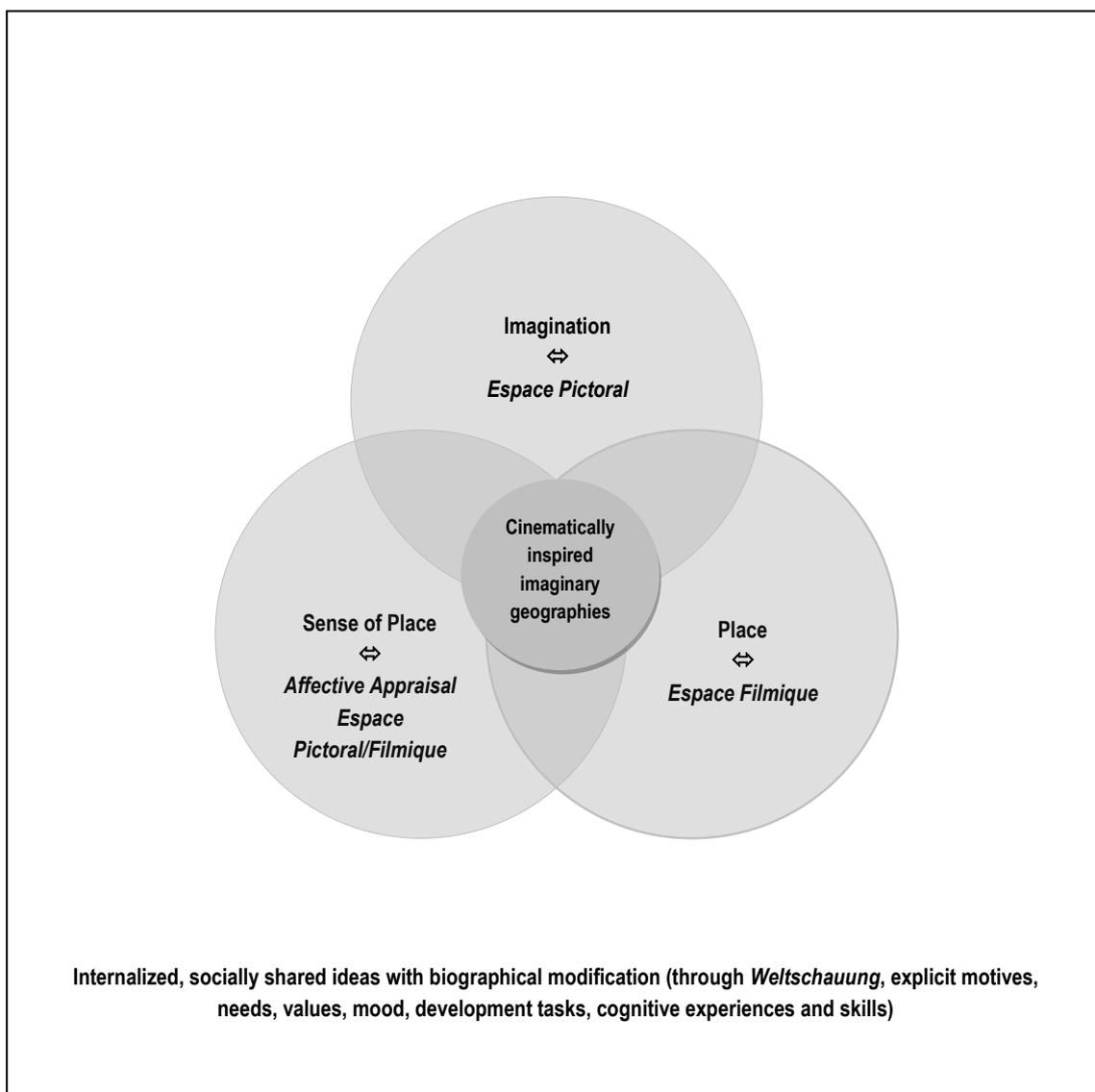


Fig. 1: Model of "Cinematically (Inspired) Imaginary Geographies" (PLIEN 2015: 79).

Imaginary geographies must be envisaged to consist of three dimensions (cf. Fig. 1). The imagination dimension encompasses information, knowledge and imagination relating to an section of the earth's sur-

face (DRIVER 1999, GREGORY 1996, GREGORY 2009). Since sections of the earth's surface are always perceived in terms of their significance for the perceiver, an imaginary geography also involves place in different stages of intensity (RELPH 1976: 46-47). Place thus forms the second dimension of an imaginary geography. The cognitive ascription of significance moreover implies an affective assessment, which is described in comparison to place as sense of place (cf. e.g. CRESSWELL 2004, ROSE 2003) and represents the third dimension of an imaginary geography. All three dimensions are mutually dependent on each other and determined by character and personality such as *Weltanschauung*, explicit motives, needs, value system, development tasks, mood as well as cognitive skills and abilities. The reception of cinematic narrations changes, intensifies or leads to the creation of imaginary geographies, since the narrated stories take place in landscapes and/or sections of the earth's surface and thus for recipients result in ecological and social experiences involving places (GIBSON 1982: 317, ZONN 1984: 144). All three dimensions of the imaginary geographies can be developed or changed in the process. The perception of the cinematic landscape with its structures, vegetation formations, inhabitants and their actions, which cannot be compared by way of aesthetic cinematic production with a primarily experienceable environment and is thus described by ROHMER (2000: 7) as "espace pictoral", broadens the dimension of the imagination. In turn, the experience, which is created by the production of a cinematic narration, influences the ascribed significance of the perceived section of the earth's surface and thus the place and sense of place. ROHMER (2000: 7) describes this experienced space as "espace filmique" (PLIEN 2015: 246-258). The second, quantitative survey (conducted in form of a pre-test) examined the scope and type of influence that cinematic narrations have on the cognitive maps of youth. To this end, youth that were in the 5th, 8th and 12th grades (137 participants) had to first visualize their cognitive maps. In addition to that, they had to place feature films that they had watched in the past on the maps. The youth were finally asked to place on their drawn maps their memories of the watched cinematic landscapes and the cognitive and affective experiences made while processing cinematic narrations as well. The still ongoing evaluation of the empirical data provided the following insight: A certain number of feature films shape the cognitive, mental maps of an entire school class. Furthermore, the knowledge about the entered countries corresponds with the *espace pictoral* and the *espace filmique* of the viewed feature films. For 78% of the youth of the upper secondary level, it became clear based on statements that the ideas of faraway places are defined cinematically. For these participants, the percentage of places, which they became acquainted with through primary experience made at the given location, sinks at the same time. Parallel cognitive maps evolved for some of the participants. The stories experienced at cinematic places similarly represented a component

of their mental maps like the knowledge of places determined through other media or primary experiences.

After merging the findings of both empirical research works (which will be presented alongside case studies and thus the collected empirical data), the objective of the planned article is to rethink and expand DOWNS' AND STEA'S model of cognitive maps (1977). With the aid of BLOTHNER'S theoretical concept of "in-between worlds" (1999: 50-52) and ESCHER'S and ZIMMERMANN'S "Mischräume" [*mixed spaces*] (2001: 227) and MERLEAU-PONTY'S phenomenology (1976), which focuses on the poles "nearness ↔ distance" in the perception of objects, the aim is also to discuss the interaction between the cinematic world and extracinematic lifeworlds and realities and thus the role that feature films have for perceiving the world.

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