

The Art of Filmmaking: A Holistic-Phenomenological Approach—Case Study of the Film *And the Alley She Whitewashed in Light Blue*

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Abstract: This paper aims to present my interpretation of the holisticphenomenological worldview adopted by me in Architecture, being my main profession both in theory and practice, to the way it was implemented in the process of creating my film. A process that forms a coherent representation of a complete worldview, fundamentally different from conventional film production. The holistic worldview has stood at the forefront of the Scientific discourse in disciplines like phenomenology, neurobiology, psychology, cognitive sciences, recent theories of complexity, and is in convergence with the fundamentals of Buddhist science and philosophy. Worlds to which my work is associated with, apparently underlying the essence of my film and the way it was created. My personal experience in multidisciplinary fields of the arts, allows me to state confidently that there is no essential difference between designing a town square, a building, a chair, a layout of a book or a frame of a film. The same set of rules that determines the correct relationship between the parts and the whole and gives a sense of unity and beauty in architecture applies in its abstract definition to anything consisting of matter, form and color, at any level of scale. The difference lies in the content, the components, and the level of complexity. The basic argument that will be presented here is that to change the feeling of the environment and create beautiful places we really feel ‘at home’, as well as creating a timeless film generating emotional experience, what is needed is not a change of style or fashion, but a transformation of the mechanistic worldview underlying current thought and approaches to the holistic one.

Keywords: Holistic; Phenomenology; Architecture; Film

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1. Introduction – milestones

I came to create my film not from the film industry but from the world of Architecture, which is part of the Arts world as a whole. My curiosity about what lies at the foundation of all those timeless organic architectures endowed with beauty and soul, which evokes us emotionally, the ones that make us feel ‘at home’ and want to return to again and again, started as a student of architecture. Looking for the patterns and the process-

methodology by which these buildings, artifacts and paintings were created.

A search that continued through my studies at the A.A school of Architecture (London); my postgraduate studies in architecture and Buddhist philosophy at U.C. Berkeley; my research work with Prof. Christopher Alexander at the “Center for Environmental Structure”.

Berkeley and finally through my acquaintance with the philosophy and science of Buddhism. And went on by asking the same questions about what the patterns are underlying those films that we want to watch again and again, the ones that create emotional experience.

After being inspired by scientists and Buddhist scholars who guided my ongoing work, I realized that in this journey I was, and the answers to these questions I was searching for, I already got in my childhood, at the Galilee holy ‘Kabbala’ city of Safed, birthplace and hometown of my family since early 19th century. At the alleys of the city, by watching my grandmother the way she was preparing the food for her guests in the hotel that she founded in a small stone building around a patio at the end of an alley in the old city. This was my family’s home until the day she died.

2. Notes on creating the film

The questions that engaged me in the world of architecture and art, the film as well, but in a different way. I am a 7th-generation descendant of a family living in the holy ‘Kabbala’ city of Safed, Israel Since the early 19th century. This was the world that had the most impact on my worldview. When I started to think about the film, I knew that there would be a substantial connection between what I have experienced and absorbed as a child in recent years and my present Scientific point of view on Architecture and art, which undoubtedly derived also from this place. But moreover, I understood that what I have experienced emotionally unconsciously as a child in Safed in the alleys, in the streets in the courtyards and by watching the way my grandmother being totally immersed in a ‘Giving God’ state of mind when peeling the green apples for her guests (**Figure 1; Figure 2; Figure 3**. Extracted from the film ^[7]), a process that brought her to enlightenment was not a subjective phenomenon due only to my intimate relationship to the place, but rather a universal and objective one ^[1]. This is the way that art, architecture and film should be practiced.



Figure 1. Extracted from the film.

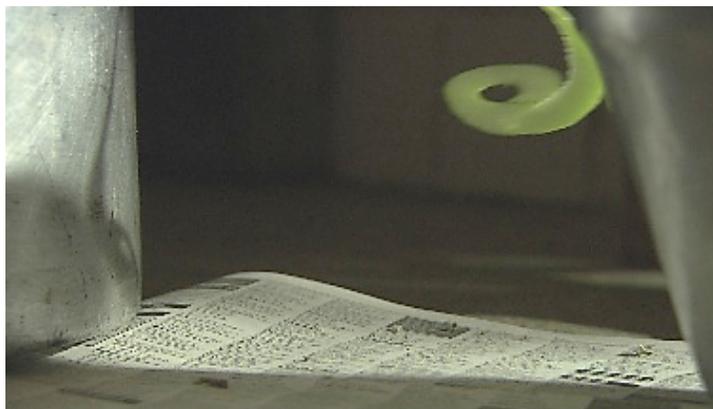


Figure 2. Extracted from the film.



Figure 3. Extracted from the film.

3. The creative process - A holistic-phenomenological approach

My holistic-phenomenological worldview both in theory and in practice, has stood in recent years at the forefront of the scientific discourse in disciplines like cosmology, neurobiology, psychology, particle physics, brain sciences, recent theories of complexity, as well as being in convergence with the fundamentals of Buddhist philosophy, domains that my work is associated with.

Buildings affect our lives and the fate of the physical environment in which we live over the course of many years; therefore, their real test is the test of time. The great buildings, villages, and temples in which man feels ‘at home’ – the ones we want to return to again and again and thus have timeless relevance are the ones that touch our hearts and have the power to create a deep emotional experience. (**Figure 4.** Extracted from the film ^[7]).



Figure 4. The villages we want to return to again and again, The Island of Paros, Greece.

There are different ways to describe buildings that have this timeless quality, Frank Lloyd Wright called them “the ones which take you beyond words.” Quoted Christopher Alexander by Stephen Grabow in his book: “The buildings that have spiritual value are a diagram of the inner universe or the picture of the inner soul” [2]. H.H The Dalai Lama calls this timeless quality “The great self” or the “nature of reality” [3].

Although this timeless quality exists in buildings rooted in different cultures and traditions the emotional experience they generate is the same (**Figure 5; Figure 6; Figure 7**). Thus, Christopher Alexander’s basic assumption was that behind human architecture there are universal codes, and that beauty and harmony in architecture and in man-made works of art are objective properties inherent within the structure itself, generating the feelings of a place [1], true also in a film the source of the feeling experienced by the audience.

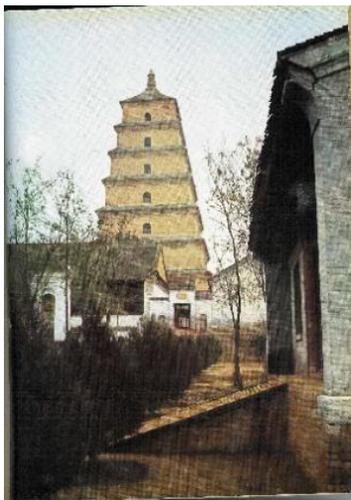


Figure 5. Great Gander Pagoda, 7th-8th century, Hsi-an-Fu, China.

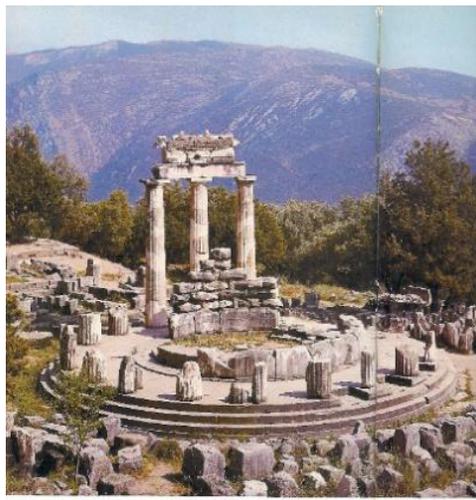


Figure 6. Tholos, 4th century, Delphi, Greece.



Figure 7. Abuhab Synagogue, Safed, Israel.

But moreover, as this physical experience is common to all people, no matter where or from what culture they come from the hypothesis was that these patterns of space are reflecting the “innate patterns” (used by Noam Chomsky’s terminology in reference to the spoken language) which are already structured in our mind from the outset, thus common to us all as human beings [1].

My personal experience in multidisciplinary fields of the arts, allows me to state confidently that there is no essential difference between designing a town square, a building, a chair, a layout of a book or a frame of a film.

The same set of rules that determines the correct relationship between the parts and the whole and gives a sense of unity and beauty in architecture applies in its abstract definition to anything consisting of matter, form and color, at any level of scale. The difference lies in the content, the components, and the level of complexity.

H.H the Dalai Lama claims that understanding these expressions of relationship -dependent arising, cause and condition, is a fundamental insight of Buddhist philosophy.

By assuming that all works of art which are timeless are the ones that take you beyond Words, my main challenge in this film was how to convey the central theme of the film part of which is rather abstract not through dialogue but through the visuals. Allowing the viewers to sense, feel, absorb and contemplate silently of what they see.

As was well done for example, in the silent films “Le Quattro volte / Michelangelo Frammartino” (**Figure 8**); “The Naked Island / kaneto Shindo” (**Figure 9**). So, only occasionally at scenes where the images alone were not sufficient to convey the ‘essay’, soft touches of my personal cryptic voiceover were embedded (**Figure 8; Figure**

9. All extracted from the films).



Figure 8. Le Quattro volte.



Figure 9. The Naked Island.

The creative process of making my film was fundamentally different from the production processes commonly existing in the film industry. The basic argument presented here is that to change the feeling of the environment and create places and buildings we really feel ‘at home’, as well as creating a timeless film, what is needed is not a change of style or fashion, but a transformation of the mechanistic worldview underlying current thought and approaches to the holistic one^[4].

4. Between two worldviews: The holistic approach vs. the mechanistic approach (the relationship between the parts and the whole)

The difference between the worldview that resulted in dissociating man from his environment and the worldview that considers man to be part of the physical and natural world we live in emphasizes the difference between the holistic organic school of thought and the mechanistic-fragmentary worldview. These are two different sets of orders^[4].

The mechanistic worldview dominant in Western thinking and underlying most contemporary architecture separates elements, consequently creating a mechanically ordered environment of autonomous fragments. Where in all the structured disconnection between the building and the street, the street and the neighborhood, the

neighborhood and the city, arouses a feeling of detachment and alienation.

In a holistic worldview, as in any organic system, each element has its own uniqueness and power but always acts as part of a larger entity to which it belongs and which it complements and for which its existence and wholeness it is responsible, as is in a film (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Organic System, interrelations between the parts and the whole.

Having adopted this concept, I do not regard urban design, architecture, interior design and landscape design as independent disciplines removed from each other, but as one continuous organic system. The building is not perceived as a collection of designed fragments, but as one hierarchical language, in which the street, the building and its interior is one continuous whole. (Figure11)

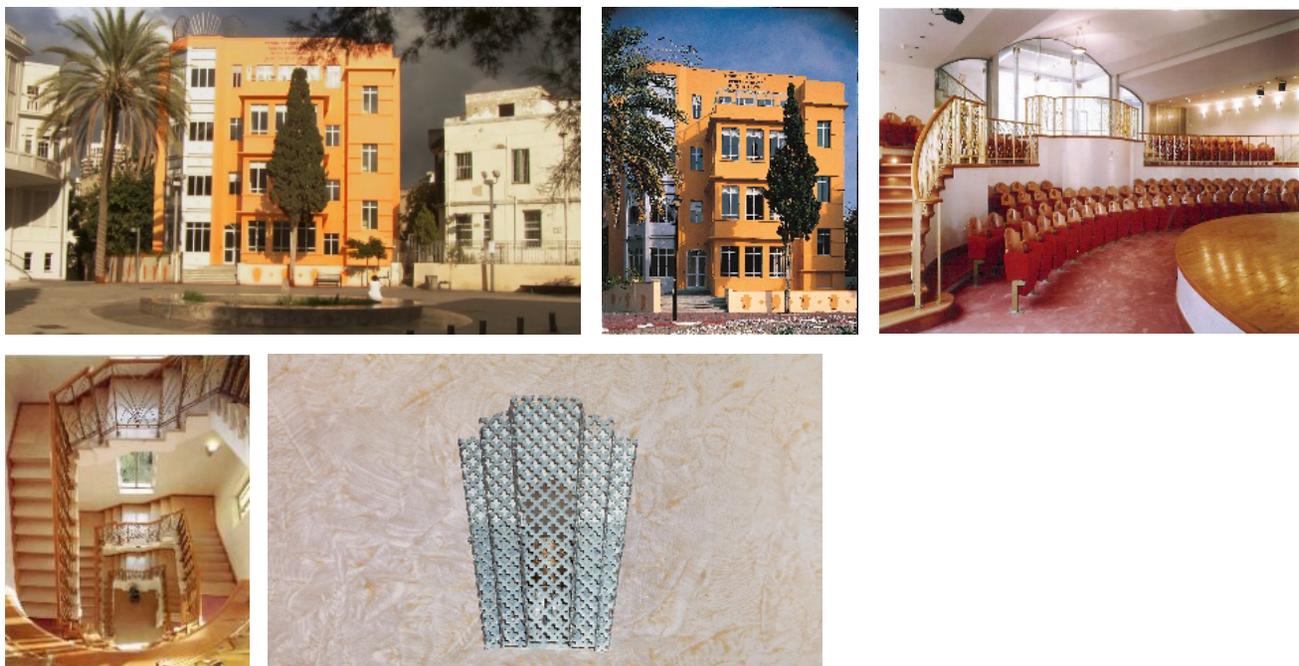


Figure 11. The square, the building and the interior are one continuous system, Music Center and Library, Tel-Aviv^[6].

The process by which the film was developed, such as a plan of the building, was not conceived as an additive fragmented process but rather as a differentiating one.

Each new element was differentiated gradually from the previous ones. Each decision taken changed the configuration of the whole, forming the basis for the next decision towards the final film, the existence of which

depended on the proper, ever-changing interrelations between the parts. The beauty and harmony of the film were related to the interrelationship among its components: the visuals, the sound, the music, the voice-over, the color adjustment, and so on. At each stage along the post- production process, the film was gradually developed in transverse layers, while all the components involved were improved simultaneously. The decision taken on each one of these components was always differentiated from the whole that existed at any moment, as if these were virtually already there. Every detail was derived from the larger whole to which it belonged, for whose existence it was responsible, and which its seeker to enhance. Going back and forth, examining at each moment the feeling of the whole. This concept of interdependence is a fundamental insight in the Buddhist science. In his book “The Joy of Living and Dying in Peace*3” His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, “In general, everything comes into existence in dependence on other factors and conditions...Since things arise and come into existence in accordance with their causes, the Buddhist scriptures contain no presentation of a self.. “

5. The cinematic language - a subtle interplay between image and sound

5.1. The ‘other’ characters

The alleys (**Figure 12**); the buildings; the stone walls (**Figure 13**); the peeling plaster and the light blue divine color of the walls (**Figure 14**), the kitchen (**Figure 15**); are not an arbitrary background locations or decorating artifacts, these are the architectural details, textures and colors that I absorbed and breathed in my childhood. But moreover, these details are not perceived as an ornament for its own sake but as the structural elements generating the whole, the contextual creator of this film. Therefore, my attention to each detail, down to the choice of the red color of the girl’s skirt (**Figure 13**) was an inseparable part of my decisions taken along the filming process (**Figure 12**; **Figure 13**; **Figure 14**; **Figure 15**; All Extracted from the film ^[7]).



Figure 12. The alleys.



Figure 13. The stone walls.



Figure 14. The peeling plaster.



Figure 15. The Kitchen.

This approach was well understood by Grandmother when hand-embroidering the white flowers on the pink napkins, or when sprinkling the sesame flowers on the rolls she prepared for her guests on Sabbath. (**Figure 16**, Extracted from the film^[7])



Figure 16. Sprinkling the sesame flowers on the rolls.

5.2. The sound

The sounds in the film are not just reflections of reality, but foremost a tool to reinforce the subtext itself, interwoven in the visual elements and a tool for associating different scenes along the film that though they appear different in form manifest the same common underlying patterns or activities that manifest the same state of mind of the human characters involved.

5.3. The storyline

The film is not a story-driven or a linear ‘plot’ but a coherent essay presenting via poetic cinematic language abstract assumptions about the secret concealed within the beauty of all those timeless places in which man feels ‘at home’. Unfolded gradually through extended intimate scenes along the time axis of the 6 holidays in which as a child I visited my Grandmother at her hotel in Safed: The summer holiday; the High Jewish holidays (Rosh Hashanah; Yom Kippur; Sukkoth; Passover) and winter. Similar in structure to the Korean movie: *Spring, summer, fall, winter /Kim Ki-duk*.

The storyline in this film is the subtext (the essay), while the narrative nodes are the childhood memories appearing in the background. The film is not about the biography of the human characters that the film embodies, but about the activities they perform. All reflecting activities in which the boundaries between art, philosophy, and the creator’s ‘Religious mission’ are blurred – a process that brings the creators to enlightenment. First and foremostly of my grandmother (**Figure 1**; **Figure 3**; **Figure 17**), or the tangka painter (**Figure 18**) or asking me the child to Place down the food - giving the charity in secret (**Figure 19**), or in listening to the hidden voices of the site on which I am designing a building (**Figure 20**)^[7].



Figure 17. Whitewashing the alley in light blue.



Figure 18. The tangka painter.



Figure 19. Placing down the food - giving charity in secret.



Figure 20. Listening to the hidden voices of the site.

6. Synopsis ^[5]

At a time of existential threat to the physical and human environment we live in, Architect Nili Portugali takes us on a deeply intimate journey in the Galilean ‘Kabbala’ holy city of Tsefat. A childhood journey that unfolds gradually from her present holistic / Buddhist /phenomenological / scientific point of view, replacing current thought and approaches. to a discovery of profound universal insights of: What is their secret of all those great timeless buildings of the past, cities, villages, tents and temples endowed with beauty and soul in which man feels ‘at home’, and what is that one pure ‘art of making’ which is thousands of years old that creates them (and the Arts), at any culture, at any place and at any time. That, via reconstructing in her unique poetic meditative cinematic language, her childhood memories are engraved on each stone of the invisible city’s history. The birthplace and hometown of her family since the early 19th century, where her grandmother, considered by Nili Portugali from her present point of view to be A ‘Zen master’, founded her hotel in a small stone building around a patio at the end of an alley in the old city. A city with cultural heritage of more than 1000 years that no longer exists and is totally forgotten.

7. Conclusion

If we just want to get close to the Center of the ‘One Timeless Way’, that grandmother was connected to, it! will lead us to create cities, villages, streets, buildings, artifacts and films in which man will feel at home. In any place, in any culture, and at any time (**Figure 21; Figure 22; Figure 23; Figure 24.** Extracted from the film ^[7]).



Figure 21. Wishing tree in Tsefat.



Figure 22. Wishing tree in Tibet.



Figure 23. Wishing tree in Japan.



Figure 24. Wishing tree in China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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