Life is Serious;
ART SERENE

Biography

Tanja Lacko (1966) was born in Zagreb, Croatia. She graduated in 1991 from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Zagreb, after which she began her professional artistic career as a theater, film, and television scenographer. She is the author of more than fifty relevant artistic works, many of which have achieved significant success with both audiences and critics. She has received notable festival and national awards in her field.

In 2013, she was appointed to the artistic-teaching title of Assistant Professor of Art at the Academy of Dramatic Art (ADA), University of Zagreb, where in 2021, she was promoted to the artistic-teaching title of Associate Professor of Art. She earned her PhD in 2024 from the doctoral program in ethnology and cultural anthropology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, with a dissertation focused on cinematic scenic space entitled *Space of Home in Croatian War of Independence Movies*.

At the Academy of Dramatic Art, she systematically advances set design education and participates in artistic, academic, and institutional collaboration projects. Together with costume designer Irena Sušac, she co-designed and led the accreditation process for the new Master's program in Scenic Design — with modules in Scenography and Costume Design — which commenced at ADA in the academic year 2024/2025, where she teaches courses in theatre and film scenography.

She is actively involved in issues related to the improvement, preservation and recognition of the scenic design professions. Since 2022, she has been a member of the Executive Board of the Filmmakers Association of Croatia and the Festival Council of the Pula Film Festival.

SERIOUSNESS OF CINEMATIC SCENIC SPACE

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Abstract

The paper examines the relationship and interaction between real space and the imaginary scenic space presented through the medium of feature film. Drawing on two research perspectives – cultural anthropological and filmological - the paper analyzes cinematic scenic space as any socially produced and socially constructed space (Low, 1996) into which meanings are inscribed by its planners, designers and users, as well as by all those who perceive and interpret that space. Cinematic scenic space emerges from real space and reflects it as its heterotopian and utopian image (Foucault, 2017), striving to be convincing and recognizable so that viewers can identify with the imaginary fiction world (Turković, 2012), even when it involves the reconstruction of the past or the prediction of the future. Cinematic scenic space is an affective space (Zanger, 2012) marked by a certain atmospheres, emotions, ideologies and worldviews. Gernot Böhme emphasizes the seriousness of real, lived space in relation to scenic space. The paper discusses Böhme's thesis through the lens of social memory, a field where real and scenic spaces meet, overlap, and intertwine, creating a bricolage of images and sounds, details and descriptions, practices and rituals, emotions and affects that individuals and communities store in their memory about a particular place. Using examples of specific Croatian cities as film locations, the paper explores the ways in which life is inscribed into cinema and cinematic space, but also how cinematic space is inscribed into life, constructing a hybrid place in social memory composed of different images, both real and fictional. These processes are also involved in the politics of remembering, through which societies and cultures, individuals and communities manipulate social memory, making the art of creating scenic space profoundly serious and far from serene.

Keywords: cinematic scenic space, social production and social construction of space, social memory, politics of remembering

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship between real urban space and cinematic space in feature films, with a focus on three Croatian cities: Dubrovnik, Vukovar, and Karlovac. Drawing on cultural anthropology, visual studies, and film theory, it analyzes how film transforms actual, lived urban environments into *scenic spaces[1]* that serve not merely as visual backdrops, but as carriers of affective, ideological, and mnemonic significance. It examines how cinematic space can function as a heterotopia or a utopia, an emotionally charged landscape or a tool for constructing collective identity and social memory.

Through case studies of three distinctly different cities - Dubrovnik as a globally fictionalized spectacle, Vukovar as an ideologically saturated site of heroic collective memory, and Karlovac as a mimetic city marked by an unspoken, universal trauma - the paper shows how film does not simply represent real places but resemanticizes them, erasing or overwriting existing meanings in line with local and/or global ideological, political, or economic agendas.

Methodologically, the analysis is grounded in qualitative *image-reading* of selected feature films and contextualized through theoretical frameworks from the anthropology of space and place (Foucault, Low, Tuan), memory culture and the politics of remembrance (Halbwachs, Nora), and postcolonial identity studies (Bhabha, Appadurai). Special emphasis is placed on the emotionalization of space (Massumi, Ahmed) and on the processes through which viewers form affective bonds with spaces depicted in film (Gaut, Grodal, Zanger), as well as on the tensions that arise when film suppresses, transforms, or replaces local meanings.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF CINEMATIC SPACE

2.1. The Construction of Space, Place, and Memory

Space, often perceived as a physical constant or neutral backdrop, is understood in cultural anthropology as a complex social construct imbued with symbolic, ideological, and affective meanings - products of individual and collective social, political, and cultural processes (Lefebvre, 2015; Low, 1996; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). Spaces are shaped by planners, builders, users, and the discourses that interpret them, turning spatial imaginaries into tangible places. By "reading" a place, one can gain insight into the social and cultural norms, patterns, and imaginaries of a particular community, as well as into the transformations brought about by globalization, localization, migration, communication, and other dynamics.

The question of how a place is sensed - of what makes a space emotionally resonant and sensorially experienced - also invites inquiry into how constructed spaces affect the physical and emotional lives of those who use, perceive, and transform them (Feld & Basso, eds., 1996; Ahmed, 2004). Put simply "we build spaces, and spaces build us." This applies not only to physical, emotional, or identity-related aspects, but also to the realm of what we call *collective memory*. Memory is not solely an individual process but a collective one, contributing to the construction of identity within a specific locality, historical moment, and community (Nora, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011). The creation of any place inherently involves the creation of a site of memory. Just as the destruction, disappearance, or forgetting of a place activates mechanisms of remembrance and/or deliberate forgetting (see Selberg & Škrbić Alempijević, 2013).

Approaching space as a social construct enables us to see physical locations as carriers of symbolic meaning, power, and identity. Space is always a representation, an experience, and a practice shaped by cultural frameworks, historical contexts, and collective memory. These theoretical perspectives provide a deeper understanding of how real spaces function within a broader socio-cultural imaginary, and they form the basis for analyzing how such spaces are reinterpreted in the cinematic medium.

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1   *Scenic space* refers to a spatial environment composed through scenographic strategies, encompassing visual, symbolic, and atmospheric dimensions in both theatre and film. The term is used in performance and film studies to denote space as dramaturgically shaped and experientially charged. See, for example: Fischer-Lichte (2008), Di Benedetto (2013), Howard (2002), Lacko (2024).

2.2. The Construction of Cinematic Scenic Spaces and Places

Cinematic scenic space, like any other space, is not merely a visual setting for action but a constructed medium of meaning - complex in its aesthetics, affect, and ideology. It is shaped through a combination of set design, lighting and sound, framing, and editing. Rather than simply reflecting reality, cinematic space interprets, transforms, and often symbolically replaces it.

Drawing from my own experience in production design, I know that the representation of real space in film can sometimes serve as a faithful, metonymic reflection of the physical world. More often, however, it assumes a symbolic, metaphorical, or interpretive role, shaped by the conceptual, dramatic, aesthetic, and practical needs of the production. In this context, film does not merely show existing space - it reimagines it. Every cinematic representation generates a new version of existing real space, one that can affirm, reshape, or challenge the individual and/or collective narratives associated with it.

Cinematic scenic space thus emerges from the interplay between the real and the imagined, the actual location and its fictional interpretation. It can be understood through Foucault's concepts of heterotopia or utopia - a kind of "make-believe space" (Navaro-Yashin, 2012) in which recognizable geographic locations are merged with consciously constructed narratives.[2] Film does not treat space as a passive backdrop; rather, it actively reshapes it, infuses it with emotion, and frequently charges it ideologically. As such, cinematic scenic space becomes an affective field, where identities, memories, and interpretations of reality intertwine.

Film viewers easily identify with cinematic worlds because they incorporate familiar elements. These spaces appear "believable," even "objective" (Heath, 1986; Peterlić, 2018). Although cinematic spatial construction is inherently manipulative - through ellipses, camera angles, and editing cuts - audiences readily accept this illusion and identify with the fictional world (Turković, 2012; Gaut, 2010). Filmmakers draw on existing collective knowledge and memory tied to particular spatiotemporal settings. They resemanticize these spaces through the cinematic medium, reshaping their meanings, assumptions, or contested narratives (Lacko, 2024).

For example, Dubrovnik no longer functions solely as a historic city - it becomes King's Landing. War-torn Vukovar is perceived as a space of martyrdom and collective trauma, while Karlovac is rendered as a site of universal destruction, stripped of its specific local identity. The emotional connections that viewers form with such cinematic spaces are significant because visual representations evoke powerful atmospheres and affects (Bruno, 2007; Grodal, 2009). Due to film's evocative power, these portrayals become etched into viewers' mental photo albums - even when they are entirely fictional, as in science fiction or fantasy – side by side with preexisting images of real-world spaces.

In this way, cinematic scenic space acts as a *vector of memory* (Wood, 1999). It helps shape cultural practices of remembrance and the interpretation of the past, present, and even the future. Feature films thus have the capacity to generate new forms of memory or to reconstruct existing ones - a process Astrid Erll (2008) refers to as the *medial construction* of collective memory. Film is among the most powerful cultural media in this regard, as it combines narrative, emotional identification, and visual affirmation of spatial meaning.

Cinematic scenic space is therefore not a passive visual backdrop but an active participant in the construction of meaning. Through stylistic choices, editing, and dramaturgical framing, film creates *make-believe* spaces - hybrids of the real and the imagined - that convey affects, ideologies, and collective memories. Film not only shapes how we perceive space but also plays a role in its reinterpretation and the production of meaning, making it a vital tool in articulating identity and memory. This chapter thus lays the groundwork for analyzing the specific cinematic representations of cities in the following sections.

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2 The term *"make-believe space"* was introduced by anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012) in her analysis of spatial transformations in the northern, internationally unrecognized part of Cyprus.

3. CASE STUDIES: THREE CITIES AS FILM SETS

3.1. Dubrovnik: The City as Fantasy and Commodity

Dubrovnik, a Croatian city on the southern Adriatic coast, has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979, recognized for its exceptional beauty and historical and cultural significance. It is one of the country's most prominent tourist destinations. However, over the past decade, Dubrovnik has also emerged as a key site of *film tourism*, particularly after serving as a major filming location for the globally popular television series *Game of Thrones* (Fig. 1.).

Fig. 1. Route Map for Dubrovnik King's Landing Walking Tour

As the stand-in for the fictional city of King's Landing, Dubrovnik has been fictionalized and transformed into a globally recognized fantasy space. Its cinematic identity becomes a heterotopia: a place that is simultaneously real and imaginary, where history, everyday life, and fiction overlap. This transformation reflects a cultural hybridization of space - one that is continuously reinterpreted through the lens of popular culture. For many television viewers, Dubrovnik is no longer perceived as a real historical city, but rather as a symbol of fictional power, intrigue, and epic conflict.

The use of real urban space in fictional narratives has a lasting impact on the perception of the city, its identity, and its collective memory. First, reality becomes filtered through fiction; viewers form emotional attachments to locations they recognize from media, often before ever experiencing them in person. Second, Dubrovnik undergoes tangible economic and cultural changes. Guided tours, themed souvenirs, festival programs, and cultural events tied to the series have become embedded in the city's contemporary daily life.[3]

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3 In 2016, UNESCO issued a warning about the negative consequences of mass tourism in Dubrovnik. In an official report on the state of conservation of the Old City of Dubrovnik, UNESCO expressed concern about the excessive number of tourists, particularly those arriving by cruise

At the same time, however, Dubrovnik experiences increasing commercialization and identity transformation. Its complex historical layers risk being overshadowed by the dominance of a fictional narrative. This shift reflects a broader process of cultural commodification. The city's transformation into a product of the cultural and entertainment industry aligns with Hobsbawm and Ranger's concept of the "invention of tradition" (1983), where history is reconstructed to meet the demands of contemporary consumers and global audiences. As a result, the city's identity becomes partially delocalized, increasingly shaped by market logic rather than by the memory and needs of the local community (cf. Beeton, 2005).

Interestingly, this contemporary fictionalization stands in stark contrast to Dubrovnik's very real and painful recent past. During the Croatian War of Independence, the city was a site of destruction and trauma. Footage of the shelling of its historic center in 1991 circulated widely, helping international audiences grasp the severity of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.[4] At that time, images of Dubrovnik functioned as an audiovisual cry for help, an urgent appeal underscoring cultural and historical endangerment.

Today, those same spaces that once represented vulnerability and trauma are repurposed as sets for fictional battles. This shift raises important questions about how the film medium participates in the ongoing transformation of spatial meaning - across time, and in response to political, economic, and cultural change.

3.2. Vukovar: The City as a Site of Conflicting Memory Politics

Vukovar symbolizes one of the deepest collective traumas in recent Croatian history. This Baroque town on the banks of the Danube River once functioned as a river port and a cultural and economic center of Eastern Slavonia. During the Croatian War of Independence, it played a decisive role in Croatia's defense. The city endured a brutal three-month siege, resulting in its near-total destruction (Fig. 2). Footage of civilians leaving the city became a globally recognized image of wartime suffering. November 18, the date of Vukovar's fall, in Croatia is commemorated as the Memorial Day for the Victims of the War of Independence and the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Vukovar and Škabrnja.[5]

In Croatian cinema, films such as *Remember Vukovar* (Zapamtite Vukovar, 2008, dir. Fadil Hadžić) and *The Sixth Bus* (Šesti autobus, 2022, dir. Eduard Galić) depict wartime Vukovar as an almost sacred space - a site of martyrdom, sacrifice, and heroism. Both films were partially shot on actual locations in Vukovar and partially built on other locations. In these films, Vukovar functions not only as a backdrop but as an authentic, almost archival record of pain - a bearer of memory. As Aleida Assmann (2011) emphasizes, cultural memory constructs "sacred spaces" of the past, which acquire the status of indestructible symbols of shared (Croatian) identity. In Croatian daily discourse, Vukovar is referred to as the "Hero City."

In Serbia, whose forces besieged and took Vukovar, a film about the tragedy was also produced. In *Vukovar Poste Restante* (Vukovar, jedna priča, 1994, dir. Boro Drašković), Vukovar is portrayed as a place where love is impossible due to war. However, the film simultaneously tends toward relativization by equating the aggressor and the victim and blurring responsibility for destruction. The fact that this film was shot in the actually destroyed city shortly after its fall, during Serbian occupation, further intensifies its symbolic charge. It highlights cinema's potential as a propaganda tool and what Annette Kuhn (2002) calls "disputed memories" that compete for hegemony.

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ships, which posed a threat to the site's Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). The report warned that, without appropriate management measures, Dubrovnik could be added to the List of World Heritage in Danger.
Retrieved from: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000248073, 2.5.2025.

4   The War of Independence (1991–1995) was a defensive conflict fought to secure the independence and territorial integrity of the Croatian state. It was waged against the aggression of the combined forces of Serbia and Montenegro, supported by the human and military resources of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA). This war marked the final phase of the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The conflict ended with Croatia's victory and the establishment of its territorial integrity.

5   After months of siege and shelling, Vukovar was captured on November 18, 1991, by the forces of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and Serbian paramilitary units. During the siege and following the city's fall, more than 3,000 soldiers and civilians lost their lives, including 86 children. Additionally, over 300 residents of Vukovar remain missing to this day.

Fig. 2. War-torn Croatian town Vukovar (1991)

Film depictions of Vukovar - whether Croatian or Serbian - are never neutral. They are ideologically constructed spaces where battles for truth, identity, and politically driven interpretations of the past unfold. In this sense, the city becomes both a "site of memory" (Nora, 1989) and a site of narrative conflict. Every frame showing Vukovar acts as a political gesture - a retroactive and reactive inscription of meaning, emotion, and identity into space.

Thus, film does not merely represent the real city of Vukovar; it resemanticizes it. Vukovar is not just a geographic location but also a symbol, trauma, political metaphor, and myth. In cinematic depictions, it emerges as a space where reality overlaps with ideology, the past with present politics, and the local with universal issues of war, responsibility, and memory. This example illustrates how film, as a medium, enables the rewriting of narratives that determine the ideological, political, historical, and cultural meanings of a real place.

3.3. Karlovac: The City as a Universal Landscape of Trauma

Unlike Dubrovnik and Vukovar, Karlovac rarely "plays itself" in the cinematic imagination, despite suffering significant damage during the Croatian War of Independence (Fig. 3). In film production, Karlovac has gained a reputation as a practical war location due to its proximity to Zagreb, good transport connections, and stable infrastructure. As such, it functions as a flexible scenographic stage that, with minimal intervention, can represent almost any war-affected place in the world.[6]

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6   Karlovac is a city located in central Croatia, approximately 60 kilometers from the capital, Zagreb. It serves as an important road and railway hub, situated on the main route to Adriatic Coast. Due to its strategic geographical position, the former Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) maintained around twenty military facilities with stationed troops in Karlovac and its surrounding area. This made the city a key focal point during the Croatian War of Independence, marked by frequent military clashes and shelling. The city and its surroundings were ultimately liberated on August 7, 1995.

Fig. 3. War-torn Croatian town Karlovac (photo Davor Višnjić/PIXSELL)

This mimetic role is well illustrated in the British-American film *The Fever* (2004, dir. Carlo Gabriel Nero), where Karlovac "plays" an unnamed city in the so-called "Third World." The film explores the responsibility of the global "First World" for the suffering experienced by people in war-torn countries. Although Karlovac is physically present in the film, it remains "invisible" as its actual war scars and local history are erased, replaced by abstract, universal symbols of violence and poverty. This raises important ethical questions about representation: can, and should, a space marked by concrete trauma serve merely as a decorative backdrop for someone else's story?

A similar approach can be seen in the Croatian film *Witnesses* (*Svjedoci*, 2003, dir. Vinko Brešan), adapted from Jurica Pavičić's novel *Ovce od gipsa*. While the novel is explicitly set in Split and deeply shaped by its cultural, social, and Mediterranean context, the film relocates the story to an unnamed continental city - shot in Karlovac - for production reasons. This spatial transposition is not simply a technical or logistical choice; it carries strong symbolic weight. Through this process, the specificities of Split's wartime trauma and local cultural identity are erased, and the narrative becomes a generic story about violence. Karlovac thus functions as a medium of universalization, where a concrete location is replaced by the spatial idea of "any" Croatian wartime city.

In this way, the film medium indirectly participates in the delocalization of memory, transforming individual and localized suffering into an abstract, nearly neutral form. This manipulation of space can be interpreted through theoretical concepts such as topophilia (Tuan, 1974) and heterotopia (Foucault, 2017). Instead of fostering emotional attachment to a specific, recognizable place, cinematic Karlovac becomes a space of "somewhere" — simultaneously real and unreal — a symbolic landscape that absorbs and reflects the histories and traumas of others. By transposing the local (Split) into the universal (an anonymous city), the film *Witnesses* creates a new memory framework, making the memorial space fluid and open to reinterpretation.

In this sense, *Witnesses* participates in a broader discourse on the politics of memory, which shapes what societies remember and how (cf. Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989). Although the film uses the real space of Karlovac, it does not engage with its specific history. Instead, it produces a fictionalized trauma landscape that lacks local articulation. This approach creates emotional distance while achieving symbolic universality,

allowing for wider reception and interpretation - but at the cost of losing the concrete, voiced identity of the city itself.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of film representations of Dubrovnik, Vukovar, and Karlovac demonstrates that feature films possess the power to shape not only the perception of space but also the collective emotional geography of a nation. Cinematic scenic space is far from a neutral backdrop; it is an active field of meaning where memory, ideology, affect, and identity intersect. Through diverse representational strategies - ranging from spectacularization and commercialization (Dubrovnik), to the sacralization of traumatic sites (Vukovar), and the delocalization and universalization of trauma (Karlovac) - film influences how communities remember, forget, and negotiate their past and present.

The films analyzed in this study do more than depict spatial configurations; they actively participate in the production of meanings that can have lasting consequences for local communities. Through mechanisms of emotionalization and narrative selection, certain cities become powerful symbols - of fiction, heroism, or trauma - while others remain silent spaces characterized by mimicry and omission. These processes open critical space for reflection on how places are remembered and who holds the authority to tell their stories.

In an era when cities are increasingly mobilized by cultural industries and global visual economies, it is essential to question how these processes impact local identities and collective memories. Film can serve both as a tool of remembrance and as an instrument of forgetting - a medium that can illuminate local history, yet just as easily overwrite it in favor of globally recognizable narratives. For this reason, analyses like the present one is vital not only for understanding the language of film but also for fostering ethical reflection on the representation of space and communities within the contemporary visual media landscape.

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LIST OF FIGURES