

**FRAMING DAILY LIFE IN SPRAWL:**

**FLANDERS URBANIZED SPACE FROM A CINEMATIC PERSPECTIVE**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possible contribution of cinematic perceptions for spatial planning in general and the inclusion of everyday experience in the planning of the Flemish urbanized landscape in particular. Urban planners as well as policy makers struggle to get grip on dispersed spatial developments, while everyday practice of consuming space in sprawly areas, also in Flanders, unimpededly continues. Our assumption is that based on a theoretical understanding of the duality between urban theories and everyday life, a cinematic approach might gain insights in the inhabitants' imagination of suburbia in general and the Flemish landscape in particular. Here we will preliminarily refer to five contemporary fiction films, such as *Nowhere Man* (Patrice Toye, 2008), *Fucking Suburbia* (Jeff Otte, 2012), *Kid* (Fien Troch, 2012), *Violet* (Bas Devos, 2014) and *Home* (Fien Troch, 2016). They show how film represents, reflects and interacts with the intrinsic characteristics, the experience value and the typical dynamics of those sprawly areas. These perceptions might enhance a deeper understanding of the daily lives in those areas, and therewith enhance a more engaged approach of those areas by planners.

## 1. Introduction: perceptions of the Flemish urbanized landscape

In our modern-day mediatized society, the moving image has a prominent role. Film influences the way we construct images of the world and, as a result, how we operate in it. Cinematic perceptions determine ideas, including ideas about space. As urban planners analyze, interpret and design places, they formulate concepts of space in order to understand its meaning and how it is used. Therefore, it is important to consider perceptions of space, including those provided by images on screen.

This is particularly the case for the Flemish urbanized landscape and its perception. Ever since the Flemish architect and urbanist Renaat Braem labelled Belgium as ‘the ugliest country in the world’ (Braem, 1968), urban professionals have been struggling with the negative impact of urbanization in Flanders. They have also adopted Braem’s critical perception of this sprawl (see a.o. Boussauw & Boelens, 2014). In their search for ways to counter uncontrolled suburbanization, both urban planners and policy makers have primarily focused on demographic, economic and ecological problems produced by dispersed urbanization (with plans and reports like RSV 1997, BRV 2018, RURA 2018, RURA 2021, etc.)<sup>1</sup>. However, there are two important objections to these attempted solutions. Firstly, these responses ignored more structural foundations of Flanders’ dispersed layout, such as geographical features of the landscape, ancient infrastructure policies and the adjoining housing, economic and spatial planning ontologies (Boelens, 2021; Boelens & Pisman, 2020). Secondly, experts underestimated the importance of deeper real-life ambitions and aspirations of the Flemish people (see a.o. Meeus & De Decker, 2013). Despite the known consequences of sprawl, such as ongoing traffic jams, impact on climate change, energy consumption and transformation of the landscape, the Flemish inhabitants in general therefore persist in their dispersed settlement behavior. Hence, and regardless the spatial concepts and plans of the past fifty years, Braem’s critique is still remarkably accurate.

The highly fragmented settlement structure by now covers almost the entire territory. Although Flanders is a densely populated region<sup>2</sup>, with a settlement area of 33%, Flanders has one of the lowest densities in terms of settlement structure<sup>3</sup> within Europe. Furthermore, while planners voice an urgent need for densification of the centers to safeguard the remaining open space from further land parceling, consumption of space unimpededly

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<sup>1</sup> Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen (RSV) 1997 : The Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders is a vision that indicates how we should use our space in Flanders and has been an important foundation of spatial policy since 1997.

Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen (BRV) 2018 : the Flanders Regional Policy Plan (BRV) is a strategic vision that includes a picture of the future and an overview of long-term policy options, in particular strategic objectives.

Ruimterapport (RURA) Vlaanderen 2018 : Spatial Report on Flanders that describes, analyses and evaluates the state of space/spatial fabric in Flanders.

<sup>2</sup> The average population density in Flanders is 488 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> in 2021. (<https://www.statistiekvlaanderen.be/bevolking-omvang-en-groei>)

<sup>3</sup> Vlaanderen, Ruimte. "Witboek Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen." *Brussels, Belgium*. [[https://www.ruimtevlaanderen.be/Portals/108/WhitePaperSpatialPolicyPlanFlanders\\_brochure2017\\_1.pdf](https://www.ruimtevlaanderen.be/Portals/108/WhitePaperSpatialPolicyPlanFlanders_brochure2017_1.pdf)] Available from (2017).

Vlaamse Overheid. (2017a). "Vlaams Bouwmeester meerjarenprogramma 2017-2020." *Brussels, Belgium*. [<https://www.vlaamsbouwmeester.be/nl/meerjarenprogramma-2017-2020>.] Available from (2017).

continues. In 2019, still 7,33 hectares of open space disappeared every day through further urbanization (Pisman, Vanacker, Strosse, et al., 2019). The announced building shift<sup>4</sup> risks to remain hollow phrases.

Apparently, when dealing with this Flemish space, there exists a major dichotomy between concepts and theories of professional experts on the one hand, and everyday culture and realities of inhabitants on the other. It is not easy to grasp the latter. Therefore, there is a need to delve more profoundly into the everyday lifeworld of Flemish people. This is also motivated by the dependency of political will on the aspirations of the general public, which makes the matter highly relational (Foucault, 1977; Jessop, 1990; Latour, 1984; Poulantzas, 1978). Notwithstanding some pioneering work concerning situational, phenomenological and ethnographic research (Reijndorp & Reijnders, 2010) or, in spatial planning, by means of research by design (a.o. Roggema, 2016; Secchi & Ingallina, 2006; Taverne, 1989), planners still hardly grasp the whole picture of this lifeworld. Apparently, knowledge of the everyday is hardly generated by the existing research methods. Plans, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), research by design, statistics, citizens science, field visits, etc. still seem to start from conceived theories and produce therewith systematic knowledge. To be able to read, understand and conceptualize the urban landscape, and especially Flemish sprawl, planners need to go beyond the systematic. In this way, the link between urban plans and everyday culture might be restored.

As such, this paper explores if a cinematic perception of the Flemish urban landscape can introduce a new perspective to understand the discrepancy in perceptions on the Flemish urbanized landscape. Therewith this paper builds on pioneering work of for instance Doreen Massey (1997, 2005). Time and again, Massey stressed that systematic narratives suppress the full impact of space as the sphere of multiplicities and pincushions of story lines. We will explore if film, as an instrument, can provide a glimpse of these everyday multiplicities. In that case, the moving image might generate insights that can't be explored by the above-mentioned mainstream or systematic planning means. Here we also follow Mark Tewdwr-Jones' argument (2011, p.29) that the camera lens is well positioned to provide such a multiple, holistic interpretation of the built environment. For Tewdwr-Jones film often provides a unique sense of space, unavailable through other explorations of space. Consequently, film can assist to reinterpret places and understand emotional attachments to them. But his reflections predominantly look for a new perspective on space and place, evoking these spaces. But this paper aims to more operationally explore if this new perspective might effectively lead to new ways of planning, more specifically with regard to the persistent Flemish sprawl. Hence, the research question of this paper: *is the moving image able to contribute to the conventional approach of spatial planning in general, and Flemish urban sprawl in particular?*

In order to answer this question, we will first delve into the theoretical backgrounds of this hypothesis. Subsequently, an investigation of the prevalent Flemish cinematographic representations of this peculiar landscape will reveal if these cinematic representations might offer (new) knowledge of the Flemish urban

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<sup>4</sup>As one of the strategic goals of the Flemish policy plan on space, this building stop was announced in 2015 to end the additional consumption of land in 2040. Therefore, a gradual reduction is implemented in which the disappearance of 3 hectares of open space every day should be reached by 2025. This procrastination seems to have the opposite effect.

culture. Furthermore, we will also examine if these representations' capacity might mediate between system and lifeworld views of Flemish planning. Finally, we will return to the question if this new or extra knowledge might enhance the efficiency of the above-mentioned attempted solutions to sprawl. This includes verifying the possible implementation in planning practice. In doing so, this paper will explore if a cinematic approach in planning gains with the prospect of a more resilient, sustainable and supported future.

## **2. The threefold 'spatial' qualities of film**

Cinema and urban landscapes have always been closely intertwined. Since the very beginning of cinema, cities and urban landscapes have been subject of interest for cinematographers. Furthermore, many authors (for example AlSayyad, 2006; Barber, 2002; Clarke & McArthur, 1997; Koeck & Roberts, 2010; Menzel, 2008; Penz & Lu, 2011; Pratt, 2014; Shiel, 2001; Shiel & Fitzmaurice, 2003) have demonstrated different aspects of the relationship between cinema and urban space. They expose thematic as well as formal aspects related to social, cultural, economic, geographical and political aspects of spatial perceptions. These insights pronounce that our understanding of contemporary (urban) space cannot be viewed independently of cinematic experience. Consequently, this research assumes that cinematic perceptions, in particular the depiction of spatial environments in films, have the capacity to represent, reflect and interact with evolutions of spaces. This threefold quality of the cinematic image (the representational, the reflectional, and the interactive) facilitates film to mediate between realities and theories on contemporary landscapes. In this sense film might indeed serve as a reading device, a social reflection and if possible as a mediator to bridge the duality between concepts and theories on the one hand and everyday ways of living on the other.

### 2.1 Cinematic representation: a reading device

First of all, Film is a visual medium. It represents information about space and might thus function as a reading device by which information about the everyday surfaces. The moving image combines filmic characteristics – montage, lighting, storyline, camera position, mise-en-scène, soundtrack, etc. – with specific attention for the everyday. The architecture historian Siegfried Giedion first coined the importance and impact of this visual medium. In *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) Giedion already pointed out the '*unlimited possibility of reproducing an optical-psychic process*' (Giedion, 1948, p. 43) of cinema. Giedion proposed to establish a new historiography, which documents the effects of movement, and modernity for the everyday. As such, he examined the split between thinking and feeling. In film full mechanization culminates with its ability to capture movements, incorporating sound and sight at one blow. But as a product of modernization par excellence, the moving picture also translates the human response to this rationalization into artistic symbols. Cultural metaphors penetrate man's existence, like the automobile ensures personal mobility, and the assembly line automates and standardizes labor and life. Giedion referred here specifically to the portrayal of mechanization and automations of the human body in for instance Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern times* (1936). Applying his examination of the role of modernity, by documenting mechanizing effects on everyday life, revealed new

insights on the urbanized space; but in turn on its opposite as well: the countryside. Especially since the latter is often (but wrongly) characterized by the trivial, the full non-urban everyday became an operational field to trace pure, non-automated, nature and in fact the very existence of human kind.

This ambition to read and understand the socio-cultural starting from individual daily life practices and influencing this in return, became more operational prominent in Michel de Certeau's (1980) book *L'Invention du Quotidien (The Practice of Everyday Life (1984))*. Corresponding to Giedion, de Certeau emphasized daily routines and their connected ways of operating, in order to develop a new methodology to grasp the everyday. For that purpose, he introduced the term 'tactics' as opposed to the regular 'strategies'; e.g. methodologies and processes with formal long-term implementation horizons. Strategies are therewith assigned to the 'producers', the institutions and structures of power. Tactics are employed by individuals or 'consumers' in order to act in environments defined by strategies. Everyday practices, such as speaking, walking, reading, eating, shopping, cooking, decorating, and so on, are typical tactical moments of marginal, non-producers to poach the forms, spaces and meanings of the powerful. De Certeau argues that culture is composed of a plural set of practices and their systems of operational combination. The central premise of *The Practice of Everyday Life* is to foreground the logic of these everyday practices, their ways of operating or doing things, their *manières de faire*, which is marked by the tactical resistance to the order of rational systems.

In his chapter *Walking in the City of L'Invention du Quotidien*, de Certeau concretely illustrates this dual operational perspective by confronting the *panorama* of a city with the *fact* of the city. He uses the cityscape of New York visible from the World Trade Centre, as the idealized perspective of a *dieu voyeur (onlooking God)*, comparable with the image of urbanists and architects in their maps, plans and rational blueprints. This is the city of the institutions, where the strategies of governments guarantee order and control. At street level, however, this order and control is exchanged for a labyrinth in which the walker deploys tactics, for instance by taking off-road shortcuts. This is the *fact* of the city, the city where people experience their memories, their linked meanings and desires. These tactics, or daily practices of the inhabitants or consumers to adapt the environment, express meaning and desires. Especially films could offer us instruments to read and even gain understanding of the tactical-everyday in the context of the (sub)urban landscape. Moreover, film provides a source of information on how these tactics are, or could be performed in specific contexts. Therefore, and according to de Certeau, film can be used not only to read and gain insight in the spatial conditions of social activity, but also to act within.

## 2.2 Cinematic reflection: a social construct of (urban) imaginaries

Secondly, films are – just like plans – social constructs, they articulate a certain perspective on the 'real' world. These constructions, cultural concepts in the sphere of the everyday, are caught in narratives. These narratives, stories that are told to us and by us, structure the practices of our everyday life and can give us insight in the lived space. Amongst others, this lived space is defined by Henri Lefebvre (1974) as the spatial imaginary of time. According to Lefebvre (1974) traditional Western philosophy neglected everyday life and the lived experience of

time, space and body as an important area of social existence. In particular Marx's critique of the nineteenth century capitalist society provided a biased focus on life through the systematic domains of labor and production. Furthermore, his objective was not merely a study of the everyday under conditions of modernity, but to propose and even attain transformation of everyday life towards a total revolution. In contrast, Lefebvre is more interested in how capitalism penetrated the details of daily life, and how it 'colonized' the everyday by new technologies to establish a 'consumer society'. He criticized the seduction of mass culture and what he calls the '*bureaucratic society of controlled consumption*'. Here Lefebvre's dialectic analysis of leisure in the modern world is crucial in his critique of everyday life. Lefebvre described how, in modern society, '*we work to earn our leisure, and leisure only has one meaning: to get away from work*' (Henri Lefebvre, 1991, p.40). Leisure is regarded by Lefebvre as a routinized instance of capitalist everyday life and thus only implies a continuation of alienation.

In his later work, *Le Droit à la ville* (1968), *La révolution urbaine* (1970) and *La production de l'espace* (1974), Lefebvre developed a translation of his analysis in spatial terms. In the latter he introduced a three-part dialectic between what he defined as perceived space (*espace perçu*), composed of our perceptions of everyday practices, conceived space (*espace conçu*), consisting of representations or theories and concepts, and lived space (*espace vécu*), composed of spatial imaginaries of time. While the perceived and conceived space, the space of scientists, urbanists and architects, are subjected to the process of rationalization, the lived space often remains out of this planners' gaze'.

As such space expands as a product, and becomes subject of exchange and consumption; space is not neutral. Therewith also the (Flemish) urban landscape should be regarded as not only a product of planners, architects, politicians and the like, but also as the product of the everyday. The latter is not so much the result of a process of (bureaucratic) urban planning, but in fact developed largely beyond that. In our case, the first law on urbanism dates from 1962, and the impact of its instruments, the regional plans (in Dutch: '*Gewestplannen*'), remained limited for a long time (Boussauw & Boelens, 2014, p.45). The endorsement of the regional plans took very long (until 1980), meanwhile residential zones and zones for residential expansion in these plans were filled up with the everyday building boom of the Fleming (often expressed as '*brick in the stomach*'). For Lefebvre, the zoning plans and subdivision plans created by spatial experts are representations, which remain framed within the conceived space. But in order to understand that space fully, Lefebvre argues to expand the meanings and use by applying his spatial triad to interpret space; and especially films might be a tool by which this more nuanced trilogy of space surfaces.

This threefold logic experience of space mirrors also the technique of *psychogeography* developed by the *Situationists*. As an artistic and political avant-garde group, the Situationists shared Lefebvre's concern with capitalist alienation and the transformative power of the everyday. But they rooted this alienation even more firmly within a consumers' culture. In their concept of the 'spectacle', the Situationists argued that lived experience is, next to consumption, also increasingly replaced by media and entertainment. Modern capitalist society equals a society of 'spectacular' commodity consumption. In order to be liberated, they 'stressed' the immediate transformation of everyday life through imagination and art. In a spectacular society the image has 'invaded' daily life and even replaced relations between people. But in order to go beyond these 'invasions' an

even more profound continual stream of artistic images would be needed towards the 'real' (social) spectacular. For Debord, *'the spectacle is not a collection of images, rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images'*. (Debord, 1967, p.12). As such the situationists ascribed 'the image' the role of a principal mediator between concepts and life. Especially cinema was regarded as the central art of the society of the spectacle, not only due to its expressive capacity of representation, but also because of the material mode of staging. Although this staging made the crowd also passive spectators, films were highlighted as social constructs of personal, everyday experience. The way a filmmaker depicts certain areas, reveals not only the characteristics of the area itself, but also unveils its significance for the cinematic (socio-subjective) narrative. The place in which a particular scene takes place situates the story, gives us an indication of the personality and origin of the characters, as well as that of the director, but also offers the audience a glance of a social dramaturgic narrative. Here film might function as a lens through which we can analyze contemporary culture and urban histories in a way that also depicts the communal sense and meaning of a place.

### 2.3 Cinematic interaction: a mediator

Thirdly, and as partly also hinted at in the preceding section, the visualizations in films can also contribute to the social debate on how to deal with space. AlSayyad describes how *'movies influence the way we construct images of the world, and in many instances they influence how we operate within it'* (AlSayyad, 2006b, p. 1). He argues that our understanding of the urban cannot be viewed independently of cinematic experience. Moreover, since film is a very common and easily accessible medium, public opinion and behavior can also be influenced by film.<sup>5</sup> The interaction between cinematic representations and our experience of the world becomes remarkably apparent in the context of tourism. Not only can film's representation of foreign locations and narrative spaces be regarded as a touristic attraction for the spectator (as film theorists like Bruno, 1997; Corbin, 2014; etc., argue), these moving images also generate a desire to and stimulate physical travel to associated sites, which consequently impacts these places. (see literature on film-induced tourism by amongst others Beeton, 2005; Riley, Baker, & Van Doren, 1998; Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Tooke & Baker, 1996). Similarly, but often less explicit, also in other areas than tourism, movies enhance awareness of places and influence the audience, the so-called 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990).

Film thus has the capacity to interact, to function as a 'language', between systems and everyday life, as Jürgen Habermas (1962; 1968, 1981) recalled this. In his view, 'interaction' or *communicative, symbolic action* is how we connect and engage with our environment. According to Habermas consensual norms define *'reciprocal expectations about behavior and must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects'* (Jürgen Habermas, 1968, p.92). Social norms and their mutual understanding are central in communicative action and define expected behavior enforced through sanctions. Departing from this human socio-cultural 'modernization', Habermas expanded the distinction between communicative and instrumental/strategic action in his later work

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<sup>5</sup> Many authors from different disciplines have investigated the influence of movies on attitudes and behavior, for example the 'Payne Fund Studies', a series of monographs already published in 1933 by a number of sociologists and psychologists or, more recently, Michelle C. Pautz 2015, etc.



*Theory of Communicative action* (1981). Here he elaborates his concept of 'lifeworld' in order to grasp the horizon of understanding the everyday. This lifeworld is composed by resources of culture, society and personality and serves as a frame for mutual action. The evolution of rationalization of society however marked the ongoing domination of the system and its purposive-rational action; 'the colonization of the lifeworld' mentioned above. From here Habermas focused on the restoration of the connection between system and everyday life through language. This 'language' should encompass the instrumental/strategic rationality, the normative and the dramaturgic and therewith bridge the divide. Translated for our case, the cinematic image provides a certain message (*normative action*), esthetically packed in a visual presentation (*dramaturgic action*), produced by a film industry (*teleologic action*) in the form of narratives (*communicative action*). As teleo-socio-subjective expressions, films can thus provide a more comprehensive perspective on the lifeworld, or everyday reality and introduce knowledge of interaction in the system world of spatial professionals. By focusing on film, a more mediating way of thinking can be enhanced and eventually bridge the gap between professional systems and daily lifeworlds.

However, in the meantime Habermas also received severe critics. Amongst others Latour urges to analyze Habermas' divide by signing away the opposition between system and lifeworld, nature and culture, social and personal, and considers these as hybrids. In *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), Bruno Latour argues that this partition is not a given fact, but artificially constructed, brought about by modern scientists. In premodern societies culture and nature were integrated. Thus, Latour argues that there is no pure nature, nor pure culture and introduces the concept of 'quasi-objects'. By focusing on the history of quasi-objects, which explain nature and culture together, networks surface in which both human and non-human interactions can be traced. This approach examines the relations and associations between heterogeneous actors enrolled within a network, in order to reveal the complexities of our sociotechnical world. Doing so, actor-network-theory (ANT) emphasizes that everything is simultaneously an actor and a network. Based on this and in his later work *Reassembling the social* (2005) Latour searches for a more descriptive methodology to study the social as a hybrid of systems and the everyday. As such, and also for planners, ANT can provide an operational tool not only to understand, describe and explain the role and construction of space, but also act within it (Boelens, 2010; Rydin & Tate, 2016). Just like everything else, space is 'hybrid' and shaped out of relations between the human and non-human. In these processes the act of planning can operate as an *intermediary* (just moving information from the one to the other) or as a *mediator* (bringing actants together, or in other word 'in networks') (Boelens, 2018, 2021). In order to move beyond the systematic imprisonment of planning, films might become an effective tool to intermediate and even mediate as a hybrid actant itself. Here it could make things clear more integrated, or holistically hybrid for everyone involved. Therewith the cinematic image becomes not only representational, but also influential. Cinematic perceptions, in particular the depiction of spatial environment in films, might represent, reflect and influence the evolutions of spaces as hybrids of the cinematic system (such as directing, celluloid, producing etc.) and the cinematic lifeworld (of the filmmaker, actors, contexts etc.). These perceptions then determine not only ideas about space, but also affect in return those who live and work in it. It becomes in fact an ongoing story of (cinematic) actant-networking about how we perceive, conceive and live space, paraphrasing Lefebvre. But even

more, as much as film influences space, film itself is shaped by space and cannot exist without it; the interaction between film and space, actants and networks, becomes hybrid in itself.

#### 2.4 In-between conclusions

Starting from the observation that there is a discrepancy between the urban discourse concerning the planners' gaze about urban sprawl and everyday life and practice in that sprawl, these notions of film as a reading device, social constructive imaginary, and mediator between or hybrid of system and lifeworld, offer a glimpse of how the cinematic view can help planners towards a more engaged, and perhaps holistic approach. Not only does film offer an opportunity to gain insight into the everyday, the lifeworld, and its intrinsic characteristics with regard to experiences, its storylines, and the typical dynamics of daily life, but it might also connect these views with the act of planning itself. By producing new information and views on the subject at hand (intermediating), but also influencing the views of the leading planning actors within a broader situational network (mediating), film enables planners to go beyond the systematic. Not only can this cinematic view be put forward to provide a better perspective on the everyday (reading space), or to tactically reflect visual and temporal imaginaries of space (socially constructing space), but with its narrative and normative/dramaturgic representations it might also mold planning actions towards more nuanced or new lived dimensions (mediating space). These three filmic actions might offer an operational method on where, in what phase and how a cinematic gaze can help planning to get a more overall and engaged view on the (sub)urban landscape.

### 3. A preliminary cinematic approach of the Flemish sprawl

#### 3.1 Setting the scenes

In order to make these actions more concrete, we have selected five contemporary Flemish fiction films which provide, amongst others, a specific example of a cinematic perspective on the Flemish sub-urban context. Based on formal and substantive criteria these films stood out. The formal criteria include the selection of fictional feature films, which excluded documentaries and series, with a release date after 2010 to guarantee the contemporaneity of the images. Moreover, the choice to focus on so-called *film d'auteur* with a significant proportion of homegrown investment preserve the author's artistic control and autonomy and embeddedness in the Flemish context. Substantive requirements include a narrative situated mainly in the present and in a prominent suburban context.

In this selection process, we discovered that although, postwar suburbia has been the setting for numerous 'suburban' films since the 1940s<sup>6</sup>, in comparison there is surprisingly little attention for suburbia in Flemish cinema. Mainstream Flemish films of this period are mostly set in the city centers or villages. However, over the

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<sup>6</sup> Postwar suburbia has been the setting for numerous *suburban* films since the 1940s, such as: *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), *The Swimmer* (Frank Perry, 1968), *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975), *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986), *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990), etc.

last ten years a short film (*Fucking Suburbia*, Jeff Otte, 2012), a youth movie (*Binti*, Frederike Migom, 2019) and three fiction films (*The Best of Dorien B.*, Anke Blondé, 2019; *Violet*, Bas Devos, 2014; *Home*, Fien Troch, 2016) have dealt specifically with the specific suburban conditions in Flanders. Of these *Fucking Suburbia*, *Violet* and *Home*, stand out in reflection on the suburban allotment. We added *Nowhere Man*, (Patrice Toye, 2008) and *Kid* (Fien Troch, 2012) since they also contain some determining scenes in a suburban setting.

To begin with, *Fucking suburbia* (2012) depicts two brothers with nothing to do during a hot summer in a boring suburban neighborhood. The oldest of the two, a thirty-year-old man, temporarily moved back into the parental house to take care of their grandmother who is confined to bed. The younger brother is only sixteen years old and tries to cope with the presence of his brother and puberty while his summer holiday seems endless. Nevertheless, this film does not have a typical straightforward story, rather it creates an emotional atmosphere. Both brothers appear to have difficulties in communicating with each other as well as with other people. Even when they are with their friends or in a single moment with their girlfriend, they remain silent. Regardless the big age-difference, both boys apparently struggle with 'distance' and 'boredom', feelings that are explicitly stressed by the suburban environment.

In turn, the central theme of *Violet* (2014) - awarded with the Grand Prix of the Generation 14plus International Jury prize - is the grief of fifteen-year-old Jesse. After he witnesses the random lethal stabbing of his friend Jonas at a quiet, nondescript shopping mall where they hang out in the beginning of the film, the movie depicts how Jesse struggles to come to terms with himself and his environment after that trauma. Unable to answer these questions to his friends, Jesse gets isolated and a growing feeling of loneliness complicates his mourning process. In this, various moments of interaction with his environment are portrayed, such as the loneliness in the audience of a black-metal concert, the tense relation with his own parents at home and moments in which Jesse hangs out with his BMX biker gang.

The central location in *Home* (2016) is the protagonist's aunt's house, an average Flemish home. Banned by his parents from the family home after juvenile, the seventeen-year-old Kevin ends up to live with his aunt. Departing from this occasion, the film captures adolescence and its difficulties, especially when it comes to the relation and communication with adults. In search for a place, Kevin hangs out with the group of friends of his nephew Sammy. Their meeting place is at home or at the parking lot of the supermarket. In this ordinary suburban environment, the film exposes big, personal dramas through everyday, small situations. Kevin especially connects with John, a quiet friend of Sammy living with a manipulative mother. John's emotional unhealthy situation at home dramatically escalates and ends up with the death of his mother. The strain of their involvement forces John, Kevin and Sammy into unimaginable actions.

The story of *Nowhere man* (2008), co-written by Bjorn Olaf Johannessen and the director Patrice Toye, revolves around the forty-year-old Tomas who 'stages his own death' longing for a new start and a more spectacular life. Living an apparently average, but good life, with a wonderful wife, he entertains fantasies of a more promising, dynamic future. Soon after executing his plan and having set foot on a tropical island, he regrets his decision. The paradise he imagined appears to be a place of hard labor, violence and racism, a place where he

is desperately lonely. After five years he tries to return to his former life in suburbia, but his remarried wife now takes control of his life.

The last film in this selection, *Kid* (2012,) portrays the emotional lifeworld of the seven-year-old boy Kid, who lives with his single mother and brother Billy on a farm. The mother apparently has financial problems, although it is not clear what exactly is going on because the events are shown through the eyes of the brothers. A fixed frontal camera, most of the time placed at the children's eye-level, registers how animals are deported, bits and pieces of telephone conversations with creditors, or other conversations just out of earshot. When the mother is shot dead by creditors, the brothers have to move to live with their aunt and uncle in a typical suburban single-family house. The film shows the grief and pain of the boys, who each deal with the situation and new suburban environment in their own way.

### 3.2 on method

As such, each of these films have something in common; their narratives were all explicitly situated in a suburban context. In doing so, the ordinary, recognizable situation of the protagonists is stressed. They all live average, common lives in familiar environments, when dramatic events (death of a friend or family member) or pivotal moments (like adolescence or midlife-crisis) turn their lives upside down. Apparently, at first glance, the suburban context plays a pivotal role in this. But in order to examine (the impact of) each of these films more in detail, the analysis is structured according to the three cinematic actions explained above: representation, reflection and interaction. The video annotation software ELAN<sup>7</sup> was used as a digital tool to visualize the first two parts of the analysis.

The first section of the analysis embodies the cinematic reading device and describes reoccurring spatial-physical themes. With attention for aspects as typology, morphology, scale, etc., the spaces in which the films are mainly situated have been indicated in relation to the storyline. A visual inventory of spatial structures has been elaborated by examining the formal composition of the shots, and the audiovisual (camera) techniques employed by directors to visualize the spatial structures. By exploring the framing, camera-settings and camera-movements of establishing shots, panoramas, street views, detailed explorations of certain areas, and other spaces in the film, we have discovered the director's spatial reading and his tactics (according to de Certeau) to employ these. As an illustration of the methods used, figure 1 indicates the visual representation of spatial structures and camera-settings on the timeline of one of the films (*figure 1*).

The second part has uncovered the social construction, through an analysis of narrative relations and their spatial imagination. Therefore, the films have been divided into sequences. For each sequence the role of the above indicated spaces has been analyzed in order to reveal the pivotal spatial-sociocultural themes within them. Furthermore, this analysis of expressions of the narratives has revealed what the Situationists describe as psychogeography. In this case, the psychogeography is the effect, the subjective subtexts and meaning the

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<sup>7</sup> As a professional tool, the computer software ELAN allows to manually and semi-automatically annotate and transcribe audio or video recordings. For more additional information on the software see <https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan>. For this research, version 5.9 was used to segment the films in tiers according to thematic subjects and add descriptions.

director aimed to achieve. This has been cleared by interviewing them. Especially montage and editing, techniques that are also central in reconfiguring maps of psychogeography, provide possibilities to produce images that expose complex nuances of life in general in relation to space in particular, and vice versa. Next to montage, stylistic effects provoked by employing lighting, color, sound optics, and so on can in specific ways also contribute to the expression of the director's vision.

Finally, the third part investigates the possible mediating role between system and lifeworld by means of a film session with stakeholders of suburbia. At a local cinema, fragments of the selection of motion pictures were screened to an audience of 23 people with different professional backgrounds (spatial planners, urbanists, geographers, students and other) and an expert panel (experienced in academic and governmental spatial research on suburbia). In order to discover their reception and appropriation of spatial perspectives in film, an interactive questionnaire allowed participation before, during and after the screening. The public was also involved in the subsequent panel discussion, moderated by the main author, which was recorded, transcribed and analyzed using a systematic process of open and selective coding adopting a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, this allows to test if films as intermediaries in an actor-network, are able to communicate and establish an understanding of Flemish urban sprawl and even influence spatial concepts, views and actions of these stakeholders. In the same way Latour focusses on actor-networks, films should always be considered in their networks in order to understand this interaction. Film is not outside society, but is the result of society and its relations, restrictions, possibilities, prevailing ideas, and so on, while it re-influences life again reciprocally.

#### **4. Preliminary cinematic views on Flemish suburbia**

This threefold cinematic analysis (by scheming, interviewing and screening) reveals three observations on how the moving image can contribute to the conventional approach of Spatial Planning in Flanders. These findings result from the threefold implementation of the cinematic analysis described above, and could also preliminary be attributed to new planning challenges for the existing and future suburban areas.

First, as a reading device, cinematic representation of Flemish suburbia draws the attention to the allotment. This selection of films shows how several esthetic scenes portray the neighborhood as an assemblage of plots. With a camera gently gliding through the streets, tracking the bmx-riders in *Violet* (figure 2) or one of the protagonists in *Fucking Suburbia*, the suburban environment becomes importantly apparent. In the latter, just like in *Nowhere Man*, also some aerial views establish the setting (figure 3). Moreover, long takes with frontal images of facades with front yards situate the particular parcels in *Kid* (figure 4), *Violet* and *Nowhere Man*. For these scenes the directors all relied on static camerawork. In contrast, *Home* is filmed with a handheld camera which produces the look of a documentary film. Furthermore, the central house of Kevin's aunt is throughout the film only visualized with interior shots (figure 5). Despite the fact that only the interior of this house is shown, the type of dwelling and its neighborhood is clear. But the combination with 4:3 format definitely enhances a claustrophobic feel.

Spatial planners tend to dismiss this dominant allotment districts as one of the determining factors in the spatial disarrangement of the Flemish landscape. This ever since the oversupply of detached houses in allotments escalated in the 1970s, when many residential zones were designated on the regional plans (red colored zones). But what these (red colored) zones would actually mean in everyday life was not really planned or designed. Because of this lack of planning or because of the political disinterest, the triviality of these neighborhoods easily disappeared from the radar. This cinematic attention and accompanying analysis can thus redirect the focus of the planner towards these features.

Second, as a social construct of (suburban) imaginaries, the cinematic reflection of the films, reveals the experience and connotations to these suburban places. It is remarkable that in all films the suburban space is depicted as safe and secure. Especially in *Violet* and *Fucking Suburbia* the residential area is depicted as a secluded world. In case of the former, the city is associated with violence while Jesse is surrounded by family solace in the quiet environment of the neighborhood. This contrast culminates in the final tracking shot of *Violet*. By moving through the residential district for one last time, just like the crew of young bikers in the beginning of the film, the camera slowly hovers through the neighborhood as if the film bids farewell to the narrative, its characters and location. In complete silence, the shot takes six and a half minutes, the audience arrives in a big overwhelming cloud to leave the spectator in a foggy mist at the end. The cloud not only closes up the film, but also secludes the neighborhood.

In addition, this narrative of protection, order and stability is also mainly generated by the static frontage images. These neat impressions, reinforced by meticulously mowed lawns, suggest and symbolize inhabitants who got their life together (*figure 4*). The contrast of the following two scenes in *Nowhere Man* details the construct of suburban domestic spaces in this motion picture. In the build-up to the escape, the aerial view of the big houses with worn-out lawns diverges from the bald and lamentable garden of the couple in this residential area (*figure 6*). Symbolizing the man's growing sense of unhappiness with his mundane life, the contrast with the other gardens shows he does not belong there. At the moment the protagonist makes an effort to improve this situation, by planting a young tree in the garden, he decides to walk into a raging house fire to fake his suicide. When the main character returns after five years in search for his wife and former life, the allotment is portrayed in spring. The condition of the house and the front garden has drastically improved. A nice garden with a mowed lawn, a fully grown tree, plants and bordered by a hedge is now the territory of a playing kid (*figure 7*). The essence of suburban life has been restored. The lifeless impression is exchanged for a pleasing and vivacious place as a new family moved in. *Nowhere man* thus presents a dual position regarding the residential outskirts. The suburbs of the first part, where the protagonist does not feel at ease and wants to escape, contrast with desirable suburbia, almost a utopian place.

These observations of Flemish suburbia differ importantly from the dichotomy between utopia and dystopia depicted in recent American feature films set in suburbia. Films like *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998), *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) and *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999) locate suburbia admittedly in clean, save and ordered allotments, but reveal opposite feelings and tensions of imperfection and anxiety. According to the American counterpart, the general depiction of the allotments in

mundane, boring quarters, demonstrate more an evolution from a suburban utopia to dystopia (for example, Beuka, 2016; Coon, 2013; Forrest, 2017; Muzzio & Halper, 2002). In contrast and although, to a certain extent, a similar alienation and isolation is also present in *Violet's* depiction of suburbia, the neighborhood is foremost portrayed as Jesse's safety net. *Fucking Suburbia* and *Nowhere man* even indicate suburbia as a paradise-like dream location for children and undisturbed families. For spatial planning these observations indicate how suburban environments could be incorporated as secure spaces that offer stability, especially in the case of children growing up. But it becomes even more apparent that the everyday meaning of these cinematic places is not related to issues of density, car-dependency or energy consumption at all. It reveals other, more subjective or dramaturgic pros and cons.

Third, as a mediator, cinematic interaction based on a selected screening to an audience of spatial experts lightens a more nuanced image of suburbia. After having seen the selection of fragments and the following debates, seventy percent of the attendees indicated that in their vision on suburbia, positive or negative aspects have changed, been strengthened or added. The majority of them (seventy-seven percent) experienced both new qualities and negative characteristics, while for twelve percent only a more positive perspective came to the fore through the fragments. The audience of spatial professionals denoted an idealized, recognizable and nostalgic image in which appreciation surfaces as a principal positive value. In contrast to the appraisal of the quiet and peaceful environments, and surprisingly only for a small part of the respondents mainly the monotonous, boring and individualistic characteristics were illuminated in the fragments.

Furthermore, the debates on the narratives of the selected fragments revealed an age-specific focus in appreciation of suburbia. As mentioned above, *Fucking Suburbia* and *Nowhere man* communicate straightforward on how these are fit for young families with their children. However, the fragments demonstrated also how in suburban structures teenagers and adults seem to take different positions regarding their environment. The teenagers in *Violet* as well as those of *Fucking suburbia* and *Home*, frequent the so-called wastelands. The skate park, the woods, the edge of the football field and even the parking lot of the supermarket are places of the teenagers, where they are not bound by adult society. Apparently, and according to the analyzed films, suburbia serves predominantly mid-aged inhabitants, and not so much the other age-groups. Thus, here these films might add to the agenda focus of planners in suburbia, in order to serve those underprivileged groups in the private-public setting of suburbia, or might focus this agenda on alternative build-up projects.

Finally, the fragments also evoked a discussion on the interpretation and impact of the moving images. Seventy-seven percent of the audience is convinced that film, as a representative medium adds on extra truths or facts on use and meaning. With an overall appreciation of suburban space, these films might indeed contribute to the public perception of those places. Cinema's influence on how space is conceived, how people see and imagine cities and urban space, will determine how they live their daily lives or how they appreciate certain spaces more than another. Romantic films with love scenes for example, will evoke affection for similar locations as those of suchlike shots. Conversely, if the crime scenes of films are repeatedly situated in certain areas, these environments will be perceived as dangerous and no-go zones.

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout this paper the cinematographic perceptions in contemporary movies were investigated as a case study to discover, whether film is able to gain more insights, and even more operationally contribute to the conventional approach of the Flemish sub-urbanized landscape in Spatial Planning. The results make clear that film unarguably has the potential to do so, especially in reference to the lived space.

First of all, cinematic representations in the selection of films draw the attention to suburban residential neighborhoods. It became apparent from the interviews that the directors deliberately choose these environments not only to situate their stories but also to esthetically portray these locations. With long takes, an important part of the screened film time is dedicated to these settings. Setting the same story-lines in an urban landscape would rephrase the narrative completely; thus, the cinematic context matters for the message.

Secondly films might also add to the knowledge about the socio-cultural construction of place. The cinematic reflection of the films, each give a glimpse of everyday lived space in suburbia. The cinematic analysis not only highlights certain spaces, like the allotment, but also envisions the experience and connotations to these suburban places. The qualities and possibilities, while often overlooked by planners, surface in the films. As such the films provide a source of information on how the culture, the everyday lifeworld and the spatial relations set themselves within this suburban context. Film thus can serve as a (cultural) lens to gain insight in the everyday experience of urban sprawl, for the better or worse. Planners could then stress the positive elements that emerge from such insights and obviously try to exclude the negative as much as possible.

However, with regard to the third perspective, the possible mediating role between system and lifeworld, the impact of films is a complex issue. The screening and following debate might reveal another image of suburbia to the audience of spatial experts. In this case, certain aspects were definitely illuminated, such as the age-related experience of suburbia. Nevertheless, the connotation with the envisioned environment is not always irrefutable. Therefore, it is equally important to track down the underlying ideas, propelling motivation and driving forces of the envisioned spaces, the central position of the director. As such, these films seem to require a more profound analyses in the profound psycho-cultural impact of the suburban space, which is often neglected by the planners and spatial policies as such.

This method of analyzing cinematic images through its three different acting roles definitely forms an addition to regular research on the matter. When considered as representation or reflection, the results of what is represented and how, the camera provides insight in, everyday multiplicities (Massey, 2005, etc.; Tewdwr-Jones, 2011, etc.), knowledge which is not generated by regular research methods. However, the mediating role of films for spatial planning was never investigated in previous studies. Moreover, the contemporary Flemish urbanized context was never analyzed through a cinematic lens. The scope of projects as '*Moving landscapes*' (*Bewegende landschappen : over stedenbouw en film*, De Caigny & Van Impe, 2013) or *Cinema rural*<sup>8</sup> is limited to documentary films to imagine the historical context of urbanization and agriculture.

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<sup>8</sup> From 2018 to 2021, the international project *Cinema Rural* mapped out various collections of films made by government institutions and agricultural organisations to communicate with the rural population. <https://cagnet.be/page/project-cinema-rural>



Notwithstanding the aim to consider contemporary fiction films, the current selection of films is limited by a focus on narrative fiction films, and in this case even films that are a bit on the fringe of classic narrative film because they often lack a classic narrative plot structure. Nevertheless, also here film might induce new knowledge to understand something of how people are and how they relate to their surroundings.

However, what it could operationally mean for planning is still in its infant phase. Research by design is not easily followed up with research by a cinematic gaze. However, using films in the problematization and analytical stadium of planning, might give new insights in what is really appreciated in suburban landscapes and what is not. Films might serve as a mean to gain those insights in a more or less systematical way. And although the five films might give a narrow view (focus on the Flemish suburbia), a subjective notion (only through the producers' lenses) or a fashion mood (due to the timing of the productions), they all are pretty congruent in their message: a focus on the predominant importance of the individual allotment, whereby the public spheres serve as a safety net of the well-known, but are also static, empty, monotonous, etc. At least based on this research, film seems to be capable of envisioning and communicating meaningful aspects of the everyday lifeworld and by doing so, enhance a deeper understanding of daily lives in those suburban areas. It remains for future research to identify how this knowledge can be further implemented in spatial planning practice.<sup>9</sup>

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## DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

*The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.*

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## FIGURES

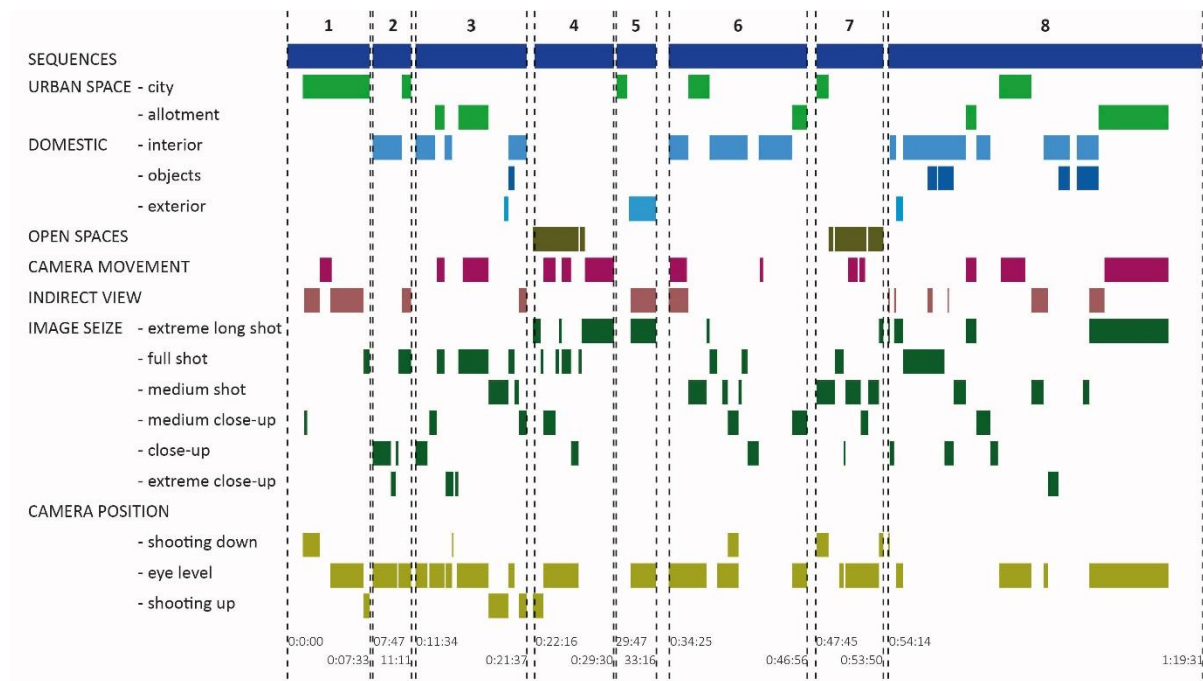


Figure 1: Example of the method used: : visualization of the sequences and spatial structures (top) and camera-settings in relation to the sequences and spatial structures (bottom) in Violet - ELAN



Figure 2: Violet – still 0:13:59



Figure 3: Fucking Suburbia – still 0:20:52



Figure 4: Kid – still 0:49:06



Figure 5: Home – still 0:17:19





Figure 6: Nowhere man – still 0:12:27.



Figure 7: Nowhere man – still 0:43:07.