

# Die Inszenierung des Blicks im Backstage-Film: Directing the Spectator's View

Nathalie Bredella

The German title of my paper is *Inszenierung des Blicks*. The term "Inszenierung" is difficult to translate. In an Essay *Art as Dramatization* the philosopher Richard Shusterman mentions that Germans prefer the term "Inszenierung" to "dramatization" and points out that this German term is related to the French term "mise en scène". The terms "Inszenierung" and "mise en scène" imply "that something significant is being framed or put in place; the scene of mise en scène is not a blandly neutral space but the site where something important is happening. Even the very word 'scene' has come to connote this sense of intensity. In colloquial speech, the 'scene' denotes *not* just any random location, but, as one says in English, 'where the action is.' It denotes the focus of the most exciting things that are happening, for example, in the cultural life or night life of a city. To make a scene, in colloquial speech, is not simply to do something in a particular place but to display or to provoke an excessive display of emotion or active disturbance. In short, just as the action of drama implies the frame of place, so the place of scene implies something vivid, vital, and exciting that is framed."<sup>1</sup> This is not only an illuminating description of the connotations of the German word "Inszenierung" which has no immediate equivalent in English but hints at a definition of essential elements of art: framing something which is important or putting something on the stage in order to see its relevance for the spectator and provoking an excessive display of emotion and excitement. I will come back to these two elements of art.

Following Shusterman I should use the term dramatization for Inszenierung, but this would not express that the spectator's view is guided in a certain direction in order to achieve a dramatic effect. I will therefore use the neutral term "guiding" hoping that it will become clear in the course of my argumentation that guiding the spectator's view is done for something vivid, vital, exciting and dramatic.

Backstage film deals with the entertainment industry on Times Square in New York in the first decades of the 20th century and, as the genre term suggests, directs the spectator's attention to the Backstage. Backstage films promise their spectator the opportunity to look behind the scenes, but the fascination of looking behind the scenes is mainly based on the fascination with the stage. In my paper I will highlight that the genre not only presents two different ontological spaces, stage and backstage, but also guides the spectator's view in different ways by filmic means such as camera movement and montage.

Before I look at the way events on the stage and backstage are filmed, I would like to take up Shusterman's insight that one essential element of dramatization or art implies that something is framed. It is set off from ordinary life. One essential consequence of framing something is that the spectator cannot enter this world and act in it. The spectator of a film cannot enter the spaces on the screen. Hence for the German philosopher Josef Früchtl spaces on the film screen are imaginary in contrast to real space in which we can act.<sup>2</sup> That we cannot act in imaginary spaces must not be a disadvantage because our position as mere spectator permits us to respond more freely to the events in the imaginary world than to those in the real world. Considering this situation Shusterman comes to the conclusion: "Because art's experience is framed in a realm allegedly to be apart from the wearisome stakes of what we call real life, we feel much more free and secure in giving ourselves up to the most intense and vital feelings."<sup>3</sup> Since the spectator can have intense and vital feelings about the events in imaginary spaces he or she can experience them as real. From the spectator's perspective imaginary and real spaces are not opposites, as Shusterman points out: "Art's fictions are therefore often said to feel far more vividly real than much of what we commonly take as real life."<sup>4</sup> This would mean that the imaginary is the real. Real in this context means in the words of William James "whatever excites and stimulates our interest."<sup>5</sup> Thus we realize no matter how important Früchtl's distinction between the imaginary and the real is, we must also consider how the spectator experiences the imaginary spaces and this, of course, also depends on how films guide the spectator's views.

In film studies it is often said that films in general and backstage film in particular present a glamorous world which was designed to make the spectator forget the dreary world they live in, suggesting that the films create an illusionary world which the spectator should take as real. The assumption of such an interpretation is that the spectator is deceived and that he would be disillusioned and disappointed if he were to know that the spaces on the screen are only illusions. Früchtl

rejects this concept of illusion. He stresses that we as spectators can know that we are sitting in a cinema and are perceiving imaginary spaces on a two dimensional screen without being disillusioned.<sup>6</sup> According to Früchtl, we will never forget, that we are presented with an imaginary world through montage because in reality we could for instance never experience flights over the ocean, the Grand Canyon and streets in New York within seconds.<sup>7</sup> These considerations indicate that the relationship between the imaginary and the real or between illusion and reality is a complex one, and in this context backstage film is of special interest because it can experiment with directing the spectator's view to the stage and backstage in different ways.

In my paper I will highlight different forms of directing the spectator's view in the backstage film *Footlight Parade*.

## Forms of Directing the Spectator's Views

### *Continuity Editing*

The first long-shot of the film *Footlight Parade* (1933, fig. 1) shows the lower part of the Times Square tower where illuminated letters announce that sound films (talkies) will replace silent films. The following shot shows a close up of Chester Kent (James Cagney) who comments "what a laugh". Thus we get the impression that Kent is commenting on what we have just seen. The cut from long shot to the close up of Kent establishes the theme of the film and introduces the protagonist Chester Kent, whose actions the camera will follow in the following sequence. A close up shows an office door with the sign "Al Frazer and Si Gould Productions." Next we see Kent coming up a staircase, entering through the door we have already seen before, and we watch him talking to two men, probably Frazer and Gould in the office, discussing the situation of entertainment. Kent is being told that he is out of job because people 'ain't paying for shows any more'. In order to show him why he



Fig. 1: Continuity editing: filmstill from *Footlight Parade*

is unemployed the three leave the office and the next shot shows the front of a movie theater, where people are queuing followed by a shot inside the theater where a talkie is shown on screen.

I have described a sequence of more or less isolated shots but they are not experienced as isolated by the spectator, because she connects the blanks and supplements what the shots do not show by her knowledge about stories. This way of synthesizing the more or less isolated shots into a story is called *continuity editing*. Classical *continuity editing* reinforces our spatial orientation and helps us in orienting ourselves in the scenographic space, the physically adjacent locales in the case of the sequence, of Times Square, Gould's and Frazer's office and the movie theater. *Continuity editing* allows the spectator to distinguish different spaces but it prevents him or her from experiencing a disturbing effect. It serves the development and logic of the enfolding story. Julian Hochberg compares the viewer's construction of edited space to cognitive mapping: "the task of the filmmaker therefore is to make the viewer pose a visual question, and then answer it for him."<sup>8</sup> Thus the spectator follows the logic of an action while building up an imaginary world, which is similar to the world he or she is familiar with and in which Kent will pursue his goals.

### Playing with Formal Elements

The story action comes to a halt when the lavish musical numbers take over.

The set of firm rules of *continuity editing* which are formulated in Hollywood stylistic practices is not followed by Busby Berkeley, the director of the three musical numbers in *Footlight Parade*. In his dramatization of views Berkeley works with surprise, repetition, variation and circularity.

His choreographies are dominated by geometric patterns and he uses crane shots, changing camera positions in order to construct perspectives of space that the spectator cannot experience otherwise. These shots cannot be synthesized into a story. They are compositions of formal elements, which are constantly rearranged in new patterns which will surprise the spectator and make her wonder what will come next. In contrast to *continuity editing*, here the cuts are visible and form a compositional unity.

In the musical number "By the Waterfall" bodies of women are cut up into parts, which are filmed from extraordinary angles, from above and under the water. Thus imaginative spaces are created which do not correspond to spaces outside the film. Berkeley uses the water for special effects in connection with the position of the camera and lighting above and under the water. Thus the spectator loses his orientation and is led into a world

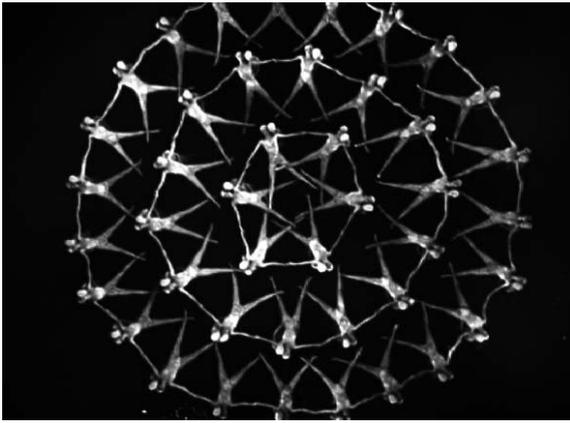


Fig. 2: Filmstill from *Footlight Parade*: musical number "By the Waterfall"



Fig. 3: Filmstill from *Footlight Parade*: musical number "By the Waterfall"

where his knowledge about space is of no use (fig. 2, 3).

Characteristic of this number is the shift from showing one chorus girl (often one smiling face covers the whole screen) to showing them as parts in extraordinary patterns. The effect of these shots is intensified by the gigantic scenery Berkeley had built up and the sophisticated technology he used for his shots: "I designed my set and consulted with the art directors, the engineers, the carpenters, the electricians and told them what I wanted. The pool covered almost an entire sound stage. [...] I had them build me plate-glass corridors underneath the pool so I could light and shoot from the bottom. People were constantly visiting the set to see if what they had heard was true. What with all the water pumps, the hydraulic lifts, and the dozens of workmen, someone said the set looked like the engine room of an ocean liner."<sup>9</sup> Berkeley's play with formal patterns seems to anticipate the digital manipulation of images of our time. Berkeley himself mentions his fascination with the technical possibility of constant motion which the camera allows: "My camera was steadily in motion because that is what the expression of motion picture is about, pictures in motion."<sup>10</sup> These choreographies construct their unity through variation, analogy, and associations. In his cuts Berkeley follows formal contrast through different principles. The montage is guided by the opposition of different parameters: that of light (black becomes white and white becomes black), that of light intensity and that of figure and background. The three-dimensional image is changed into a two-dimensional one. Further contrasts are those between abstract and concrete, linear and circular, and symmetry and asymmetry. These cuts require elastic thinking from the spectator because she or he has to follow the different patterns closely and thus will experience amazement about the abundance of patterns, which lead to no final result and do not seem to fulfil any function.

How can the effect of such play with formal patterns be explained? One possibility could be with reference to Kant's concept of the beautiful, which pleases without fulfilling a function or a purpose but only by activating our cognitive faculties for their own sake. Kant's other concept of the sublime in his aesthetics would not be adequate, but in the modern version of the sublime it could be used to interpret Berkeley's choreographies. In Martin Seel's aesthetics, the sublime or the contemplative aspect of the aesthetic experience means that the spectator no longer establishes a harmonious relationship between his or her environment and needs and interests but loses his or her orientation. The spectator is no longer at the center of things. This can have a liberating effect. A slightly different aspect of the sublime is stressed by Shusterman: "Fragmentation and vivid encounters with disagreeable resistance can also stimulate an invigorating, life-enhancing aesthetic experience, as theorists of the sublime have long recognized."<sup>11</sup> One probably could not say that the spectator who watches Berkeley's musical numbers encounters disagreeable resistance, but there is fragmentation in his musical numbers so that they seem to verge on the beautiful and the sublime.

### Stage and Backstage View

In one backstage scene we see how Kent supervises the production of musical prologues while walking through rehearsal rooms. First the depth of the hallway is enhanced by seeing Kent walking towards the camera. Then the camera shows him entering through the door into the first room. The set consists of rooms that have no walls on the side where the camera is (one might think of the construction as somewhat similar to that of a dollhouse or one might compare the set to a regular building cut open), and in this particular situation, the construction of the set is deliberately made obvious as the camera moves along, showing Kent from the side as



Fig. 4: Filmstill from *Footlight Parade*: backstage scene



Fig. 5: Filmstill from *Footlight Parade*: backstage scene

he goes through the door (fig. 4, 5). This creates the impression that these rooms are part of the stage scenery without the fourth wall. Within the backstage plot this effect is generally avoided. Thus the spectator is irritated. Is this stage or backstage? Obviously it is backstage, but it is presented as stage. The camera moves parallel to the scene. This could convey the impression that the rooms are lined up as on a conveyor belt. The next shot, which shows the rehearsal from Kent's perspective returns to the principle of *continuity editing*.

### The Real within the Imaginary

I started with Früchtl's distinction between imaginary and real spaces and the two aspects of dramatization in Shusterman's aesthetics. Art means

putting something on the stage and framing it so that it is not part of ordinary experience. It occurs in a different space. But this imaginary space encourages the spectator to experience intense and vital feelings because he or she is free and secure. Hence the imaginary space, following James's concept of reality is "more vividly real than much of what we commonly take as real life". In my paper I have shown how the spectator's views can be directed to make him aware of how differently the stage and backstage can be constructed. Therefore I do not believe that backstage film should be interpreted in such a way that it creates an illusionary world that wants to make the spectator forget that he is seeing an imaginary space on a two-dimensional screen.

#### Notes:

- 1 Richard Shusterman, *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*, Ithaca & London 2002, p. 234f.
- 2 Josef Früchtl, *Das unverschämte Ich: Eine Heldengeschichte der Moderne*, Frankfurt/Main 2004, 225.
- 3 Shusterman, see note 1, p. 237.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 William James in *ibid.*, p. 237.
- 6 Früchtl, see note 2, p. 229f.
- 7 Ibid., p. 230.
- 8 Julian Hochberg in D. Bordwell K.Thompson J. Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, London 1985, p. 59.
- 9 Quoted from T. Thomas and J. Terry, *The Busby Berkeley Book*, Conneticut 1973, p. 70f.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Shusterman, see note 1, p. 231