Back to the Beginning
Wim Wenders' *Pina* and the Spatial Aesthetics of 3D Cinema

Wim Wenders' *Pina* (2011) is, in many ways, a first. It is the first film that the director realized in 3D and the first 3D documentary feature nominated for an Academy Award. Beyond that, however, the film also points to other beginnings and primordial principles, namely the question of what the stereoscopic image has to do with our understanding of vision, or, even more fundamentally, how cinema can teach us to see.

This question is by no means a new one. It has been inherent in cinematography since its infancy and has accompanied each cinematographic development stage ever since. In his essay "The Myth of Total Cinema," André Bazin points to an approach that highlights the stereoscopic understanding of space as the actual catalyst for the emergence of cinema: "As for the latter, the film historian P. Potoniée has even felt justified in maintaining that it was not the discovery of photography but of stereoscopy [...] that opened the eyes of the researchers."[1] Bazin's reference suggests that the spatial knowledge of stereoscopy not only preceded cinema historically but also decisively influenced and shaped its image forms. Since their introduction in the mid-nineteenth century, stereoscopic images enjoyed enormous popularity. For example, stereo photos and stereo slides for home use were widespread; in addition, there were devices for collective viewing in public areas. The spatial illusion of depth made possible by these devices was a central component of the visual culture of the nineteenth century, and, in this way, "the immense

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1   André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 20.

popularity of stereoscopy undoubtedly contributed to the development of a historically distinct horizon of expectations for early cinema."[2]

Although stereoscopic vision was intrinsic to photography and the moving image from the very start, 3D film productions have remained on the periphery of film history. However, we know that both the Lumière brothers and Edwin S. Porter were already experimenting with stereoscopic processes in the 1910s. There are also examples from later decades, such as *The Power of Love* (Harry K. Fairell, 1922), which debuted in the 1920s as the first feature-length 3D film, *Nozze vagabonde* (Guido Brignone, 1936) in the 1930s, which was the first 3D film with sound, and the first 3D color film, *Robinson Crusoe* (Aleksandr Andriyevsky, 1947), in the 1940s. Each film, however, was an isolated endeavor that did not lead to any further investment of stereoscopic films. 3D film first experienced a decisive upswing only in the 1950s in Hollywood—but even there, its "golden age" was short-lived. This era effectively lasted only three years (1952–1954) and focused on genre productions, such as adventure and horror films, which used 3D techniques as a short-lived attraction value.[3] After this short boom, the interest in 3D was already waning by the mid-1950s, and stereoscopic films became a niche product.[4] In this sense, then, the question of what a 3D film has to do to make us see in new ways seems to be completely justified even in the year 2011. When asked this question, Wim Wenders responded in an interview as follows:

> 3D: I think that this technology has completely gotten up on the wrong side of the bed. All of these action and blockbuster films have given people a false impression of it. They all have the impression that this technique is only there to add more special effects and make a lot of noise so that everything really blows up in your face. In animated films, it's really not that different either; they're all more like rollercoaster rides. And of course, it has its own

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2   Michael Wedel, *Filmgeschichte als Krisengeschichte. Schnitte und Spuren durch den deutschen Film* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 72.

3   Examples of this type of attraction-based use of 3D are *Bwana Devil* (Arch Oboler, 1952), *House of Wax* (André de Toth, 1953), or *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold, 1954). The only exception to this is *Dial M for Murder* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1953), a film that explores the stereoscopic aspect of space in a far more subtle way. However, even Hitchcock considered this his only experiment with it and did not make any other 3D films.

4   These niches include softcore porn, such as in *The Stewardesses* (Alf Silliman, Jr., 1969), Blaxploitation remakes such as in *Wildcat Woman* (Stephen Gibson, 1976), or attractions in theme parks, such as *Marvin the Martian in 3D* (Iwerks Entertainment, 1997).

charm, but it gets old after a while. And I thought when I saw the first mas-
terpiece that there's been in a while now, *Avatar*, I thought, this is actually
the ideal medium to view our world through. And it was the first film that
should make us forget everything else that's come before it and take 3D se-
riously. And when you actually take it seriously, you see something fantastic.
It really allows you to see things in a new way.[5]

It is not difficult to draw a parallel to the beginnings of cinema from these
remarks. Spectacle, action, effects: Just like the early cinema of attractions,
according to Wenders, 3D film is still in its infancy at the dawn of the digital
age. Rollercoaster rides—both today and back then—rely on overwhelming,
rather than expanding, the view. In order to track down a new dimension
of perception, a particular pioneering spirit is needed, even more: a study of
space that conceives of 3D technology not as a supplemental, but as a gener-
ative principle. Only when the logic of special effects has been disrupted will
the new medium, together with its specific possibilities of representation and
staging, be properly understood.

     With these remarks, Wenders is calling for nothing less than the search for
a new formal language. Indeed, the production process of *Pina* is reminiscent
of experiments by the first filmmakers—trial and error included. Although an
experienced director, Wenders approaches the new technology with the en-
thusiasm of a novice that puts all cinematic craft knowledge aside—precisely
because they are useless here in such a new, different type of filmmaking.
For example, the setups of digital 3D equipment are similarly monstrous and
heavy as the first film cameras, and the impossibility of easily looking through
the viewfinder or at the monitor screen resembles that of early cinema. The
fact that 3D filmmaking follows its own laws became quickly and painfully
obvious, as Wenders explains:

     The first test shots were appalling. We quickly realized: all the sources of
     error from 2D film multiply to 3D. For example, when panning with dancers
     on stage, it can quickly happen that the image stroboscopes, i.e. jerks around
     unnaturally. With 2D, you know how to avoid that: You have to pan slower.
     On 3D, it didn't seem avoidable at all. Every fast arm movement of a dancer
     produced the impression as if you saw two, three, or four arms for a fraction
     of a second. Film doesn't reproduce every movement on the screen smoothly,

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5   "Regisseur und Autor Wim Wenders über *Pina* und das Potential von stereoskopischem
      3D," *Beyond Festival*, http://2011.beyond-festival.com/de/media/index.html.

but we've practically gotten into the habit of not noticing it. Only in 3D, every optical flaw was suddenly visible in big and bold letters.[6]

The tentative moments of uncertainty, the new understanding of the problems of motion blur, for example, or the departure from the aesthetic conventions of highly mobile cameras, make up the stylistic principles of *Pina*. In fact, the various approaches of these new beginnings in filmmaking are not only invoked by the film but also reflected through its technology. The aesthetics of the beginnings do not precede the images, they only become virulent through them.

This can be seen, for example, in the numerous references to the relationship between viewing space and staging space, as well as in the conditions of perspective and understandings of perception inherent in them. Right at the beginning of the film, Wenders shows the unfolding of 3D space—not as a sudden surprise effect but as a processual development to which our gaze gradually becomes accustomed. One of the first shots presents the empty stage of the Tanztheater Wuppertal. We see the entire architectural construction of a classical proscenium stage: in the front, the first rows of audience seats, in the middle, the stage floor complete with the left and right partitions, in the back, the enclosing back panel. Shortly after this, the setup of the dancefloor is shown, as sand is poured out and spread around on the stage floor. The position of the camera has now slightly changed: it has moved a bit closer to the stage. Now, the stage ramp is still visible in the shot but not the first few rows of seats. In the next sequence, which shows a performance of Pina Bausch's choreography for *The Rite of Spring*, the camera has gotten so close that we, the viewers, feel as if we are a part of the action. We are now no longer in front of the stage but onstage; we now no longer merely perceive the space of the stage but share it with the dancers. All boundaries have disappeared, and all of the lines of orientation have been swallowed up: it is no longer possible to tell where the stage ends and the picture begins, where the horizontal and vertical lines might find their boundary: freed from confinement, the space seems to stretch in all directions and extend into infinity. Furthermore, we see both the foreground as well as the middle and background with a sharpness that seems to dissolve conventional perspective relations. Nothing in the distance becomes blurry; everything remains in focus. We can

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6   "Filmisches Neuland. Interview mit Wim Wenders," http://www.pina-film.de/de/ueber -3D.html.

simultaneously, in one and the same moment, experience everything playing out upstage, centerstage, and downstage.

Wim Wenders' aesthetic approach explores this specific arrangement and thereby shows a particular sensibility for the potential of stereoscopic cinema. Unlike in two-dimensional film, the illusion of depth here is not caused by the change of camera position but achieved by the layering of the depth scale, which makes possible both lingering on the stage itself as well as attentive contemplation of the movements occurring on it. The decisive factor here is that Wenders does not show the elements central to the action in alternation, but integrates them simultaneously into the image. Thus, it is not a matter of forgoing something, in the sense of an aesthetic reduction, but, contrarily, of increasing the complexity—of uncovering a further playing field within which to experiment with a new dimension of perception.

Pina is characterized by a basic conception that does not assume a flat image but, rather, the open volume of a box-shaped stage. This principle, however, is not only utilized but also revealed as a technique of illusion in its own right. This can be seen, for example, when two dancers from Bausch's ensemble look at the stage model for *Café Müller*. The fact that this is not a framed flat image but a diorama becomes obvious when the dancer stretches his arm into the model. This intervention into the image space is then complemented by a change in perspective, from a full-frontal shot to an elevated shot: the dancer's hand can now be seen pushing the miniature props back and forth. After initially breaking up the illusion, Wenders reconstitutes it again in the next instant. The two dancers look into the miniature model—and suddenly see a performance of *Café Müller* there, complete with living, lithely moving dancers. All at once, the moving image has nestled itself into the static model in order to create an interlacing: a mini-3D film inside a 3D film. This film trick is old, very old: it has been around since Georges Meliès' basic camera tricks of the 1890s. But even so, this simple play with illusion techniques has its own particular magic. As if by magic, spaces can be constructed and suddenly made to disappear, can overlap one another, be reflected in one another, and change into each other: our eyes gladly allow themselves—even still today, and perhaps even more—to be deceived.

The question of which stages to play on and which spaces open themselves up through these in the process is, for Wenders, not a question of a cohesive event but of open play. This becomes especially clear in such moments when the dancers are not performing in specially designed stage scenarios but act in preexisting location settings. The dancers repeatedly leave the clearly marked

area of the theater in order to look for other locations to perform: a factory, a swimming pool, or a glass house in the middle of the woods. This results in a mirroring interchangeability of inside and outside: any location can become a stage, any cityscape can become a site for a dance routine. On the one hand, these are actually existing places, but on the other hand, they are also tableaus composed as if designed for a film, which clearly emphasizes the stage-like quality of the three-dimensional image space.

Therefore, it is noteworthy how in these cases, Wenders clearly assumes the coherence of an image's composition, or in other words, his intention to define spaces of portrayal and spaces of action as visually determinable proportions and units. What is critical here is the fact that the image is structured by horizontal and vertical lines, which cause its essential elements and their relations to each other to be conceived of as a whole. All of the examples mentioned here are characterized by a gridding that emphasizes the geometric composition of its elements in space. This is seen alternatively in the merging vanishing lines in the background, which extend the depth of the space (such as in the factory and the glass house, where the grid is realized with iron struts, pipes, and shadows), or in shapes that clearly emphasize the tripartite division of foreground, middle ground, and background (such as in the swimming pool, where the various materials are employed as means of delimitation: tiles for the front part, which function like a stage ramp, water for the middle ground, and glass for the back wall as an enclosing surface).

However, the images only become truly expressive through a further dimension, that is, the dimension of time. The intertwining of spatial depth and temporal continuity evokes a sense of reality that extends beyond the representational capability of the static, flat image. This impression of reality is heightened by conveying a feeling of candidness and limitlessness. Every gesture can give rise to another, every movement can take on a new form. Wenders supports and emphasizes these fluid possibilities of unfolding movement in that the camera registers more than it stages. This is accomplished by forgoing fast editing and opting for long, static shots which allow us to observe a multitude of movements in their full execution.

André Bazin was already pointing to this specific disposition of perception by the 1950s. Bazin's argument against editing as a fundamental film-stylistic element focuses on the basic ability of cinema to make time perceptible as a continuum. For Bazin, film is a medium of time whose particular strength is the ability to present the continuous flow of time as a cohesive whole. Contrarily, editing breaks up and destroys this unity of the passage of time, since

"[t]he expression of concrete duration conflicts with the abstract time of mon-tage."[7] Along with the ability to experience a temporal duration, Bazin notes a further advantage to the unedited, uninterrupted shot. This benefit is con-nected to the depth of field, a process that Bazin especially values because of how it reinforces the viewer's intellectual involvement. Depth of field, in particular, assumes "a more active mental attitude on the part of the spec-tator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress. While analytical montage only calls for him to follow his guide, to let his atten-tion follow along smoothly with that of the director who will choose what he should see, here he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice."[8] Everything that the filmic image can contain as far as complexity is retained in the long, deep-focused shot. In this way, it challenges the viewer himself to move within the image space in order to explore its ambiguity and complexity.

In Wim Wenders' work, this time-based compositional technique is clearly demonstrable. However, it is modified and extended by the fact that the image spaces seem to continuously detach themselves from their repre-sentational logic. A brief example from *Pina* will serve to clarify this point. It involves a scene on an escalator filmed with a static camera in a single continuous shot. Again, we see an extremely geometrically organized image composition. The boxy quality of the space of the escalator is emphasized by strict ordering lines. Particularly striking here is how the diagonal lines are organized around a linear perspective, which seems to draw us in from the foreground into the depth of the space. In addition, the rectangular, shaft-like frame constructions of the steel struts bolster the impression of a constantly expanding tunnel being pulled into the distance. But the whole thing only becomes truly complex with the opposing movements that take place in the image space. While the escalator presents a steady, flowing movement into the depth of the space, the dancer at first moves up the steps, or in other words, dances into the foreground. At first, he comes at the viewer but then speeds up his movements in a way that makes him seem to be dancing in place. He then ultimately gets so slow that he disappears into the distance with the escalator and thus moves away from us again. The

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7   André Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh
     Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 52.
8   André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in *What is Cinema?*, trans.
     Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 35–36.

escalator scene, therefore, features an astounding complexity of forward and backward motion, of statics and kinetics, of stable spatial structures and gliding dance moves, of rigid lines and the dissolution thereof. Every element here seems to simultaneously encounter its opposite: the straight encounters the zigzag, the solid frame construction encounters the soft lines of clouds in the evening sky, the dancer's front side meets his back side after having turned around, and his almost floating dancing toward the front encounters the same dancing into the background.

It is this simultaneity, this particular fluidity of space and time, that makes Wim Wenders' *Pina* into a 3D film that genuinely renews our way of seeing. In effect, it raises nothing less than the question of how current cinema relates to a continually expanding world of images. Thomas Elsaesser stresses:

> If one thinks of 3-D not as part of a cinema of attractions, not as startling you or throwing things at you from the depth of space, but as the vanguard of a new cinema of narrative integration, introducing the malleability, scalability, fluidity, or curvature of digital images into audiovisual space—doing away with horizons, suspending vanishing points, seamlessly varying distance, *unchaining* the camera and transporting the observer—then the aesthetic possibilities are by no means limited to telling a silly story, suitable only for kids hungry for superheroes, action toys, or sci-fi fantasies.[9]

Digital 3D films don't have to be direct successors to spectacle cinema, as Wenders shows. His exploration of space does not assume artificially generated worlds but the space of our everyday experience that we need to rediscover. Wim Wenders' 3D film *Pina* thus does not only address cinema's awareness of its own possibilities of flexibility—it addresses, above all, us as viewers. Because 3D films raise our awareness not only of living with images but also of moving with and within them.

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9   Thomas Elsaesser, "The 'Return' of 3-D: On Some of the Logics and Genealogies of the Image in the Twenty-First Century," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2013): 237.