

My talk has two titles:

**Space - the place we live in**  
**or**  
**The world is a canoe**

When Brian told me, the topic for this year's symposium was "A Sense of Place", I was immediately electrified. The spatial localization in film narration has always moved and interested me. And I was reminded of a statement by my German colleague Sybille Knauss who wrote: "Fiction doesn't mean invention. Rather, it describes the space in which the narration takes place. It is always dangerous to enter a territory without having a good knowledge of your whereabouts; without knowing the customs at hand, the laws to obey, the possible traps to avoid." End of quote. When we enter the realms of fiction we inevitably also enter a space, sometimes even a room. In order to find our way around and not get lost, we have to develop a "sense of place". My own path to finding this orientation as a writer has two roots.

Since I started my career as a film critic, I always felt great enthusiasm for the theoretic premises of cinema, which I spent quite some time getting acquainted with. In some respect, these are also the basics of screen-writing. I have written an essay about this in *Scenario*, the film and screenwriting almanac that I publish. I have always been aware of the importance of the individual's spatial perception, the experience of space. Its very special meaning for my own fictional writing I only grasped during the preparation for "Writers for Europe", when Brian said he didn't want the symposium to be too academic. When I started thinking about how my rather abstract understanding of the meaning of space relates to my own writing, I realized how great its influence has been since the beginning of my writing career.

This is why my talk has two separate parts, that are intertwining and alternating, and why it has two titles. The first title "Space, the place we live in" refers to the theoretic considerations of the topic. The second title "The world is a canoe" is inspired by my practical work as a writer and film-maker. In the following, I would like to try and explain how I developed my

personal notion of a “sense of place”. Not only what it has meant for my screen-writing, but also for my view of the world.

In my extensive workshop interviews with fellow writers about their careers for *Scenario*, I always start by talking about their childhood, about the scenery they grew up in, about the landscapes of their homes. Every single one of these writers was very aware of how much their origins have shaped their writing. And it wasn't just their geographical origins alone that seemed important. It was the actual landscape itself. In German there is a word for this: “Landsmannschaft”. The translation as “fellow countryman” doesn't quite reflect the subtle impact a landscape can have, with all its specific peculiarities, its stories, myths and legends.

I was born in Schleswig-Holstein which is a wide tongue of land stretching from the North of Germany towards Denmark and Scandinavia. It is a region between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. These two affect the people and the landscape, but are completely different. Thomas Mann once described the Baltic Sea as follows: “The sea rested lethargic and smooth, with blue, bottle-green and ruddy strips, silvery reflections playing overhead, the seaweed drying to hay during its afternoon nap and the jelly fish lying out to evaporate.” End of quote. The Baltic Sea is a semi-enclosed sea without any ebb or flow. Not so the North Sea. Theodor Storm's famous novella “The Dykemaster” or “Leveemaster” produced one of the many legends of the region, recounting the story of a dike master. This is the description of the waves of the North Sea during a storm tide: “With white crests they came, howling, as if containing the cry of all the gruesome predators of the wild.”

Between these two oceans there is nothing but the wide, flat land. The inhabitants have gained an image (encouraged by TV commercials) as being rather uncommunicative and withdrawn. There are jokes about how dull the Frisians are, but also about how their slowness ultimately becomes super cool. An often used term that was borrowed from the Frisians dialect, the Low-German, and it seems typical for this group of people. “*Tünen*” *tünen* means exaggerating or twisting reality, or making up weird stories. And “*tünbuddel*” is someone who cooks up stories, which doesn't mean lying, but telling the “untruth” in a very entertaining way.

I was always pretty good at coming up with excuses for coming late or been lazy and have been called a “tünbüddel” from a very early age. Needless to say, you can trust me completely and you have to believe all that I have to say today.

In the late 1970s, I lived in Berlin, after having finished my degree there, and was good friends with the film-maker Rudolf Thome. He lived in Kreuzberg, close to the Chamissoplatz. Back then, it was a neighbourhood with dilapidated, un-renovated houses from the turn of the century. Often without a bathroom and an outside-toilet halfway down the staircase. This was also where Fassbinder filmed the location shots for “Berlin Alexanderplatz”, based on the novel by Alfred Döblin. He tells the story of the wageworker Franz Biberkopf, who, after being released from prison, wants to start a new life. When he gets dragged under by the anonymous and disorienting metropolis and can't make friends, he retreats to petty crimes and becomes a victim to the allure of modern life. Finally, he fails in his stylized fight against the metropolis Berlin. The book is one of the major works of German Modernism and stands out due to its innovative composition, expressive language and poetic narrative technique.

Because of Fassbinder's big film shoot the local residents weren't able to park their car for many weeks and their TV antennas had to be removed. This was all before digital TV and CGI. In any case, the people in the neighbourhood started to hate the film production. Rudolf and I also suffered from the constantly shutoff streets and started being more and more critical of the film production. In the novel “Berlin Alexanderplatz”, Döblin wanted to capture the implications of modernism and the maelstrom in an anonymous and disorienting city during the roaring 20s. Fassbinder did a very historic film version and, consequently, needed a lot of rebuilds. *We* thought, however, that the adaptation of the novel should try and portray the city of Berlin in its current state, where a political battle was being fought over the enforced restoration of old neighbourhoods. Döblin used an expressive language, including new media like photography and newspaper into his account. Therefore we thought that the newly developed video technology should be part of the current adaptation. And so, we set out to co-write the film “Berlin Chamissoplatz”.

I had written a title sequence that was supposed to open the film. From a production point-of-view, it was a little extravagant, especially taken into account the cinematic means in the year 1980 and our limited arthouse budget. The shot was supposed to start in the sky over Berlin, floating over the roofs and then drop in a slow 360 degree spin onto Chamissoplatz, with a street party taking place as a platform to promote the reconstruction of the neighbourhood. The shot was going to end on the stage of a local band who were playing the theme song for the title sequence. The complex and meticulously written out opening sequence had passed all rewrites and all public funding offices, but when it finally came to shooting it, the director Rudolf Thome, who was also the producer, got cold feet. Suddenly, it seemed way too complicated and expensive. Instead, he wanted to replace it with a montage of separate shots. As I also served as his assistant director, I heard about it and allied myself with the D.O.P. Martin Schäfer who immediately started to fight for the single shot. He absolutely refused to give up on the opening and searched for creative solutions to shoot it as it was written. He was persistent and didn't resign and I would like to show you the final result....

#### CLIP

The camera movement we just saw is a very direct cinematic expression of what was happening while writing the film. We literally swivelled into the neighbourhood and into the lives of its inhabitants and dove into its social structure, the cultural climate and interconnectedness of the quarter. The camera movement was an immediate expression of our writing. And the D.O.P. Martin Schäfer intuitively sensed this and realized it on film.

The director was living at Chamissoplatz at the time and was more or less part of its subculture. He introduced me to the environment and from here, I developed the film's storyline. We spent time with the people who organized the opposition against the reconstruction efforts and also with the architects who were planning it. We saw those who feared their living conditions might change and those who wanted to change the living and housing conditions with absolute conviction to what they thought would be the better. The film is a love story between an architect and a female student, in the course of which we get to know the social, cultural and emotional conditions of life in this particular place. The characters

developed out of their own milieu. We developed a sense of place. It dealt with how different living environments and world views crashed into each other: the bourgeois Westend, where the architect lives in his villa, and the lower-class proletarian milieu in Kreuzberg. The whole story of the film emerged from this geographic contrast. In the end the incongruity of positions and environments also resulted in the impossibility of making the lovers' love last.

Space and time are both existential basics of existence which have always fascinated humans and shaped their way of thinking. Film is the artistic medium that artificially folds up these two experiences, of space and of time, with the help of three different means: photographic depiction, movement and montage. This is why the cinematic space has always been more than just a setting, even if it was a set design built on a metaphorical "stage". The cinematic space is the result of different artistic expressions, the reproduction of real sets being only one of them.

In the past years, science has seen a renaissance of the idea of space, going far beyond the understanding of a place as having solid boundaries and a horizon. Philosophy and natural science have started conceiving the delimitation of three-dimensional space already and called this *spatial turn* or *topographical turn*.

A space isn't perceived as something given, something material and already existent, but as something that is produced during the social process. In modern thought, space is understood as a multidimensional coordinate system, whose structure is being derived from the relative and relational layers of bodies to each other. In current discussions within the film community, for example when it comes to 3D (– mostly fuelled by technological fever –) different ideas of space are often confused: there is the represented space (that is: narrative space the narrate universe), the sensory space – that is the space we see on the screen and the space of the movie theatre – where we sit and watch together with other viewers. The idea of space that seems to surface in these discussions is still that of the old three-dimensional, contained space and not that of cinematic space as a narrative field. Here in this field, the vastly different coordinates and scopes of film design converge to create an emotional effect.

Like directors, screenwriters view space as much more than just the place where the story takes place. It is a means of manifold communication with the reader and lives far beyond the aspects of realism. Colours, light, movement and other aspects are all developed and determined in the process we as screenwriters and directors call “preparation of the set”.

The space emerging in images through the film narrative, used to be limited to the photographic reflection of external realities. Early film theorists like Arnheim described the modalities of depictions and developed the following definition: “The cinematic space creates the illusion of an enclosed, independent, homogenous, three-dimensional universe. The montage as well as the – by now – seemingly endless possibilities to manipulate the cinematic image allow the representation of any spatial visualization that can be conceived of in a two-dimensional area. The specific quality of cinematic space emerges in two forms: the artificiality of the film on the one hand, meaning the two-dimensional area, the framing of the specific image and its fragmenting through montage. And on the other hand there is the strong impression of realism – the photographic image and movement. The single shots represent fragments of the space-time-continuum of the chosen universe. It is suggested that the latter has existed since the beginning of the cinematically represented time and will continue to exist long after it ended.” End of quote. That is to say, the narrative space reaches far beyond the represented image in space and time. The hereby defined cinematic space succeeds effortlessly in drawing in the viewers who imagine themselves among the characters and are empathically moved by their actions. This is called cinematic immersion.

As the viewer of a film we are presented with an artificial universe. The represented, narrated cinematic space is only convincing if its construction realigns with our daily spatial perception. We have to rely on our experience from the real world, no matter if we are planning to use cinematic devices – that is: the writing the film – or if we are decoding and emotionally processing them – that is: watching the film. We always compare the world we are presented with, with the world we live in and where we have gathered our experiences. The screen lights up to reveal an artificial universe, provided that there is a common denominator between the

filmic image and the world we live in. Our personal experiences with space are the basis for our perception of the universe. For our stories to work, the viewers have to abandon their resistance against the artificiality of the depiction, what Coleridge calls a “willing suspension of disbelief”. If you relate this statement about cinematic space to the more current definitions after the spatial turn, it automatically includes the social, cultural and emotional vectors between all individuals in a certain way this means our whole human experience.

In my interview with Wolfgang Kohlhaase, he gave a delightfully short response to my question about his writing creed: “If you are in one place, you are in the world.” In the course of our conversation he explained that, in contrast to other German films, his screenplays never had a problem to reach audiences beyond the national boundaries. “Stories that travel the globe deal with the world as a generic term, as the most common residence of a person, but at the same time they are set in a very specific place. And the more accurate, extreme or even incredible the experiences are, that the people make here, the more likely I succumb to the temptation of becoming a part of them. Tell me something particular, I already know about the general. You should be socially accurate, you should know where you live... It's too easy and false to say, something could be set anywhere. It is not so. Something can be *seen* anywhere, if it is set in one particular place.” End of quote.

Behind the convictions of this particular author we can see a very specific idea about place. A very concrete notion of space emerges and corresponds with the newest notions of space in science. Space can't just be measured by degrees of longitude and latitude. A place isn't just a dot on our GPS, but is rather determined by the position of the people in it, by their relations and through their social and emotional connections.

Claudio Magris used a beautiful image for the spatial localization of narrative: “A splinter can contain the world.” Magris lives in Trieste and works as a novelist, essayist and literary academic. “A splinter can contain the world.” Magris specified this: “A splinter can be the world, but only if it is *not just* a splinter, but the world itself.” At first glance, it might seem tautologic, hearing it for the first time might suggest a trivial inversion. It is, however, a

reference, that the splinter isn't an arbitrary small object, but rather had to be ripped out of the world, meaning, it was once subjected to its laws, drenched in its spirit. It is of very specific origin. Such a splinter can only be found or shaped if you are fully present in a place, not just in its landscape and architecture, but also its social and psychological conditions. One could say, you have to be *at home* in this place.

So, it seems that a landscape affects its inhabitants, shapes them, and the filmic image delivers this shape as a “gestalt”, communicating so much more than the surface level. It is not just something topological, but – through our preliminary knowledge – we also have an understanding of its social and psychological imprint. Therefore, the on-screen landscape isn't just a metaphor for the internal psychological condition of a person, rather it's a direct reference to his or her nature. “If you know where you are, you know who you are,” says Swedish author Henning Mankell.

The first feature film that I was involved with as a writer had the title “The House in the Park”. Reminiscent of Chabrol, the story is set entirely in a stately mansion with a lavish park. After the landlord loses his self-control for a moment, crime enters the estate. “Chamissoplatz” isolated a social space in the great city of Berlin and the title makes reference to this. Then, I wanted to focus on another part of the city again and wrote “The Secret History of the City” with director Michael Klier. The working title had been “Underground Berlin” and was inspired by “The Third Man” where a large part of the story takes place in the canalisation underneath the city of Vienna. In our case, a Jewish musician returns to Berlin for the very first time and searches for his former hiding place in the canalisation where he survived the persecution through the Nazi regime. This happened while the wall was still up and Berlin was a separated city. The separation, however, didn't apply for the underground. You must know: In the canalisation, the wastewater flowed from East to West and from West to East. You could separate the people, but not their sewage. And the tunnels were used for espionage, smuggling and attempts to escape East Germany. Unfortunately, Michael Klier didn't get funding for the project and we were able to sell the story but it was never made into a proper film.



In the course of my research about a “Sense of Place” I suddenly realized, that islands didn't just interest and intensely fascinate me in my daily life. My first love lived on the island of Sylt and during my studies I made several longer trips to the island of La Gomera. Ireland also captured my heart for quite some time. On Porto Santo, a small island of the archipelago of Madeira, I wanted to build a house which I later actually did, but in the island of Sardinia. Later, I travelled to New Zealand and Hawaii. I visited Capri and Cuba, Crete and Skyros. What can I say – I have a weak spot for islands. I had always been aware of this, as it was pretty obvious. But now I saw the island as more than a topographic term, more than a concrete geographic space that I felt drawn to. Apparently, the island was also something of a symbol, a “figure of thought”, that I pursued in my writings.

Islands have always fired the imagination of people and artists. It starts with the legendary accounts of Atlantis and continues with the *Treasure Island* of Robert Louis Stevenson and Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe. As for dramas, Shakespeare's “The Tempest” is probably the most famous example. The clear boundary between land and water makes the island a special place. It is a limited space with its own laws; a habitat, a living space or a biotope, where the consistent climate conditions lets specific plants, animals and even humans settle. It was on islands where many scientists had first insights for their break-through theories that have shaped our world view to this day. Charles Darwin, for example, developed his theory of evolution on the Galapagos Islands.

I now understood that islands are more than a tourist destination, or a place of longing, but also an organizing “figure of thought”. The cultural figure of an “island” serves as something of an analysis tool. Islands are narrative structures of texts and they work as literary strategies. The first great island-epic was Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus's journey went from one Mediterranean island to the next. Nowadays, we would call him an “island-hopper”. The islands of the *Odyssey* are fictional worlds, contrasting the home of our hero; they are constructed insularities. So, one could see the island as a metaphor for an enclosed world of a literary work which is being “visited” by its readers.

Films have often chosen islands as their locations, as a concrete setting that – by nature – has a tremendous visual appeal. It ranges from Friedrich Murnau's silent film “Tabu”, set on Bora Bora in 1931, to “Cast Away” by Robert Zemeckis with Tom Hanks in the lead, or the popular TV series “Lost”. And Steven Spielberg's “Jurassic Park” makes use of the evolutionary importance of islands in his narrative about surviving dinosaurs.

But when we talk about how places and spaces impact our awareness, and shape our sense of place, the island becomes a sort of “figure of thought”. A specific type of metaphor, that works as an analogy and makes something very concrete feasible. Through the means of elective affinity, of “gestalt” or models, we are provided with an insight. 'Figures of thought' are a means of creative design, a means of creative expression.

If we look for examples of other “island films”, we won't necessarily find films that are set *on* an topographic island – like the ones mentioned above – but rather films as varied as “The Shining”, “Murder on the Orient Express”, “The Name of the Rose”, “Psycho”, “Alien” or the recent “Grand Budapest Hotel”. All these examples draw their dramatic power from the closed nature of their locations: a hotel, a monastery, a space ship. Wes Anderson might be the most famous for creating the very obvious “islands” in his films, where the designs follows very particular rules and even the story is fashioned under limited conditions. This is probably most apparent in “Moonrise Kingdom”, which is set on a fictional island off the coast of New England in the year 1965. On the internet, you could discover and wander around Anderson's imaginary island by moving your cursor across all its detailed topography.

Just as an *artificial* limitation, a *real* landscape can also set a very helpful frame work. The swamps of Louisiana are a good example. “Southern Comfort” by Walter Hill and the recent “Beasts of the Southern Wild” are based on the physical laws of Louisiana's extreme scenery. On TV, the series “True Detectives” uses the same setting. Islands aren't just entities completely enclosed by water. We also see an oasis in the endless sand ocean of the desert as an island. They represent a special space of encounter, an experimental field for social

utopias or a place to evaluate a reform idea. A wonderful example of islands used as such “rehearsal spaces” is *Lord of the Flies*, or the afore mentioned *Tempest*.

But the island is also a prison. We know Alcatraz from the movies, it is the incarnation of the island as a prison, a place of banishment or exile. And I just remembered: I have also been to Elba, the exile of Napoleon.

Islands have also often been considered creepy and known as a home to horrific monsters. And again it started in Greece. In the Greek myth, the Minotaur lives on Crete and in the movies, King Kong and his Japanese colleague Godzilla also come from islands. So simultaneously, islands are seen as places of isolation, but are also associated with delimitation and movement. They appear through the fog and disappear again, they are hard to reach and hard to grasp.

In the beginning I said that film is the artificial unfolding of time and space. Are there islands only in space or also in time? The idea of a “time island” refers to an already existing dramatic term and its great dramatic effect has been widely applied. I am talking about the “time lock”. The clear time limitation in the story “48 hours”, again by Walter Hill, or the TV series “24” are only two examples in a long list from the film and TV history which we could all continue forever. Brian's idea for “A Sense of Place” showed me that we need a new term, we should use this new term similar to “time lock” - that is the term “place lock”. The clear limitation of the setting, a spatial inescapability, helps us greatly in developing our characters' environments, and also the social, cultural and emotional premises for their existence. Place lock!

The project that is closest to my heart right now is called “Echoes of Paradise” and derives its dramatic power – surprisingly enough – from the island metaphor. The happiness and joy that islands seem to promise might come from the fact that even the Christian paradise was a sort of island. The garden of Eden is an oasis of everything good in the midst of a profane, real world. This is the island we were expelled from, this is the one we look for, we long for. Our

longing has been consistent throughout the centuries. My own project explores the roots of Hawaiian music that, weirdly enough, go all the way back to Prussia. It was the Prussian Kapellmeister Heinrich Berger, together with the former Hawaiian queen Lilioukalani, who composed the world-famous “Aloha oe”. Berger was an island addict, a Gauguin of music. During my research on Ohau, through encountering the descendants of the indigenous people, my own “sense of place” was further refined.

For a relaxing break, I would like to show you the teaser of “Echoes of Paradise”...

The Pacific Continent, the great space stretching across thousands of sea-miles between New Zealand, Tahiti / Bora Bora and between Hawaii and the Easter Islands, consists mostly of tremendous expanses of water. The indigenous people have all traveled these waters, they navigate them without assistive technology, they don't just orient themselves by the stars, as they can be concealed by a cloudy sky, they could read the wind, the movement of the waves and the water currents, they could read the space they lived in. I like the idea that we as story-tellers also navigate the space we live in. And my affinity to the idea of navigation is probably not just owed to my experiences in Hawaii, but also to the long tradition of boatbuilders on my mother's side of the family. They build wooden fisher boats to sail the wild waters of the North Sea.

My colleague Sybille Knauss, that I mentioned in the beginning, wrote: “Writers are travel guides in the fictional realms. Here, they know their way around better than anyone else. Just like a good travel guide they know that the readers always look for the familiar in the unfamiliar. They want something to recognize. By discovering something familiar, you learn to understand the unfamiliar.” End of quote. Of course, I can relate to these thoughts, but they refer more to the finished stories, the ones that are already told. They are not about the moment, when we as writers and story-tellers develop our sense of a place, imagining it for the first time, before we then serve as a travel guide later on. Through our narration we navigate the space of our fiction. There is no GPS, only our experience. We have to understand that “space is the place we live in.”

You can acquire knowledge about this place by learning about it scientifically, or you can acquire knowledge by sitting in a cafe and observing people, or you can travel to a far away island, but you can also – as Kafka claims – just stay at your desk and sit there for a long long time, because at some point, the world will reveal itself to you. It's inevitable. Why? We are in the world. We are a splinter of the world. The indigenous people of the Pacific summarise it as, *The world is a canoe*. To understand it, we have to carefully examine the sentence itself, as well as the metaphor it uses. The double-hull canoes that were sent out to discover and populate the more distant islands, contained just about everything: skilful navigators, the sailors and the paddlers, there were not only men, but also women and children, there were pigs, chickens, plants and seeds. And only if everything reached its goal, the trip was successful. Only then could they successfully settle on the foreign land and have a chance to live there long-term. *The world is a canoe* means nothing else but that everything the world is, everything that is living here, must live, and must survive the long voyage in order for the world to remain the world.

In the West, we have also had the chance to realise this. We journeyed out into outer space and we took a look at the earth from up there. 'The blue marble' is the image of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This precise image of a completely illuminated world that the crew of the Apollo 17 saw on their way to the moon, has become iconic. The name or the term "The Blue Marble" is a figure of thought as well. We do not only see its worldly reality, but an even greater reality is revealed to us. The blue planet floats through the vast infinity and darkness of the universe. Many environmental programs have used this image to symbolise the uniqueness and vulnerability of planet earth. The world – a canoe travelling through the infinity of space. But unfortunately, we also saw something else in the blue marble. We sensed only the pure and precious qualities of the planet, and took them for granted. From a distance the planet looks as if there were no people, no civilisation, no garbage dumps or islands of plastic waste in the sea. There is no trace of humans and the planet appears pristine/untouched, like unused soil. The distant perspective didn't give us a warning to preserve and protect the earth, instead,

'the blue marble' was taken as a kind of insurance to keep on doing what we're doing for more and more growth.

We gather here today explicitly as Europeans. And we can look at Europe as an island as well. Even Europe we can understand as an island. But it isn't that easy to define the boundaries of this island, if you think about it beyond topological terms. It isn't that easy to describe or understand what is keeping it together at its core. This is the question about the narrative of Europe. A narrative which people seem to be able to find less and less, and why Europe is increasingly drifting apart. And it is the reason why it grows unhindered – which normally only cancer cells do – and why it is losing its social cohesion more and more. I think that the question about a sense of place doesn't stop when it comes to politics.

Developing my sense of place as a writer doesn't stop at the well-constructed borders that I erect in my fictional island stories. Our knowledge of the concrete place that we, as writers, live in, our ability to navigate our way through our imaginary fictional spaces, must remember that “the world is a canoe”. From this understanding springs our responsibility as story-tellers. Or, as Albert Camus once said: “The purpose of a writer is to keep civilisation from destroying itself.” That sounds way too big, it sounds overwhelming and unmanageable. It sounds like we can only surrender or fail miserably. But Camus also told us to imagine Sisyphus as a happy man.

So, let's get that rock rolling, let's roll that Sisyphus rock up the hill again and again. In ancient times in Hawaii, the indigenous people laid their babies right after they were born into the small and shallow waves which reach the sandy beaches. Why? So that they develop their sense of place as early as possible.