

## “TOM’S GONE. HE LEFT THE FILM”. WHEN FILM CHARACTERS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE SCREEN START TO INTERACT

Gloria Withalm

University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria

[gloria.withalm@uni-ak.ac.at](mailto:gloria.withalm@uni-ak.ac.at)

### Abstract

Though the quote in the title is from Woody Allen’s 1985 film *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the phenomenon that characters from a film-within-a-film relate to their audience or vice versa is much older. As early as 1924 the projectionist in *Sherlock Jr.* (played by Buster Keaton) stepped inside the movie just shown. In his case it was only in a dream, but several examples throughout film and television history present the screen as something permeable that the characters can easily go through.

After embedding this stylistic device in a general model of filmic reflexivity, the paper will start from films or television shows in which on-screen characters and their own audience talk to each other. On a scale of increasing interaction between the two worlds, a next step shows objects changing sides. Ultimately, the screen that used to be a “fourth wall” becomes completely pervious and characters are able to cross the boundary and move from one world to the other. The various audiovisual texts will be categorized and discussed with regard to the role the *screen passage* plays within the diegesis. The paper will end with a presentation of the aesthetics modes chosen to visualize the actual passing through.

### 1. When movies refer to themselves — A comprehensive model of filmic self-referentiality

Screen passages are very special examples of filmic reflexivity. Filmic reference to itself as a medium is as old as the medium itself. It can be found in every genre and different levels of reflexivity can be observed. In much the same way, there is not just one single function of these textual strategies. In order to deal with the topic in a comprehensive way, a model has to be developed which covers the entire range of observable textual strategies and practices relating them to the double nature of film as a *sign system* and as a *socio-cultural system*.

The approach I have chosen for my model<sup>1</sup> is based on the work of the Italian semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1977 [1975], 1985): his concept of sign work and a schema of social reproduction derived from the fundamental process of production–exchange–consumption. And film is also subject to this fundamental cycle of *production — exchange (or distribution) — consumption (or reception)* culminating in the *product* (on top) (Fig. 1), both in the material (including the economic) and in the semiotic sense.

On the production side is the most obvious form of self-referential discourse, often called film-in-film.<sup>2</sup> After a film has gone through the process of distribution there is the second prominent moment of the cycle: film reception — going to the movies, watching a film.

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview on the model, cf. Withalm 2007.

<sup>2</sup> An 1899 film of the Lumière Brothers showed the audience for the first time a cameraman shooting a parade of decorated cars (*Concours d’automobiles fleuris*, FR 1899, n° 1009).

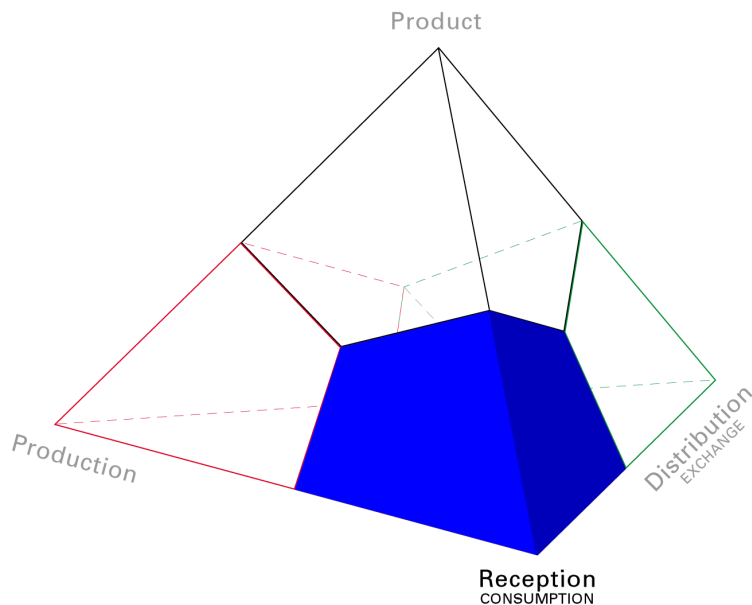


Figure 1: Model of filmic self-referentiality

## 2. Reception: a film is (supposed to be) shown

*Consumption* or *reception* in the “world of the audience” is the third stage in the cycle. Stories deal with the people watching a film either by going to the movies or at home, but also with the movie theaters as such, the people working there, the showing of a film. Filmic references to the whole cycle including reception are indeed almost as old as film itself. In 1896 two Frères Lumière films with the main title *L'Entrée du cinématographe* were released: one (no. 250) shows the audience leaving the Empire Theatre on London's Leicester Square, the other one (no. 275) presents the premises in Vienna. Just five years later, we step inside the movie theatre and watch the screenings in two films and their topic is my point of departure: a very special relation between a patron and the movie on the screen.

Like the first, partly lost film *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (R.W. Paul, GB 1901)<sup>3</sup>, *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edward S. Porter, US 1902) shows a simple guy, a yokel, who goes to the movies for the first time. At one point he mistakes the events on the screen — a kissing couple<sup>4</sup> — for reality, tries to grab the guy and tears down the fabric. In his film *Les carabiniers* (FR/IT 1962), Jean-Luc Godard lets Michel-Ange (Albert Juross) behave in the same way when he watches a young woman in the bathtub. But the screen can also be destroyed from the other side, from behind. In the *Man From U.N.C.L.E.* episode “The Never-Never Affair” (Joseph Sargent, US-NBC 1965, s1-ep25), an enemy agent is shot and crashes through the screen, just as a guy on a motorbike escaping a chase in *Another 48 Hrs.* (Walter Hill, US 1990) did.

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Paul described the film in his catalog of works:

“This amusing novelty is a representation of an animated photograph exhibition and shows the stage, proscenium and screen. The first picture thrown on the screen is that of a dancer, and a yokel in the audience becomes so excited over this that he climbs upon the stage, and expresses his delight in pantomime as the picture proceeds.

The next picture (within the picture) is that of an express train, which rushes towards the yokel at full speed, so that he becomes frightened, and runs off at the wings.

The last scene produced is that of the yokel himself, making love to a dairy maid, and he becomes so enraged that he tears down the screen, disclosing the machine and operator, whom he severely handles” [http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/444455/synopsis.html, accessed: 26 March 2017].

<sup>4</sup> According to the *Edison Films Catalog*, he “evidently thinks he recognizes his own daughter” [no. 135, September 1902, 81–82; https://www.loc.gov/item/00694324, accessed: 31 October 2017].

### 3. “Is there a doctor in the house?” — Film characters talking to their audience and vice versa

True, all the men in the previous examples interact with the movies, so to speak, but in a very material sense, and they remain in the “real world”. However, the next examples show the very onset of actual communication, of dissolving the boundary: the members from the two separate worlds seem to see each other and are able to communicate.

It starts with the girl Red, usually known as Little Red Riding Hood, and the Wolf in *Little Red Walking Hood* (Fred [Tex] Avery, US 1937). Right in the middle of their chase and fight, the Wolf asks her to stop because a man and a woman, or rather their shadows, move slowly from the right to the left at the bottom of the picture, “Hey, Red, just a minute, let’s wait till *these people* here get seated, and we’ll go on with this thing.” Already a year later, in *The Mice Will Play* (Fred Avery, US 1938), a patron in the audience is able to speak to the on-screen characters and even save the life of one of the protagonists. Four little boy mice sneak into the laboratory of Dr. I.M. Nutts, start to fool around and try out the various medical devices. While one looks through a telescope, three mice carry a syringe to pierce Johnny in his buttocks. They start counting “one, two, ...”, but before reaching “three” and finishing the act, the silhouette of a woman appears on screen. She throws her hands high in the air and yells “Don’t do that!”. The three of them drop the syringe, pouting, “We never have any fun”.

*Thugs With Dirty Mugs* (Fred Avery, US 1939), a cartoon spoof of the 1930s gangster movies, has members of the two worlds talking to each other. When the shadow of a man enters the screen from the bottom, the gangster boss on the screen — named Killer Diller and “played by Ed.G. Robemsome” — draws a gun, points it directly towards the audience and yells, “Well, you sit right down back there ’til this thing’s over, see!”. The poor man does as ordered, but in one of the following scenes, he tips off Captain Flat Foot Flanigan as to the next plans of the gang.

### 4. “Is there any spinach in the house?” — Objects changing sides & dangerous interactions between screen and audience

Since interaction takes place in several progressive stages, at the next stage objects can already pass through the screen. Unfortunately, in most of the cases it turns out to be quite perilous when the boundary between the two worlds becomes permeable.

The first example is yet another Tex Avery animated cartoon. In *Daffy Duck and Egghead* (Fred Avery, US 1938), Egghead sets out to shoot ducks but is disturbed by the black silhouette of a man on the screen. Egghead whispers, “Sh! Sit down! There’s a duck in here. Sit down!”. The guy, however, stands up a second time to change places and when he gets up for the third time, Egghead just shoots him. In a later cartoon, *Bacall to Arms* (Robert Clampett, US 1946), the spoofed Bogart character (Bogey Gocart) from the feature film *To Have– To Have– To Have–* etc. shoots the horny Hollywood Wolf because he was flirting with Laurie Becool.

However, dissolving the barrier is not at all confined to Warner cartoons of the 1930s and 40s. *Circuito chiuso* (Giuliano Montaldi, IT 1978) opens right before the afternoon showing of a Spaghetti Western in a neighborhood cinema in Rome. During a classic shootout towards the end one of the gunslingers (played by Giuliano Gemma) fires his gun. A man in the audience screams and falls to the side, dead. The film-on-screen claims two more victims in the audience before it finally stops on its own. Ballistics reveals in the end that the bullet came from a gun dating back to 1863.

Contrary to these last films, the lethal shooting in *Smorgasbord* (aka *Cracking Up*; Jerry Lewis, US 1983) does not start in the film. Warren Nefron (Jerry Lewis) tries to commit suicide in a hotel room and has chosen a rather complicated way: a rifle is propped up on a table with the trigger connected to the doorknob, Warren places himself between the muzzle and the TV set, and phones the room service for a bucket of ice. Unfortunately, the door is

locked. Warren has to get up and open the bellboy. A shot, the television screen cracks, and one of the on-screen gunslingers is dead. The second one aims at Warren and the bellboy, and fires. A second crack on the screen appears and the young man is gunned down.

## 5. Screen passages to and fro

### 5.1. “I ought to be in pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Film has fascinated its audience from the very beginning of motion pictures, and people dreamed of being in the movies. Hence, (day-)dreams of characters who envision themselves to be within a film was a device used fairly often to amalgamate the world of those watching a film-within-the-film and the world of the film-within-the-film they were watching.

Nobody can actually enter a film scene, except in a dream, like in the famous *Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, US 1924). Buster is a young man who is “employed as a moving picture operator in a small town theater”, as explained in a title, but he really wants to be a detective. He is in love with a young woman (Kathryn McGuire), but his rival (Ward Crane), a bad guy, has stolen a watch from the girl’s parents. Buster is falsely accused and forbidden to see her again. He goes back to his picture show and starts the film. Up in the booth he dozes off, his dream self leaves his body, looks back on his sleeping self, and steps out of the booth. Down in the theater he walks up the aisle, steps onto the stage, and enters the screen. First there is the door of a house, but within a second the scene quickly changes — something characteristic both for a dream state and a movie — and “the Boy” (as the character is called) is subject to a quick montage. In the film-within-the-film titled *Hearts and Pearls*, Buster can finally act out his dream persona, the renowned detective Sherlock Jr., and succeeds in solving the mystery of a stolen string of pearls. Back in reality, the case of the stolen watch is also solved, and the two lovers are reunited.

To enter a movie plot in a dream is one thing, to really step into the film on the screen, to perform a so-called “screen passage”, is quite another thing. But when bullets manage to change sides, why should not people be able to do so too...? Some of the characters do not enter the film of their own free will, but are somehow “transported” into the movie. All of a sudden they find themselves in the middle of a film, confronted with strange and foreign worlds.

In the case of the eleven-year-old Danny Madigan (Austin O’Brien), a golden magic ticket that once belonged to Harry Houdini makes the boundary between the worlds of *Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, US 1993) pervious, and allows ignited dynamite sticks to bust through the screen into the movie theatre during the private screening of the latest Jack Slater movie. The explosion hurls Danny into the film and onto the back seat of Slater’s (Arnold Schwarzenegger) convertible racing through Los Angeles.

Also a bit on the mysterious side are the means by which Kwai Chang Caine (David Carradine) enters a martial arts home movie in the episode “Flying Fists of Fury II: Masters of Illusion” of *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* (George Mendeluk, US-WB 1995; s3-ep18). Since Caine, as a Shaolin priest, is known to the seasoned viewer as being able to go back in space and time, or enter limbo (a twilight zone between here and the other world), why shouldn’t he be able to step into a film? The main plot of the episode centers on mysterious accidents on the set of a martial arts movie about the life of the famous fighter Li Fong, whose soul is apparently caught in an old film reel. Caine tries to save this restless soul by stepping into the film. With the help of Lo Si, The Ancient (Kim Chan), he will have the power “to meld, to be one with the film” and enter the screen. Though the film catches fire, Caine is able to leave the film/screen just in time.

In other examples the protagonists are using some strange gadgets that cause the transition, like in *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, US 1998). David (Toby Maguire) and his sister Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) fight for the new strange remote control, are swirled into the

TV set, and have to learn to cope with life in black-and-white when they land in a TV marathon of David's favorite 1950s sitcom.<sup>5</sup> In the case of "The Tale of the Midnight Madness" (*Are You Afraid of the Dark*, s2-ep2, D.J. MacHale, CA-YTV 1993), it is a film reel (an old silent movie about a vampire, very much in *Nosferatu* style) left by a mysterious man at the Rialto, an old movie theater, in order to save it from closing. One evening *Nosferatu* (Christopher Heyerdahl) steps out of the film and bites the manager. Pete (Eddie Robinson), a student working at the cinema, manages to enter the screen — while his colleague Katie (Melanie Wiesenthal) starts the last reel — and to destroy the vampire in the traditional way through exposure to sunlight.

Contrary to all these examples, the censor (Janusz Gajos) in the Polish film *Escape From the "Liberty" Cinema* (*Ucieczka z kina "Wolność"*; Wojciech Marczewski, PL 1991) does not need any mediating object. The film is set in the last days of the old communist regime in Poland. It tells the story of a local censor and the events he has to cope with that take place at the "Liberty" cinema just across the street from his office. During an afternoon projection, the characters, or rather the actresses and actors of the screened Polish melodrama titled *Daybreak*, suddenly start to ad-lib, and refuse to continue with the plot.<sup>6</sup> One character asks to speak to the censor. When he comes, Malgorzata (Teresa Marczewska), the leading actress of the film-within-the-film, confronts him with his former life before he became a censor and all the ideas long forgotten. In the end, he even manages to walk into the off-screen space of the film into a new kind of reality: a foggy roofscape where he meets actors who complain heavily about the way he has censored them and cut them out of movies over the years.

## 5.2. "People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL". Out of the movie and into the real (?) world

Screen passages can go in both directions. Many film characters leave their world of celluloid and step out of the screen. The best-known example is possibly Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, US 1985). Cecilia (Mia Farrow) uses the movies to escape from her bleak everyday life in the 1930s in general, and her abusive husband in particular. Her current favorite film, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, tells the story of a bunch of rich New Yorkers, and the adventurer and hobby-archeologist Tom Baxter (Jeff Daniels). In the middle of a scene in a luxurious Manhattan penthouse, Tom suddenly turns away from the conversation with his friends, looks straight into the audience and addresses Cecilia, who is puzzled about whether he really looks at her, "My god, you must really love this picture. — Yes, you! You! — This is the fifth time you're seeing this". And — very much to the shock of the on-screen characters and the patrons in the audience alike — he leaves the film and steps out of the screen.

The "Demon of Illusion" (Robin Atkin Downes), so the name of the character, is the reason for the invasion of villains from old horror movies in "Chick Flick", an episode of *Charmed* (Michael Schultz, US-WB 2000, s2-ep18). He wants to destroy the three Halliwell sisters, the most powerful good witches of all time: Prue (Shannen Doherty), Piper (Holly Marie Combs) and Phoebe (Alyssa Milano). When Billy (Chris Payne Gilbert), the good movie character, starts a fight with the demon, they accidentally fall out of their movie. The demon releases several movie killers into present day San Francisco. Finally, the sisters learn that the demon "is travelling in the print", which means they have to go into the movie with

<sup>5</sup> Other examples are *Amazon Women on the Moon* (episode *Murray in Videoland*; Robert K. Weiss, US 1987), *Stay Tuned* (Peter Hyams, US 1992), or in the "The Terror of Tiny Toon" episode of *The Simpsons* (*Treehouse of Horror IX*, s10-ep4.2, Steven Dean Moore, US-Fox 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Actually, it quotes *The Purple Rose of Cairo* not only with regard to the story line, but also in an almost material sense. A film critic has the idea to show the US movie. During the screening the two projectors get mixed up and, accidentally, the two movies are projected one over the other. Eventually, Tom Baxter, the character from the 1930s film-within-the-film *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, ends up in the late 1980s clinic from *Daybreak*.

the help of Phoebe's potions and destroy him. They find the demon, and can leave the film in the last minute before Prue causes the filmstrip to melt in the projector.

Though not actually demons, the two characters from an old film in the episode "From Out of the Rain", are as lethal in their actions. In this episode of the British sci-fi show *Torchwood* (s2-ep10; Jonathan Fox Bassett, GB-BBC 2008), Ianto Jones (Gareth David-Lloyd) takes his colleagues Owen Harper (Burn Gorman) and Gwen Cooper (Eve Myles) to the Electro, an old cinema from his childhood. The program of old local street scenes is suddenly interrupted by pictures of a circus and a sideshow. The projectionist is unable to turn off the projector, but eventually the film stops. Ianto is convinced that Captain Jack Harkness (John Barrowman), their boss at the Torchwood Institute, was among the attractions. When the friends leave, shadows pass behind him, and, later, others from the mysterious sideshow called the "Night Travelers" follow. According to Jack Harkness, the Night Travelers "left a trail of damage and sorrow wherever they performed". The two sideshow characters keep on stealing people's breath, tears and saliva, and summon all their colleagues.

### 6. Screen passages: plotlines & film aesthetic devices

Passing through the threshold between the two worlds is not confined to any particular genre or period of film history. As different as they are, there are some common traits. Let's start with the characters stepping out of their film-within-the-film. Most of them are perfectly aware that they are characters from a movie they're leaving – much to the surprise and anger of their fellow characters. Various members of the rich in-group in *Purple Rose of Cairo* argue with Tom Baxter to stay on. Without him, the story cannot continue. Tom, on the other hand, has to find out that life in the "real" world is not at all like life in the movies. Learning how to make love "without fading out" is just a minor problem compared to the fact that his movie money is not worth a dime.

Within his movie, it was difficult to convince Slater in *Last Action Hero* that he is just a movie character. However, as soon as he and Danny step out of the film into New York, he literally has to learn the hard way that real life is very different: smashing a car window with his bare hands does hurt, guns have to be reloaded, and getting shot outside the movie can be lethal. Danny figures that the only chance to keep him alive is to bring him back into his film. At the theater, there is still the world of Jack Slater on the screen where nothing can harm him, but no way to enter it. Help comes finally from the Grim Reaper, who has passed through the screen of Bergman's *Det sjunde inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1957) earlier in the movie. Danny panics, but Death (Ian McKellen) has not come to take him or Jack away. Following Death's advice, Danny finds the stub of the magic ticket and takes Slater back into the movie where his chest wound is no longer fatal.

Movie characters are used to know what to do and what to say, or, as Billy in "Chick Flick" explains to Phoebe, "I am those lines. That's how I was written. [...] Everything I've ever known, understood, touched, it's all been scripted". With one of them gone, the script does not help anymore, they have to improvise, rewrite the film. When Billy points out that he only knows what's been written for him, one of the sisters figures out that probably the villains can only be killed in the same way they found death on screen. Now they know how to make the movie psychos disappear.

Captain Jack Harkness and his team in the *Torchwood* episode are also confronted with difficulties fighting bad guys. Finally, he also goes back to the fundamentals of film to destroy the deadly Night Travelers. He captures them again on film and exposes the undeveloped film to light.

"Trapped" is a good word that describes the situation both before and after the screen passage. It may define the fear of those stepping into a film, because there is always the danger that they cannot get out in time before the film ends, as Lo Si has warned Kwai Chang Caine in the *Kung Fu* episode. The same problem happens to Pete in "The Tale of the

Midnight Madness” and the two Halliwell sisters in “Chick Flick”. They all need assistance from outside. In all these cases the physical film strip running through the projector is crucial. For instance, Prue Halliwell rewinds the film to give her sisters time to jump out before the end.

Sometimes also the film characters feel, or are really, trapped in the film, like Li Fong in the amateur film of his training in “Flying Fists of Fury II”, or the Night Travelers in *Torchwood*’s “From Out of the Rain”. Captain Jack Harkness explains to his colleagues why the villains left the film in the first place: “If cinema killed the travelling show, maybe this is their way of fighting back, their only chance to escape before every old movie theatre and piece of film has gone. What better way to get revenge?”

Since film is more than story arcs and dialog lines, the question, what does it actually look like when characters step out of or into a film, is central to the discussion. Both the complexity, and the extent of special effects used to show the passing through the screen, depend primarily on the budget of the production in question. As a consequence, if a film (or an episode of a television show) contains multiple passages, sometimes only a few are actually depicted in detail. The rest happens, so to speak, “off-screen”. In the case of “Chick Flick”, the events are accompanied by a whoosh sound. However, not showing the act can also have dramaturgical reasons, as at the beginning of “From Out of the Rain”, when Ianto sees only moving shadows out of the corner of his eye.

Since in many examples the film-within-the-film is in black-and-white, the character has to change in the moment of transition. When entering the movie, the characters decolorize, like Pete, Caine, David & Jennifer, or the Halliwell sisters, and Phoebe Halliwell comments her changes right away: “Check me out! I’m retro”. Those stepping out of grayscale, on the other hand, change into color, like Tom in *Purple Rose of Cairo*, or the Night Travelers in the *Torchwood* episode. The sole exception is Billy in the *Charmed* episode. Since he remains in shades of gray, Phoebe has to apply make-up to his face and hands to help him blend in. In *Pleasantville* it’s the other way round; when color hits the small town (as a metaphor for sexuality and love of life), David has to help his mother with gray make-up.

In most of the examples mentioned, the characters about to leave the film are slowly detaching from or peeling off the screen, thus becoming three-dimensional. Whereas the screen appears to have the quality of a soft plastic foil for those who are able to leave the film, for all the others it is rather a pane of glass separating the two worlds — again, the moment of being trapped. Right after Tom has decided to jump off the screen and talk to Cecilia, one of his friends from *Purple Rose of Cairo* tries to follow him, but when moving towards the screen, she feels her face pressed against the invisible barrier. The same happens to Phoebe and Piper in “Chick Flick” The moment they try to get out of the film, they bang right into the screen.

Both actions — stepping into and stepping out of a film — are sometimes visualized in specific ways. In two examples (the “Flying Fists...” episode of *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* and “The Tale of the Midnight Madness”), the passage through the screen is viewed from the side in an extreme acute angle<sup>7</sup>. Both in *Last Action Hero* and in the *Charmed* episode, a similar point of view is chosen at one moment. The “Midnight Madness” example, however, includes yet another camera movement. When Pete approaches and touches the screen, the camera moves in a quarter circle arc to the right until the two worlds — movie theater and film — are shown as parts of a split screen: the movie theater is on the left in color, the old film in shades of gray is on the right side. When Pete reaches through the screen, first his hand and then his body turn black-and-white. *Escape From the “Liberty”*

---

<sup>7</sup> When the Grim Reaper leaves Bergman’s film in *Last Action Hero*, it is shown from a similar angle, the scythe being the first element passing through from one world to the other.

*Cinema* even goes one step further. The camera completes a semicircle as soon as the Censor has entered the film, until it shows the film from behind the screen.

With the use of CGI, filmmakers have many more techniques at hand. In *Pleasantville*, David and Jennifer start a fight over the new strange remote control and accidentally push a button. Suddenly, they start to dissolve into patterns of the horizontal lines television images are composed of and are sucked into the television screen. The image starts to wobble until the siblings are fully integrated into the sitcom world.

A very special special effect accompanies all screen passages in the film *Last Action Hero*. Whenever something or someone changes sides, no matter which way, the movement is introduced by a blueish glow, haloing the characters with a kind of Kirlian effect. Oscillating between a magical and a physical perspective, this visualization is definitely appropriate. Movies are made of light and energy after all...

### **7. A short and very personal coda**

The closest moment to a screen passage I have ever experienced was the poetic use of 3D at the very end of Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (US 2010).

Throughout the film, Absolem, the Blue Caterpillar (voiced by Alan Rickman), was one of the central characters, who popped up several times and interacted with Alice (Mia Wasikowska). The last time she met him he turned into a chrysalis. At the end, when Alice is onboard the trading ship, a blue butterfly lands on the shoulder of her blue coat. She looks at the butterfly, greets him with "Hello, Absolem". He flutters away, right towards the screen, out of the screen, and into the audience, dancing over our heads, while the screen slowly fades to black before the end credits appear.

### **References**

ROSSI-LANDI, Ferruccio. 1977 [1975]. *Linguistics and Economics* (Janua Linguarum, Series Maior 81). The Hague: Mouton.

ROSSI-LANDI, Ferruccio. 1985. *Metodica filosofica e scienza dei segni. Nuovi saggi sul linguaggio e l'ideologia*. Milano: Bompiani.

WITHALM, Gloria. 2007. The self-reflexive screen: Outlines of a comprehensive model. In Winfried NÖTH & Nina BISHARA (eds.), *Self-Reference in the Media* (Approaches to Applied Semiotics 6), 125–142. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

WITHALM, Gloria. 2014. Filmzensur im Film – Geschichten, Figuren, Verfahren. In Erich SCHWEIGHOFER, Meinrad HANDSTANGER, Harald HOFFMANN, Franz KUMMER, Edmund PRIMOSCH, Günther SCHEFBECK & Gloria WITHALM (eds.), *Zeichen und Zauber des Rechts. Festschrift für Friedrich Lachmayer*, 1197–1220. Bern: Editions Weblaw.

13th World Congress of Semiotics IASS-AIS  
Kaunas, Lithuania, 26–30 June 2017



**“Tom’s gone. He left the film.” –  
When film characters from both sides  
of the screen start to interact**

**Gloria Withalm, Vienna (Austria)**

## Characters from both sides of the screen interact

When Movies Refer to Themselves – a Comprehensive Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality

Reception: a Film Is (Supposed to Be) Shown

“Is There a Doctor In the House?” — Film Characters talking to their Audience and vice versa

“Is There Any Spinach In the House?” – Objects Changing Sides & Dangerous Interactions Between Screen and Audience

Screen Passages To and Fro 1:

“I Ought to Be In Pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Screen Passages To and Fro 2:

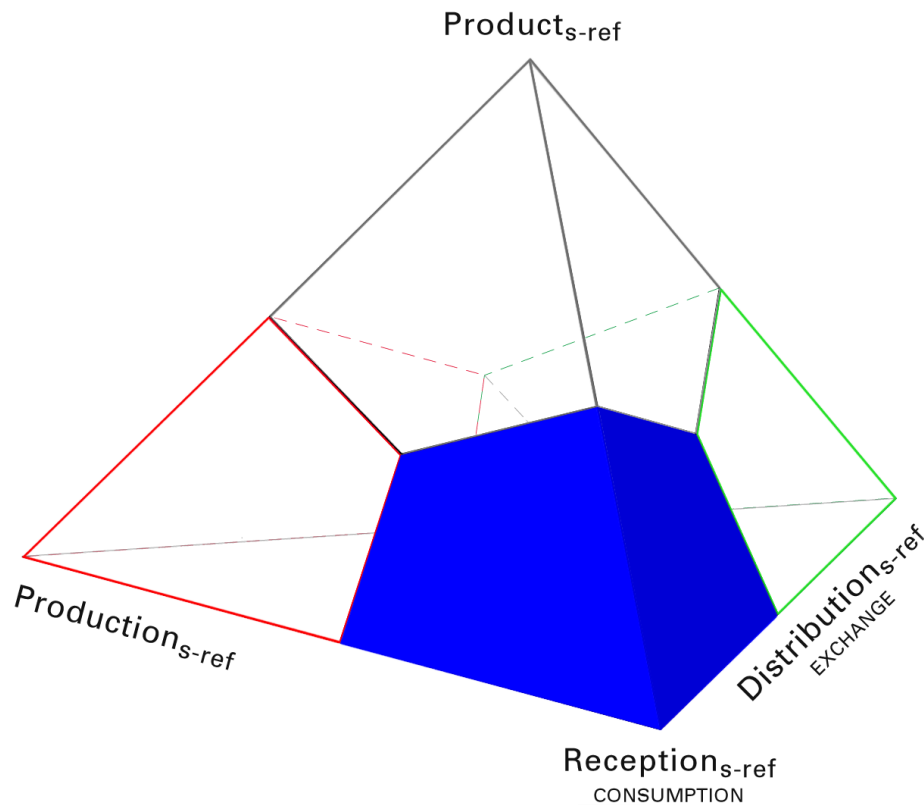
“People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL”. Out of the Movie and Into the Real (?) World

Screen Passages: Plotlines & Film Aesthetic Devices

A Short and Very Personal Coda



# A model of filmic self-referentiality



Withalm, Gloria (2007). "The self-reflexive screen: Outlines of a comprehensive model". In: Nöth, Winfried/Bishara, Nina (eds.). *Self-Reference in the Media* (= Approaches to Applied Semiotics. 6). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, S. 125–142

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Characters from both sides of the screen interact

When Movies Refer to Themselves – a Comprehensive Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality

### Reception: a Film Is (Supposed to Be) Shown

“Is There a Doctor In the House?” — Film Characters talking to their Audience and vice versa

“Is There Any Spinach In the House?” – Objects Changing Sides & Dangerous Interactions Between Screen and Audience

Screen Passages To and Fro 1:

“I Ought to Be In Pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Screen Passages To and Fro 2:

“People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL”. Out of the Movie and Into the Real (?) World

Screen Passages: Plotlines & Film Aesthetic Devices

A Short and Very Personal Coda

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Tearing down the screen



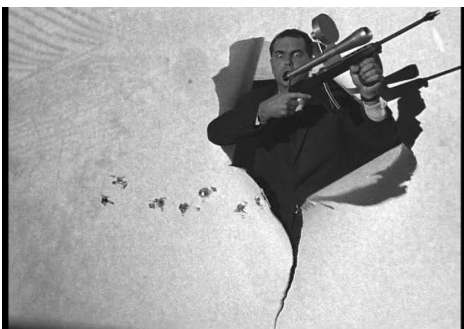
*Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edward S. Porter, US 1902)

Michel-Ange (Albert Juross): first time at the movies — *Les carabiniers* (Jean-Luc Godard, FR/IT 1962)

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Through the screen – from the other side



Ilya Kuryakin (David McCallum) and Napoleon Solo (Robert Vaughn) shoot a guy hiding behind the screen — *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.: "The Never-Never Affair"* (s1x25, Joseph Sargent, US-NBC 1965)

The bad guy on his bike bursts through a delicate spot on the screen — *Another 48 Hrs.* (Walter Hill, US 1990)

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



# Characters from both sides of the screen interact

When Movies Refer to Themselves – a Comprehensive Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality

Reception: a Film Is (Supposed to Be) Shown

“Is There a Doctor In the House?” — Film Characters talking to their Audience and vice versa

“Is There Any Spinach In the House?” – Objects Changing Sides & Dangerous Interactions Between Screen and Audience

Screen Passages To and Fro 1:

“I Ought to Be In Pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Screen Passages To and Fro 2:

“People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL”. Out of the Movie and Into the Real (?) World

Screen Passages: Plotlines & Film Aesthetic Devices

A Short and Very Personal Coda

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



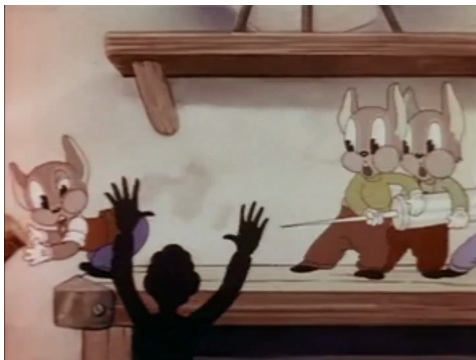
## Shadows on the screen



“Hey, Red, [...] let’s wait till these people here get seated” – *Little Red Walking Hood* (Fred [Tex] Avery, US 1937)



“Well, you sit right down back there ’til this thing’s over, see!” – *Thugs With Dirty Mugs* (Fred [Tex] Avery, US 1939)



“Don’t do that!!!” – *The Mice Will Play* (Fred [Tex] Avery, US 1938)



“I know, Captain! The Killer’s gonna be at Mrs. Lotta Jewels” – *Thugs With Dirty Mugs* (Fred Avery, US 1939)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



# Characters from both sides of the screen interact

When Movies Refer to Themselves – a Comprehensive Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality

Reception: a Film Is (Supposed to Be) Shown

“Is There a Doctor In the House?” — Film Characters talking to their Audience and vice versa

“Is There Any Spinach In the House?” – Objects Changing Sides & Dangerous Interactions Between Screen and Audience

Screen Passages To and Fro 1:

“I Ought to Be In Pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Screen Passages To and Fro 2:

“People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL”. Out of the Movie and Into the Real (?) World

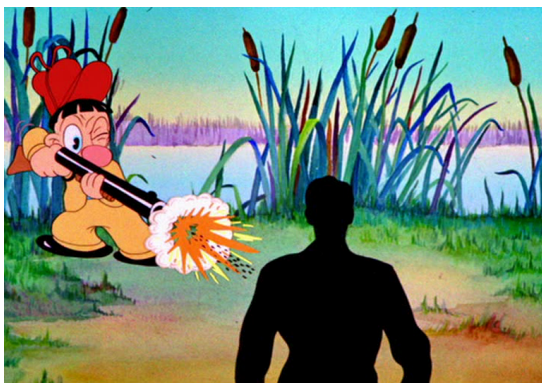
Screen Passages: Plotlines & Film Aesthetic Devices

A Short and Very Personal Coda

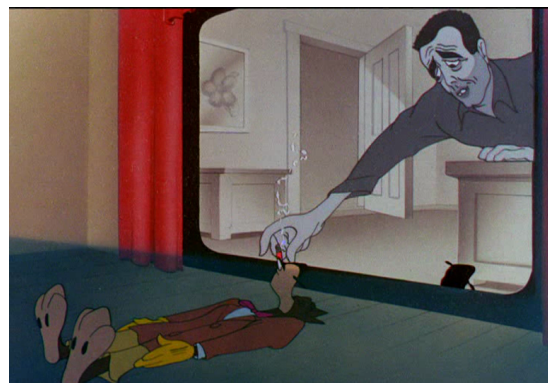
G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Dangerous interactions — 1



“Shsh! Sit down! There’s a duck in here. Sit down!” – *Daffy Duck and Egghead* (Fred Avery, US 1938)



Bogey Gocart shoots the horny Wolf – *Bacall to Arms* (Robert Clampett, US 1946)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Dangerous interactions — 2



*Circuito chiuso (Closed Circuit; Giuliano Montaldi, IT-RAI 1978)*: The Gunslinger (Giuliano Gemma) shoots out of the movie and keeps killing the patron sitting in one particular seat

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Dangerous Interaction — 3



Warren Nefron (Jerry Lewis) tries to kill himself, but the room service guy is shot instead — *Smorgasbord (Cracking Up; Jerry Lewis, US 1983)*

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



# Characters from both sides of the screen interact

When Movies Refer to Themselves – a Comprehensive Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality

Reception: a Film Is (Supposed to Be) Shown

“Is There a Doctor In the House?” — Film Characters talking to their Audience and vice versa

“Is There Any Spinach In the House?” – Objects Changing Sides & Dangerous Interactions Between Screen and Audience

Screen Passages To and Fro 1:

“I Ought to Be In Pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Screen Passages To and Fro 2:

“People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL”. Out of the Movie and Into the Real (?) World

Screen Passages: Plotlines & Film Aesthetic Devices

A Short and Very Personal Coda

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Entering the screen — in dream

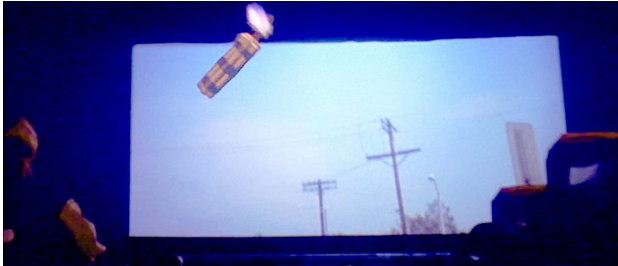
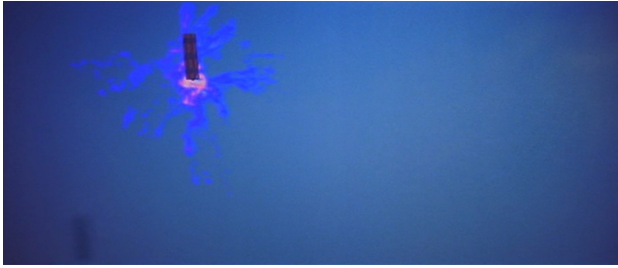


*Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, US 1924)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Entering the movie — 1

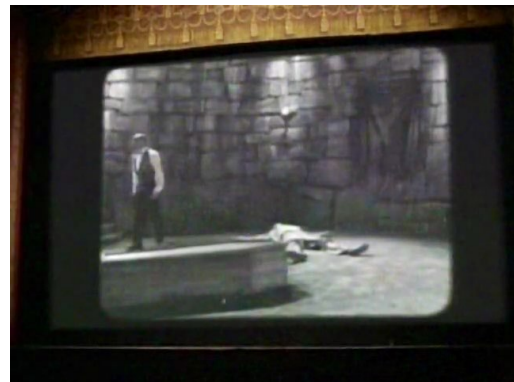


*Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, US 1993): Danny is hurled from the New York movie theater into the film and onto the back seat of Jack Slater's convertible in Los Angeles

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Entering the movie — 2



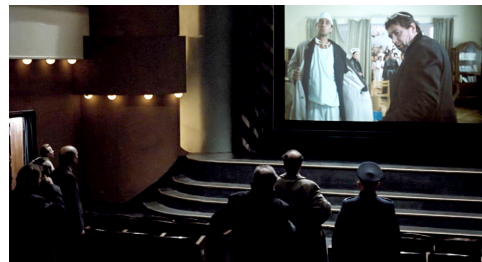
*Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* – "Flying Fists of Fury II: Masters of Illusion" (George Mendeluk, US 1995; s3-ep18): Kwai Chang Caine (David Carradine) enters the film to save the fighter Li Fong lost in limbo

*Are You Afraid of the Dark*, "The Tale of the Midnight Madness" s2-ep2, D.J. MacHale, CA-YTV 1993): Pete enters the *Nosferatu* movie

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Entering the movie — 3



*Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, US 1998): David (Toby Maguire) and Jennifer (Reese Witherspoon) are swirled into the TV set

*Escape From the "Liberty" Cinema* (Wojciech Marczewski, PL 1991): Rabkiewicz (Janusz Gajos) steps into the film on the screen (*Jutrzenka* aka *Daybreak*)

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IAASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Characters from both sides of the screen interact

When Movies Refer to Themselves – a Comprehensive Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality

Reception: a Film Is (Supposed to Be) Shown

“Is There a Doctor In the House?” — Film Characters talking to their Audience and vice versa

“Is There Any Spinach In the House?” – Objects Changing Sides & Dangerous Interactions Between Screen and Audience

Screen Passages To and Fro 1:

“I Ought to Be In Pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Screen Passages To and Fro 2:

“People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL”. Out of the Movie and Into the Real (?) World

Screen Passages: Plotlines & Film Aesthetic Devices

A Short and Very Personal Coda




## Leaving the film — 1



“My God, you must really love this picture. [...] I gotta speak to you.” — “Old sport, you’re on the wrong side.”  
*Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, US 1985)



*Charmed* (“Chick Flick”, Michael Schultz, US-WB 2000, s2-ep18): The Demon of Illusions drags Billy into reality.  
G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas 

## Leaving the film — 2



*Torchwood* (“From Out of the Rain”, s2-ep10; Jonathan Fox Bassett, GB-BBC 2008): the Ghostmaker (Julian Bleach), and Pearl (Camilla Power) summon all their colleagues from the 1920s movie of the *Night Travellers*

# Characters from both sides of the screen interact

When Movies Refer to Themselves – a Comprehensive Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality

Reception: a Film Is (Supposed to Be) Shown

“Is There a Doctor In the House?” — Film Characters talking to their Audience and vice versa

“Is There Any Spinach In the House?” – Objects Changing Sides & Dangerous Interactions Between Screen and Audience

Screen Passages To and Fro 1:

“I Ought to Be In Pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Screen Passages To and Fro 2:

“People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL”. Out of the Movie and Into the Real (?) World

**Screen Passages: Plotlines & Film Aesthetic Devices**

A Short and Very Personal Coda

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## The bad guys from the movies burn — 1



“Maybe [...] the only way the psycho’s know how to die is how they were killed on screen” — Bloody Mary was “thrown out of a window”, the axe guy “was electrocuted”. *Charmed* (“Chick Flick”, Michael Schultz, US-WB 2000, s2-ep18)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## The bad guys from the movies burn — 2



When the film with the filmed film characters is exposed to daylight, they burn  
*Torchwood* (“From Out of the Rain”, s2-ep10; Jonathan Fox Bassett, GB-BBC 2008)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Into the film — from color to black-and-white



*Are You Afraid of the Dark*, “The Tale of the Midnight Madness” s2-ep2, D.J. MacHale, CA-YTV 1993)

*Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* – “Flying Fists of Fury II: Masters of Illusion” (George Mendeluk, US 1995; s3-ep18)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Out of the film — from black-and-white to color



*Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, US 1985)



*Torchwood* ("From Out of the Rain", s2-ep10; Jonathan Fox Bassett, GB-BBC 2008)

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Black-and-white vs. color vs. black-and-white...



*Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, US 1998): David (Toby Maguire) puts gray make-up on his TV-Mom (Joan Allen) in color



*Charmed* ("Chick Flick", Michael Schultz, US-WB 2000, s2-ep18): Phoebe (Alyssa Milano) puts regular make-up on Billy (Chris Payne Gilbert) to conceal that he's in b-w, but then she kisses him...

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Different screens — soft plastic foil vs. glass pane



*Charmed* (“Chick Flick”, Michael Schultz, US-WB 2000, s2-ep18)



*Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, US 1985)



*Torchwood* (“From Out of the Rain”, s2-ep10; Jonathan Fox Bassett, GB-BBC 2008)



*Charmed* (“Chick Flick”, Michael Schultz, US-WB 2000, s2-ep18)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Screen at an extremely acute angle



*Kung Fu: The Legend Continues* – “Flying Fists of Fury II: Masters of Illusion” (George Mendeluk, US 1995; s3-ep18)



*Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, US 1993): Death (Ian McKellen) leaves “his” film (~ *Det sjunde inseglet*, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1957) shown in an arthouse cinema, scythe the first



*Are You Afraid of the Dark*, “The Tale of the Midnight Madness” s2-ep2, D.J. MacHale, CA-YTV 1993)



*Charmed* (“Chick Flick”, Michael Schultz, US-WB 2000, s2-ep18)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Camera: traveling to a split screen

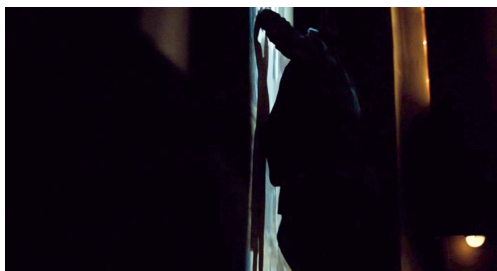
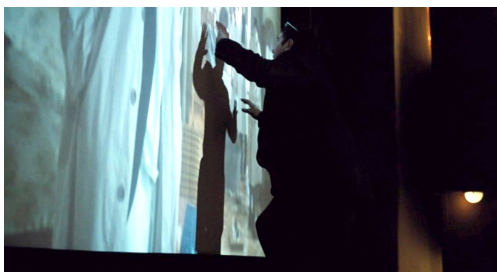
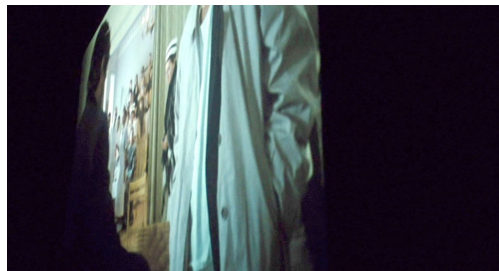
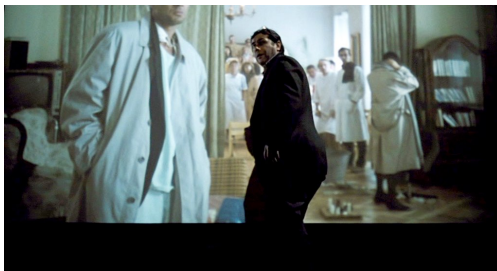


*Are You Afraid of the Dark*, "The Tale of the Midnight Madness" s2-ep2, D.J. MacHale, CA-YTV 1993)

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Camera: circular movement to behind the screen



*Ucieczka z kina "Wolność"* (Escape From the "Liberty" Cinema; Wojciech Marczewski, PL 1991)

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Entering the screen – special effects



*Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, US 1998): wobbling horizontal lines



*Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, US 1993): blueish glow Kirlian style

G. Withalm: "Tom's gone. He left the film." — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas



## Characters from both sides of the screen interact

When Movies Refer to Themselves – a Comprehensive Model of Filmic Self-Referentiality

Reception: a Film Is (Supposed to Be) Shown

“Is There a Doctor In the House?” — Film Characters talking to their Audience and vice versa

“Is There Any Spinach In the House?” – Objects Changing Sides & Dangerous Interactions Between Screen and Audience

Screen Passages To and Fro 1:

“I Ought to Be In Pictures”. From the seat into the movie

Screen Passages To and Fro 2:

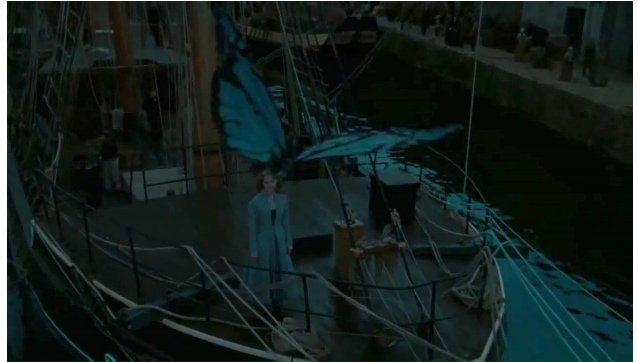
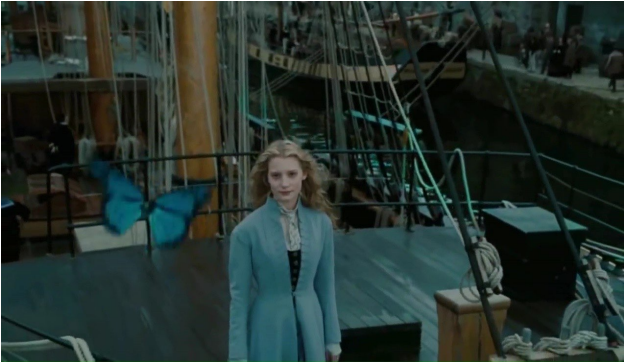
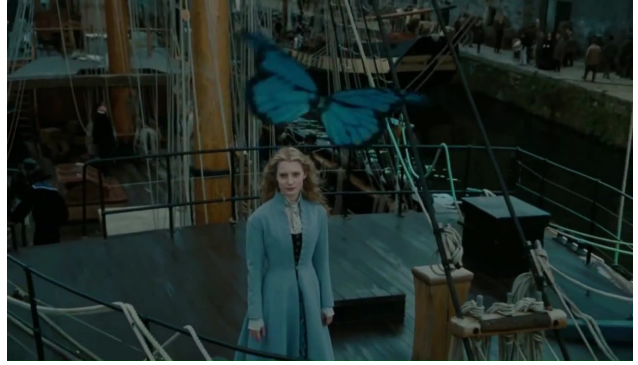
“People from a piece of film have decided to go AWOL”. Out of the Movie and Into the Real (?) World

Screen Passages: Plotlines & Film Aesthetic Devices

**A Short and Very Personal Coda**



## A magic butterfly ...



“Hello, Absolem”, and the 3D butterfly flutters away, right towards the screen, out of the screen and into the audience, dancing over our heads – *Alice in Wonderland* (Tim Burton, US 2010)

G. Withalm: “Tom’s gone. He left the film.” — 13 IASS 2017 / Kaunas

