

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

www.IRJMSH.com
www.isarasolutions.com

Published by iSaRa Solutions

WORLD-BUILDING IN NON-FANTASY FILMS: Constructing Immersive Realist Worlds Through Space, Time, and Sound

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Abstract

This dissertation advances the argument that world-building — a concept overwhelmingly associated with fantasy, science fiction, and mythic genres — operates with equal necessity within realist cinema, where filmmakers must engineer diegetic environments that register as authentic and inexhaustible to their audiences.¹

By extending Mark J. P. Wolf's subcreation framework and his notion of the 'inner consistency of reality,' the study contends that realist cinema constructs its secondary worlds not through deviation from the Primary World but through the density of cultural, historical, and institutional scaffolding embedded within its narratives.²

Synthesising Wolf's concept of secondary world infrastructures with André Bazin's ontological realism, Gilles Deleuze's time-image theory, and Michel Chion's model of audio-vision, this dissertation reframes cinematic realism as a generative act of world-construction rather than a passive act of mechanical inscription.³

The six films selected for analysis — Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018), Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* (2004), Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* (2014), Kiran Rao's *Dhobi Ghat* (2010), and Aditya Dhar's *Dhurandhar* (2025) — collectively traverse postcolonial resistance, domestic memory, urban proceduralism, institutional critique, city-as-mosaic storytelling, and contemporary geopolitical thriller.⁴

The analysis identifies three organising concepts: forced presence, temporal empathy, and inferred world-building. The study demonstrates that the immersive power of non-fantasy cinematic worlds arises not merely from what audiences see and hear, but from how they are made to experience the passage of time and from what they infer about diegetic spaces that lie perpetually beyond the camera's reach.⁵

Introduction: Realist Cinema as an Act of World-Building

World-building is most habitually discussed within the traditions of speculative narrative — fantasy, science fiction, and mythic epic — where authors and filmmakers construct environments radically discontinuous from ordinary experience.⁶

Yet this habitual association risks obscuring an equally important dimension of world-building: its operation within realist cinema. Even the most grounded, contemporaneously set film demands a coherent diegetic world in which its events are made legible.⁷

Realist films do not simply hold a mirror to observable reality. They actively produce a particular version of reality through deliberate decisions regarding location, compositional framing, shot duration, sound design, and narrative selection. A film set in a recognisable city

does not attempt to exhaustively document that city; it constructs a specific cinematic world that privileges certain spatial relations and social textures while eliding others.⁸

The spectator is not engaging with the city itself but with a diegetic environment shaped by aesthetic choices. From this vantage point, realism is not the absence of construction but a particularly persuasive and self-effacing mode of construction — one that labours to conceal the craft behind the illusion.⁹

Mark J. P. Wolf's scholarship on imaginary worlds furnishes a productive theoretical lens here. Wolf argues that the fictional world, rather than serving as a mere container for narrative events, should be treated as a primary object of inquiry in its own right — possessing its own geography, cultural logic, institutional architecture, and historical depth.¹⁰

Applied to cinema, this framework reveals that realism is a complex orchestration of spatial, temporal, and sensory design. Cinematography manages the spectator's movement through space; production design supplies material textures and environmental details; sound design extends the world acoustically beyond the visible frame; and editing modulates the lived experience of time. Together, these elements generate a cinematic ecosystem — a set of spatial and social relations that conjure the impression of a world that is inhabited, ongoing, and larger than any single scene can contain.¹¹

This dissertation is organised around the thesis that realism in cinema constitutes a form of subcreation in J. R. R. Tolkien's sense — the imaginative fabrication of a secondary world that achieves credibility through what Tolkien calls its inner consistency of reality. Cinematic realism accomplishes this not by inventing new physical laws or mythological creatures but by achieving a sufficient density and coherence of social structures, institutional practices, and lived routines.¹²

The dissertation's central claim is that the realism effect in cinema derives not from photographic indexicality per se but from the density and internal coherence of the world infrastructures constructed within the diegesis. Courtroom procedure, police investigation, domestic labour, and urban commerce all serve to intimate that the world on screen extends far beyond what any particular sequence can show.¹³

The analytical inquiry is organised around three conceptual pillars. The first is forced presence: the cinematographic and editorial techniques through which films compel spectators to experience duration as the characters do. The second is temporal empathy: the affective mode produced when extended scene duration draws the viewer into sustained identification with characters' temporal experience. The third is inferred world-building: the capacity of precisely chosen narrative fragments to prompt spectators to imaginatively complete a world that extends far beyond what the film explicitly represents.¹⁴

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

World-Building Beyond Fantasy: Mark J. P. Wolf and the Logic of Subcreation

The scholarly discourse on world-building has historically been anchored in speculative genres, where creators construct elaborate environments sharply discontinuous from consensus reality. Within literary and media studies, world-building refers to the process of fabricating the environment in which a particular narrative unfolds: the geographical, social, cultural, political, and technological conditions that collectively constitute a fictional reality.¹⁵

The most influential theorisation of this process is found in Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012), which makes the case that fictional worlds deserve to be studied as autonomous objects that can, in principle, subsist independently of any single narrative. For Wolf, the defining feature of a successful fictional world is what Tolkien called the inner consistency of reality: the quality of coherence achieved when all of a world's constitutive elements — geography, culture, language, political structure, historical memory — operate according to a discernible internal logic.¹⁶

Although Wolf's theoretical apparatus was developed with fantasy and science fiction firmly in view, its applicability to realist cinema is structural rather than incidental. The dominant tradition in film studies has tended to approach cinematic realism through the lens of photographic indexicality, emphasising the medium's capacity to record material reality. While this indexical account illuminates something real about the medium's relationship to its profilmic objects, it risks occluding the equally real fact that even a film set in a recognisable historical location creates a distinct secondary world through its compositional and editorial choices.¹⁷

Wolf's concept of secondary world infrastructures is especially productive for this analysis. These infrastructures are the structural elements that provide depth and support to fictional environments: cultural systems, institutional arrangements, labour patterns, linguistic registers, technological networks, and historical traditions. When such elements are richly and consistently rendered, they produce what Wolf terms world saturation — a condition in which the information present in the work exceeds what any given narrative strand strictly requires, allowing the spectator to apprehend the world as extending well beyond the events currently on screen.¹⁸

In the context of realist cinema, world saturation is achieved through the granular elaboration of social institutions and daily environments. A courtroom drama that meticulously renders bureaucratic procedure, legal terminology, and institutional architecture creates a world that feels richer and more extensive than its nominal plot requires — and it is precisely this surplus that grounds the spectator's sense of inhabiting a real social environment.¹⁹

Applying Wolf's framework to realist cinema involves a productive reorientation: rather than evaluating films against a standard of factual accuracy, the analyst asks about diegetic coherence and infrastructural density. The filmmaker, in this account, is a subcreator — a maker of secondary worlds intimately connected to the primary world but organised by their own internal logic and selection principles.²⁰

André Bazin and the Ontological Argument for Cinematic Realism

Any serious engagement with cinematic realism must reckon with the philosophical legacy of André Bazin, whose essays, collected in *What Is Cinema?*, established the foundational terms of the debate. Bazin's account of cinema pivots on the claim that the photographic image bears a physical trace of the reality that existed before the shutter opened — an ontological bond with the world that distinguishes it from other representational media.²¹

Crucially, however, Bazin did not reduce cinematic realism to the mere mechanical registration of images. He was deeply attentive to the fact that certain cinematographic styles were more adequate to capturing the fundamental ambiguity and complexity of the real world, famously championing long takes and deep-focus cinematography as formal strategies that honour the ontological density of the profilmic world by resisting the reductive power of montage.²²

His concept of the democratic image is particularly pertinent here. Deep-focus cinematography distributes visual information across multiple planes of the frame, presenting the spectator with simultaneous layers of action rather than directing attention to a single privileged focal point. This distributes interpretive agency to the viewer and allows environmental details — architecture, incidental social activity, material textures — to assert their presence as components of a coherent and continuous world.²³

From a world-building perspective, Bazin's arguments underscore the importance of spatial continuity and environmental integrity. The long take, by preserving the natural flow of duration, allows the cinematic world to manifest its own temporal logic. When events unfold with minimal editorial intervention, the spectator perceives duration in a manner approximating lived experience — and this phenomenological approximation is one of the primary mechanisms through which realist films generate the impression that the diegetic world genuinely continues beyond the frame.²⁴

Gilles Deleuze and the Time-Image

Where Bazin's account emphasises the spatial dimensions of cinematic realism, Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of cinema opens a complementary perspective focused on temporality. In his two-volume study, Deleuze distinguishes between the movement-image, which characterises classical action-centred cinemas, and the time-image, which he associates with the post-war European and world cinemas that emerged from the experience of historical rupture.²⁵

In the movement-image regime, time is subordinated to action: sequences are structured according to a sensory-motor logic in which characters perceive their situation, react to stimuli, and thereby drive the causal chain of the narrative forward. The time-image, by contrast, disrupts this subordination: characters find themselves in situations to which they cannot adequately respond, and the film allows time itself to become visible as a direct object of cinematic experience.²⁶

This theoretical framework carries significant implications for realist world-building. When a film allows time to pass at something approaching its natural pace — through extended takes, scenes of waiting, or extended depictions of routine activity — the spectator becomes acutely aware of the temporal texture of the diegetic environment. Walking, working, queuing, and

simply enduring become not mere transitions between plot events but occasions for the direct experience of how time flows within a particular social world.²⁷

Deleuze's notion of the crystal-image extends this analysis further. Crystal-images are moments in which the present and the past become indiscernible within a single image — instants in which temporal depth is made perceptible. Many realist films exploit this quality through their deployment of environments that carry visible historical traces: architecture shaped by successive occupations, cultural practices that persist from earlier historical formations, social structures bearing the marks of colonial transformation.²⁸

Michel Chion and the Sonic Construction of Cinematic Space

The theoretical framework would be incomplete without attention to the role of sound in constituting cinematic worlds. Michel Chion's concept of audio-vision, elaborated in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, provides the most sophisticated available account of how sound and image collaborate to produce the spectator's perception of diegetic space. Chion's central claim is that cinema is a genuinely audiovisual medium in which the two registers are inseparably fused in the act of perception.²⁹

Two of Chion's concepts are particularly generative for the analysis of realist world-building. The first is *synchresis* — the perceptual fusion of a sound and an image when the two are presented in synchrony, even when the sound was not produced by the visible source. The second is the function of ambient or environmental sound, which Chion regards as a crucial mechanism for extending the sense of space beyond the visible frame.³⁰

The environmental sounds that populate a realist film — traffic, industrial machinery, distant voices, the hum of ventilation systems — collectively intimate a world that is larger and more densely populated than any individual shot can show. These sounds imply unseen events occurring just beyond the edges of the frame, making sound design a primary tool for inferred world-building.³¹

Cognitive Film Theory and Narrative Transportation

The final theoretical strand concerns the cognitive and affective processes through which spectators engage with cinematic worlds. Cognitive film theory, particularly as developed in the work of David Bordwell, approaches film spectatorship as an active meaning-making process in which viewers draw on stored schemas, pattern-recognition capacities, and inferential reasoning to construct a coherent mental model of the narrative world.³²

This framework is particularly illuminating for the analysis of realist world-building because it foregrounds the viewer's tendency to extend what they see beyond the boundaries of any given scene. A glimpse of a police station connotes not only that space but an entire institutional apparatus. The richly detailed environments of realist films are triggers for this inferential activity, prompting viewers to imaginatively populate the world with social complexity.³³

This cognitive process finds a complementary description in narrative transportation theory, developed by Richard Gerrig, Melanie Green, and Timothy Brock. Transportation refers to the

state of deep engagement in which the viewer's cognitive and affective resources are substantially recruited by the narrative world. Research in this tradition suggests that films with high levels of environmental detail, internal logical coherence, and compelling characters produce the strongest transportation effects.³⁴

Methodology

Research Design

This dissertation employs a qualitative analytical methodology oriented toward the interpretation of cinematic form and its relationship to the construction of diegetic worlds. The primary research concern — how visual composition, temporal structure, sound design, and spatial organisation work together to produce the impression of a fully inhabited world — demands close, interpretive engagement with specific films rather than quantitative enumeration of formal features.³⁵

The methodological approach is grounded in textual analysis, the dominant interpretive practice in film studies, which treats film as an audiovisual text amenable to systematic formal analysis. Wolf's world-building theory organises the overarching interpretive frame; Bazin's realism theory guides the analysis of spatial continuity; Deleuze's time-image furnishes the vocabulary for temporal analysis; Chion's audio-vision informs the analysis of sound; and cognitive film theory illuminates the spectatorial dimensions of world-building.³⁶

Qualitative Film Analysis

The primary methodological instrument is qualitative film analysis, understood as the close, iterative examination of specific sequences in relation to their formal properties and their effects on the viewing experience. Rather than tallying quantitative metrics, the analysis engages with the dynamic interplay among cinematography, production design, sound design, editing, and performance — all of which contribute simultaneously to the impression of a real world.³⁷

The practical procedure involves repeated viewings of selected sequences, during which detailed observations are made about visual composition, camera behaviour, environmental design, and sound layering. Attention is given to the relationship between foreground and background, the handling of off-screen space, the duration of individual shots, and the selection and blending of diegetic sounds.³⁸

Analytical Parameters

To maintain analytical consistency across the six case studies, the examination is structured around four parameters: spatial continuity (the degree to which a film constructs an imaginatively mappable environment);³⁹ visual density (the richness of environmental information across the visual field);⁴⁰ temporal design (how shot duration and editing rhythm

shape the spectator's experience of time);⁴¹ and sound design (the deployment of ambient and off-screen sound to extend the world beyond the visible frame).⁴²

Limitations

The study's qualitative orientation and deliberately restricted corpus entail certain limitations. The interpretive findings are not designed to be statistically generalisable across the full range of realist cinema; they are offered as theoretically grounded readings that illuminate the mechanisms of realist world-building with particular clarity. The analysis also deliberately brackets questions of industrial context — financing, censorship regimes, and distribution networks — in order to maintain focus on formal and aesthetic analysis.⁴³

Case Studies in Realist World-Building

The Battle of Algiers: Urban Topography, Occupation, and the Architecture of Resistance

Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) occupies an exceptional position within the history of political realist cinema. Narrating the Algerian independence struggle against French colonial rule from 1954 to 1962, the film was shot on location in Algiers using a predominantly non-professional cast. The visual aesthetic that results — grainy black-and-white photography, handheld camera work, observational framing — so closely resembles actual newsreel footage that Pontecorvo appended a note confirming that no documentary material had been incorporated.⁴⁴

The Casbah — the historic Arab quarter of Algiers — functions in the film not merely as a setting but as an active participant in the narrative. The neighbourhood is constructed as a topographically complex, organically evolved urban environment whose winding alleys, steep stairways, interconnected rooftops, and hidden courtyards constitute the material conditions of possibility for armed resistance. The spectator is taken through the Casbah repeatedly, accumulating a cognitive map of its geography that progressively reveals the strategic logic of the insurgents' tactical choices.⁴⁵

The spatial contrast between the Casbah and the European quarter functions as a sustained spatial metaphor for colonial social structure. Where the Casbah is characterised by density, intricacy, and the constant visible presence of communal life, the European quarter is marked by broad boulevards, open terraces, and the spatial confidence of the coloniser. Movement between these zones is charged with the political significance of spatial transgression, rendering the colonial division of urban space visually and narratively legible.⁴⁶

The apparatus of colonial counter-insurgency — military headquarters, interrogation facilities, identity-document checkpoints, detention infrastructure — is depicted not as a series of isolated dramatic episodes but as a systematic and continuous operation. Scenes of soldiers processing identification papers, conducting house-to-house searches, and enforcing curfew regulations present colonial domination as an administrative and bureaucratic practice, revealing the institutional architecture through which the colonial order is sustained.⁴⁷

Sound plays a constitutive role in the construction of the film's world. The acoustic environment of the Casbah — crowd murmur, chanted political slogans, sudden explosions, the

grinding of military vehicles — creates a sonic texture that implies activity and tension extending well beyond whatever the camera currently shows. This quality of sonic surplus is one of the primary mechanisms of inferred world-building in the film.⁴⁸

Long takes that allow characters to navigate the urban environment with minimal editorial intervention give the spectator time to experience the rhythm of the city — the gradual accumulation of tension as soldiers patrol, as civilians gather, as insurgents prepare. These extended passages conform to Bazin's model of realist duration: by resisting the temptation to accelerate through montage, the film preserves the ambiguity and complexity of events as they might actually unfold.⁴⁹

Roma: Memory, Domestic Space, and the Phenomenology of Everyday Duration

Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (2018) represents a distinct variant of realist world-building in which the primary site of construction is the domestic interior and the intimate textures of daily life. Set in Mexico City in the early 1970s and based on the filmmaker's own childhood memories, the film follows Cleo, a young Indigenous domestic worker employed by a middle-class family in the Roma neighbourhood.⁵⁰

The production's commitment to period accuracy is exhaustive. The street on which the action is primarily set was physically reconstructed; period-appropriate automobiles, commercial signage, furniture, and clothing were sourced or fabricated; and the acoustic environment was populated with radio programming contemporary to the early 1970s. These elements exceed the requirements of narrative coherence, performing instead the function of generating the sense of a world that is fully realised and historically specific — Wolf's world saturation at its most granular.⁵¹

Cuarón's camera operates on a slow, horizontal tracking principle — moving through the house's rooms, corridors, and rooftop with measured spatial intelligence. Rather than cutting quickly between compositional positions, the camera drifts laterally, accumulating the spatial knowledge that allows the spectator to construct an accurate mental map of the house as a whole. This technique achieves Bazin's ideal of spatial continuity: the house is presented not as a series of disconnected interiors but as a coherent, three-dimensional environment.⁵²

The film's most formally ambitious sequence — the Corpus Christi Massacre scene — illustrates *Roma*'s capacity to integrate personal narrative and historical event within a single continuous long take. As Cleo and the family's grandmother visit a furniture shop to purchase a crib, they are caught in the violent dispersal of student protesters by government paramilitaries. The formal continuity of the take exemplifies what Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image describes: a moment in which the personal present and the national historical memory become simultaneously legible within a single image.⁵³

Departing from the convention of non-diegetic musical scoring, *Roma* relies almost exclusively on diegetic and environmental sound: traffic, street vendors' calls, barking dogs, distant aircraft, construction noise. Following Chion's framework, these sounds extend the spectator's perception of space beyond the visible frame, creating an acoustic world that is larger and more populous than any individual shot can contain.⁵⁴

Scenes of domestic labour — Cleo sweeping the courtyard, soaking laundry, preparing meals, shepherding children — unfold at the pace at which such activities actually occur, with no editorial compression. The spectator is required to inhabit the duration of the work alongside the worker. This is forced presence in its most disciplined form, producing temporal empathy of a particularly complex kind.⁵⁵

Black Friday: Procedural Realism and the City as Investigative Field

Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* (2004) is organised around the machinery of criminal investigation and its relationship to the urban fabric of post-liberalisation Bombay. Adapted from S. Hussain Zaidi's journalistic account, the film reconstructs the chain of events surrounding the 1993 Bombay bombings and the subsequent police investigation.⁵⁶

The film's most distinctive world-building strategy is its commitment to procedural detail. The investigation is rendered as a long, painstaking, and morally equivocal process in which information is extracted, cross-referenced, and assembled incrementally across a wide range of institutional sites — police stations, safe houses, interrogation rooms, intelligence offices, and courtrooms. This institutional depth creates a world that feels genuinely systemic.⁵⁷

Kashyap uses the investigation's geographical reach to construct Bombay as a city of interleaved neighbourhoods, each with its own social character and spatial texture. The cinematographic approach — handheld camera, natural light, long focal lengths that compress urban space — contributes to the film's pseudo-documentary realism. The camera frequently struggles to maintain visual purchase on subjects moving through crowded environments, and this technical difficulty is incorporated into the aesthetic rather than concealed.⁵⁸

The non-linear temporal structure of the film mirrors the epistemological condition of the investigation itself: information is not presented in chronological sequence but in the order in which it becomes available to investigators. The spectator's experience of assembling a coherent understanding from fragmentary and non-sequential data replicates the cognitive experience of the detectives within the narrative.⁵⁹

Sound design is primarily environmental and diegetic, with the acoustic texture of Bombay — traffic, crowd noise, police communications, the sounds of markets and workshops — creating a continuous sonic backdrop that implies a city in constant motion. Offscreen sounds frequently suggest activities and events that are not visually represented, extending the spectator's sense of the city as a world that exceeds the investigation's field of view.⁶⁰

Court: Bureaucratic Time, Institutional Space, and the World of Legal Procedure

Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* (2014) is one of contemporary Indian cinema's most formally rigorous explorations of institutional space and bureaucratic temporality. Centred on the trial of Narayan Kamble — an aging folk singer and activist charged with abetting suicide through the content of one of his protest songs — the film systematically refuses the dramatic conventions of the courtroom genre.⁶¹

The film's visual strategy is dominated by static wide shots that present the courtroom as a total environment — a space in which roles are distributed, positions are fixed, and actions are governed by procedural convention. Background figures — lawyers consulting with clerks, spectators shifting in their seats, junior advocates exchanging papers — are constantly present, constructing the courtroom as a world densely populated with participants whose functions extend well beyond the immediate proceedings.⁶²

Legal proceedings unfold in real time, with no editorial compression: lawyers read documents in their entirety, witnesses deliver testimony at the pace at which testimony is actually given, and the court adjourns with the same abruptness and inconclusiveness that characterises actual judicial scheduling. This is forced presence operating at maximum intensity: the film refuses to spare the viewer the experience of institutional duration, and in doing so reveals the degree to which the legal institution operates according to a temporal logic systematically disconnected from the urgency of the human situation it is ostensibly addressing.⁶³

The film's world-building extends beyond the courtroom through sequences that follow the principal legal actors into their private lives, situating the institution within the wider social formation that sustains it. The cultural and social dispositions that the professionals bring with them into the institutional space are not incidental to how justice is administered but constitutive of it — a clear example of inferred world-building.⁶⁴

The courtroom's acoustic environment — the whirr of ceiling fans, the rustle of paper, the murmur of corridor activity, the periodic eruption of street noise from outside — creates a sound world that anchors the institutional space in a larger urban environment. The deliberate absence of a dramatic musical score denies the spectator the emotional guidance that music conventionally provides, requiring instead that emotional responses be derived from the material circumstances of the space.⁶⁵

Dhobi Ghat: The City as Social Organism and the Mosaic of Urban Experience

Kiran Rao's *Dhobi Ghat* (2010) approaches urban realism from a perspective that is simultaneously intimate and expansive. Set entirely in Mumbai, the film weaves together four narrative strands — a reclusive painter, a visiting American banker turned amateur photographer, a young laundry worker, and a newly married woman whose experience of the city is mediated through a series of personal video diaries — in a structure that privileges convergence and encounter over linear causality.⁶⁶

The *Dhobi Ghat* — the vast open-air laundry that serves as one of Mumbai's most distinctive urban institutions — is presented with a degree of procedural specificity that most mainstream Indian cinema would consider expendable. The labour of the washermen is depicted in extended, unhurried sequences less concerned with advancing any particular character's story than with establishing the economic and social reality of the labour infrastructure that the laundry represents.⁶⁷

Each character's movement through the city reveals a different layer of Mumbai's social geography, and together these perspectives construct Mumbai as a social organism of

irreducible complexity. The video diary sequences of Yasmin introduce an embedded-media aesthetic — footage shot by a character within the narrative using a domestic camcorder, whose technical imperfections are presented as the authentic marks of a particular mode of engagement with experience.⁶⁸

The acoustic landscape of Mumbai — the soundscapes of market streets, the rhythms of the laundry, the distant trains, the layered conversations of a densely inhabited neighbourhood — creates an acoustic world that implies the city's continuous existence beyond any particular scene. Following Chion's framework, these environmental sounds function not as atmospheric decoration but as a primary mechanism for extending the spectator's sense of the city's spatial and social extent.⁶⁹

The temporal arrangement of the film allows for temporal empathy, where the viewer participates in the experience of passing through the spaces of the city alongside the characters. Scenes of mundane activity — navigating markets, preparing meals, moving through traffic — are given considerable screen time, allowing the spectator to experience the urban environment as a space in which time is constantly and unhurriedly passing.⁷⁰

Dhurandhar: Geopolitical Realism and the Ethics of Espionage World-Building

Aditya Dhar's *Dhurandhar* (2025) extends the realist world-building tradition into the genre of the geopolitical espionage thriller. The film centres on an Indian intelligence officer who infiltrates networks associated with cross-border terrorism, moving through a range of spaces associated with surveillance, concealment, and strategic deception: intelligence offices, safe houses, criminal networks, urban underworlds, and the corridors of political power.⁷¹

Scenes within intelligence organisations show analysts processing surveillance data, officers coordinating operations, and policymakers deliberating on strategic responses. This procedural attention constructs intelligence work not as a sequence of heroic individual actions but as the product of a complex institutional apparatus — a world of hierarchies, protocols, and information management practices that the narrative's events are embedded within and made legible by.⁷²

Sound design incorporates a distinctive feature that marks the film as an example of inferred world-building: the use of archival audio — news broadcasts, political speeches, recordings of actual events — to connect the film's fictional narrative to the historical and political context in which it is embedded. By weaving actual historical sounds into the film's acoustic environment, the sound design positions the fictional events within a real geopolitical frame, producing what Chion describes as a truth effect.⁷³

Rather than adopting the rapid-cut, spatially fragmented aesthetic of the mainstream action genre, *Dhurandhar* uses long takes and spatially continuous camera movement to present physical confrontations as events occurring in real space and time. The spectator's ability to track the positions of characters within a coherent spatial environment is maintained even during moments of maximum tension — a form of forced presence that gives the audience a sense of physical witness to the action.⁷⁴

The film's realist aspirations raise ethical questions that are particularly urgent in the contemporary context of South Asian geopolitics. An immersive and procedurally detailed representation of intelligence operations, terrorist networks, and cross-border conflict necessarily intervenes in public understanding of events and actors that are subjects of ongoing political and diplomatic contestation.⁷⁵

Comparative Discussion: Strategies of Realist World-Building Across Contexts

Read together, the six films illuminate both the common mechanisms through which realist cinema constructs immersive diegetic worlds and the significant variations that arise from different historical contexts, national traditions, and generic frameworks.⁷⁶

The most consistent shared feature is the commitment to social infrastructure as a world-building material. The colonial administrative apparatus of *The Battle of Algiers*, the domestic labour economy of *Roma*, the criminal investigation machinery of *Black Friday*, the legal bureaucracy of *Court*, the urban labour infrastructure of *Dhobi Ghat*, and the intelligence and criminal networks of *Dhurandhar* are all instances of the same basic world-building strategy: the construction of social institutions as legible environments that the spectator can mentally inhabit and imaginatively extend.⁷⁷

This shared strategy produces worlds that feel larger than their narratives. Because each film shows enough of its institutional infrastructure to imply the existence of more — because the viewer can infer, from what is shown, what would be found in the spaces just off-screen — the diegetic world in every case feels as though it exceeds the film that depicts it. This is Wolf's world saturation operating across different national and generic contexts.⁷⁸

Temporal design is perhaps the area of greatest formal diversity among the six films. At one end of the spectrum, *Court* and *Roma* commit to a temporal aesthetic of uncompressed duration — the clearest instances of forced presence. At the other end, *Black Friday* and *Dhurandhar* deploy a more dynamic temporal approach that reflects the pace of investigation and espionage. *The Battle of Algiers* occupies a middle position, alternating between contemplative long takes and more urgent montage passages.⁷⁹

The acoustic dimension of these films is consistently handled through strategies of environmental richness and sonic surplus. In every case, the acoustic environment extends the world beyond the visual frame: the crowd noise and military machinery of *Algiers*, the street life of *Mexico City*, the urban density of *Bombay*, the institutional sounds of the Indian legal system, and the archival political audio of *Dhurandhar* all imply a world that is larger and more populated than any single shot can contain.⁸⁰

The comparative analysis also reveals the ethical implications of the different types of world constructed by realist cinema. The politically and militarily charged worlds of *The Battle of Algiers*, *Black Friday*, and *Dhurandhar* raise the most urgent questions about the relationship between cinematic realism and political perception. Narrative transportation research suggests that deeply immersed spectators are susceptible to the world's influence on their attitudes and

beliefs in ways that less engaged viewers are not — a susceptibility that is inherent to the realist project rather than contingent on any particular thematic focus.⁸¹

Conclusion and Directions for Further Research

This dissertation has argued that realist cinema constitutes a form of world-building whose ambitions and achievements are comparable to those of speculative and fantasy genres. The analysis has demonstrated, across a diverse corpus of six films, that realist cinema actively constructs secondary worlds through the precise orchestration of spatial design, institutional infrastructure, temporal rhythm, and sonic environment — and that these worlds achieve their persuasiveness through what Tolkien and Wolf call the inner consistency of reality.⁸²

The first significant conclusion is that realism should be understood as subcreation rather than representation. Just as Tolkien's fantasy subcreator constructs a world whose credibility depends on the coherence of its internal logic, the realist filmmaker constructs a secondary world whose credibility depends on the density and coherence of its social, institutional, and environmental infrastructure.⁸³

The second conclusion concerns the indispensability of temporal design to the realist world-building project. The concept of forced presence describes the formal strategy by which certain realist films require their spectators to experience duration in something approximating the rate at which it is experienced by the characters. In *Court* and *Roma*, this strategy is pursued with exceptional rigour; in *Black Friday* and *Dhurandhar*, it is adapted to reflect the pace of investigation and espionage without sacrificing its fundamental world-building function.⁸⁴

The third conclusion concerns the constitutive role of sound in realist world-building. The acoustic environments of all six films are primary mechanisms for generating the spectator's conviction that the diegetic world is larger and more complex than what the camera can show. Environmental sound, off-screen sound, and — in the case of *Dhurandhar* — archival historical sound collectively produce the sonic surplus that is the acoustic analogue of Wolf's world saturation.⁸⁵

The fourth conclusion concerns the relationship between cinematic world-building and spectatorial cognition and affect. The spectator of a highly immersive realist film is not merely an observer of the depicted world but an active cognitive and affective inhabitant of it — someone whose mental model of the world is shaped by the film's infrastructural density, whose emotional responses are calibrated by its temporal rhythms, and whose implicit attitudes may be influenced by the political and social values embedded in the world's construction.⁸⁶

The dissertation's contribution to the broader theoretical discourse on cinematic realism consists above all in its demonstration that the world-building framework — hitherto developed primarily in relation to speculative genres — is a productive and illuminating lens for the analysis of realist cinema. The concepts of world saturation, inner consistency, and secondary world infrastructures all translate productively across the generic boundary between fantasy and realism, revealing dimensions of realist filmmaking that more conventional frameworks have tended to overlook.⁸⁷

Directions for Further Research

An extension of the world-building framework to diverse national cinema traditions — African, Southeast Asian, Eastern European, Latin American — would test the generalisability of the conclusions reached here and might reveal world-building strategies that are culturally specific rather than universal.⁸⁸

The relationship between realist world-building and long-form serialised television drama, which offers narrative formats that permit more extended elaboration of diegetic worlds than the feature film can sustain, represents another productive area of inquiry.⁸⁹

The emergence of virtual reality and interactive cinema creates new contexts in which the spectator's relationship to the diegetic world is transformed from passive immersion to active navigation, raising new questions about world-building, spectatorial agency, and the ethics of immersive representation that the present framework is not equipped to address but might usefully inform.⁹⁰

Finally, the collaborative dimension of cinematic world-building — the division of world-building labour between the cinematographer, production designer, sound designer, editor, and director — constitutes a significant and undertheorised topic that a production studies approach might productively address.⁹¹

In sum, this dissertation has established that realist cinema is not a passive recording of reality but an active construction of secondary worlds — worlds that achieve their immersive power through density, coherence, and temporal honesty, and that bear, in their construction and reception, ethical responsibilities commensurate with their world-building ambitions. The concept of realism as world-building does not diminish the realist tradition's commitment to social truth; it reveals the extraordinary craft through which that commitment is realised.

EndNotes

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