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Chapter Author(s): Ian Christie

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1. Introduction – Phenomenologies of Screen Space

Ian Christie

No man can conceive anything, but he must conceive it in some place.
– Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

The anxiety of our age has to do fundamentally with space.
– Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1967)

If once it was "time" that framed the privileged angle of vision, today, so it is often said, that role has been taken over by space.
– Doreen Massey, *For Space* (2005)

Andrei Tarkovsky (1987) famously defined cinema as above all an art of time, enabling its spectators to experience time in novel ways – and its makers to "sculpt" it. Twenty years earlier, André Bazin had defined cinema as a photographic medium as "objectivity in time" or "change mummified" (1967, 15). But is it not equally, or even more fundamentally an art of *space*? Even before we have registered any sense of time, in front of a screen we are unavoidably "in another place." In classic cinemagoing, we have traveled to a special place where this vision of a different world is presented in its optimal form, framed by a dark surround, with distractions minimized. The history of cinemagoing is rich with phrases such as "being transported/immersed" and entering "other worlds." As early as 1911, the playwright Jules Romains wrote about the cinema audience entering a "group dream" in which, "while their bodies slumber [...] they pursue burglars across the rooftops, cheering the passing of a king from the east, or march onto a wide plain with bayonets or bugles" (1988, 53).

Today, multiplatform media call into question the classical model of cinematic space, with its abstracted ideal spectator before a fixed screen.

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The portable image/mobile screen forms part of a redefined space, in which viewer and viewed are no longer fixed, but constantly changing place and in flux. The cinema – place of a "special memory," as Raymond Bellour (2012) termed it – may once have been a stable place within this flux, like the gallery or concert hall, but now and in the foreseeable future, it is very much the exception rather than the rule. We are, it seems, adrift in multifocal and constantly evolving spaces. And here, we are inevitably more conscious of two superimposed or embedded spaces: that of the viewing experience and of the experience viewed; of representation and of reception. We are habitually "in two places (or more) at once." And during the worldwide closure of cinemas in 2021-2022 – which was also the period when this collection took shape – domestic viewing became a new norm, with streaming overtaking other forms of domestic viewing.[1]

Why then, we may wonder, have the spatial aspects of the cinematic or filmic experience been largely ignored by theorists of the medium? Perhaps because they seem so obvious, even banal. What can we say about the fact that any filmic image shows somewhere other than the darkened room and the framed screen – apart from cataloguing the typical spaces of, say, the Western, the *film noir*, or the "heritage film," which takes us into considerations of genre, authorship, ideology, and away from space *per s*e.

Perhaps this is exactly the problem. As the philosopher Edward Casey suggests, near the end of his large historical study *The Fate of Place*:

> The shape of place, its very face, has changed dramatically from the time of Archytas and Aristotle. So much so that we may have difficulty recognizing place *as place* as it comes out of the concealment in which it has been kept for over two millennia. It certainly no longer appears as a mere container. (1997, 339)

Casey points to Martin Heidegger's rejection of the "container model" early in the latter's major text *Being and Time* (1927), transforming it into "more of an event than an entity." He also cites Jacques Derrida's "denial that place as such [...] is ever simply *presented*: for him too, place is an event, a matter of *taking place*." (339). Casey goes on to celebrate in this "Postface" to his history the "ever-proliferating guises" in which place has appeared in recent philosophy: as imaginary *topoi* in Bachelard; as *heterotopoi* in Foucault; as

1 For an analysis of film viewing by location, see the British Film Institute report *Opening Our Eyes* (2011, 16). The 6 percent of viewings in cinemas estimated in 2011 would almost certainly be a smaller proportion today.

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traces in Derrida, also in Heidegger, Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and Stegner. He notes that it "surfaces in the cultural efflorescence of 'cultural geography.' Never having vanished into Space (or Time) altogether, place is abounding" (339).

Casey's concern is to extricate specific senses of "place" from what he believes has been a dominant abstract sense of space running through Western philosophy – typified by the opening of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1965), with its dove "cleaving the air in her free flight [that] would be still easier in pure space." For the influential English cultural geographer Doreen Massey, whose work has been an important influence on Patrick Keiller, a contributor to this collection (and for its editor), it is certainly important to disentangle space from time. But it is also important not to succumb to the lure of place – "usually evoked as 'local place'" – as a "politically conservative haven" (2005, 5-6). Her manifesto work, *For Space*, recognized the difficulty of keeping space in view, as "the product of interrelations" and the "dimension of the social," and may appear antithetical to that of Casey (9). Yet Massey wants to insist on "place as an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories," and places as posing "in particular form the question of our living together," (151) which are issues raised by a number of contributors here.

The present collection is indeed informed by what has often been termed "the spatial turn" in critical theory and in cultural geography, while recognizing that this can mean very different things to those shaped by different philosophical traditions. Most of its contributors are probably familiar with Michel Foucault's "heterotopia" (1976) and many will have at least a passing acquaintance with Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991). But fewer may be familiar with the architectural theorist Christian Norburg-Schultz's *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1971) or the anthropologist Edward T. Hall's *The Hidden Dimension* (1966), despite the use that has been made of these by writers on film design and screen space.[2]

Two long-running historic debates in film theory are not directly addressed in this collection: the early contention between "theatrical" and filmic space; and the discussions of "narrative space" launched by Stephen Heath in the 1980s, and involving narratologists such as Gerard Genette, D.

2 For instance, Charles Tashiro's *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History of Film* (1998) draws on Norburg-Schultz for its theorization of design; and Hall's idea of "territoriality" was an influence on J.B. Jackson's conception of "American space," discussed in my chapter on NOMADLAND, but is also invoked here by Yosr Ben Romdhane in her discussion of stereoscopic cinema (chapter 11).

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Herman, and others. Nor is Mikhail Bakhtin's *chronotope* explored here, as a potential way of specifying how time and space are typically combined in different genres of narrative fiction, such as adventure, epic, or romance. In discussions of this, the emphasis has often been primarily on the different temporal modes employed, rather than the spaces typical of these genres, which might well be fruitful. The main aim, however, has not been to summarize or develop new theoretical paradigms, but to offer a range of "case study" approaches to the neglected issue of screen space, and to span a wide range of historical media, from pre-cinema panoramas and stereoscopes, through different phases of twentieth-century cinema, to the emergence of videographic and digital media, and finally the XR immersive experience of the present.

About the Book

The collection is divided into three parts – Spaces of Spectatorship, Spaces on Screen, and Spatial Speculations.

PART I begins with the most popular form of immersive spectacle of the nineteenth century, the Panorama, as Luke McKernan evocatively describes the experience of visiting Europe's last surviving example of this form, the Mesdag Panorama at The Hague in the Netherlands, comparing this with one of several films that have played with positing an "off-screen" space within their diegesis. Mark Cosgrove writes from the experience of a career in film exhibition, programming a variety of specialist or "art house" venues in Britain, and arguing that spaces of exhibition do significantly impact the experience of the works shown.[3] He also reaches beyond conventional exhibition to discuss the growing importance of site-specific presentations that combine live performance with the projected image. Last in this section is an unusual and highly personal exploration by Roger Odin of the "mental space" created through domestic filming under COVID-19 lockdown conditions in France in 2021.

PART II – Spaces on Screen – offers four contrasting case studies in the creation of fictive spaces. Mark Broughton examines the English country-house estate that was both subject of and filming location for Joseph Losey's 1971 film THE GO-BETWEEN. Noting that this was at the time an unprecedented case of combining landscaped exteriors with the

3 For a historical sketch of the interaction between cinema architecture and social experience, see my article on Russian cinema buildings (Christie 2001, 32-34.) See also Tsivian 1994, 15-120.

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actual house they surround – where previous "heritage" films had relied on studio-built settings interspersed with landscape imagery – Broughton probes both the history of English landscape "improvement," beginning in the eighteenth century, and the roots of the "picturesque" aesthetic that inspired it. Losey, he argues, as an American-born "foreigner" to English society, and aided by Harold Pinter's radical script, is able to reveal

> the violence […] and cultivation that seem beyond the estate's gardens, but in fact underpin the whole estate. The "Old Garden" […] where Ted and Marian have sex, acts as a picturesque enclave near the house's terrace garden: a reminder that the violence and differences concealed by picturesqueness are at the heart of the estate.

In sharp contrast, the modern interiors seen in Chantal Akerman's films, often infused and imprinted by the filmmaker's autobiography, display a modernist sensitivity to the filmic representation of "found" domestic space. Sarah Leperchey traces eloquently how framing, movement, and duration are deployed by Akerman across an extensive body of work. And since Akerman played a part in the emergence of a second phase of "expanded cinema" in the 1990s "her installations invite us to use the conceptual framework of the 'spatial turn,' and thus to rethink the relationships that are established between filmic space and the space within which moving images are seen by their viewers."

Not only do Akerman's films have more in common with the architectural premises of Anglo-American "structural film" than might be obvious, as Leperchey demonstrates, but by virtue of their focus on mundane settings, they also anticipated a widespread preoccupation with "everyday" space that emerged contemporaneously in the work of Henri Lefebvre, Georges Perec, and Michel de Certeau.

Back in Britain, Patrick Keiller's "Robinson trilogy" – LONDON, ROBINSON IN SPACE, and ROBINSON IN RUINS – directly address the fabric of England in terms of historical and economic geography, albeit informed by what might be termed a post-modern sensibility. As the filmmaker, himself a former architect, explains, these are all linked by the conceit of being fictional accounts of research by a would-be scholar called Robinson into a series of "problems" – of London as a historical complex, of England's industrial decline, and of the multi-layered fabric of England's landscape.

Keiller's perspective was deeply informed by his association with the cultural geographer Doreen Massey, and he quotes suggestively from her

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book *For Space*: "Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (2005, 9). Like Akerman, his films would also lend themselves to gallery-based display, in this case a 2012 exhibition at Tate Britain, *The Robinson Institute*, in which objects and paratexts "spatialized" what had previously existed as an audiovisual continuum (a form that is revisited in the "Afterword").

In the final chapter in this section, I consider Chloe Zhao's NOMADLAND, not only in terms of its fictionalized reportage on the phenomenon of America's "new nomads," but also from two other perspectives. One is the deep impulse to escape from an oppressive "civilization" that has run through North American culture from the era of the Pioneers and New England Transcendentalists up to Mark Twain's Huck Finn and the twentieth century's Beats and Hippies: a search for some Edenic wilderness that has given America's empty spaces and its highways their distinctive cultural and historical significance, as theorized by Leo Marx, J.B. Jackson, and others.[4] The other perspective, more recent and relating to other chapters, is recognizing the significance of NOMADLAND appearing near the end of the COVID pandemic's enforced isolation, which may well have affected responses to its protagonist's choice to reject the doubtful consolations of domesticity after her bereavement, seeking instead a Winnicottian "potential space" of fulfillment.

PART III – Spatial Speculations – begins with a dialogue exploring differences between evocations of space in prose and screen fiction. This was prompted by two earlier publications by Isobel Armstrong and myself. Armstrong, a distinguished literary critic, had noted a striking difference between the topographical information conveyed by different classic nineteenth-century novels, and was interested in pursuing this into the following century. For my part, I had compared a number of filmic representations of "home" and welcomed a chance to pursue this classic debate, not in terms of adaptation, but of how we interpret different spatial cues, particularly in the case of two major John Ford Westerns, MY DARLING CLEMENTINE (1946) and THE SEARCHERS (1956).

In the next chapter, Catherine Elwes recounts how, even before becoming a pioneer English video artist and curator, she had faced the challenge of

4 It may be worth signposting here an earlier article in which I attempted to "read filmic space historically," relating the representation of places of filming to their historicity, taking as my text Milcho Manchevski's BEFORE THE RAIN (1994), filmed in Macedonia and London. This reading was strongly influenced by both Lefebvre's *Production of Space* and W.J.T. Mitchell's then-recent anthology *Landscape and Power* (1994). See Christie 2000, 165-174.

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"finding a place to practice as a woman artist." Her later work as a curator and historian of moving image art leads her to draw a polemical distinction between male artists' persistent preoccupation with exceeding the terrestrial boundary, and a succession of works by women which have punctured this grandiosity. While granting that images of the earth viewed from space have allowed us to invest our planet "with ecological and aesthetic meanings that go beyond the modern concept of space as territory, owned, fought over, and wantonly exploited for profit," she is concerned to restore a grounded sense of embodied values in a range of works discussed, whether or not they invoke extra-terrestrial subjects.

The coming of digital cinema in the early 2000s made possible a return of stereoscopic illusion, after the aborted experiments with this in the 1950s. Combined with CGI, as Yosr Ben Romdhane explains, this has given cinema unprecedented scope to create novel spatial experiences, and in particular to enhance the haptic sensation, which the discoverer of stereoscopy, Charles Wheatcroft, first identified as one of its distinctive qualities. Ben Romdhane makes a persuasive case for a range of 3D films which may not enjoy critical acclaim, yet offer remarkable opportunities for spatial exploration. In a somewhat similar vein, as Teresa Castro observes, the combination of drone footage and video sharing platforms now in existence for varied reasons has made possible a new sense of the global with an often eerie aesthetic appeal of its own, as in the views of deserted cities that proliferated during COVID lockdowns. But as Castro warns, in an essay written at the height of such lockdowns, there is a danger of such aestheticization dulling what should be political and ethical responses to the imagery shown by drones and satellites. Despite the feelings of mastery and detachment that such perspectives can give, she argues, like Elwes, that we need to keep our feet on the earth, and resist distraction from urgent environmental challenges.

Thanks in large part to the rapid development of digital media, we are living in an era of what has been termed "hypermediation," discussed in the "Afterword." The richness of past eras' representation can now be experienced as never before, enhanced – or as some would argue vulgarized – by new technologies. Today's "immersive" media displays are promising extraordinary experience, which overflow conventional framing, using XR technologies. We may wonder if these constitute a "new space" of virtuality, evoked in such neologisms as "cyberspace" and "the metaverse," or if they are the remediation of an old concept? They certainly recall the goal that André Bazin (1967) identified in a history of nineteenth-century audiovisual media – the creation of a perfect simulacrum – but they are also an experience

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readily available to millions of video gamers, although one largely ignored by film and media theorists.

Cinema of the last thirty years has not hesitated to explore the potential spaces, and especially the paradoxes, of XR simulation, in films such as Kathryn Bigelow's STRANGE DAYS (1995), David Cronenberg's EXISTENZ (1999), Steven Spielberg's MINORITY REPORT (2002) and READY PLAYER ONE (2018), and Rian Johnson's LOOPER (2012). Yet as immersive "edutainment" becomes an everyday reality in today's economy, the conceptualization of its experience seems to be trapped in a contested conceptual limbo – a "harmless metaphor" (Conrad 2023) or "knowing kitsch" (Jones 2013) for those, who cling staunchly to the traditional structures of theater and museum; or an exciting new world of potential, harnessing digital sound and image reproduction to create a novel space of participation (Dean 2023)?

How we position ourselves in this critical arena may well prove more a matter of generational identity and experience than of analytic or aesthetic principle.[5] What is clear, at least, is that we can no longer maintain "fixed, undialectical or immobile" (Hebdige 1990, vii), let alone "container" concepts of space, if we genuinely want to understand the complexity of the real and virtual spaces we inhabit and experience. This collection aspires to offer some pointers toward a conceptualization fit for current and future purposes.

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5 See the study "How Different Generations in the UK Respond to Digital Advertising" (Koutsou-Wehling 2023), in which Gen Z and Gen Y have a similar level of interest in the metaverse (26 percent), while Generation X and Baby Boomers have least (fourteen and eight percent respectively).

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About the Author

Ian Christie is a film historian and curator, currently Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck, University of London. He is a fellow of the British Academy and has been a visiting professor and fellow at universities in Oxford, Cambridge, Stockholm, Canberra, Paris, and Olomouc, and at Gresham College in London 2017-2021. He has written and edited books on Powell and Pressburger, Russian cinema, Martin Scorsese, and Terry Gilliam; and contributed to many exhibitions, including *Modernism: Designing a New World* (V&A London, 2006) and *Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932* (Royal Academy, 2017). In the *Key Debates* series, he previously edited *Audiences* (2012) and co-edited *Stories* (2018). His most recent books are *Robert Paul and the Origins of British Cinema* (2020) and *The Eisenstein Universe* (2021), and he has co-directed a film about Eisenstein in Mexico, A TRIP TO TETLAPAYAC (2023).

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