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6.1 The Viewer's Embodiment into Cinematic Space

Notes on a 'Space-Image' Cinema

Antoine Gaudin

This chapter is an invitation to consider cinematic space through a new analytical view – which actually is not only a 'view', but a carnal perception that deeply implies the spectator's body. The focus of this paper is a notion I call the 'space-image' (Gaudin, 2015). This name echoes Gilles Deleuze's well-known concepts "movement-image" and "time-image" (Deleuze, 1983, 1985). Although my study is not grounded in the same theoretical and philosophical field as Deleuze's, and although I do not intend to 'complete' his work, I do adopt one of his general principles: as the movement-image and the time-image, the space-image refers to a space that is not just a content or background of the image, but is at the same time a major philosophical issue and a fundamental plastic material of cinema.

At the beginning of my work, though, I had no desire to develop a new notion. My goal was only to study the poetics of space in the works of a few contemporary auteur filmmakers, such as Gus Van Sant, Jia Zhang-ke or Philippe Grandrieux. I would have been satisfied to work within the frame of existing theories of cinematic space – like, for instance, the neo-formalists (Bordwell, Staiger, & Thompson, 1985; Heath, 1981). But if I did remain in this classical framework, there may have been aesthetic issues I would not have tackled. To fully analyze these films, I felt the need for a new paradigm.

The concept of space-image, however, does not compete with the existing paradigms of cinematic space. Space-image is meant to be a complementary notion, highlighting the fact that before showing and staging an imaginary space 'behind the screen', every film is first a spatial phenomenon in itself. Thus, space should also be considered as a primary plastic power inscribed within the moving image. This phenomenological approach is substantially different from classical approaches to space in film analysis.

First, in efforts to describe cinematic space, most works about cinema use notions coming from other artistic fields, like the pictorial 'landscape' and the theatrical 'setting'. Even though these notions can be adapted to the properties of cinema, the issue of a plastic notion of space specific to cinema remains largely open – especially if we want to go beyond the spatial 'grammar' of classical narrative and editing.

Second, most of the time, when the issue of space is raised, it is done spontaneously according to the dominant conception of space within our culture: a space that has been basically conceived as a static container since the Renaissance and the modern age; that is, as an empty box we see according to the optical laws of perspective. This is why, despite a good number of works about cinema dealing with the issue of space in a way or another, only a few actually try to define what they call 'space'.

In fact, cinematic space is most often 'taken-for-granted' – meaning that one does not feel the need to define it – since it is based on what Jan Patočka calls our "collective unconscious metaphysics of space" (2002, p. 15). This dominant optical conception of space is surely effective and well-adjusted to our everyday life, but it hides other dimensions of our experience, especially the ones linked to the feeling of our moving body; by that, I mean the phenomenological conception of space, not as an object in front of us, not as a place where we can be, but as a primary kinaesthetic sensation that permanently bounds us to the world.

Third, most discourses mentioning cinematic space do so by taking it as a starting point. They focus on how the film uses space in order to express other staging issues – for instance, the evolving relationship between two characters – but they do not really raise the philosophical issue of space itself – a space that can be considered as both a main subject of the film and a critical dimension of human existence.

Accordingly, most discourses focus on what cinema does with ‘a space’ that we are already used to perceiving. They do not directly address the phenomenological impact of the cinema medium, that is, its ability to make us experience and comprehend differently the space we live in differently.

Of course, there are exceptions to this general observation. For instance, the works of theorists like Sergei M. Eisenstein (1929/1969, 1930/1995, 1935/1973, 1946/1986, 1974), Elie Faure (1922/1953), Eric Rohmer (1948, 1954, 1970/1991) and Henri Agel (1978) develop some compelling insights regarding the matter of a space considered both as a primary plastic power of cinema and as a major philosophical issue in films. But despite these early works, we can still say that within Film Studies, the ontological issue of time has been more deeply researched – by authors such as Gilles Deleuze, Andrei Tarkovski, Jacques Aumont, Philippe Dubois, Alain Ménil and Yvette Biro – than the ontological issue of space. Maybe that is because unlike cinematic time, cinematic space has been mostly regarded as self-evident and not as a way to think our sensory perception of space differently. In this sense, I intend to discuss cinematic space as a perceptive phenomenon.

This approach requires a new analytical view, which does not entirely depend on the pictorial or theatrical categories of space – landscape, setting, etc. – nor on the spatial ‘grammar’ of classical narrative and editing – which are also cultural constructs. This approach should thus be more closely linked to the abstract and rhythmic powers of cinema.

* * *

There are two distinct ways of understanding cinematic space. On the one hand, there is the space ‘depicted by the film’: it is the static three-dimensional space that we are used to perceiving ‘behind the screen’, in which the characters live. Due to the realism of cinema, we experience this space by engaging our viewer’s body into it, identifying with the bodies of the characters that actually, unlike us, inhabit this space (see, for instance, Straus, 1935/2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1976, 1946/2009; Metz, 1968; Michotte van den Berck, 1948; Oudart, 1971; Smith, 1995). Of course, this ‘space depicted by the film’ is constantly shaped by the *mise en scène* and editing, and it implies a continuous interplay with our imaginary representation of the off-screen space. On the other hand, there is the space ‘inscribed in the film’s body’, which is the main issue of the space-image approach. When it comes to this space, the screen is no longer considered a ‘window open onto the world’ as Bazin wrote, quoting Leon Battista Alberti on Renaissance paintings (1985, pp. 69–89). Instead, it must be regarded as a primary physical-dynamic structure, within which a continuous interplay between emptiness and wholeness is inscribed, a continuous variation of an abstract volume of void – referring only to what appears within the frame; there is no off-screen space at this level. This uninterrupted interplay has some effects on the viewer’s body, but it is almost never taken into consideration in discourses on cinema.

Yet, some films can reveal this space to us. Let us consider, for instance, *Serene Velocity* by structural filmmaker Ernie Gehr (1970).

The film is a very quick succession of shots of the same place, taken from the same point of view: we can identify a corridor that constitutes the space ‘depicted by the film’. All of the shots are taken with a different focal length and, little by little, during the screening, one can no longer refer objectively to the static three-dimensional space ‘behind the screen’.

Instead, one may feel the emergence of another space: one that is just a pure succession of contractions and expansions, like an abstract heartbeat, detached of the initial figurative space.

That is what constitutes the cinematic space as a primary plastic power inscribed in the film's body.

That being said, I suggest we return in detail to the description of this space 'inscribed in the film's body', before getting back to the global notion of space-image. According to the space-image paradigm, a movie should not only be regarded as an exhibition of space. It must also be considered as a spatial phenomenon in itself, engaging the entire viewer's body, not only their vision and hearing, but also their kinaesthetic sense.

In fact, moving images are always a cinema-specific kinaesthetic experience of space. This stands even in non-figurative movies, since space is a fundamental element of each film. We can say that these abstract films are the ones that make us immediately grasp what cinematic space is, as an image phenomenon, since they do not represent any liveable space behind the screen. For example, in *Arnulf Rainer* by Peter Kubelka (1960), each flash between black and white produces a kinaesthetic jump effect – for the warm colours seem to move forward, while the cold colours seem to move backward (Doerner, 1935/1984). The important point here is that there is no such thing as a lack of space within the space-image paradigm. There never is 'no space at all', for space is a primary matter 'inscribed in the film's body'.

If we can feel and understand the primary spatial sensation that these structural films make us experience via their pure depth-and-burst variations, that will allow us to address classical narrative cinema, in which we will once again encounter this primary spatial sensation, lying behind the realistic representation of the well-known static three-dimensional space we are used to perceiving. Indeed, before being anything else, a film is a light projection on a screen, opening a space for us and making our body sense a certain volume of void.

Take, for instance, the opening shot of *Gerry* (Gus Van Sant, 2002) (Figure 6.1.1): the movement of the camera, the wide shot, the depth of focus, the lack of objects in the field, everything here works for the kinaesthetic implication of the viewer in a vibrant volume of void. After the movie theatre goes dark, as the light hits the screen for the first time, we rediscover space, not only as a place or a landscape – in this case, a desert – we inhabit more or less naturally, but also as a primitive sensation. In other words, the first image of a film can make us feel space as it suddenly appears – something that we never feel in our everyday life because we are always *already* in space.

In this regard, the cinematic apparatus may converge with the ambition of phenomenological philosophy by putting aside our cultural habits in order to join the world in its sudden physical appearance.

Such dynamics do not only occur within the movie's first shot, even if the latter produces the strongest effect. Unlike the Newtonian paradigm of space, cinematic space is relative – i.e. not absolute – since it is sensed through a process of continuous variation of forms and volumes operating inside the film images. In this regard, each cut, each transition from one shot to another, constitutes a pure spatial variation, a sudden expansion or contraction. For instance, in the transition between two scenes of *Still Life* (三峡好人, Jia Zhang-ke, 2006) – between the last shot of scene A and the first shot of scene B (Figures 6.1.2 and 6.1.3) – there is a remarkable expansion of the volume of void, which is immediately sensed by our body as something like an abstract vertigo, before leading to the 'vertiginous' idea of a natural scenery modified by the laws of money: the bank note 'travels' from one shot to the other.

How does the viewer's body react to these spatial modifications within the film? One may answer this question by analysing the well-known sequence in *Sherlock Jr.* (Buster Keaton, 1924) in which the dreaming character enters a film, entitled *Hearts and Pearls*, while it is screening in a movie theatre. Along ten consecutive cuts, the logical continuity of his movements faces the arbitrary nature of the spatial discontinuity

Imposed by the editing: from a crowded street to a desert, and from a beach to a mountain cliff, each cut leads to a total modification of the visual field (Figures 6.1.4 and 6.1.5). In this

scene, the body of the character, jumping by surprise immediately after each cut, perfectly symbolises the cinematic viewer's body. The latter is, indeed, always impacted by the small spatial trauma of the cut, the sudden change of the whole visual field, a spatial 'interval' between two different shots – one that has no direct matching in everyday life. This spatial discontinuity is always sensed in cinema, although we are rarely aware of it – mostly due to the techniques of narrative continuity – except maybe in this great self-reflexive scene. The visual field can also change in a single shot. In this situation, the movement of the image itself causes a more progressive variation of the volume of void, which depends on the moving visual forms inside the frame. Let us consider the opening shot of *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), where the camera, following the female character, moves from the inside of the house to the desert outside (Figures 6.1.6 and 6.1.7). The shot begins with a flat bi-dimensional effect of light and darkness – the image of the desert looks like a painting on a black wall – and then, as the camera moves forward through the opened door, it makes us gradually sense the immense vastness of the desert, the volume of void of a land that takes the men away from home, and sometimes allows for one to return: Ethan, arriving from the horizon. The spatial conflict between the vastness associated with solitary wandering and the cosiness associated with sedentary community, which is to become one of the main narrative issues of the film, may be primarily felt by the viewer's body given the kinaesthetic experience of this first shot.

Variations of focus and setting play a major part in creating such an experience of space within a single frame, as do all the parameters of the *mise en scène*. Let's take, for instance, the shaky frame, the decreasing light and the increasing blur, which in the opening sequence of Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1998) shot in the Chamonix valley progressively contract cinematic space to make us physically experience a narrowing contact with the natural scenery, far away from the landscape optical paradigm that may have connoted the domestication of nature. In this way, we can instantaneously recognise the troublesome closeness with the wilderness, a key aspect of the character's destiny.

As we have seen, this primary sensation of space is independent from the figurative nature of the image, and subsequently from the 'liveability' of the space depicted by the film. Thus, the question should not only be 'what specific space does the film show us?', but also 'what abstract space does the film make us live?'. The word 'abstraction' does not necessarily imply the non-figurativeness of the image, nor does it describe a bi-dimensional space that would be located on the surface of the screen, like the one described by Rudolf Arnheim (1932/1997) or Lev Koulechov (1925/1994). It rather refers to the autonomous 'life of forms' that runs simultaneously with the representation. The space inscribed in the film's body is an abstract spatial power that is a fundamental element of the moving image. Through this space inscribed in the film's body, cinema brings a primary kinaesthetic sensation of contraction/expansion that runs continuously and simultaneously with the classical perception of a solid liveable space, as a container for the characters and their actions.

Meanwhile, of course, the space depicted by the film does not disappear.

In fact, in every film, the specific space depicted by the film – a three-dimensional world behind the screen – and the abstract space inscribed in the film's body run together like two simultaneous musical voices. Together, they make up a dynamic system of continuous movement and variation, and it is this system that I suggest naming 'space-image'.

This paradigm implies that cinematic space has no permanent substance: it is never given as a fixed object, a steady form. Rather, it is constantly shaped and reshaped throughout the whole screening. It is also the case in steady shots where nothing moves, because the passage of time modifies our perception of space by giving a greater importance to the off-screen space, for instance. Thus, through *mise en scène* and editing, the filmmaker continuously models his

primary space material – just as a potter models a clay sculpture, giving its form to an instable moving matter.

Each film thus elaborates its own ‘spatial rhythm’, which is not a Platonic metric rhythm such as the one we find in music. Instead, it is a Heraclitean rhythm that can be compared to an irregular flow, made up of continuous contractions and expansions. Continuing with the film’s body metaphor – sustained, for instance, by the idea of an abstract ‘heartbeat’ in *Serene Velocity* – we can say that this spatial rhythm is like the film’s ‘breathing’. Due to this breathing, the space flows in the film’s body, as a pure volume of air, an abstract and dynamic void. This flow becomes the permanent interface between the viewers’ body and the space depicted by the film.

Let us check the effects of this spatial breathing with the opening scene of *Journey to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*, Roberto Rossellini, 1954) (Figures 6.1.8 and 6.1.9). Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders play the parts of a wife and a husband chatting while driving a luxury car on the dusty roads of Southern Italy. The inserts of wide shots of the road are primarily perceived as sudden spatial expansions, physically revealing another space, a metaphorical one: the emotional space between the two characters that the viewer is meant to understand later, but can be sensed now. It does so in the kinaesthetic effect of the cuts, of the volume of void the editing creates between the characters, even at this early stage when everything seems to be fine between them. In this opening scene, the Italian countryside, that is later meant to narratively reveal the failure of the characters’ relationship, is already physically coming between them via the editing of the scene, pushing them apart, expanding the distance, the gap, between them. So, it is not only Italy as a ‘primitive’ country that sets them apart, it is also this ‘air full of insects’ – as described by the character of George Sanders – that the editing inscribes into the film’s body, proving that, in cinema, space is not only a matter of content, but also a matter of *void*.

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Every film builds its own spatial rhythm, meaning that every film can potentially be analysed with the theoretical tool of space-image. However, it would be excessive to pretend that all films contribute to a real ‘space-image cinema’. If such a cinema exists, it is a cinema in which the spatial experience sensed by the viewer’s body matches the treatment of space as a major sensory-philosophical issue by the film itself.

This process would imply a global narrative and editing that would ensure, firstly, that the space depicted by the film is no longer relegated to the background of the human drama, meaning that the narrative does not reduce it to a setting, but rather makes it a major sensory issue, maybe by focusing less on the characters psychology (as suggested by Kracauer, 1960/2010); and secondly, that the spatial rhythm inscribed in the film’s body, this fundamental abstract power of the film image comes to the foreground of our sensory attention, thus implying that the filmmaker moves slightly away from the classical cutting. Indeed, classical cutting rules tend to work towards the disappearance of this kind of awareness in the viewer’s mind. They do so, notably, by trying, though never totally succeeding, to erase the spatial trauma of the cut.

If these conditions are fulfilled in a film, then the relation between viewer and space may be raised through the specific properties of the cinematic medium, among which we must include the spatial power of its basic expressive means – cut, movement, change of light and so on – that some films allow us to rediscover as a phenomenon. I insist on the rediscovery of these basic powers because to me, what makes a film significant in terms of space-image is not the fact that it makes the space a demonstrative attraction in a spectacular setting, as might be the case in Hollywood big-budget blockbusters. Rather, it is its ability to make the space a sensory and existential issue at a human, everyday scale.

In conclusion, in some films, the space-image constitutes phenomenological way of engaging the fundamental expressive powers of cinema in order to more deeply understand our lived space by going further than the representation of the static three-dimensional space we are already used to perceiving. The latter space ‘depicted by the film’ is still here but due to the movement of images, space no longer presents a self-evident pattern; it becomes an issue again, as cinema makes us live an ‘aesthetic idea’ of space only expressed in film. Accordingly, if cinema reveals a ‘sensory philosophy’ of space, it does so not only because it stages a space behind the screen, but also because it constitutes a powerful spatial experience in itself – regardless of what it might show.

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