

SPATIAL PRACTICES: SOME THOUGHTS ON CINEMA, MEMORY AND ITS FUTURE*

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In a review of some of the findings of an ethno-historical study of 1930s cinema culture that I have been working on over a period of some years, a chapter on “the scenes of cinema memory” concludes with the following remarks:

For [the 1930s] generation, going to the pictures was the occasion for the very earliest ventures into the world beyond the home. Close to home, almost an extension of home, and yet not home, “the pictures” is remembered as both daring and safe. Referencing Freud, Michel de Certeau suggests that the back and forth (fort/da) movement and the “being there” (Dasein) which characterise spatial practices re-enact the child’s separation from the mother. To translate this conceit to cinema memory, it might be argued that, for the 1930s generation, cinema constitutes a transitional object.¹

How was this discovery arrived at? Why is it important? And what might it suggest about the peculiarities of cinema memory and about the future of cinema memory, now that cinema – certainly in the form the 1930s generation knew it – is dead?

First of all, it is about how place and space figure in certain kinds of memory-stories, and about how memory works through the body, or is embodied. In his phenomenological study of remembering, Edward Casey says that place is important in remembering because “it serves to situate one’s memorial life”² in several possible ways:

- places can act as containers of memory
- places can be *mises-en-scène* for remembered events
- memory itself is like a place that we revisit.

Therefore memory both is a topography and has a topography. Note that I am talking about place and not (the more abstract) space. The idea of place implies attachment, belonging – or its absence. Attachment in turn implies a bodily relationship, or even a merging of boundaries, between body and place.

It surprised me to find how insistent place was in the memories of 1930s cinemagoers. There is plenty of variation in how place is evoked, and in how metaphors of place organise people’s memory talk.³ But emerging from all the variation is an overall sense, above all in accounts of childhood cinemagoing, of a navigation of mental topographies of familiar remembered territory. My contention is that this “topographical memory talk” offers clues to the ways in which cinema memory works as a distinctive form of cultural memory. One key feature is the prevalence of the discursive “walking tour” in

informants' early cinemagoing memories: a retelling of journeys to the pictures, always made on foot, often with very precise details of street names and landmarks. This is an embodied and kinetic memory – a reliving of the experience of moving through space, or rather through a very particular and familiar set of places.

There are five aspects of this kind of memory talk that make it distinctive:

- the starting place for the memory-journey is usually the family house, the home;
- the journey is highly goal-directed, its destination being the neighbourhood picture house;
- there is a sense that the same journey is/was frequently and repeatedly made, combined with
- a sense of its ordinariness, everydayness;
- an implicit return home is part of the journey.

Underlying this sense of repeated movement away from home and back again, and of the quotidianness of the journey's topography, is a sense of fort/da, a trying out of separation in a psychical, emotional and physical space of belonging, security.⁴ This is why I contend that in 1930s cinemagoers' place-memories, cinema figures as an extension of home.

It is significant, I think, that these memories are always of a particular sort of cinema – the neighbourhood picture house, invariably remembered as modest and accessible (“one on every street corner,” as a number of informants put it). This is another aspect of their home-like quality (I shall return to the question of different types of cinema below). It is worth noting, however, that memories of going to the pictures are more pervasive and lengthier in the telling than are memories of being at the pictures. Going-to and being-at memories also differ markedly in both content and timbre. I shall return to this point as well.

When I wrote that cinema constitutes a transitional object for the 1930s generation, this was not a particularly deep thought, nor a very considered conclusion. But I have since taken the opportunity to look at some discussions of transitional objects and popular culture which suggest that the idea might be worth exploring in greater depth. Transitional objects (and, more broadly, transitional phenomena) is a concept developed by D.W. Winnicott, the foremost representative of the British Independent tradition of object-relations theory in psychoanalysis.

Transitional objects are the ubiquitous first possessions of infants and young children (a blanket, a teddy, etc) that belong at once to the child and to the outside world, occupying an intermediate position between fantasy and reality, the place of imagination. Winnicott famously said: “No human being is free from the strain of relating outer and inner reality,”⁵ and transitional objects and transitional phenomena help negotiate that relationship. They inhabit what Winnicott called an “intermediate zone” between inner psychical reality and the external world, keeping the two separate but related. Importantly, they are precisely material objects, things: they have a physical existence but are pressed into the service of inner reality. They are at once part of the subject and not the subject.

Winnicott uses the term “transitional space” to refer to this third area, this intermediate zone or space inhabited by transitional phenomena: his spatial metaphors are, I

think, significant. His earliest writings on transitional objects link them wholly to childhood and developmental issues, in particular with the activity of play, whose defining characteristics he regards as:

- preoccupation, near-withdrawal
- activity is “outside the individual but not the external world”
- objects/phenomena are drawn from the external world and pressed to an inner reality agenda.

It is clear from some of Winnicott’s later writings, however, that he thinks transitional phenomena have a structural aspect as well: in particular, he explores the relationship between transitional phenomena and how adults experience and relate to culture. For present purposes, I am interested in both developmental and structural aspects.

- Developmental. Winnicott links transitional objects and associated behaviours in infants and young children with processes of separation. For Winnicott, this means separation from the mother, but I would broaden this out to include separation from a mother-associated place-object, the home. In either case, this is part of a process of development of self in distinction from the outside world, and serves as a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar, thus facilitating the child’s acceptance of the new.
- Structural. The dynamic equilibrium of inner and outer reality is not confined to the transitional objects of childhood, but continues in adult life. We continue re-enacting play and other transitional processes throughout life in relation with our “adult” transitional phenomena. These phenomena are identified by Winnicott as culture in general (“There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing [...] to cultural experiences”), and art and religion in particular. Here the tension lies between living in the everyday, inhabiting ordinary consciousness, and leaving it; and a key issue is how we manage the transition between the two. Christopher Bollas has talked about the experience of transitional phenomena in adult life in terms (borrowed from Bruce Berenson via Marion Milner) of the aesthetic moment: “An occasion when time becomes space for the subject. We are stopped, held in reverie, to be released, eventually back into time proper.”⁶ Others refer to “the ebb and flow of losing and refinding oneself personally and endlessly in space-time.”⁷

As I have noted, place-memory or topographical memory is pervasive in 1930s cinemagoers’ talk. An embodied form of memory discourse, place-memory re-enacts separation and the interaction of inner and outer worlds in terms of the remembered experience of bodily movement through space and to and from particular places – in this instance home and the picture house. It is in this sense that the cinema building, the place, functions as a transitional object in the Winnicottian sense.

But what happens inside the cinema? The remembered walk to this place is a process of enacting and of restating belonging to a place-object that is both outside home and like home: this is the locality, the neighbourhood. What happens inside the cinema is rather different: it is the virtual experiencing of other, unfamiliar places. There are in fact two levels involved in the experience/memory of being inside the cinema: being in

the cinema building, the auditorium; and “being in” the world on the screen. Significantly, informants’ memories of this aspect of “going to the pictures” are relatively few in number. They are also either (a) unanchored in space and/or time (memories of isolated images or scenes from films, for example; usually frightening or funny ones); or (b) often rueful stories about the speaker’s failure to understand or properly negotiate the difference between ordinary space and time and space and time in the cinema (for example, stories of sitting through several performances, losing track of time and getting into trouble with worried parents). Or else they might be (c) narratives about the transition from the everyday world to the world of the cinema (repeatedly expressed in terms of being transported to ‘another world’) and crucially back again.

In all these stories, the experience of being in the cinema is remembered first of all as being outside ordinary time and space:

Standing in the street queuing in pleasant anticipation of what the next couple of hours had to offer, as the lights dimmed and the screen lit up away we went transported into a world of fantasy.⁸

And also as involving an involuntary, passive journey – informants repeatedly talk about being “transported” or “carried away:”

It’s like being in another world... And then when I come out, I’m a bit, you know, kind of ooh! A bit, eh, carried away. And, eh, then I come down to earth eventually.⁹

A handful of memories of this kind even evoke the epiphanic quality that marks the aesthetic moment:

Oh it was great! Cause the life, the cinema life then it was everything!¹⁰

I indicated above that two distinct types of picture house emerge in 1930s cinemagoers’ memories, and noted that the neighbourhood or street corner picture house is associated particularly with place-memory and with negotiation of home/outside world issues. The other sort of cinema is remembered as a place that, in its own right, is just as separate from the everyday as the world inside the cinema. This type of cinema embodies, in memory, some or all of the following qualities:

- a) it is one of the new 1930s supercinemas, or “dream palaces;”
- b) it is reached not on foot but by other means of transport, and is beyond the neighbourhood – in other towns, perhaps, or in the city centre;
- c) the decor and general ambience of the place is exotic and other-worldly;
- d) it is associated with memories of courtship or romance – that is, with adolescence and adulthood as opposed to childhood.

This, I believe, could have some bearing on how we might speculate about the future of cinema memory – by which I mean how (and indeed if) cinema might figure today in transitional processes, in negotiations of inner and outer realities, and therefore how today’s cinemagoers and consumers of films might remember these things in years to come.

Questions to consider in this content include:

- Does cinema, and do films, figure at all today as transitional phenomena? If so, how?
- How does this involve issues of place and/or space?
- How does this involve the body?

In approaching these questions, we clearly need to take into account the impact of changes in how films and cinema are delivered to the consumer, and how and where these are consumed and used. But it goes beyond this, I believe. Transitional processes are not transhistorical: reality perception and experience of the outer-inner relationship are historically and culturally variable. For people in the west, for example, the contemporary emphasis on shifting boundaries (of both inner and outer worlds) as opposed to stable structures should perhaps be borne in mind. It is also worth stating that transitional phenomena, particularly but not exclusively as experienced or remembered in adulthood, can have a collective dimension and so become part of a generational memory bank.

To conclude, then: here are some features of present-day cinema that might be relevant to a discussion about the future of cinema memory:

1. There are far fewer cinema buildings than there were in the 1930s, in real terms admission is far more expensive, and the frequency of cinema attendance per person is much lower now than it was in the 1930s.
2. Films are widely consumed in venues other than cinemas, for example:

Roger Silverstone has written about television texts and of the television set itself as transitional objects;¹¹

video and DVD permit repeated viewings of films, allowing the viewer to pause, skim, and so on: the film text itself thus becomes a different sort of object – one of mastery, perhaps, rather than of subjection.

3. Today many forms of entertainment are available, many of them new: for the 1930s generation, cinema was the “main attraction;” now it is one among many and is not usually regarded as cutting edge in the way it was in the 1930s.
4. New modes of delivery of films and new technologies for their delivery make possible a range of different bodily relationships with the physical or the material means of consuming film texts. To the extent that these are potentially more tactile, more immediate, the relationship between films and viewers perhaps becomes more like that between toys and their users.
5. The consumption of films and cinema today involves distinctive modes of sociability and relationships to places. For example, home consumption and the attendant organisation of domestic space has implications for the negotiation of separation issues (bedroom culture, etc.). On the other hand, going out to see a film in a cinema today is perhaps more like 1930s cinemagoers’ relationship to cinemas in the second category – those remembered as other, placeless or distant, outside the everyday.

- * This essay is based on a talk given at Colloquium for Screen Studies, "Cinema - Dead or Alive?," Senate House, University of London (February 14, 2003).
- 1 Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), p. 36. The de Certeau reference is from: Michel De Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*. 1. *Arts de faire* (Paris: Union Générale d'Édition, 1980); trans. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- 2 Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 183-184. Emphasis in original.
- 3 For details, see A. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2.
- 4 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", in *Pelican Freud Library*, Vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984); see also Anni Bergman, "From Mother to the World Outside: The Use of Space During the Separation-individuation Phase," in Simon A. Grolnick, Leonard S. Barkin (eds.), *Between Reality and Fantasy: Winnicott's Concepts of Transitional Objects and Phenomena* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), pp. 147-165.
- 5 D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," in *Through Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis: Collected Papers* (London: Karnac Book, 2002).
- 6 Christopher Bollas, "The Aesthetic Moment and the Search for Transformation," in Peter L. Rudnytsky (ed.), *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 40-49. The quotation is from p. 48.
- 7 Gilbert Rose, "The Creativity of Everyday Life," in S. A. Grolnick, L. S. Barkin (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 347-62. The quotation is from p. 355
- 8 *Cinema Culture in 1930s Britain Archive* (hereafter CCINTB) 95-232-1, Raymond Aspden, Lancashire, to Valentina Bold, n.d. 1995.
- 9 CCINTB T95-158, Tessa Amelan, Manchester, 28 May 1995.
- 10 CCINTB T94-12, Thomas McGoran, Glasgow, 30 November 1994. For further examples see A. Kuhn, *op. cit.*, Chapter 9.
- 11 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994).