



## **Cinematic experience, film space, and the child's world**

KUHN, AF

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/jspui/handle/123456789/4861>

Information about this research object was correct at the time of download; we occasionally make corrections to records, please therefore check the published record when citing. For more information contact [scholarlycommunications@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:scholarlycommunications@qmul.ac.uk)

ANNETTE KUHN

## CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE, FILM SPACE, AND THE CHILD'S WORLD

**Résumé:** Cet article développe certaines idées de la psychanalyse—en particulier la conception objectale et relationnelle du phénomène transitionnel—qui concernent les aspects psychical, physiques et, à un certain degré, sociaux du monde de l'enfant en tant qu'ils peuvent donner forme à notre compréhension de l'expérience cinématographique. Dans cette perspective, cet article explore la sorte particulière d'engagement que le cinéma peut offrir à son consommateur dans l'interaction entre l'expérience psychique intérieure et la réalité matérielle extérieure dans le monde du film et dans l'expérience du spectateur. L'article suggère que le caractère distinctif de la matérialité du cinéma en tant que médium culturel réside dans les façons avec lesquelles le film peut créer et organiser l'espace et le mouvement, et suggère aussi comment le cinéma peut recréer et évoquer le sentiment d'entrer dans, ou de retrouver, le monde de l'enfant. Ces questions sont discutées en référence à trois films : *Où est la maison de mon ami ?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987) ; *Mandy* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1951) ; et *Ratcatcher* (Lynne Ramsay, 1999).

This essay explores some ideas from object-relations psychoanalysis concerning the psychical, physical and, to a degree, the social aspects of the child's world and considers how these ideas can inform an understanding of the cinematic experience—that is, of the particular sorts of engagements that cinema can offer its viewers. It looks at the interplay between inner, psychical, reality and outer, material, reality in both the world of the film and the experience of the viewer, addressing film's distinctive capacity to create and organize spatiality and motion. Finally, with reference to a number of films, tentative consideration is given to the ways in which cinema can recreate or re-evolve a sensation of entering, or re-entering, a childhood world. The objective is to explore how object-relations psychoanalysis, with its capacity to address the way cinema simultaneously constructs and breaks down spaces and thereby navigates the interface between real and imaginary, offers a route to understanding the cinematic experience, and thus provides a productive methodological approach to film analysis.

As it is understood here, the concept of "cinematic experience" mainly references models of the "cinematic apparatus" elaborated within a strand of film theory that appropriates psychoanalysis in the quest to understand the peculiar

psychodynamics, or the metapsychology, involved in the viewer's encounter with cinema. The psychoanalytic ideas most commonly drawn on in theorizing the cinematic apparatus have been instinct or drive-based and have emphasized the centrality of scopophilia, or the drive to pleasurable looking. In consequence, such work has been focused largely on issues around the instrumentality of vision and spectatorship in the cinematic experience. In this approach, based ultimately on Freud's thinking about the drives, unconscious processes are paramount.<sup>1</sup> Here, however, a variant of object-relations psychoanalysis is drawn on, in which *attachment* is emphasized and in which the Unconscious assumes less importance in mental life. This model can shed light both on the world constructed by the film and on the experience of the viewer, whilst at the same time taking into account the materiality of cinema as a cultural medium whose distinctiveness lies in the ways it can create and organize spatiality and motion. It also presents a grounded, even an empirically testable, conceptualization of the interplay between inner mental reality and outer material reality in the cinematic experience, whilst opening up fresh strategies for reading films.

## I

Central to the object-relations approach pursued here are the concepts of transitional object, transitional phenomena and transitional process, introduced and developed from the 1950s onwards by Donald Winnicott, a paediatrician and foremost representative of the British Independent tradition in object-relations psychoanalysis. Transitional objects, now common currency in thinking about infant and child development, are the first "not-me" possessions of infants and young children (a blanket, an old piece of cloth, a teddy). While transitional objects are exactly that—objects, *things*—the point about them is that they are pressed into the service of the child's inner world. They belong, that is, to the child's fantasy world while at the same time having a physical existence in the outer world of material objects. In terms of the child's mental space and object-world, then, the transitional object is at one and the same time part of itself and not itself. Such objects inhabit an intermediate position between fantasy and reality, and this intermediate zone, according to Winnicott, is the place of imagination.

Broadly speaking, this object-relations approach embodies several key attributes. Above all, perhaps, the central issue is not simply the objects themselves (imaginary, "real," or more likely a mix of the two) but equally, or more, significantly the *spaces* between objects. Spaces are paradoxical, in that they have the capacity at once to connect objects and to keep them apart. Winnicott makes great play in his writings with terms that connote "betweenness," terms like "transitional space" and "intermediate zone," suggesting that transitional phenomena inhabit, and operate in, these "spaces between." This sets up a highly fluid and dynamic model of the psyche and its formation and operation, one which also allows for the conceptualisation of a non-fixed and non-universalising

relationship between the subject, the psyche and the external world. For Winnicott, this relationship is at the core of what it is to be human: “no human being is free from the strain of relating outer and inner reality,” he says, and transitional objects and transitional phenomena help us negotiate that relationship.<sup>2</sup> Transitional space can usefully be visualised through a mental image of a bridge spanning a river. The bridge allows people to cross from one side to the other, whilst the banks of the river remain apart from each other. This spatial metaphor aptly brings out an idea and a feeling of *movement* between and through spaces. A sort of psychical back and forth, ebb and flow, in other words, marks the subject’s engagement with transitional phenomena. It is perhaps worth noting that this is not necessarily a straightforward process: it has its vicissitudes.

Winnicott links transitional objects and associated behaviours in infants and young children with processes of separation and individuation. In the first place, the separation is from the mother/caregiver; but it will, in due course, extend also to separation from mother-associated *place*-objects, notably the home. One of Winnicott’s apparently simple—but in fact rather profound—dicta is “Home is where we start from.”<sup>3</sup> To this, as we shall see, might be added: “and come back to.” On the subject of separation/individuation, the object-relations psychoanalyst Anni Bergman has drawn attention to the infant’s “incessant coming and going, leaving and finding mother,”<sup>4</sup> as it tests the reliability and durability of its objects and learns about their continuing existence independently of itself. This is an outward, bodily expression of the “back and forth” quality of these psychical engagements, played out in real space (for example, the child will repeatedly leave the room and keep coming back to check that mother is still there). In this process of making the self separate from, as well as joined to, the outside world, suggests Bergman, “the inner world of thought and fantasy allows for the *symbolic representation* of experiences in space.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, in this attachment-based object-relations model, it is through separation processes that individuals learn to symbolise—to imagine and to create.

For Winnicott, transitional objects are associated in the first instance with childhood and with developmental processes, in particular with playing. He observed that the activity of playing is characterised by preoccupation and near-withdrawal on the part of the child. The play space, he argues, “is not inner psychical reality: it is outside the individual but it is not the external world.”<sup>6</sup> It is precisely a space between the two. Playing involves the body; and while playing, the child manipulates external phenomena, investing them with “dream meaning and feeling.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the child at play, as it inhabits and uses its body in real space, is also inside an imaginal, fantasy space.

The playing state of withdrawn preoccupation, and the idea that an interaction between real and imaginary worlds is at work, has much in common with Gaston Bachelard’s characterisation of reverie. In a thought, if not in words, that could have come from Winnicott, Bachelard says of reverie that “It gives the I a

non-I which belongs to the I: my non-I.”<sup>8</sup> Bachelard is referring to what he calls poetic reverie, a state in which the relaxed and self-realized adult may immerse herself in a kind of oneiric state that has much in common with the daydreaming of his solitary child and Winnicott’s playing child. Or, as Winnicott puts it, “There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences.”<sup>9</sup> That is to say, there is a continuity between the transitional processes of childhood and their associated mental states and the way that as adults we may experience, or engage with, cultural objects and activities—painting, poetry, and so on.

As already noted, the idea of spaces, especially “spaces-between,” is central to Winnicott’s model of object relations. Spaces, of course, are contained by their boundaries, just as boundaries are defined by the spaces they contain; Winnicott was fully aware of the psychical and developmental significance of the interplay between boundary and space, arguing that while humans need boundaries, both physical and psychological, these can become over-containing and even oppressive. The infant and the child’s passage from dependence to separation to individuation involves an engagement with boundaries that is full of potential pitfalls: on the one hand the risk of containment and compliance, of becoming engulfed by the “insult” of the reality principle; on the other, that of boundlessness, and failure to engage with outer reality. “The struggle between our impulses and a sense of security...is an eternal struggle,” says Winnicott; and it is acted out in our engagements with transitional phenomena, in childhood and beyond.<sup>10</sup> It is the character of an individual’s engagement with boundaries and spaces in the object-world that shapes his or her own ways of dealing with the unfamiliar and the new throughout life.

It has already been suggested that home is particularly significant in the separation/individuation process. In this object-relations model, home figures as both space and object, and is a (or indeed *the*) prime site for the negotiation of inner and outer worlds. It is therefore worth considering how “home”—as it figures in the space that surrounds the child and “separates and unites him with his mother”<sup>11</sup>—can figure in transitional phenomena. In the process of individuation, the space of the earliest home becomes part of the “not-I,” while also maintaining its resonance as an internal object. As such, home may be experienced in a range of different ways. As Anni Bergman asks:

The space surrounding the self is not part of the self, but it is not part of others...How far does it extend? With whom and under what circumstances can it be shared? When is it friendly and protective, and when frightening and vast? When does it isolate, when does it connect?<sup>12</sup>

To these questions might be added: Where and what are the boundaries of “home,” and how is the subject to relate to them? What is the nature, psycho-

dynamically, of the space inside the home and the space that surrounds the home? In the object-world, how do comforting, enclosed, “mother-spaces” figure in relation to spaces that are open or exposed, unfamiliar or even frightening? These different spaces function, and accrue their psychical investments, in relation to each other; and the point at which enclosed and open spaces meet can acquire particularly significant psychical weight. These liminal spaces (“spaces of transition between a mother-world and a world outside”)<sup>13</sup> can become highly invested, serving as a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar, facilitating the child’s acceptance of the new.

Liminal spaces in and around the home—windows and doors, especially—may exert an attraction in that they allow the child to be in enclosed and open spaces at the same time, at once secure and “going exploring”; so she might hover in the doorway between two rooms, say, or be fascinated by the view from a window, or play endlessly with doors and door handles. Then, “as the sense of being a separate individual develops, so does the need for a variety of spaces..., and so does a proprietary feeling toward such spaces.”<sup>14</sup> Because of their developmental significance, the home’s edges—its boundaries and its borders between inner and outer, its thresholds—may lastingly assume special emotional and imaginal weight. Negotiation of the home’s enclosed and open spaces, its thresholds and its adjoining spaces, is among the most important developmental tasks of childhood. It is perhaps no coincidence that so many children’s games involve a zone of security that the players call “home.” These games are about leaving a secure (home) zone and rendering oneself vulnerable to being caught and dismissed from the game, or “out”: blind man’s bluff, hide and seek, tag, musical chairs and even perhaps their video-game equivalents. Outside “home” lies a dangerous open space—real, virtual or imaginary—that has to be conquered with skill and daring in the game. The game’s attraction lies in this risky and thrilling venture into open, potentially insecure, terrain. But—and this is crucial—the game only works because players can leave the zone of security in the confident hope that they can always return to it. In the words of the psychoanalyst Michael Balint: “All thrills entail the *leaving* and *rejoining* of security.”<sup>15</sup>

In an evocative turn of phrase, Balint calls the child’s zone of risk “friendly expanses.” Important here, once again, is what connects and separates home and friendly expanses—the boundary between the two, the threshold. But just as essential to the game is *movement* across the space between: the transitional space, the threshold that joins and separates “home” and open space. The repeated passage back and forth from safety to danger and back again is precisely the point of the game. In this passage, “home” may be where we start from, but it is also the place we know we can return to. In object-relations terms, this repeated back and forth motion is analogous to, and indeed rehearses in safety, the child’s processes of separation from mother, from “home.” As part of its growing up, the child will explore, and push at the boundaries of, the zone of risk, facing the

dangers of increasingly challenging open, non-home, expanses. The point is that the expanses are “friendly” only to the extent that “home” can be relied upon as a refuge. Conversely, the object-world and its spaces may be marked by discontinuity and dislocation.

At this point, the concerns of object-relations psychoanalysis intersect with those of geographers inquiring into children’s use of, and relation to, their spatial environment, as that environment claims the child’s attention, engagement and participation. These geographers share with psychoanalysts the aspiration to understand these matters from the inside, from the child’s point of view.<sup>16</sup> In 1979, a pioneering ethnographic study of children’s experience of place was conducted among children and adults living in a small New England town. This produced many insights about the children’s world that still retain resonance and conviction today. What the investigator, Roger Hart, uncovered was an active, vibrant, independent childhood culture organized around the exploration and use of a wide range of non-home spaces. In particular, he discovered that children’s permitted spatial ranges are a product of negotiation between themselves and their parents, and that they vary according to the child’s age and gender. “Home,” Hart also found, is always the starting point of children’s mental maps; and these maps chart “path networks” that are independent of adults’ routes. For children, the prime object is not to get from A to B: “the journey itself is frequently the purpose of the trip,” he says,<sup>17</sup> and children use many shortcuts (often illegal) and “ritual routes.” Children also favour slightly challenging places, like woods, ponds or quarries, as well as “risky” short cuts: places, that is, that they may fear to some degree. Another significant finding was that children’s space has to be accessible “through their own locomotion before they can mentally represent spatial relations to it.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, only those spaces that can be accessed on foot, or by bicycle, figure on children’s mental maps.

Two key points emerge from this discussion. Firstly, a sense of *liminality* is apparent in the psychical investment in boundaries, borders, edges and thresholds, and in the contiguity or the dislocation of spaces as they are negotiated in transitional processes. It is present as well in the sense of betweenness, and of the junction, separation and bridging of spaces, in the object-world. Secondly, the metaphor of bridging also signals the resonance in this model of motion, or *kinesis*, of a specific kind: movement back and forth. This dynamic and fluid object-relations model, with its account of mental life as organized around attachment, spatiality and motion, offers illuminating insights into the workings of symbolization, imagination and creativity, and sheds light on the aetiology and the character of our mental engagements when we are playing, or in a state of reverie, or enjoying various kinds of cultural or aesthetic experience.<sup>19</sup>

## II

When it comes to grasping the distinctive qualities of the cinematic experience,

this object-relations model is suggestive in a number of ways. It promises a freshly productive approach to a metapsychological understanding of our engagement with cinema and films, an approach that offers a fuller explanation and a more profound understanding of the processes at work in the cinematic experience than the drive- and vision-based models of mainstream psychoanalytic film theory.<sup>20</sup> The distinctive quality of the cinematic experience has much to do with the ways in which films create and organize worlds on the cinema screen, within the boundaries of the film frame, in terms of both spatiality and motion. Because of this, as a form of cultural experience cinema seems peculiarly capable of accessing and expressing the liminality and the kinesic attributes of transitional phenomena. In other words, cinema's organization of space, and its play of stasis and movement, within the boundaries of the film frame can echo these phenomena, making the medium capable, through its matters of expression, of evoking highly invested objects and psychical processes relating to transitional processes, especially those spaces and the passages which have to do with the task of negotiating inner and outer worlds.

This contention can readily be tested against the nuts and bolts of film "grammar." Put simply, film creates spaces that are imaginary but which at the same time allude to a, or the, real world: in this respect, film space is like the mental space of playing and cultural experience. Through editing, filmic spaces are joined together—sutured—in such a way as to create a map, in varying degrees intelligible, of the spatial organization of the film's imaginary-and-yet-real world. Separating as well as joining together the film's spaces, film editing bridges the gaps between these spaces, sometimes effectively suturing them (as, for example, in the point-of-view shot) and sometimes separating or dislocating them (as in parallel montage, which sutures time but dislocates space). Furthermore, film produces motion not only between shots and across spaces but also (through mobile framing) within shots as well.

Particularly revealing in this regard are films that push the medium's elective affinity with the psychical processes associated with transitional phenomena a step further by figuring the originary settings of these phenomena in their very *mise en scène*. These are films in which "home," thresholds, or "friendly expanses" are featured in such a way as to chart, through the cinematic organization of space, liminality and motion, the very *topoi* of separation/individuation, absorption/reverie, imaginal/real, that characterize the transitional phenomena of the child's world and carry them over into the realms of adult cultural experience. That is, they re-create the spaces of the child's world as it were from the inside, inviting the adult viewer to re-enter them.

### III

Besides casting light on the distinctive attributes of the cinematic experience as a variant of cultural experience, attention to these issues opens up fresh ways of



approaching the interpretation of individual films and groups of films, including films in which childhood or children figure centrally. Three such films are *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987); *Mandy* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1951); and *Ratcatcher* (Lynne Ramsay, 1999), and they are very different from each other in era, provenance, style, setting and content. *Where is the Friend's Home?*, Kiarostami's first feature-length film, is set in rural Iran and unfolds with the compositional precision, lingering takes and dedramatization that was to become the filmmaker's hallmark; the post-World War II Ealing Studios drama *Mandy*, on the other hand, is organised much more closely along the economical lines of the character-led classic narrative; while *Ratcatcher*, the most recently made of the three films and the debut feature of Scottish filmmaker Lynne Ramsay, combines the narrative looseness and temporal expansiveness of the art film with the attention to setting and character typical of British social cinema. An initial, intuitive, response to these films suggests that, despite their outward differences, they have something in common that might repay investigation. Indeed, their very differences throw down a vigorous challenge to the propositions set out in this essay.

*Where is the Friend's Home?* opens with a scene set in a school classroom, where the protagonist Ahmed's friend is scolded by the teacher for arriving late: he has forgotten his exercise book and has had to go back home to fetch it. At his own home later that day, Ahmed starts doing his homework, but suddenly realizes that he has mistakenly taken his friend's exercise book as well as his own. The long middle passage of the film traces the boy's determined quest to return the book to his friend, who lives at some distance away in an unfamiliar village, and at an unknown address. The film's action, which takes place over two days, revolves almost entirely around several journeys undertaken alone and on foot by Ahmed, apparently lengthy journeys from home to an unfamiliar place and back again. Each journey covers the same terrain and each has the same destination, the boy's friend's house, and each is mapped spatially, and proceeds temporally, in almost obsessive detail. Through the afternoon and evening of the first day, Ahmed undertakes his journeys from his home village of Koker, over a hill and across fields, through streets and alleyways, to his friend's village of Poshteh. On his odysseys, he encounters various people, familiar and unfamiliar, helpful and unhelpful. Failing to find his friend's house, he eventually gives up and returns home in the dark to resume his homework. At school the next day, Ahmed is at last able to give the exercise book back to his friend, who is therefore spared a further scolding from the teacher because his homework has been done for him.

For most of the running time of *Where is the Friend's Home?*, the forward movement of the plot is governed entirely by Ahmed's negotiation of the spaces between his home and his friend's village. Although there is a denouement, and the plotline about the exercise book is resolved in the classic sense, this is not



Fig. 1. *Where Is the Friend's House?*  
(Abbas Kiarostami, 1987)

the central point of engagement set up by the film: this lies in the visual and spatial organization of the narration of Ahmed's repeated journeys on foot across the open spaces that separate the two villages. Through *mise en scène*, mobile framing and editing, each journey is mapped in considerable detail, such that the geography becomes as important a protagonist as the boy himself. The signature shot of *Where is the Friend's Home?* is a strikingly composed image of a zigzag uphill path that marks the start of each of Ahmed's three journeys away from Koker (fig. 1), lending a ritual quality to this exploration of a child's geography: his leaving and rejoining of security, his incessant coming and going, his going exploring beyond a permitted, secure, spatial range. In this single, repeated, image is condensed the very psychodynamics of cultural experience as a negotiation and inhabiting of "spaces between."<sup>21</sup>

\* \* \*

*Mandy*, the story of a young deaf-mute girl's struggle to learn to communicate, features another intriguingly insistent image of a near-empty space, in this case a piece of waste ground (actually a bombsite) lying behind Mandy's house.<sup>22</sup> The spatial relationship between house and waste ground (between "home" and open space, that is) shifts over the course of the film, marking a process of coming of age, and coming into language, on the part of the protagonist. In this film, home and open space are brought together through edits that insist on views of the spaces outdoors. But because these views are normally from inside the house, the open space is set up not just as beyond, but also as cut off from, the "zone of security."

The waste ground appears five times in the film. On the first two occasions, it is seen initially from the angle of an upstairs window at the back of the house, though not from the optical point of view of any of the film's characters (fig.2). The backyard (where Mandy's mother stands holding her infant daughter) will figure as an important intermediate space (fig.3). Fig.5 shows the waste ground without intermediate spaces for the first time. It is seen from Mandy's point of view (fig. 4). On its third appearance, the waste ground is seen from the viewpoint of Mandy's father, though this is revealed only at the end of the scene (figs 6,7,8). On this occasion, some boys approach Mandy, and she shrinks back, frightened to risk leaving the "zone of security." On the waste ground's fourth



2



7



3



8



4



9



5



10



6



11

Fig. 2-11. *Mandy* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1951)

appearance, the point of view is once again Mandy's. She looks out of the upstairs window (fig.9) and sees the waste ground, on which children are playing (fig.10). A little later, a visually unmotivated tracking shot moves from inside the backyard and through the gate that divides the intermediate space of the yard from the waste ground, eventually revealing Mandy in long shot from behind as she moves beyond the threshold between home (and "home") and open space (now at last a "friendly expanse"), and approaches the other children to tell them her name and join in their play (fig.11). The film ends soon after this triumphal moment.

In terms of cinematic experience, the waste ground scenes in *Mandy* may be read as a working over of the very human quest to relate outer and inner realities. Paradoxically, the director, Alexander Mackendrick, who made a number of films with children as central characters, rarely set up shots from the viewpoint of child characters.<sup>23</sup> It follows that when these do appear, as in the second and fourth appearances of the waste ground in *Mandy*, something significant is afoot. Furthermore, the ways in which the shots of the waste ground figure in *Mandy*, and how these incorporate—or do not incorporate—characters in the film, are suggestive of the varied ways in which different kinds of space—those of home, threshold and open ground—can be organized and orchestrated through the language of cinema (image composition, editing, angle, point of view and, finally, camera movement). This, in turn, keys into a broader consideration of the emotional, psychological, and cultural meanings of the space of home in relation to thresholds, of the relation of both to the spaces beyond, and also about the meaning of passages between the two, both in "reality" and in imagination and reverie.

\* \* \*

*Ratcatcher*, set in early 1970s Glasgow, centres on a twelve-year-old boy, James Gillespie, who playfully pushes his friend, Ryan Quinn, into a canal. Ryan drowns. James is haunted by this event and withdraws from his family. The film follows James over the subsequent days. A synopsis of what is in effect a rather flimsy plot, however, reveals nothing about *Ratcatcher's* highly resonant qualities as a piece of cinema. On one level, it could be said of *Ratcatcher* that it traces the central character's responses to a trauma, and this is certainly a plausible reading.<sup>24</sup> There are also aspects of the film that call to mind a Ken Loach-style "dirty realism." This, too, is accurate to a degree: *Ratcatcher* undoubtedly has a place alongside Loach's work in the canon of the British social art film. But it explores inner, psychical realities as well as outer, social ones—and indeed explores each in relation to the other. It is actually the interplay of, and the passage between, real and imaginal spaces that gives this film its peculiar intensity. In fact, *Ratcatcher's* very *topos* is arguably Winnicottian transitional space, and its trajectory the potentially difficult negotiation of inner and outer worlds that Winnicott regards as a defining feature of human existence. Interestingly, the director herself has said as much: "I like moving from...mesmeric to hard reality;

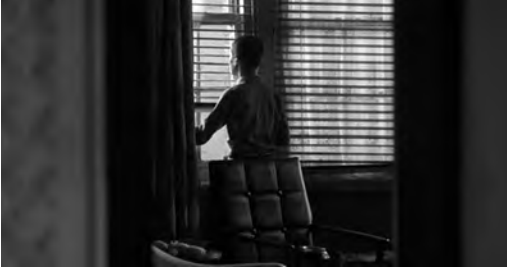


Fig. 12-13. *Ratcatcher*  
(Lynne Ramsay, 1999)



from internal reality to outside world; from internal...to observational.”<sup>25</sup>

This play of fantasy and a brutal reality intertwines with, and spins off, the film’s plot in a deceptively casual manner. So, for example, as well as providing a *mise en scène* of urban poverty, deprivation and squalor, the bags of rotting rubbish that litter the film’s spaces accentuate its themes of waste, vermin, pets and children’s play. Perhaps the closest the film comes to social realism is a plot-line about James’s family’s desperate desire to move out of their tenement flat and into a new house. But even here, the very *topos* of “home” is shot through with imagination and fantasy. The film’s organization of spaces and movement suggests that the quests facing James are indeed about separation/individuation, and that, in the end, these come back to issues of home and its thresholds, and the relationship between these and a series of non-home spaces that are in varying degrees “friendly,” challenging or dangerous. The film lays out, and moves through and between, its spaces in a manner that echoes the liminality and kinesis of transitional phenomena.

Therefore, although *Ratcatcher* may certainly be read in the conventional manner in terms of plot and character, to do no more than this misses entirely its intensity as cinematic experience. If *Ratcatcher* is indeed “about” childhood, or childhood trauma, or growing up rough in Glasgow, these themes are written into the film’s very matters of expression, the very inner and outer spaces and psychical processes that have to be negotiated in the child’s, James’s, world. This argument may be tested by briefly examining the spaces within the film, their defining characteristics and how they interconnect.<sup>26</sup>

In order of topographical proximity to the Gillespies' flat, which figures as "home," the film's main spaces are: the Gillespies' tenement flat ("home"); the tenement stair (the close); the tenement's back yard, or back court; the Quinns' flat, in the same tenement; the street outside; the canal; James's friend Margaret-Anne's flat (in a new high-rise block); and the new house and adjoining field. It is worth pointing out that all these spaces are in some way or other connected with James. Another marked feature of *Ratcatcher* is the proliferation and the variety of its thresholds, many of which are ambiguous in that they do not necessarily embody the above noted element of security. By comparison with *Mandy*, *Ratcatcher's* thresholds are ambiguous: they imply a rather complex zone of transition, even a degree of permeability, between "home" and its proximate open spaces—the street, the back court. The complexity of the organization of these spaces within the film frame lends them a paradoxical tone, an uncertainty as to where—*pace* Balint—the secure and the risky begin and end. As in *Mandy*, in *Ratcatcher* windows figure as thresholds, but again in the latter this is not straightforward. The tenement's back court is overlooked by the windows of the flats, and there are a number of shots of characters looking out of windows onto the yard, or the street, from inside a flat. Some of these simply offer the point of view of James (as in figs. 12 and 13) or of other characters. Others, however, while similarly composed, appear to be unmotivated by the look of any character. Throughout the film, though, windows figure as a particular kind of threshold: two spaces, inside and out, are bridged by looking, or the spaces are pointedly *not* bridged in that the source of point of view is withheld. The paradoxical quality of the window—threshold carries over into the space of the new house, where a window that functions initially not as a boundary but as a magical open sesame into an enticing new world later becomes a barrier.

*Ratcatcher's* trajectory, its narrative movement, is governed throughout by, and organized around, the spaces themselves—their interconnections, or (importantly in this film) their *dis*-connections—more than around any character. It is as if the spaces themselves are more important protagonists than the film's fictional characters. Undoubtedly, it can be argued that *Ratcatcher's* developmental arc is figured through the degree to which, and the ways in which, the characteristics of its spaces and their interrelationships change over the course of the film.

To take a key example, the canal's relationship with the film's other spaces is never fully laid out: it lacks intermediate spaces, is dis-located. There are no thresholds between the canal and any of the other spaces in the film; so, for example, the way from "home" to the canal, and—crucially—back again—is never mapped out. This space, significantly, is almost exclusively the domain of children and adolescents, and possesses the qualities of the ritual routes and challenging places that characterize children's geographies. It is a place and a scene of danger—several bad things take place there. The path and the waste ground alongside the canal figure in the film as a meeting place more than as a

route from one place to another. However, in scenes towards the end of the film, the canal does begin to take on some qualities of a place of passage—albeit an uncertain kind of passage—between “home” and Margaret-Anne’s flat. The passage is dis-located and un-placed, in that the beginning and end points of James’s journeys between the one and the other are not spatially tied in. The canal is distinctive, too, in that it morphs from being tightly, almost claustrophobically, framed at the start to figuring in an increasingly extensive spatial context as the film progresses, until at the end it is seen in a wide, extreme long shot that shows a broad expanse of waste ground edged in the far distance by high-rise flats and other buildings.

The new house and its adjoining field appear on three occasions in the course of the film, the first in a lengthy sequence that opens with James sitting on a step at the threshold of the Gillespies’ tenement close watching his older sister as she crosses the road to wait at a bus stop. In a bid to discover her mysterious destination, James goes back into his flat and filches some coins from his father’s trousers pocket. He returns to the street and boards the bus. In expanded time, the bus conveys him from his street out to the terminus, apparently far into the countryside. Here James comes upon an estate of partially-built houses, enters one, and explores the white spaces inside, eventually discovering an unglazed window space beyond which a golden, empty field is visible. He clambers out and runs and plays in the field; and is then next seen walking back home along an empty road.

Throughout this sequence, the various spaces (close, street, “home,” new house) are tied together, either by spatiotemporal editing and/or by point-of-view shots. The whole passage is exactly a journey from home to an unfamiliar space and then back home again, much as described by Balint in his discussion of “home” and “friendly expanses.” The thresholds and the intermediate spaces are clear, and the unfamiliar spaces of the new house and field possess the qualities of Balint’s “friendly expanses” and of the real/imaginal space of playing. The bus journey is the film’s only instance of locomotion other than on foot. In relation to the defining characteristics of children’s geographies, the bus journey—along with the temporal expansiveness of James’s journey—marks the space of the new house as “other” in terms of the child’s world. In this way, too, the new house is set up as both real and imaginary. In every one of these respects, this sequence is in clear contrast to all of the canal scenes. It is also markedly different from the subsequent two occasions on which the new house is seen.<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \*

The metapsychological argument about film and cinema advanced here is that through its organization within the frame of spatiality, liminality and motion, the medium is capable of replaying or invoking states of being that are commonly experienced as inner, and which operate largely at a preconscious, rather than at



an unconscious, level. They have to do with the ways our inner worlds engage external objects, and vice versa. These are engagements that while potentially involving looking also, and more significantly, call into play more generalized “body-mind” states and activities. One of the distinctive features of cinema’s organization of space within the frame, and of its play of stasis and movement, is its capacity to express and evoke—at the levels of feeling and memory—highly invested objects, spaces and passages, in particular those which have to do with the task of negotiating inner and outer worlds.

The medium of cinema appears unique in having the potential to offer this kind of cultural experience. Films can lay out the spaces of their worlds in such a manner as to invite the viewer to enter them, engage with them and become part of them, echoing the ways in which we negotiate the spaces and boundaries of our inner and outer worlds through transitional processes.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, film’s capacity to evoke the spatial, liminal and kinesic qualities of transitional processes enables the medium uniquely to convey, as it were from the inside, the feeling-tone and the psychical investments of key processes and activities of childhood such as playing and separation/individuation, so that the experience of watching a film may re-evolve the mental states associated with these activities. This is how films can invite viewers to re-enter, as adults, the world of childhood, and it explains the peculiar intensity of engagement solicited by films, like *Where is the Friend’s Home?*, *Mandy*, and *Ratcatcher*, that while exploiting the medium’s general capacity for “intimate immersion,”<sup>29</sup> take childhood preoccupations as their very subject matter.

#### NOTES

As part of the Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience (T-PACE) project, [http://www.slif.qmul.ac.uk/filmstudies/t\\_pace/index.html](http://www.slif.qmul.ac.uk/filmstudies/t_pace/index.html), this essay draws on general arguments about transitional phenomena and cultural experience set out in “Thresholds: film as film and the aesthetic experience,” *Screen* 46, no.4 (2005) and extends them to new approaches to the theory and analysis of films. For their kind support, my thanks go to Marc Furstenau and the organizers of the 2009 FSAC Annual Conference, to fellow members of the T-PACE study group and to the two anonymous readers for this journal.

1. See, for example, Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus,” *Camera Obscura* no.1 (1976): 104-126; Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: MacMillan, 1982), chapter 3. Theories of cinematic engagement that concern themselves with the relationship between the “embodied spectator” and the screen have tended to abandon psychoanalysis in favour of cognitive or phenomenological approaches to perception. See, for example, Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Anne Rutherford, “Cinema and Embodied Affect,” *Senses of Cinema* no. 25 (2003), [http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/25embodied\\_affect.html](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/25embodied_affect.html) (accessed 13 August 2009).



2. D.W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" (1951), in *Through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis: Collected Papers* (London: Karnac Books, 2002), 240. The essay is reprinted in D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005).
3. This became the title of a posthumously published collection of essays: D. W. Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).
4. Anni Bergman, "From Mother to the World Outside: The Use of Space During the Separation-Individuation Phase," in *Between Reality and Fantasy: Winnicott's Concepts of Transitional Objects and Phenomena*, eds. Simon A Grolnick and Leonard S. Barkin (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995), 160.
5. *Ibid.*, 164, emphasis added.
6. D.W. Winnicott, "Playing: a Theoretical Statement," in *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2005), 69.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), 13.
9. Winnicott, "Playing: a Theoretical Statement," 69.
10. Quoted in M. Davis and D. Wallbridge, *Boundary and Space: An Introduction to the Work of D.W. Winnicott* (London: Karnac Books, 1990), 144; see also D. W. Winnicott, "On Security," *The Family and Individual Development* (London: Tavistock, 1965), 30-33.
11. Bergman, 148.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 149.
14. *Ibid.*, 159.
15. Michael Balint, *Thrills and Regressions* (London: Hogarth Press, 1959).
16. See, for example, Stuart C. Aitken and Thomas Herman, "Gender, Power and Crib Geography: Transitional Spaces and Potential Places," *Gender, Place and Culture* 4, no.1 (1997): 63-88.
17. Roger Hart, *Children's Experience of Place* (New York: Irvington Publishers, Inc., 1979), 331-332.
18. *Ibid.*, 333.
19. On creativity and cultural experience, see Christopher Bollas, "The Aesthetic Moment and the Search for Transformation," in *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott*, ed. Peter L. Rudnytsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 40-49; Marion Milner, "The Role of Illusion in Symbol Formation," in *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott*, ed. Peter L. Rudnytsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 13-39; Lesley Caldwell, ed., *Art, Creativity, Living*, Winnicott Studies Monograph Series (London: Karnac Books for the Squiggle Foundation, 2000).
20. Object-relations approaches to the metapsychology of the cinematic experience are discussed, from a psychoanalytic standpoint in Graham Clarke, "Notes Towards an Object-Relations Approach to Cinema", *Free Associations* 4 no.3 (1994): 369-390; Ira Konigsberg, "Transitional Phenomena, Transitional Space: Creativity and Spectatorship in Film," *Psychoanalytic Review* 83, no.6 (1996): 865-889; Phyllis Creme, *The Playing Spectator: A Study on the Applicability of the Theories of D.W. Winnicott to Contemporary Concepts of the Viewer's Relationship to Film*, PhD thesis, University of Kent, 1994.
21. Jerry White, "Children, Narrative and Third Cinema in Iran and Syria," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 11, no.1 (2002): 78-97, contains an illuminating discussion of *Where is the Friend's Home?*
22. The cultural-historical significance of this bombsite is discussed in Annette Kuhn, "Mandy and Possibility," *Screen* 33, no.3 (1992): 233-243.
23. Philip Kemp, *Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick* (London: Methuen, 1991).

24. See Emma Wilson, "Still Time: *Ratcatcher*," *Cinema's Missing Children* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 108-122.
25. Lynne Ramsay, quoted in Annette Kuhn, *Ratcatcher* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 85.
26. For a detailed exploration see *Ratcatcher*, 69-77.
27. For details, see *Ratcatcher*, 61-68.
28. The concept of the "open image" is relevant here: see Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, "The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema," *Screen* 44, no.1 (2003): 38-57.
29. C. Cullen, "Details are Acoustical: the Films of Lynne Ramsay," *Afterimage* 29, no.1 (2001): 12-13.

ANNETTE KUHN is Senior Professorial Fellow in Film Studies at Queen Mary, University of London, and an editor of the journal *Screen*. Her books include: *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (1995 and 2002); *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (2002); (co-edited with Kirsten Emiko McAllister) *Locating Memory: Photographic Acts* (2006); and (edited) *Screen Theorizing Today: A celebration of Screen's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* (2009).