

From Intimacy to Infinity: exploring the role of interior in 3 short films

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses interior as a concept used as a motivating principal in a collaborative work between filmmakers and interior designers. This raised work substantial questions in relation to the role of 'interior' within each of the films made through the collaboration. Where and how was interior defined and located? What sort of interior relations existed within each of the screenplays? And how might these be represented relative to the various filmic instruments of camera, set, lighting, sound, etc?

The paper describes and critiques the film-based operations and processes used by the three writer/directors, two interior designers, sound team and cinematographer in the production of interiors within the recent triptych of short films titled Motel.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to give a work-in-progress report on the *Motel* project, an exercise in creative research¹ framed as a self-reflexive collaboration between three film-makers and two interior designers, all of whom are practitioner/researchers. The *Motel* project commenced in 2008 and will be completed in 2010. It centres around the production of a triptych of short films set in and around a common fictional location, an Australian country motel (Figure 1).

The *Motel* project is, at the time of writing, approximately halfway through. This is a good time to reflect on what has been discovered through the 'material thinking'² of the project thus far, and in particular how the concept of 'interior' has been placed as a focal point of our creative collaboration.

FILM-MAKING + INTERIOR DESIGN.

In conventional film production practice, the production designer, as a classic film textbook tells us, 'is in charge of visualizing the film's settings'.³ The unit led by the production designer draws plans for the sets and costumes, and then oversees their realisation. This all takes place within a strict industrial hierarchy of 'units' or 'departments', each in charge of a different creative aspect of the film, and all in the service of the director's vision of the script.

One of the aims of the *Motel* project has been to explore the creative potential of interdisciplinary collaboration. For the film-makers, working with interior designers rather than a specialist film production designer (as would usually be the case), has provoked a challenge to the way the film scripts have been developed and interpreted before the film triptych was shot, and enabled fresh perspectives on key aesthetic and stylistic production issues. The distinct conceptual approach the interior designers bring to the concept of 'interior', in particular, has meant that the process of 'visualizing the film's settings' referred to previously has expanded into a dialogue as to how



Above
Figure 1: Production still, Agency Time. Photo Roger Kemp

this idea of interior can be brought to bear on the narrative themes of intimate connection and distance that run through the triptych.

For the interior designers, working in the hitherto unfamiliar realm of film production has prompted new perspectives on the idea of 'interior' that is by definition central to their practice and research. These are: the use and production of narrative in forming interiors, the camera as a spatial mediator; the relation between interior and image, and the implication of time, duration and distance in interior environments.

BACK-STORY (1): FADE UP ON FILM-MAKERS

The *Motel* project began as a collaborative experiment between the three film-makers, each of whom agreed to write a short film drama script centring on any two characters of their devising (specified only in that one would be male, one female). The only thing connecting the scripts at the beginning was their proposed shared motel setting. By chance, one of the scripts was drafted and read by the other two writers before they commenced their own scripts, and this provided the opportunity for each of them to pick up obliquely on a theme introduced in that first script: the theme of time travel.

Since the starting point for the film-makers' collaboration had been the common fictional physical space or setting for the three films, and that this space – the motel – has become such a richly coded environment of modernity within Western culture (cinema, photography, literature, design and other art-forms), it was evident that production design should be given a key role in the realisation of the project. Given that the project had to be achieved without a large production budget and within the context of a university creative research setting (rather than an industrial film studio or independent film production company), these potential limitations instead became an opportunity to initiate a genuinely trans-disciplinary collaborative experiment when the film-makers made contact with the interior designers.

BACK-STORY (2): ENTER INTERIOR DESIGNERS

The first discussion that took place between the film-makers and interior designers allowed each of the collaborators to give an insight into each other's respective backgrounds; the two interior designers discussing commercial interior design and academic projects, and the three directors discussing past experience with screen writing and production.

Film has a significant historical relationship to architecture and interior design and is widely discussed and referred to in design discourse in both academic and commercially-based journals. It has a strong influence on design culture in general and its influence can be seen in many

contemporary interiors. Film's ability to control and compose spatial conditions and atmospheres and to present purposeful spatial scenarios from existing ubiquitous environments is seductive to interior designers, as their role is most often to generate compelling spatial environments and interactions.

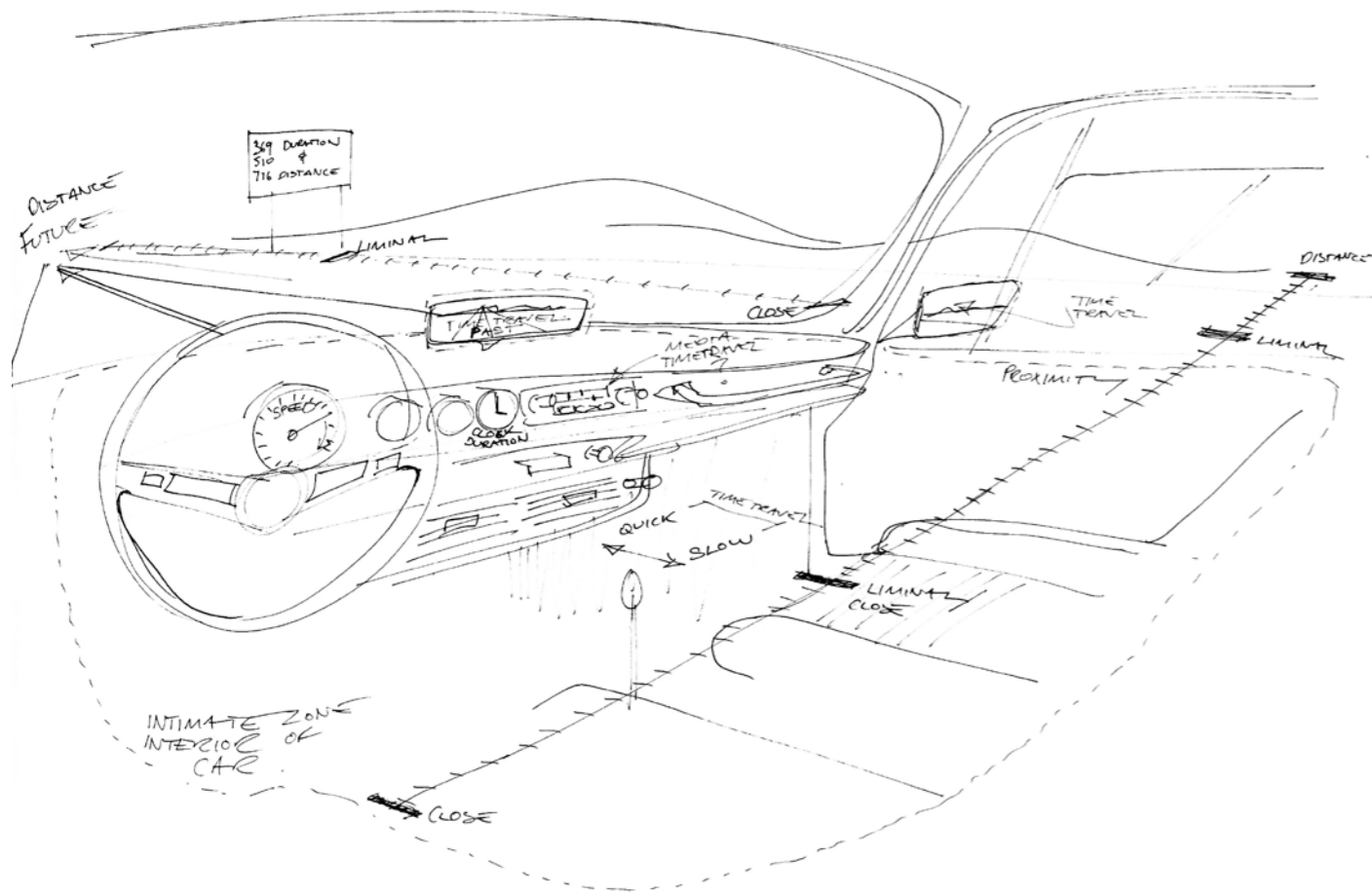
Processes derived from film such as story boarding, have been in regular use and reference in design and architecture. Bernard Tschumi's work in Manhattan Transcripts and projects such as Parc de la Villette in Paris, offer up filmic techniques as a way of designing space through analogous references to framing, cutting and the strong influence of narrative. Diller + Scofidio's renovation of the Brasserie Restaurant in New York employs video cameras to take a still image of people entering the restaurant. These images are then projected in multiples above the bar, integrating filmic material into built space. This adds to the voyeuristic nature of the space. Because of the saturation of film image and language through design and indeed popular culture, the potential for overlapping and connecting issues was obvious, yet the nature of these intersections was yet to be discovered.

ENCOUNTERING THE SCRIPTS: BUILDING A BRIEF

The standard film-making creative hierarchy, with the directorial auteur at the top, has been destabilised in the *Motel* project in so far as the writer/directors and the interior designers have undertaken the project as equal collaborators creating a shared vision while respecting the different craft skills and responsibilities attached to each clearly defined role. While the film production process commenced as usual with the writing of scripts by each of the three writer/directors, these scripts were then given over to the interior designers to interpret, play with and respond to, as if they were 'found objects'. The agreed assumption was that in the end a production design would be achieved, but an interim stage of 'slowing down the process', as the interior designers conceived of it, was inserted.

The scripts, otherwise known as screenplays, were presented to the designers in the standard screenplay format: A4 typed documents separating dialogue and contextual information such as description of environment and actions occurring in relation to that dialogue. The script format, with each reading as a short story, provided a brief for the design development in so far as each described a number of different spaces over varying durations and time periods. The conventional layout structure of these documents is such that one page of script equates to approximately one minute of film time. Each film was to be seven minutes in length, with the collective triptych being about 20 to 25 minutes duration.

Having read the scripts and becoming familiar with the story, characters, spaces and aspirations of each director, the designers made a deliberate decision to resist moving directly into a process of



aesthetic development. Instead, they directed their attention to a spatial investigation of the script.

This raised substantial questions in relation to the role of 'interior' within each of the films. Where and how was interior defined and located? What sort of interior relations existed within each of the screenplays? And how might these be represented relative to the various filmic instruments of camera, set, lighting, sound, etc?

NEGOTIATING INTERIOR: CONSTRUCTING SPATIAL RELATIONS

In an early meeting between the directors and interior designers a conversation developed around issues of interior and, more significantly, interiority. 'Interiority is that abstract quality that enables the recognition and definition of an interior. It is a theoretical and immaterial set of coincidences and variables from which 'interior' is made possible.'⁴

The concentration and consideration of these ideas led to a negotiation of spatial relations presented through the scripts. Descriptions of locations in the scripts such as the motel room, inside the car; the highway, the motel office offered up the opportunities to draw out more detailed relationships occurring in those spaces that presented conditions of interiority and indeed exteriority (Figure 2).

Critical spatial relationships between objects or between the actors were understood through ideas of proximity and intensities. These ideas were then communicated back to the writer/directors via a process of spatialising the script. Levels of proximity and intimacy were then generated through a process of interiorising or exteriorising spaces.

An example of this implemented is where the two main characters in each film took up various positions of physical and emotional intimacy or distance, with physical proximity not necessarily matching the notion of 'interior'. Not all material filmed utilised the idea of an actual physical 'exterior'; rather exterior was viewed as a non-intimate space existing inside the motel room or car.

CONSIDERING TIME: TIME TRAVEL, DISTANCE AND DURATION

The Motel, set on a highway in the middle of nowhere, acts as a liminal space offering ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy; an appropriate setting for exploring ideas of time travel. The ubiquitous motel

is a transit form that mediates between the fixed address and vagrancy, between home and car. A form of accommodation that consists of road sign and interior; the homeliness of the motel has a minimal external condition.⁵

Time travel is explored in different ways through each of the films in the triptych. Film (1), *Agency Time*, is set in the mid 1960s but takes a leap forward in time via a customised silver Mercedes flying down the highway out of sight. Its occupants, travel consultants for a company called 'AgencyTime', are looking

for new holiday destinations but one of them ends up going too far and encountering a far less attractive future.

Film (2), *The Papin Sisters*, details the relationship between two lovers meeting in a highway motel room. As the script unfolds, we become aware that the characters are father and daughter and this event is enabled through a slippage in time. Time here is 'impossible' in the same way that it is 'impossible' for a father and daughter to maintain any kind of continuing sexual relationship. The interiority of their relationship is toxic, and indeed this film takes place only in the motel room, suggesting a suffocating inwardness that cannot be sustained.

Film (3), *Spiral*, is set in the present day in a motel that has not changed its appearance since the late 1960s. This film tells the story of a journalist investigating a story about time travel who is reunited, after twenty years and through the eerie intervention of a geeky motel office clerk, with her first boyfriend. The time travel experienced by the protagonists of this story is metaphorical, as they seek to return to a love affair they shared half a lifetime ago.

AN INTERIOR APPROACH: SPATIALISING THE SCRIPT

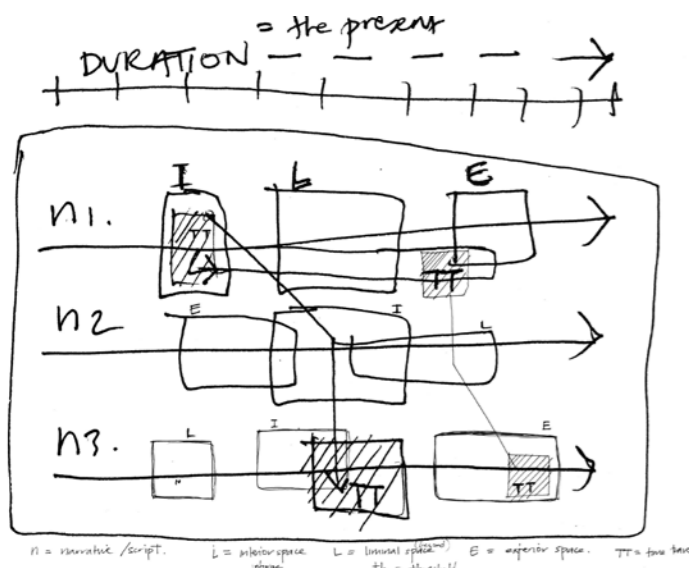
Having broadly negotiated the interior approach, a return to the script was decided upon to help extract where the spatial relations would manifest through the film. For the interior designers, that important slowing down of the process was managed by resisting the move towards making representational images of spaces described in the text, such as the motel room, the highway, or the motel office. Instead, a continued discussion of the scripts was actively pursued through ideas of interior, exterior and in-between. These conditions of space are identified within the text, not as spaces described as material or location but as the varied types of spatial situations or relations – or embodied character relationships – underlying those physical environments.

Usually at this stage production designers would underline on the script all the words relating to objects as a way of generating

Opposite

Figure 2: Building spatial relations. Anthony Fryatt

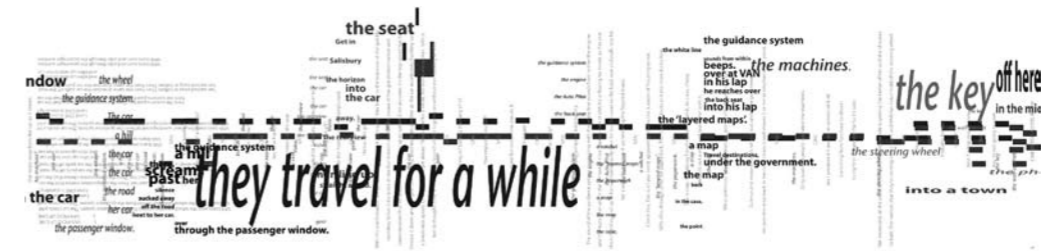
a list of things (props) that need to be acquired and located within the set. However the interior designers wanted to focus on the various spatial relations offered through the entire content of the script. Much like Stephen Holl's diagrammatic analysis of inter-relational properties of modern urban complexities⁶ the interior designers sought to extract interior relations evident in the text through simple spatial descriptions – words, actions and phrases such as; above, behind, underneath, across, away, out of, out here, back in, out on the highway, through the door, way out and emerging. These words became significant spatially and were highlighted for further attention. Unbeknown to the writer / directors, these highlighted words presented intriguing opportunities for the designers in thinking about the various interior spaces within the script. At this early stage the interior designers concentrated far more on these qualities in the scripts than trying to grasp much about the overall story or character development.



An instinctive decision was taken by the interior designers to spatialise the text by changing the physical format of the scripts, enlarging them and merging them into one document. The scripts were rearranged, taking them out of the A4 (1 minute per page) format and rotated into a left to right, oversized page layout. This was a liberating act; there were now no page breaks. The script could now be unfurled and laid flat like a plan drawing made of text. This seemed to make the scripts more open and accessible (Figure 3). They became public documents that could be read by a number of people simultaneously, compared to the closed nature of the previous A4 format. They could be drawn over, projected on, pinned up or laid out across a table. The words now ran over nearly three metres in each script, running in parallel above and below each other much like a music sheet or media score. The scripts themselves could now communicate qualities of duration and time simply by stretching or compressing the flow of words across the page. With the three scripts positioned next to each other it opened them up to comparison and review. The words and phrases that had been highlighted begun to spread like a web of lines connecting similar or related elements; the three scripts became one web.

The script shifted from being simply a written document into something more closely resembling a graphic layout that generated its own spatial qualities beyond the envisioned spaces described in the text. The success of this tactic led to an increasingly layered and complex handling of the scripts; different spatial qualities such as intimacy, distance, interior, exterior were extracted, highlighted and valued individually for thickness and density before being laid back into the increasingly visual document. Clear spatial relationships emerged as these qualities were plotted into the 'rotated script'. The script became a key tool in beginning to position interior ideas through the film and building up spatial complexity that could be used by the three directors (Figure 4).

This approach to the script seemed a significant departure from the norm. The standard film script format has a header for each scene that outlines the scene number, the location (e.g. 'Motel



Room' or 'Highway'), the general time of day (e.g. 'Day', 'Dusk', etc), and whether it is an interior ('INT') or exterior ('EXT') scene. Since this clear binary between 'INT' and 'EXT' scenes is so well established in film production, the writer/directors in the Motel project were initially concerned that the interior designers would only be interested in and equipped to design those scenes which had 'INT' written on the header. In which case, who would design the exterior scenes – 'exterior designers'? Landscape architects? It was a revelation for the film-makers to discover the way in which 'interior' was conceived by the designers as a subjectively experienced environment, an interplay between the arrangement of objects in physical space and the inhabitation of that

Opposite
Figure 3: Diagram for the rotated script. Roger Kemp

Above
Figure 4: Segment of rotated script. Lisa Corcoran

space. Suddenly the discussion of the interior space was not confined just to a motel room, office or even the interior space of a car; but now could extend those spaces far beyond their conventional boundaries. Even a scene of a conversation between two characters outside on an empty highway could be conceived as a kind of interior space, an intimate zone containing the two of them separate from the rest of the environment surrounding them.

Thinking of the idea of interiority in this way, as a phenomenon born in the subjective experience of an inhabitant of a space – or in this case of a fictional filmic character – was extremely productive in imagining how to express in cinematic terms the themes of emotional connection and distance that were increasingly found to resonate across the three film scripts.

SPATIAL SEQUENCE AND NARRATIVE

There was still reluctance within the process to commit to firm aesthetic considerations; the priority was to build atmosphere and narrative through interior relationships. There were, however, certain unavoidable specifics already determined by the scriptwriters: places and items such as cars, highways, motel rooms, bathrooms, a bed, a desk, or a chair. The spatial qualities extracted from the script could be attached to these elements for the actors and directors to negotiate and encounter. From this process fragmented scenes of occupation began to emerge, and the interior designers were able to construct snippets of spatial events and narrative in a series of plan-like drawings. As these micro-scenes became linked together they increasingly helped to inform the greater spatial layout of the different locations. In turn the 'rotated script' allowed the directors and designers to see where these scenes were located in relationship to each other – and critically – how they could be integrated into the broader narrative of the three films. The narratives were rarely linear; however the map-like quality of the rotated script allowed for spatial interconnections to be made by the designers and directors alike, both within the individual scripts and between the films.

Excitingly, the use of this methodology was embraced by the writer/directors and was retained into the shooting phase of the project. The trope of 'interior' became a useful tool in directing the performances of the actors. The performances became a dynamic in which, notwithstanding their physical proximity in a given scene, the directors and actor(s) might agree that the characters portrayed could feel themselves to be emotionally closer or more distant from each other. This is not in itself, of course, a new idea as an imaginative technique to generate a specific performance, but it is the bringing to the fore of the 'interior' idea as a conceptual anchor-point across the domains of production design, cinematography and performance direction, not to mention sound design, that has proved to be productive to the film-making process.

CONSTRUCTING THE SPACE

These scenes of occupation allowed a number of things to occur; plans of the sets could be committed to, location shoots could be considered in detail and, importantly, the role of the camera and cinematographer could be more firmly introduced to the process. The urgency of film production demanded that aesthetic considerations and design of the physical space now commence; practical considerations to do with building the sets and shooting the film were now to be addressed.

The process of designing, building, planning and shooting was inevitably a complex collaboration. Because of the inherent flexibility of film, the schedule frequently departed from the script narrative. However, upon reflection, the process of constructing the space appeared to consist of at least four distinct phases: *Imagination Space*, *Set Space*, *Camera Space* and *Screen Space*.

IMAGINATION SPACE

Imagination space describes how the various different sets existed as interior spaces located within the imagination of the group. Specifically this describes the point prior to the construction of any physical sets or even any type of conceptual image making

or representation. Rather than seeking a specific location to replicate in pursuit of authenticity, it seemed far more powerful if the aesthetic and atmospheric qualities emerged from a collective set of personal recollections, photographs and filmic references. The outcome was a series of layered, vague and expansive spaces formed from a mixture of memories and desires, which offered up far more possibilities for film settings. The novelist Italo Calvino describes this opening up of space via memory and imagination eloquently: 'As this wave of memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands.'⁷

It was revealing, if unsurprising to consider that even this 'pre-filmic' phase of the project was utterly affected by media concerns. The films, all set in different eras of time, were linked through the same motel room that featured in each film. It was agreed that the aesthetic was deliberately banal and ubiquitous. The rooms appeared faded and tired, and yet the group's desires for certain qualities of glamour and mysticism were emerging. The group implicitly and inevitably accepted this contradiction and improbability that derived from the medium of film. 'Our gaze, too, has been constructed and our imagination shaped in advance by means of photography, literature, painting, video, film.'⁸

SET SPACE

The making of material space was achieved either by building in studios or altering locations. The *set space* is a contradictory condition; undeniably 'real' in its materiality, but its nature is also unavoidably fictitious. Locations were twisted and distorted through changes made to the materiality of the space; cars were wheeled into cycloramas and motel rooms built within the cavernous space of the studio. It all presented itself as a close and believable version of the 'real' and yet would dissolve and fall away at the merest scrutiny and the artifice revealed.

At the edges the transitions were absolute; the shift between a believable motel room and an unfinished 'film flat' occurred instantly. For the interior designers it was an extraordinary

spatial experience. Owen Paterson, production designer on the *The Matrix* described it thus:

I love it when you can stand on the outside of a set that you've designed and built, and then step through that plywood doorway and be in a palace, hovel, a church or a space craft without ever having left the sound stage.⁹

Despite this flirtation with a sense of the 'real' there were also some very different actualities from spaces encountered in the permanent built environment. For instance, the technical requirements of the camera demanded that set space be enlarged to allow for distinctive shots. The motel room set in particular was improbably large for a cheap motel room: this expansion of space is a standard studio production practice and only remnants of the feeling of 'too much space' may be felt in the finished production.

For the interior designers these significant distortions and absences crystallised how constructed space can exist finely caught in a state of tension between belief and disbelief. Within such overtly transitional spaces the viewer can make distinct choices as to which space they wish to inhabit at any point in time. This quality gives an importance to set space that goes beyond its critical role in the production of film.

CAMERA SPACE

The filming of the set space was very much an active occupation by the camera, which had a powerful ability to transform the space in new ways. Louis Delluc describes how the camera 'willfully restrict(s) the field of vision so as to intensify expression'.¹⁰

It is not just framing that achieves this; lighting was a shared key concern of the cinematographer and interior designer alike, and was augmented in the cinematic context by further issues including those of colour, focal length, depth of field, aspect ratio, height, angle and camera movement. All have the ability to close in, compress or expand the set space, manipulating how the set is seen and framing the occupation of the actors in a highly precise manner.

The monitor (a 'live feed' extension of the camera), had a remarkable ability to reveal the visual expansion or contraction of the set space, and as such made a compelling presence on set. It allowed the viewer to inhabit the immersive experience of the mediated camera space whilst simultaneously experiencing the material 'real' set space around its periphery (Figure 5). With the actors and camera occupying the set, the *camera space* took on an increasingly internal quality distinct from that of the set; issues of belief and disbelief began instead to be replaced by varying intensities of interiority. The camera came to control and master the set space; for instance, the seemingly infinite transitions between set and studio present in the 'triple image reflection' of the *The Papin Sisters* were overcome and thus made irrelevant through the camera's ability to choose and exclude in such a precise manner:



Within the camera space, screen space already existed to a certain extent, but it was still understood within the much larger set space that is off screen. The possibility of decision making and determining the spatial experience within a context of the pro-filmic physical set was still available to the inhabitant; the voyeuristic quality of the screen was not yet fully experienced.

SCREEN SPACE

The screen space is absorbing and compelling in its ability to allow suspension of belief by the viewer. Existing space is removed,

distant and re-constructed into a virtual image that is convincing and whole in its portrayal. When the images and sound are 'out' of the location and experienced in say, the edit suite, a schism has occurred moving it from the 'reality' of the location/set into the hyper-reality of the screen space.

On screen the evocation of interiority is constructed by the interplay between the physical settings and costumes and the techniques of seeing applied to them by the camera. The pro-filmic physical space exists only in so far as the camera presents it to us as viewers (and even then of course the camera may lie, as all seasoned audiences know – the physical space seemingly depicted may be a deft collage or a computer-generated simulacrum). For example, in the scene from *Motel: Spiral* in which two characters find themselves reunited



after twenty years in the motel car park, the *interiority* of the scene between them can be constructed by a series of close-up shots using a long focal length and shallow depth of field, which serves to isolate the two characters from their surroundings and draw them into a 'field of intimacy', in the midst of, but separate from the landscape around them. With all other considerations removed the viewer is thus drawn further and further into the interior quality of the screen until ultimately they 'enter'.¹¹

Emerging initially from media, the *Motel* project appeared to come full circle, returning to an entirely mediated state accessed

only through the screen. It raises compelling questions for interior designers as the slippage between screen and imagination space is exposed, and the virtual space takes on the most convincing and 'whole' space in the mind of the inhabitant. As the art director, Sir Kenneth Adam, states: 'My aim has been to create a stylistic reality for the audience, more "real" than a literal interpretation of reality.'¹²

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to expose critical ideas of interior and interiority, actively pursued through the production of three short films. It undertakes this task at a point within the production cycle where the films are still emerging, having been shot, but now entering a significant stage of post-production. This provides the collaborating authors with an opportunity to reflect on the processes undertaken and to bring to the fore these issues again for the final stages of production.

The *Motel* project is a significant collaborative work that has enabled both the interior designers and film-makers involved to actively explore the connection between the two disciplines. The interior designers have prompted a significant shift in the role of interior within a filmic production. The interior has shifted from being understood as a defined location of space, for example, the inside of the motel room, to being conceived through the manipulation and construction of spatial relations.

The format and structure of the traditional screenplay has been reinvented to better attend to the spatial conditions to be depicted and explored through the films. This equates to the advancement of spatial conditions relative to the highlighted dialogue presented in screenplays.

The project has exposed some significant differences in the conception of cinematic and built space that was not fully appreciated prior to the commencement of the work. In particular it has allowed both filmmakers and interior designers to examine the complexities that arise when constructing space within the

mediated field of film. From this a series of distinct conditions of space has emerged within the process of film making; that of *imagination space, set space, camera space and screen space*.

As the project continues it is exciting to consider what a further examination of interior and film against this framework of spaces may reveal. The potential for interior design practitioners to inform and extend film-making appears significant. It is also pertinent to consider how film's ability to manipulate, construct and offer up highly specific spatial conditions can advance the practice of interior design and reveal the extent to which film affects our understanding of interior space.

NOTES

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2. Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, xi.
3. David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: an introduction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 26.
4. Christine McCarthy, 'Towards a definition of Interiority', *Space and Culture* (8: 2005), 112.
5. Sarah Treadwell, 'The Motel: An image of Elsewhere', *Space and Culture* (8: 2005), 214.
6. Steven Holl, 'Within the city: Phenomena of relations', *Design Quarterly* (139: 1988), 12.
7. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Pan Books, 1974), 10.
8. Ignasi de Solà-Morales, 'Terrian Vague', *Presents and Futures, XIX Congress of the UIA Barcelona*, (Barcelona: UIA, 1996), 35.
9. Alessio Cavallaro, (ed) *Setting the Scene: Film design from Metropolis to Australia* (Melbourne: ACMI, 2008), 37.
10. Patrick Keiller, 'Architectural cinematography', in Kester Rattenbury ed, *This is not architecture: Media constructions*, 38. (London: Routledge, 2002), 37.
11. Juhani Pallasmaa, 'City sense', in *Encounters: Architectural Essays*, Peter Mackeith, ed, (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy Rati, 2005)
12. Cavallaro, (ed) *Setting the Scene: Film design from Metropolis to Australia*, 37.

Opposite left

Figure 5: The camera monitor. Photo Anthony Fryatt

Opposite right

Figure 6: Production still, *The Papin Sisters*. Photo Anthony Fryatt