

2022-06-04

# Bachelard, Besson and Bakhtin: A Dialogical Discourse on the Potential of Intimate Space

Brown, R

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/19487>

---

10.1177/12063312221092621

Space and Culture

SAGE Publications

---

*All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.*

## Bachelard, Besson and Bakhtin: A dialogical discourse on the potential of intimate space

### Abstract

Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* ponders the image of the wardrobe. Fixated by the figurative nature of its inner space, for Bachelard, the wardrobe is intimate, secret, and ordered. It is a space of protected memories, accessed more through the imagination than the everyday. Besson's *The Fifth Element* opens up intimate space. Its external envelope offers no impenetrable boundary but instead a permeable threshold. *The Fifth Element* suggests an alternative for intimate space, where the incongruous, even conflicting, come together. Such a possibility evokes Bakhtin's construct of *dialogism* which revealed in the potential of dialogue between one and other, across both literal and figurative thresholds. This article brings together disparate strands from philosophy, film and architecture. Through their juxtaposition it will consider the potential for a new perspective on intimate space as *dialogical space*, in which private and public might meet, interact and even embrace, and so see themselves anew.

### Key words:

boundary, dialogic, intimate, threshold

## introduction

This text explores dialogic space, a conceptualization of space that rather than accepting inherited notions of “monological coherence and closure” (Shields, 1996, p. 245), recognizes it as a “multivalent project” (Kahn, 2002, p. 250). Dialogic space not only accommodates but moreover embraces the other, even across difference. Central here is the potential of threshold conditions – rather than boundaries – between difference. Dialogical space emphasizes encounters between one and an other, and the role thresholds can play in these encounters. This concept is explored here through a juxtaposition of intimate, private space and more public space offering intimate exchange with an other. This discussion is advanced through reference to the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, the French filmmaker Luc Besson’s *The Fifth Element*, and Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing on dialogism, and further articulated through considering a wardrobe in an apartment entry hall.

Upon first encounter, linking Bachelard, Besson and Bakhtin and a wardrobe appears an incongruous proposition. Bachelard’s phenomenological grounding and Bakhtin’s inquiry of self-other relations seem disjointed; challenging this nexus further, Bachelard’s writing seeks something essential, while Besson’s films willingly question convention. What any of this has to do with a wardrobe is seemingly unclear. They are however interrelated in several ways.

This text was initially prompted by my own interest in Bakhtin’s dialogism and its applicability to space, spatial meaning and inhabitation, especially its possibility of engaging across difference. Thinking about this made me think of science fiction, because most things do; NB: credit is due here to sci-fi director Joss Whedon’s similar phrase on most things making him think of the *Millennium Falcon* (cited in Ross 2005). This of course got me thinking of spatial form, its meaning and inhabitation in science fiction, and led to a dialogically framed re-watching of Besson’s *The Fifth Element*. At turns a great and jumbled movie (Ebert 1997), Besson’s film is marked by juxtapositions of expansive space (whether as city, desert or outer space) and more intimate spaces of air ducts, living and sleeping pods, and taxis to name a few. Besson’s treatment of these intimate spaces brought to mind Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* and in particular his discussion on wardrobes, which links conversely to the wardrobe in the aforementioned apartment entry hall. This text draws upon each of these aspects to help illustrate my conception of dialogical space; these references to Bakhtin, Besson and Bachelard will however be presented in reverse order to help position what is a thought-in-formation on dialogic space. The reference to the entry hall is then added as a final illustration of this thinking.

Connecting Bachelard, Besson and Bakhtin is not grounded in some metaphorical correlation, but rather reflects my own interest in the relationship between things especially across difference. This intentional crafting of relationships between disparate entities is reflective of educator Edward de Bono’s (1970) commentary on lateral thinking; offering a way to see beyond received understanding, it values the insights offered by alternative perspectives, including being open to possibilities offered by the least obvious relationships. This linkage equally reflects film theorist Robert Stam’s (1989, p. 19) articulation of of the “migratory” cross-disciplinary drift of the Bakhtinian method’, affording new insights through a ‘threshold encounter (1989, p. 16)’ between different fields. This approach is represented in Bakhtin’s own work, which stretches from literary criticism and language (for which he is most known) to aesthetics, cultural history, ethics, the human sciences and perception (Gardiner 1992). This drift is similarly evidenced in an extension of Bakhtin’s ‘arguments to fields or purposes he did not have in mind (Vice 1997, 1),’ ranging across film, post-structuralist, post-colonial and queer theory, the fine arts and social geography.

Alongside an embrace of such discursiveness is recognition of a common theme in their work examining the presence of difference within space and the role of spatial boundaries and/or thresholds. For Bachelard, this difference resides in our spatial orientation within the house, i.e., inward away from the boundary between inside and outside. For Besson, it lies in the simultaneous presence of spatial enclosure and its openness

through a permeable boundary. For Bakhtin, it is situated in self-other relations, notably in the dialogue and orientation between one and the other.

Their discussions of space are reflective of a wider engagement with space by both the arts and philosophy, shifting from an earlier emphasis on history to one of space as forecast by philosophers Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec (1986) over 30 years ago. The study of space within the humanities has since grown in importance (Andrews 2014). This spatial turn equally owes a debt to philosopher Henri Lefebvre's (1991) trilogy of spatial representation: how space is structured, the intentions underpinning its structure, and how we interpret that structure. The presence of space and difference is of course intrinsic in an ever-increasingly globalised world. Extensive discourse attests to this, for example theorist Michel de Certeau (1984), Lefebvre (1991), sociologist Peter Marcuse (2002), or geographer Doreen Massey (2005), to name a few. How we deal with this difference is vital; as architect and critic Michel Sorkin (1997, p. 9) argues, 'the accommodation of difference is the key project of contemporary democracy.'

Just as general conceptions of space became a centre point of discourse in the arts, so too has urban space notably here within cinema, which has increasingly drawn upon the urban as a site in which to project and explore utopian and dystopian narratives of modernity (Everett 2000, 14). This shift is particularly true of the science fiction genre. Moving beyond its historical dismissal as lacking gravitas, critical scrutiny reveals that science fiction narratives are actually mediations on the issues of our day (Burns, 2007; King and Krzywinska, 2000; Sardar 2002). More pointed here is the increasing use of science fiction as an arena in which to speculate on the urban. As academic Amy Butt (2018) highlights, science fiction affords an incisive lens on the urban condition, with a 'growing call within urban studies for a greater appreciation of the critical common ground offered by sf, and its relevance to expanding conceptions of the urban.' Similarly, urban theorist James Donald (1997, 200) suggests, 'the point of examining the imaginary cities constructed in novels and films is that it is often artists rather than urbanists who found the language and images to teach us.'

Discussion of any of the themes raised above – i.e., dialogism, sci-fi film, urban space – is in itself not new. They are topics that have been addressed in multiple discourses. What is distinctive however is bringing dialogism together with the latter two, and what is revealed by this co-joining. *The Fifth Element* is reflective of the interface between sci-fi film and urban space. Film Studies Professor Susan Hayward (2000) for example has identified *The Fifth Element's* exploration of identity and representation within the city, focusing on questions of gender and politics raised by the relationship of the body to / within the city. Although insightful, my own discussion brings a dialogical perspective to the interface between sci-fi film and urban space in *The Fifth Element*; discussed here are the relationships between people in space and the spaces they inhabit, and what these mean for their identity and conceptualisation of that space. This relationship is explored with emphasis on spaces of encounter – i.e., threshold spaces that offer opportunity for intimate contact with another. In so doing it responds to sociologist Rob Shield's (1996) all-too-still-true charge that there has been relatively little application of Bakhtin's thinking on dialogism to the context of the urban. What discourse does exist focuses on community planning processes, or speculations on formal aesthetics. Concurrent discussion of the other within the urban exists, though framed within overarching representations of economic, political and/or social disparity, or on general propositions for accommodation of the other, and not on a more intimate level of exchange between one consciousness and another.

This article embraces this challenge. Considered here is an alternative possibility for space in which the incongruous, if not conflicting, come together. Inspired by Besson's depiction of such encounters in *The Fifth Element*, this construct will then be considered for its potential as a dialogical architecture between conflicting interests (here those private and public), using the design of a wardrobe as a site of speculation. What emerges is understanding that we can extend our conception of intimate space to include that which offers opportunity for encounter, engagement, even embrace with the other (and ourselves); through such dialogical intercourse we both give to and gain from the other.

## bachelard and the intimate space of the wardrobe

Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* explores the poetic image and sense of intimacy he grants to it. His site of exploration is the idea (as well as memories) of the house. This phenomenological perspective underlies his intention to reveal a house's elemental nature. Bachelard states that, 'our house is our corner of the world (Bachelard, 1964, 4).' The house as corner speaks of a deeply engrained desire for refuge in which its occupant 'huddles up to itself, takes to cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed (Bachelard 1964, 91).' Intrinsic to Bachelard's refuge is a sense of intimacy, of privacy concentrated and protected.

Diverting briefly, sentiments of refuge are paralleled in discourse on biophilia, which posits an innate desire for refuge grounded in humankind's East African savannah origins (Orians, 1986). In domestic history however, notions of intimacy are not so primitive, and emerged (in the West) from more recent roots. Concepts of intimacy and privacy, and indeed our contemporary conceptualisation of the home, first began to emerge in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Western Europe. Such thinking was afforded by significant changes taking place, including greater access to wealth, an increasing separation of home and work, longer presence of children in the home, and the emergence of ideas of the individual self and the family. With these developments came a greater sense of domestic privacy (Rybczynski, 1986).

Returning to Bachelard, a key site of the house's privacy (i.e., intimacy) is to be found in wardrobes. Though seemingly an insignificant space, he posits that wardrobes are not everyday pieces of furniture and are not opened every day nor to just anyone; rather they have quality of intimacy which might be otherwise missing from our lives (Bachelard, 1964/1969). It is a space of protected memories, more accessible through imagination than everyday actions. Its intimacy speaks of something very personal and meaningful, and hidden away. This intimacy doesn't however require the wardrobe remain out of site; rather it is notional, inferred by the very visible boundary creating a dividing line (reinforced by lock and key) between inside and outside. This intimacy is accentuated by a sense of order the wardrobe offers to the house in the face of possible disorder (Bachelard, 1964/1969). The boundary of Bachelard's wardrobe both delineates a clear line between inside and outside, and equally makes 'a general comprehensive system manifest (Norberg Schulz, 1980, p. 12)' and so offering control.

Concurrent with the boundary's visibility is a simultaneous sense of invisibility. Bachelard (1964/1969) argues it is better not to be able to see inside that which is enclosed, and rather is best left to the imagination; 'to verify images kills them, and it is always more enriching to *imagine* than to *experience* (p. 88).' He adds, 'the pure recollection, the image that belongs to us alone, we do not want to communicate; we only give its picturesque details. Its very core, however, is our own, and we should never want to tell all there is to tell about it (Bachelard, 1964/1969, p. 85).'

What Bachelard urges us to protect, to remain hidden to all but ourselves, is our memories, our innermost feelings and thoughts. The wardrobe is a space of protected memories. Held within are 'the things that are unforgettable, unforgettable for us, but also unforgettable for those to whom we are going to give our treasures. (Bachelard, 1969, 84).' Implied here is delineation of those who we will give our treasures to (clearly not everybody) and those from who we will hide away our treasures (most everybody). The wardrobe's physical boundary represents a socio-cultural line we draw between ourselves and others. Bachelard's wardrobe has a distinct sense of interiority – not only of being bounded, but also of looking inward on itself and away from others in the outside world. The danger in Bachelard's romanticized notion of the wardrobe is it removes the wardrobe, and what it contains, from the everyday. It disconnects the wardrobe's contents and memories from the other – those inhabiting the space in which the wardrobe sits. In doing so, the wardrobe becomes a silenced, dead space. "A wardrobe," writes Milosz (cited in Bachelard, 1964/1969, p. 79), "is filled with the mute tumult of memories." Even Bachelard (1964, 88) acknowledges this, likening a wardrobe to a casket, 'a dungeon for objects.'

## besson and the unveiling of intimacy

Apart from an introductory scene set in 1914 Egypt foreshadowing a coming threat to Earth, *The Fifth Element* is set in 2357. Earth is threatened by the arrival of pure evil, bringing darkness that will wipe out life as we know it. Earth's only defence resides in the form of five elements: the first four are earth, fire, water and wind, represented in stone, and kept in hiding. The 5<sup>th</sup> element is the ultimate warrior embodied in a living being. To defeat evil, the 5<sup>th</sup> Element must stand with the other four elements, serving as conduit for the energy of the 4 essential elements which come together as light to defeat pure evil's darkness.

Beyond this comic book-inspired narrative – and the comic book explosion of colours, sights and sounds in which the film is presented – another narrative follows Leeloo, i.e., the Fifth Element, who takes shape in the form of a human female, and Korben Dallas, a former soldier and now taxi driver in a future, mostly dystopian, New York City. Through seeming chance Leeloo and Korben first meet when she literally falls into his taxi escaping government officials who unaware of her identity categorise her as an undocumented alien (the potency of which in the context of current Anglo-American politics arguably warrants critique in itself). Through a series of (mis)adventures Korben and Leeloo seek out the other four elements, aided by a priest of an ancient religion knowledgeable about the Fifth Element and the global government of Earth. All the while they must fend off mercenaries and henchmen sent out by a human business magnate collaborating with evil.

Professor of Cultural Studies Sean Cubitt (2004) articulates a common critique of *The Fifth Element*, and of much of Besson's *oeuvre*, as emphasising the visual over meaningful characterisation or narrative. His critique equally extends to much of contemporary cinema's emphasis on spectacle and exaggeration over clarity. While having some validity, I agree with Hayward's (1998) suggestion that Besson's bricolage of genres and images is actually a strength founded upon intertextuality. Such intertextuality helps to dissipate the boundaries which too often delineate separate discourses into something more permeable (Stam, 1989). This intertextuality is evidenced in Besson's work through an 'inbetweenness' of cultures and genres – e.g., American and French) (Powrie, 2006) – and in the interface of technology (represented in part by the city) and the body (Hayward, 2006).

From the dialogical perspective pursued here however, it is the exchange between one and the other and how this is paralleled in spatial relationships that is most pertinent. The intentionality of such relationships is not to merely juxtapose them, but rather to provide opportunity for one to inform the other; equally present here is how their exchange reveals the threshold between them, and how space itself begins to speak of the characters' psychology. This exchange comes to the fore in *The Fifth Element* as Korben and Leeloo move from small, interiorized space to larger, exteriorized space.

The presence of small, interiorized spaces is a familiar trope in Besson's films. They are present in previous works such as *Leon*, *Nikita*, and *Subway*, and even later films such as the Besson-produced *Taken*. Similar spaces abound in *The Fifth Element*, and include (but are not limited to): the inner sanctum of a temple in an Egyptian desert; a re-animation pod within a comparatively cavernous government lab where we first meet Leeloo; ventilation ducts which eventually open into rooms or even onto the street; Korben's taxi within the soaring vertical spaces of a future New York's streets; Korben's box-like apartment in a super-high high-rise crammed with ever smaller shower and sleeping cubicles; coffin-like sleeping pods within a luxury liner-like spaceship in outer space; the narrow spaces between seats in an opera house; or under a pool table in the luxury-liner's lobby.

In Besson's other works these spaces are something to go into and stay within. In *The Fifth Element*, this here-to-fore intimate space is brought into the open. However hidden or locked away an inner space may seem to be, Besson's allows us in, and its characters out. Besson's notion of intimacy moves beyond that

which is private and personal to an intentionality 'to make known publicly or formally (Merriam-Webster, 'Intimacy', 2017).' *The Fifth Element* presents us with juxtaposed images of a smaller, more private space with a larger, more public space. Like in a Fyodor Dostoevsky novel the primary scenes of the movie are situated at this juncture. Through various character's movement from contained space to open space, intimate space is opened up as previously rigid boundaries are transgressed. Besson reveals the interior's outer envelope offers no fixed, impenetrable boundary, but is instead a more permeable threshold. Thus, boundary is no longer that which gives a sense of enclosure and presence, delineating inside and outside (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Instead, it 'implies that there is a continuation beyond' it (Eckler, 2012, p. 80), with the boundary as a meeting point, not a divide. Such a break is suggestive of not just a *here and now*, but also *there and then*; that is, of being in one state and of moving on to another. Psychologically and socially, it is ground in which interpersonal relationships occur; spatially, it is about movement and connection between here and there, self and other, and across time.

Represented here is more than just a shift in the primary definition of boundary as a divide, to reconsideration of the very nature of the space and the extent in which it acts. In *The Fifth Element* Besson extends a theme previously explored in *Subway*, in which intimate space 'is hijacked and rerouted as an alternative space (Hayward and Powrie, 2006, p. 6).' Within this alternative space, narratives of how spaces are structured, conceptualised and interpreted through use and dialogue are linked with inhabitants' identity. Such a restructured space 'provides a vehicle for asserting personal identity in the quest for independence from the shackles of conventional society... (and) comes to represent a site of personal liberation (Orme, 2006, pp. 123 and 125).' In so doing it serves both this space serves as a meeting point for one with another, and as a meeting point for the individual with him/herself.

This intertwining of people's identity with place in film narrative is pivotal (Orme 2006). This linkage is of course a given within architectural discourse, for example in architectural theorist Christian Norberg Schulz's (1980) discussion of our orientation within place being linked to our identification with that place. It is a belief echoed in French writer Noel Arnaud's proposition, 'I am the space where I am (cited in Bachelard, 1964/1969, p. 137).' It is equally a trope we find present in other films, for example in the linkage between Scarlett O'Hara and Tara in *Gone with the Wind*.

In *The Fifth Element* this co-joining of people and place is re-presented dialogically. Moving beyond understandable fixations on Leeloo in much other discourse, the focus here is on Korben Dallas, too often reduced to and dismissed as simply another manifestation of the reticent, brooding, gruff American action hero. There is more to Korben's character than is typically acknowledged, if one looks beyond Korben's initial facade and understands Korben through the spaces he occupies. Borrowing from French cultural studies lecturer Mark Orme's (2006) discussion of *Subway*, these spaces assume a key role in the (re)construction of Korben's identity through his ongoing encounters with, and others within, these spaces. Crucial is that Korben and the spaces he occupies become dialogically charged through each other. (This is not to deny the role Leeloo plays in Korben's transformation, a point I return to shortly.)

At first meeting Korben has retreated into his private corners of the world – notably his apartment and his taxi – which exhibit compartmentalization, depersonalization, and lifelessness. Within these spaces his contact with others is at best filtered, if not limited, e.g., on the telephone with his mother, or through a screen between his seat and the passengers' seat in his taxi. It is only when the boundaries of his personal corner are transgressed (i.e., a mugger at his apartment door) or permitted out of necessity (a flying Chinese takeaway which visits his apartment window) that Korben's persona emerges from his corner, though only briefly and temporarily.

Korben's illusion of a refuge of private, personal space is shattered when Leeloo falls and crashes through the roof of his taxi. Her entry into his previously intimate space literally changes the direction of his taxi, and figuratively re-orientates Korben towards the world around him. Immediately upon her arrival we see a change in

Korben, as he exhibits a previously unseen openness and tenderness. When the police arrive to take her back into custody, she pleads for his help. Against his predilection of retreating into his corner, and the seemingly better judgement underpinning his voicing of the reasons for not helping her, he ultimately decides to save her from the police. In so doing he steers toward a course that brings about further change.

The worlds positioned by Besson in his films mirror the sense of disconnection generated by our own contemporary environments. The sense of alienation and displacement he evokes echoes Jameson's (1991, p. 83) contention that our spatial environments have simultaneously overwhelmed and undermined 'the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.' Rather than retreating from this onslaught however, in *The Fifth Element* Korben emerges from his illusory refuge and opens up to the outside world. Instead of turning away from and ignoring the other, Korben and the intimate spaces he inhabits turn towards and actively engage with the other. Dismissing escape from the constraints of the social world as characters in Besson's other films (Hayward 1998), Korben moves out to address the world. This shift in Besson's work may have something to do with a stated desire to offer 'some momentary relief to social injustice (Hayward 2000, 140).'

## bakhtin and a dialogical intimacy

Besson's *The Fifth Element* suggests an alternative possibility for intimate space, in which the incongruous if not conflicting come together. Such a possibility evokes Bakhtin's construct of *dialogism* which revelled in the potential of dialogue between one and an other across both literal and figurative thresholds, even across difference.

This is a daunting proposition. Historically in the West (a concept rather porous in definition and carrying significant intellectual baggage but also with some common currency), our response to difference has been to treat it as other. This other not only exists outside normalised values but also threatens civilised society (Morton 2003). One only need look at recent political developments in the UK and US to see evidence of such a narrative. Yet history has taught us such thinking too often results in tragic outcomes, including marginalisation, subjugation, or the negation of the other. Ironically, the West (but equally at times the non-West) has defined itself through defining what it is not, i.e., the other (Torgovnik, 1999). Rather than taking a pejorative position – we are what they are not – what if we were to engage with this meeting of self and other in a more positive sense? What if we to dismiss the false belief that we autogenically define ourselves, as propagated at various times by various cultures and nations (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983), and instead acknowledge that who we are is defined through our interaction with others (Taylor 1991). What would happen if we were to allow the construction of our self-identity to consciously open up to engagement with the other?

This engagement with the other across difference was key to Bakhtin's work. He argued that we define ourselves, and achieve what we are capable of achieving, through the other. 'I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another (Bakhtin 1984, p. 287).' In *The Fifth Element* this is present as Korben increasingly engages with the other over the timeframe of the movie; it is accentuated at the end of movie in a moment of crisis (i.e., a failure to act will result in the destruction of the world as we know it), when Korben has to cross the line he himself has delineated. It is a boundary of a metaphorical space in which he has enclosed himself away from others. He takes Leeloo into his arms – not to carry her as in an earlier scene (asserting manliness, power) – but rather to embrace her (intimacy) – bringing her close to his own emotional and physical self. His making of an emotional and physical (i.e., spatial) connection with Leeloo is further extended in revealing that he needs and loves her. Prompted by his interaction with Leeloo, Korben is forced to reconsider his relationship with others and his own spatiality. No longer just him apart from others, he and others are intertwined in terms of a common humanity and their individual identities. As framed through Bakhtin's (1990) dialogism, through his



engagement with others Korben begins to see how others react to him and sees himself as others see him. Through this he becomes an *other* to himself, and from this position of outsidership he sees (and makes) himself anew.

Korben's transition is reflective of Bakhtin's thinking on the crossing of figurative boundaries that are generated by one consciousness between itself and an other. For Bakhtin (1984, p. 287), significant is 'that which takes place on the boundary...on the threshold.' Bakhtin's discussion of boundary as threshold pays homage to the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Bakhtin suggests the thresholds in Dostoevsky's work – e.g., staircases, front halls, corridors, as well as the street and square - 'are the main places of action in those works, places where crisis events occur, the falls, resurrections, renewals, epiphanies, decisions that determine the whole life of a man (Bakhtin 1981, 248).'

It is crucial to empathise that Bakhtin's thinking on crossing boundaries was not advancing an argument for some form of synthesis; one needs the other to see the whole but the two horizons do not merge into one (Bakhtin, 1990). Rather, the self and other remain as individuals, each with their own identity but equally with an expanded horizon. The simultaneous presence of difference allows each to be illuminated in light of the other. Encountering the other we are not only exposed to new ideas, but also see ourselves through how the other responds to us. In the context of this exchange we cross over previously fixed boundaries, both between ourselves and others and within ourselves; such exchanges redefine these previously conceived boundaries as thresholds.

## a wardrobe as a dialogical, intimate space

Further illustration of this dialogically redefined intimate space is provided here by reference to an apartment my wife and I refurbished a number of years ago (now since sold). Finding it in a state of disrepair, we went about stripping the apartment back to its core and starting over. We soon encountered a problem in the design however, as we simply had too much stuff: my collection of books, my wife's collection of antique plates and surprising amount of clothes and shoes. Their disposal was not an option, yet every conventional layout we drew was overwhelmed by trying to find a place to store all our stuff.

At a certain point amidst this "crisis" we had an epiphany; instead of trying to marginalise or minimise the presence of our all possessions, why not work directly with it such that the problem actually became the solution? That is, rather than trying to fit all our stuff into a conventional layout, why not design the apartment around displaying it? With this realisation fresh in our minds, the apartment's design fell into place: the living room in effect became a library showcasing my books, the dining room a gallery for my wife's plates, the bedroom a play on manipulating standard IKEA wardrobes to give presence to the room.

The key space for discussion here however is the design of the entry hall, which sat in the middle of the apartment between the front library, dining room, and back bedroom. Incorporated here was a built-in wardrobe for our coats, hats and shoes. But rather than hide these away, we decided to turn these belongings, and the wardrobe itself, into a feature within the entry hall. Instead of conventional solid doors, we fitted sliding polycarbonate doors. We removed the ceiling light in the entry hall and replaced it with lights installed inside the wardrobe. With a simple flick of a switch on entering the apartment or passing between the front and back, the wardrobe became at once display cupboard and illumination for the entry hall.

Aside from a manipulation of light and space, underpinning our thinking was a sensibility of how we live. We were simply not interested in the intimacy of Bachelard's wardrobe, and the concealment and secrecy he desires of it. Nor were we interested in locking away our memories, indeed who we are. While our possessions don't fully define us, they do speak of things that we value, i.e., knowledge, food and design. These are things

that are part of our everyday life, and so need to be present in the everyday. We are interested in a different kind of intimacy; one that speaks of a close but broader connection between ourselves and with others.

The design of this wardrobe is suggestive of a dialogical space, one in which priority is not given to singular agendas (i.e., storage of personal items) but rather to bringing together disparate agendas so that they may purposefully juxtapose, and so illuminate, each other. In this reconsidered wardrobe, our personal belongings weren't negated, but offered up an immediate casualness to the visitor; it was a way of saying 'we have nothing to hide', and that 'we hope this makes you feel comfortable in our home'. What is typically discretely located or even hidden became visible, allowing a public (i.e., entry) space to interact with a private (i.e., wardrobe) space; what might often become mere clutter was instead repositioned as testimony of who we are. Equally, what is typically closed off became a source of illumination for another space. Echoing Bakhtin (1990), their co-presence did not necessitate that one negate the other, but rather allowed for a simultaneous activation of each other.

As a dialogic space the wardrobe became an intermediary between the outside world and the interiorised space of our home, as well as ourselves; more than just an in-between, it took on a more active spatial role of exchange between one and an other. The artefacts situated in it (and the memories embodied within them) were not something to hide away as secrets, but rather became something to share. Situated here, they and the wardrobe itself became a talking point, opening up conversation with others. Yet in sharing ourselves with the world, we equally gained something back, as we found that this helped to say ours was an open household, where intimacies could be shared.

### connecting the unconnected: a dialogue of bachelard, besson and bakhtin

Brought together here have been seemingly disparate discourses of Bachelard, Besson and Bakhtin. The intention in their juxtaposition was to draw from alternative perspectives in constructing a conception of dialogic space. This construction has been advanced through considering how each discusses boundaries and thresholds. To help this construction, considered have been shifts from boundary to threshold, and the acts defining these shifts, in Besson's *The Fifth Element*; these have been set against inherited conceptions from Bachelard of wardrobes as intimate spaces. Equally drawn upon has been a discussion of a re-envisioned wardrobe to delineate another form of intimacy grounded in encounter and exchange.

The juxtaposition of Bachelard, Besson and Bakhtin is equally accentuated in the context of film. Bachelard was suspicious of any imagery that is merely an ephemeral expression and not grounded in concrete substance. For Bachelard (1964/1969) film lacked any meaningful, authentic roots. To (dis)regard film however is to miss the potential of what film has to offer. I would argue that film is not a simulacrum, it does have its own substance. It allows us to play, to test out our aspirations and concerns, beliefs and ideas. It is authentic in that it reflects a very real desire to engage more fully with the world. As Hopkins (1994, pp. 47 and 50) argues:

*'the cinematic place is not, therefore, limited to the world represented on the screen...but the meanings constructed through the experience of film...The meanings constituted through film do not simply reflect or report on space, place, and society, but actively participate in the production and consumption of the larger cultural systems of which they are a part...cinematic landscape is...an ideologically charged cultural creation whereby meanings of place and society are made, legitimized, contested and obscured.'*

In a similar vein, Stam (1998, p. 42) posits that 'that the filmic experience is inevitably inflected by the cultural or political awareness of the audience itself, constituted outside the text.'

Inevitably conflicts, if not collisions occur. Yet these collisions are no bad thing. Afforded is opportunity for one to illuminate the other, with understanding of the latter being enhanced through their simultaneous presence if not interaction with the other. These thoughts evoke Kahn's (2002, p. 250) call for a more 'messy model...a multivalent projection...one that conjoins incommensurate terms, more in keeping with the often contradictory, and strange adjacencies' that are intrinsic to everyday life. Deutsche (1999, pp. 184 – 185) adds that, 'because the ground of our commonality is uncertain, has no fixed point...it is open to interrogation...a process in which the meaning and unity of society are perpetually negotiated.'

We are reminded of this ongoing dialogue between one and the other at the end of the film. Korben and Leeloo have returned to the re-animation pod back in the lab and are seen in passionate embrace; meanwhile the lab's chief doctor peers in from outside. It offers yet another collision of the private and the public. Besson, like Bakhtin, is telling us that we are part of a larger, ongoing dialogue while concurrently wishing us to challenge the boundaries we have delineated. They each question received notions, not to rebel, but to pursue a re-working of the way in which we configure our relationships. Their discussion is not exclusionary, casting the other (even prevailing powers) into an all too easy role of the bad guy. Rather they are willing to embrace the different and imperfect, exploring the potential mutual illumination of self and other. Together, they suggest the possibility of a spatial in which such a dialogical embrace might be actualised.

### Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Dr. Allister Gall of *Imperfect Cinema* (University of Plymouth) for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this paper at the *Imperfect Cinema Conference*, and for his observations on the original presentation. The author would also like to thank Dr. Mathew Emmett, Dr. Sana Murrani and Dr. David Sergeant for their insightful and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this text.

### references

- Andrews, E. (2014). *Place, Setting, Perspective: Narrative Space in the Films of Nanni Moretti*. Lanham, England: Fairleigh Dickinson Press.
- Bachelard, G. (1969 [1964]). *The Poetics of Space* (Trans. M. Jolas). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). 'Forms of Chronotope in the Novel', in M. Holquist, ed., *The Dialogical Imagination – Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist) (pp. 84 – 258). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). 'Appendix II: Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book', in C. Emerson, ed., *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Trans. C. Emerson) (pp. 283 – 302). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Burns, M. (2007). 'Mars Needs Women: How a Dress, a Cake, and a Goofy Hat Will Save Science Fiction,' in J. Espenson, ed., *Serenity Found: More Unauthorized Essays on Joss Whedon's Firefly Universe* (pp.15–25). Dallas, TX: Ben Bella Books.
- Butt A. (2018). 'City Limits: Boundary Conditions and the Building-Cities of Science Fiction', *Open Library of Humanities* 4(2), p.4. doi: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.233>. Available at <https://olh.openlibhums.org/article/id/4498/> (Accessed 27.06.21).
- Cubitt, S. (2004). *The Cinema Effect*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- de Bono, E. (1970). *Lateral Thinking*. London: Penguin Books.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Deutsche, R. (1999). 'Reasonable Urbanism', in J. Copjec and M. Sorkin, eds., *Giving Ground – The Politics of Proximity* (pp. 175 – 206). London, England: Verso.
- Donald, J. (1997). 'Imaging the Modern City', S. Westwood and J. Williams, eds., *Imagining Cities – Scripts, signs, memories*. London: Routledge, pp. 181 – 201.
- Ebert, R. (1997). 'The Fifth Element', Available at:

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-fifth-element-1997> (Accessed 20.01.17).

- Eckler, J. (2012). *Language of Space and Form*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Everett, W. (2000). 'Introduction – From Frame to Frame: Images in Transition', in W. Everett, ed., *The Seeing Century: Film, Vision and Identity*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 1 – 18.
- Foucault, M. and Miskowiec, J. (1986). 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Spring, 22 – 27.
- Gardiner, M. (1992). *The Dialogics of Critique – M. M. Bakhtin and the theory of ideology*. London: Routledge.
- Hayward, S. (1998). *Luc Besson*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Hayward, S. (2000). 'Luc Besson's Cinquieme element (1998) and the Spectacular: The City-Body and the Sci-Fi Movie', in W., Everett, ed., *The Seeing Century: Film, Vision and Identity*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 136 – 146.
- Hayward, S. (2006). 'Le Dernier Combat and Le Cinquieme element', in S. Hayward and P. Powrie, eds., *The Films of Luc Besson – the Master of Spectacle*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, pp. 91 – 107.
- Hayward, S. and Powrie, P. (2006). 'Introduction', in S. Hayward and P. Powrie, eds., *The Films of Luc Besson – the Master of Spectacle*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, pp. 1 – 9.
- Hobsbawn, E. and Ranger, T., eds. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Hopkins, J. (1994). 'A Mapping of Cinematic Places: Icons, Ideology and the Power of (Mis)representation', in S. Aitken and L. Zonn, eds., *Place, Power and Situation – A Geography of Film* (pp. 47 – 61). Lanham, England: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism – or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London, England: Verso.
- Kahn, A. (2002). 'Imaging New York', in P. Madsen and R. Plunz, eds., *The Urban Lifeworld – Formation Perception Representation* (pp. 237 – 251). London: Routledge.
- King, G. and Krzywinska, T. (2000). *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace*. London, England: Wallflower.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space* (Trans. D. Nicholson-Smith). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Marcuse, P. (2002). 'The Layered City', in P. Madsen and R. Plunz, eds., *The Urban Lifeworld – Formation, Perception, Representation* (pp. 94 – 114). London, England: Routledge.
- Massey, Doreen (2005). *for space*. London, England: Sage.
- Merriam-Webster, 'Intimate', Available at <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/intimate> (Accessed 19.01.17).
- Morton, S. (2003). *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. London, England: Routledge.
- Norberg Schulz, C. (1980). *Genius Loci – Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York, NY: Rizzoli.
- Orians, G. (1986). 'An ecological and evolutionary approach to landscape aesthetics', in E. Penning-Roswell and D. Lowenthal, eds., *Landscape Meanings and Values* (pp. 3 – 22). London, England: Allen and Unwin.
- Orme, M. (2006). 'Imprisoned Freedoms: space and identity in Subway and Nikita', in S. Hayward and P. Powrie, eds., *The Films of Luc Besson – the Master of Spectacle* (pp. 121 – 134). Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Powrie, P. (2006). 'Of suits and men in the films of Luc Besson', in S. Hayward and P. Powrie, eds., *The Films of Luc Besson – the Master of Spectacle* (pp. 75 – 89). Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.
- Ross, D. (2005). "EW review: 'Serenity' has character", *CNN.com*. 22 December. Available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/Movies/12/22/ew.dvd.serenity/> (Accessed 30.06.21).
- Rybczynski, W. (1986). *Home: A Short History of an Idea*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Shields, R. (1991). *Places on the Margins*. London, England: Routledge.
- Sorkin, M. (1997). 'Traffic in Democracy', *1997 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture*, University of Michigan. Available at: [https://taubmancollege.umich.edu/pdfs/publications/map/wallenberg1997\\_michaelsorkin.pdf](https://taubmancollege.umich.edu/pdfs/publications/map/wallenberg1997_michaelsorkin.pdf) (Accessed 08.07.16).

- Stam, R. (1989). *Subversive Pleasures – Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film*. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1991). *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Torgovnick, M. (1990). *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Vice, S. (1997). *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

#### Author's biography:

Robert Brown is Professor of Architecture at Plymouth University, with over 30 years of professional practice experience. Central to his research on socio-cultural identity and urbanism is a dialogical perspective, interrogating conditions of difference between people, places and cultural representations, and the possibility of embracing and working with difference. These inquiries are framed through a cross-disciplinary perspective (e.g., architecture, cultural geography, film) to reveal new understanding and potentiality for change.