

Framing Cinematic Space

Tanja Michalsky, Malvina Giordana, Adrian Bremenkamp in conversation with prisma

In addition to informing us, entertaining us, inspiring us, and all the other things it does, cinema profoundly influences our relationship to space. This influence is evident in the way the medium of film shapes our collective understanding of place, landscape, and environment. The Department’s research in Cinematic Space connects what we see on screen with what lies beyond it: the cultural, historical, and production contexts outside the frame that nevertheless define what is in the frame and how it is perceived. Alert to how concepts of space are formed and transformed throughout history, a research group within Tanja Michalsky’s department is analyzing the strategies that tie films to a specific territory, city, region, or era. Thinking about what is on-screen, what is off-screen, and how these categories relate to each other then becomes a way to parse cinematic space as practiced by several lines of research of the department: *Social Space in Italian Film*, *Paesaggi del Sud*, and *Media Devices of Spatiality*.

Why is there a project on film and cinema in a Max Planck Institute for Art History?
Adrian Bremenkamp: Cinema belongs just as much to visual culture as more traditional artistic genres. It therefore finds an undisputed place in the field of visual studies that is known as “Bildwissenschaft” and that addresses all kinds of visual artefacts and media. As an art historian, I find the dual nature of film fascinating: on the one hand, it captures a slice of reality, almost like a documentary, even in fictional films. On the other hand, cinema is a deliberate construction designed to tell stories, evoke emotions, or even influence viewers. This duality makes film an invaluable tool for exploring how societies conceptualize issues such as urban space at different points in history.
Tanja Michalsky: I’ve long been interested in how space is represented and conceptualized, from the Middle Ages to the



▲ A scene from *Sedotta e abbandonata* shows the local police chief of Sciacca (Sicily) standing in front of the map in his office and comparing the shape of Italy, first with and then without Sicily, which he covers with his hand: “Meglio, molto meglio!” he exclaims in frustration, while his assistant from Veneto looks on perplexed. *Sedotta e abbandonata* (Pietro Germi, 1964)

present day. Over the years, my focus has included historical maps, urban design, and the spatial identity of cities like Naples. Studying how cinema represents urban spaces is a natural extension of these interests. By studying film, we can explore how cities are imagined, shaped, and understood not just as physical places but as cultural and emotional landscapes.
What is “cinematic space”?
Malvina Giordana: Let’s travel in our minds to Monument Valley as shown in John Ford’s Westerns, to the Rome of post-war Italian Neorealism, to the Sassi of Matera in Southern Italy, which Pasolini transformed into Jerusalem in his *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964). In doing so, we are embarking on a journey that sets out from the intersection of visual and spatial experience and delves into a symbolic geography of the world that cinema provides with its pervasive imagery. In fact, we can

speak of virtual environments that come to life through moving images but that are a montage of different elements: on the one hand, shots that emphasize the environment, the landscape, the architecture – what in Italian we call “piani” – and on the other hand those that frame the human figure – called “campi” – are edited in the film to restore the spectator’s sense of unity. And yet this perceived unity extends beyond what the camera shows, enriching itself with the viewer’s experiences and cultural background. This is why cinematic space, which encompasses all these aspects, represents a rich interpretative opportunity. And the spatiality of cinema is by no means neutral or passive. Film is an aesthetic device to control, visualize, and produce space.

Can you give an example?
Malvina Giordana: Over this last year, we have directed our attention to the relationship between Italian society and the urban transformations of Rome in the 1950s and 1960s by looking at films showing female characters at work. We explored, for example, the architecture of the staircase as a built space in which different social constellations and their respective transformations can exist simultaneously. Our examples ranged from the monumental stairs in Luciano Emmer’s film *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*, where seamstresses sit during their break from work before returning to the suburbs, to the claustrophobic ones that collapse under the weight of dozens of unemployed women looking for work in Giuseppe De Santis’s film *Roma ore 11*. These are not just settings: they can be strong metaphors that, for example, evoke the women’s wish for social ascent in *Roma ore 11* and the tragic denial of this aspiration as the staircase collapses. At the same time, they function as places that are potentially real, connected to an experienced space, such as the Spanish Steps, now swarming with tourists who are no longer allowed to sit on these stairs. More generally, it could be argued that the relationship between these spaces and women’s bodies reveal the contradictions of a supposedly uniform and universally valid attitude towards modernity.

Could you describe the different lines of research?
Adrian Bremenkamp: One of the first initiatives within the research focus *Social Space in Italian Film* was a curated cycle of six films on the phenomenon of migration in Italian Film from the 1950s until today. The selection of films ranged from *Il cammino della speranza* (Pietro Germi, 1950), which deals with emigration from Italy, to *Fuocoammare* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2016), which addresses immigration into Italy. Films not only visually construct the spaces we see depicted in them, they can also make visible the process by which spaces are created; in other words, it can show us the very mechanics of the construction of social spaces. So-called “migration films” make this especially



▲ Stairs shape and semanticize space. The chosen camera angle exploits the possibilities of two very different sets of stairs, first the Spanish Steps and then a Roman tenement staircase, for the mise-en-scène of female bodies in urban space. *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* (Luciano Emmer, 1952) and *Roma ore 11* (Giuseppe De Santis, 1952).



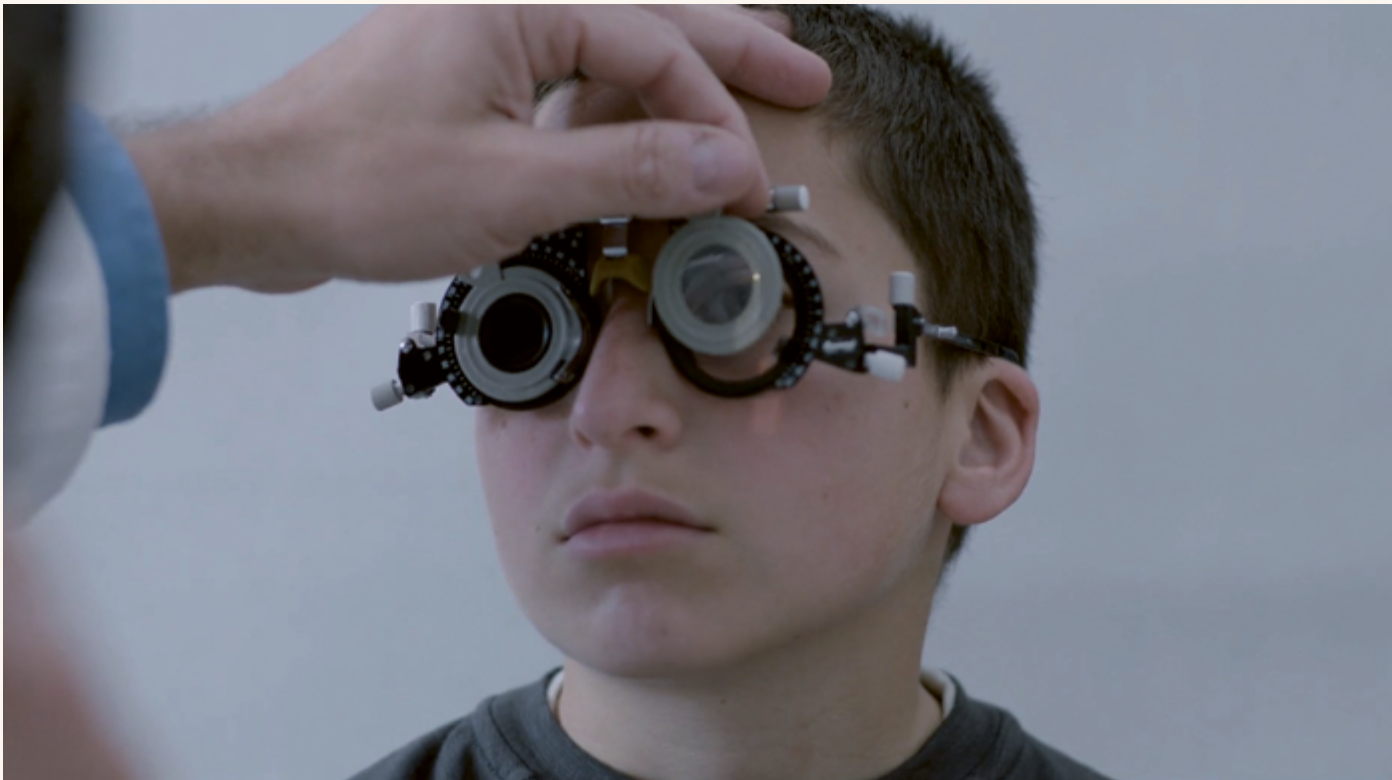
▲ Nino Manfredi’s character freezes when chewing on the movie’s eponymous “bread with chocolate” out of fear that the sound of the chocolate cracking between his jaws might disturb the chamber musicians performing in a Swiss park. *Pane e cioccolata* (Franco Brusati, 1974).

obvious as they often confront the social habits the migrant protagonist embodies with the new spaces he or she encounters. These films capitalize on this confrontation in driving forward the movie’s dramaturgical progression. Some films, such as *Pane e cioccolata* (Franco Brusati, 1974) – a film that treats the problems of an Italian seasonal worker in Switzerland in the genre of the tragi-comedy and that stars the famous actor Nino Manfredi – are able to address and even analyze how migrants struggle with the conundrum of constructing a social space that can function as a home to them within the host country’s social space – a space that demands integration and assimilation, and this to a degree that eradicates the very personality of the protagonist. Other films such as *Fuocoammare*, set on the island of Lampedusa, self-reflexively show the work of media and optical devices in the construction of contemporary geopolitical borders.

Malvina Giordana: More recently, we launched two new projects: *Paessaggi del Sud* and *Media Devices of Spatiality*. The former focuses on the role of the cinematic imaginary within the figurative palimpsest and discursive infrastructure that define the porous notion of ‘Meridione’ (South). The landscapes of Naples and Matera, as real places and film sets, are particularly suitable examples for discussing the material and symbolic strategies imposed on the South during a crucial period of post-war Reconstruction. We tried to understand how films shaped the tourist’s gaze, examining the role of state censorship on film themes that were meant to contribute to the representation of a newly born Italy. At the time, cinema was a widespread form of entertainment for an audience of all ages, classes, and genders. *Media Devices of Spatiality* has a more theoretical approach and was set up in collaboration with Tommaso Morawski, whose research has a more philosophical angle. It aims to study the technologies of space production, examining in particular how they function, the position they assign to the observer, and the operations and gestures they require or make possible. We intend to work with what we consider a crucial shift in the recent theoretical debate, especially in media archeology: a shift from the object – the medium – to its specific mode of functioning: mediation. Studying the history of spatiality in its multiple declinations and articulations is a way to question the medialities of the gaze at the heart of different spatial revolutions.

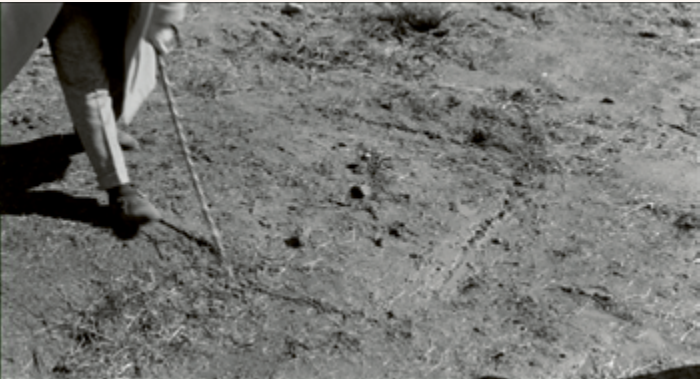
How is this interdisciplinary project set up in terms of methodology, professional expertise, and personnel?
Tanja Michalsky: The origins of the project lay in the collaboration with Lorenzo Marmo and Malvina Giordana (Film Studies) and Tommaso Morawski (Philosophy). Working with researchers from different disciplinary fields – art history, film studies, philosophy – has proven to be very fruitful. Particularly in film studies it is important to consider different perspectives, as this ephemeral medium is all too often transformed into narratives that no longer keep present the materiality of the film and its appearance in individual perception.

How do you work? What methods and formats have proven useful in your research so far?
Adrian Bremenkamp: We started with a curated series of film projections around a given theme developed within the research group. In a second step we invited external collaborators on the basis of their specific expertise. The film screening in the evening would be followed by a close-reading seminar the day after, with one member of the group being in charge of hosting the seminar and initiating it off with a brief presentation. This person would also have prepared particularly relevant passages of the film to be replayed and discussed. This continuous collaboration can quite naturally grow into a publication project, as



▲ Two frames in which we see the staging of the work of media and optical devices. Below, the screen of the Lampedusa control tower overlooking the Mediterranean; above, a child living on the island being treated by a doctor for his “lazy eye.” *Fuocoammare* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2016).

it did for the volume *Geografie della migrazione* (published in the *Quaderni della Bibliotheca Hertziana* series) – but such an output does not have to be the immediate goal. We believe in the idea of little steady steps that give themes the time to ripen and mature.
Tanja Michalsky: It is fundamental to reconstruct the historical and cultural horizon in which these films originated to understand them fully. And yet at the heart of our work lies a meticulous analysis of the image itself. Precisely the continuous zooming in and out – to use a filmic metaphor – connects micro-analysis with a macro-perspective and allows for new insights. The moving image demands special methods of investigation, but from the point of view of art history, the image and the cinematic space as such are too often pushed far into the background where they don’t receive the attention they deserve.
The concept of space is central to your department, which also deals with medieval art history and early modern cartography. Aren’t these very different spaces to what you call “cinematic space”?
Tanja Michalsky: This question goes right to the core of our research. On the one hand, space is a physical given, on the other, a category of perception, and last but not least a phenomenon that is historically defined and therefore constantly changing.



▲ *Le mani sulla città* (Francesco Rosi, 1963) illustrates in an almost didactic way how building speculation works and what its consequences are. In the shaky flight over the new development areas, we see the dangers – shortly afterwards, the protagonist explains that money can be made very quickly from one square meter of undeveloped land. The model of the new buildings in front of the city's construction sharks and the walled map behind the decision maker number among the filmic devices that put on display the media of an urbanism defined and determined by the interest of speculators.



Geografie della migrazione nel cinema italiano. Luoghi e immaginari del transito

Edited by Adrian Bremeenkamp, Malvina Giordana, Lorenzo Marmo and Tanja Michalsky and published in our series Quaderni della Bibliotheca Hertziana in 2022, this volume sheds light on the workings of cinema as a mythopoeitic machine that intervenes in geographic space. For more information: <https://www.bibl.hertz.it/de/pub/quaderni>

Since film creates a very specific space not only through the camera perspective but above all through the editing and montage of the individual images, it is perfectly suited to the investigation of spatial structures. It is only by switching between media and historical epochs that an understanding of the construction of social space becomes truly tangible – and that is what we are working on.

What role does the cultural and scientific landscape of Rome play in this project?

Adrian Bremeenkamp: Rome itself is a theme of some of the films we are analyzing in order to understand the conception of urban space at various times in the second half of the 20th century. This gives us the opportunity to compare the perceived reality of Rome today with earlier instantiations of the city preserved in film. The familiarity with the urban space of Rome and its historical evolution informs our investigation of Rome as a cinematic space. This is especially true if we take a transversal view of the different forms, genres, and modes of production with respect to such an intensely ‘cinematic’ city.

Tanja Michalsky: My personal research is much more centered on Naples, so analyzing *Le mani sulla città* (Francesco Rosi, 1963) is an obvious choice. But the specific features of this specific city in this particular film only become apparent in comparison with other films and cities – and since the production of films in and about Rome is much broader, it is very worthwhile to draw on them.

Malvina Giordana: We have established collaborative networks with the film departments of Università Roma Tre and the Università di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’, which are very important for the continuity and the ongoing development of our research.

Last year we also established a collaboration with the Casa del Cinema in Rome, which hosted a screening of *La montagna infidèle* (1923) by Jean Epstein. This reportage on the 1923 eruption of Mount Etna in Sicily and the catastrophic transformation of its landscape was shot by one of the most important personalities of the French avant-garde on commission by the production company Pathé. Rediscovered in 2020 in a 28mm Spanish version and restored by the FilMOTECA de Catalunya, it had been considered lost for almost a full century. We organized a public projection and commissioned a new soundtrack by a composer of electronic music and now we have this extraordinary new material that also speaks to the broader department project Palimpsest Naples – a project whose range of interests encompasses volcanic eruptions and landscapes ravaged by catastrophe.

Adrian Bremeenkamp: Of course, this is a silent film, but originally it was projected with accompanying music – it needs a sound score to be viewed with. Otherwise, it is like a musical instrument without a resonance chamber – it remains two-dimensional. Since we do not have any records of historical scores for this film, Malvina had the idea to commission a new score, which was performed live by the musician – this is an established practice in silent film festivals. This experiment was very interesting for us researchers as it made it very obvious how strongly sound and music contribute to the creation of cinematic spaces. At the same time, it made the film much more accessible for a contemporary audience; the cinema was full, and the Roman public responded with enthusiasm.

What kind of results are you interested in?

Tanja Michalsky: The collaboration between film scholars and art historians who share an interest in cinematographic space is particularly promising because film, image, and space are considered and interpreted in equal measure. The cinematographic modelling of space thus becomes tangible for both sides in a new way while the focus on Southern Italy can also reveal clichés and stereotypes.

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