
Cinema of Confinement

By Thomas J. Connelly

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Thomas J. Connelly creatively and lucidly investigates a genre of cinema he terms “the cinema of confinement”. Defining his term by referring to David Fincher’s *Panic Room* (2002) as a film where “the narrative tension focuses predominantly within one location” (4), he highlights a wealth of films characterised by their minimal range of settings and limited spatial parameters within these settings. He is keen to highlight that “confinement films are not exclusive to one genre” (14), and he examines films from a range of other genres, including thrillers and science-fiction. These include but are not limited to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), Ingmar Bergman’s *The Passion of Anna* (1969), Oliver Stone’s *Talk Radio* (1988) and Dan Trachtenberg’s *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016). Focusing on spectatorship as the lens to interrogate how these single-setting films “make for an engaging and suspenseful spectatorship” (3) *despite* being set in one location, Connelly pinpoints the concept of excess, claiming that “excess energizes space within the cinema of confinement as well as builds narrative tension” (5). Connelly notes the common assumption that a singular setting film will lack the necessary narrative tension to keep an audience captivated. His work, however, makes the case for the cinema of confinement as a vibrant group of audio-visual texts through which the concepts of excess, desire, the gaze and fantasy can be richly examined. Indeed, from this starting point Connelly states that to “encounter the gaze in confinement cinema is to experience its excessive dimension as both shock and attraction” (5), and he sets up these two different experiences of spectatorship as the broad thread running throughout his work. Drawing extensively upon a number of key theorists, such as Jacques Lacan, Michel Chion, Todd McGowan and Slavoj Žižek, to structure his overarching approach to the genre, Connelly also refers to other works, such as those by Thomas Elsaesser, Sigmund Freud and Lev Manovich, within each chapter. His introduction presents, defines and explains several key terms, particularly focusing on Lacan’s work to set up his following chapters and, most notably, covering the concepts of the gaze, fantasy and the post-effect of the gaze that inform his opening chapter.

Chapter One broadly compares and contrasts the films *Room* (Lenny Abrahamson, 2015) and *Green Room* (Jeremy Saulnier, 2015) to highlight how “they differ in their stylistic approaches to building and sustaining suspense and narrative tension” (17). Connelly is keen to point out that although escape is the protagonist’s goal in each film, it is how the gaze

operates as either a knowable or unknowable force that distinguishes the two confinement films. Connelly brings in other notable film examples, such as *Misery* (Rob Reiner, 1990), to highlight the difference between inner and outer reality when discussing *Room*, whereas he focuses on the creation of chaotic space in *Green Room* as “revealing an obscene underside of the American hardcore scene” (27).

Chapter Two predominantly focuses upon the role enjoyment plays in Hitchcock’s *Rope* – in particular, the perverse enjoyment Brandon takes from successfully concealing the murder – and also the role of fantasy. Connelly makes the case that the function of the penthouse window in *Rope* “is to conceal the excess of the gaze...to present a coherent reality to work in tandem with Brandon and Phillip’s secret” (30). Picking apart the different levels of the penthouse window with reference to Lacan, Connelly suggests that the window represents a “comprehensible reality” whilst also causing “the observer to become aware of his or her looking within the visual field” (33). With detailed reference to Hitchcock as a filmmaker and the legacy of the 1920s *Kammerspielefilme* (German chamber-play films), Connelly outlines how the window serves to maintain fantasy before ultimately shattering the fantasy frame.

Chapter Three continues this theme of shattering through Bergman’s *The Passion of Anna* but focuses more closely on Andreas’ psychological confinement on his island and how his fantasy of self-imposed solitude ultimately proves unattainable and is destroyed. Connelly employs Bergman’s description of the “chamber-play film” to ground and to highlight *The Passion of Anna* as a film in which “the intricate mise-en-scène and limited setting play a vital role in the close examination of character and story” (48). Here Andreas’ unsettled space is the expression of his deeply troubled internal state. Connelly ends the chapter by unpicking the importance of the zoom and pinpointing Andreas’ final disintegration as the “nightmarish depiction of reality deprived of its fantasmatic support” (61).

Chapter Four examines the Overlook hotel in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) as a place of “unreliability” with creeping supernatural elements hinted at by the emergence of the “free-floating gaze” (64). Employing Freud’s term “Uncanny” and Žižek’s work on the “suture” technique, Connelly highlights that Kubrick creates the unsettling feeling that “there is something more in the Overlook’s space than space itself” (66). Connelly significantly highlights the role *The Shining*’s film form plays in accessing other spaces, arguing that “the reverse shot not only suggests the presence of the Overlook’s ‘netherworld,’ but also operates as a key that unlocks doors to the Overlook’s ghostly dimension” (76). He closes the chapter positioning the film itself as cyclical maze with no map.

Chapter Five employs Michel Chion's concept of the *acousmetre* to examine how Stone creates a space of paranoia in *Talk Radio*. Referring back to the work covered in earlier chapters, Connelly finds that the excessive enjoyment taken by the protagonist, Barry, in recording his provocative show is in some way responsible for the film's created impression of "constant surveillance" (84). While Barry espouses within the limited confines of his radio studio, the bodiless voices of the angry callers reverberate around the room, but, more importantly, the bodies of those callers are hidden in plain sight when Barry walks around in public. The cityscape "transforms into a haunting presence" because the callers' voices remain unattributed to a particular body, but it is Connelly's observation that Barry functions as an empty ghostlike being that highlights the different areas of "confinement" within *Talk Radio*.

Chapter Six continues the investigation into the disembodied voice with *Phone Booth* (Joel Schumacher, 2003) and *Locke* (Steven Knight, 2013) but furthers the work by considering the effects of telecommunication on the excess of the confined spaces. Touching briefly on database narratives, Connelly probes the effects of the multi-screen display on the linear narrative of *Phone Booth*, particularly in terms of the film's design of oversaturation. With a brief foray into *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993), Connelly pinpoints a "sinister side of telecommunication" as that which "elicits our desire because we seek to know who the caller is". Situating *Locke* in the road movie genre, Connelly defines the confined car as a self-reflective confessional space similar to the phone booth in *Phone Booth*, but he also engages with the film with a more focused investigation into ethics and duty. In both cases, Connelly argues that telecommunication and Chion's *acousmetre* "render the confined spaces unsettled and antagonistic" (118).

In some ways Chapter Seven continues the work of Chapter One by examining how the captive characters of *10 Cloverfield Lane* similarly create a fiction within a fiction, as in *Room* and *Green Room*. The difference here lies within how "the subject's desire is key to the film's narrative tension within its confined setting" - more specifically, how Michelle "normalises the bunker's confined space, thus keeping Howard's obscene underside at bay" (120). The spectator's (and Michelle and Emmet's) surplus knowledge thus creates and maintains the narrative suspense. This surplus knowledge is denied at the end of the film, however, by its open ending corresponding, according to Connelly, with the theme of desire that is central to *10 Cloverfield Lane*.

Connelly's conclusion reaffirms that his work is structured around interrogating how each work within the cinema of confinement genre "make[s] for an exciting film over a long period of time" (137). He proffers the explanation that "the films explored throughout this project

embrace cinematic excess by exposing the gaze as a knowable or unknowable force within the confined setting” (137), a line of inquiry commenced with Chapter One’s examination of *Room* and *Green Room*. He sums up his project via an examination of *127 Hours* (Danny Boyle, 2010), *The Wall* (Doug Liman, 2017) and *Panic Room*, drawing on the work covered in his previous chapters to hypothesise on the “allure of confinement cinema” (148). Suggesting that possibly the increasing engagement with virtual space has affected cinematic space, Connelly provocatively claims that “the increase in confinement cinema offers some insights on digitization and cyberspace communication in relation to the logic of desire” (149). He leaves the reader with the conclusion that confinement cinema has a powerful effect on the spectator given how it enforces spatial limitations, speaking to our particular technological moment and, without a doubt, making “for a suspenseful and energizing spectatorship” (152).