**Film Space - Invisible Sculpture: Jane and Louise**

**Wilson’s Haptic Visuality**

MARIA WALSH

Over the past decade, Jane and LouiseWilson have become known for their split-screen film

installations, multi-screen environment(s) in which moving images are thrown on hanging

screens and cubes. Their subject matter has comprised mainly of architectural sites of power

such as the US Air Force base at Greenham Common, the Houses of Parliament the former

headquarters of the Stasi in Berlin. They film these sites using a documentary style camera

recording their journeys through these labyrinthine buildings.What makes the installations

unique is the manner in which the Wilsons juxtapose two diverse viewpoints of the same

site across multiple screens.

The artists film their individual passage through these buildings and sites on separate

cameras then edit their material digitally to juxtapose and intercut their diverse viewpoints.

On the one hand, their filmic spaces are ostensibly constructed on geometric principles

using the rectangle of the screen as a readymade framing device, however, the dual and/or

multiple juxtapositioning of screens and spaces undermines the logic of the frame as a

window onto another world.

In this essay I want to focus on one of their early works, *Stasi City* (1997), because of

its spatial intensity as opposed to more recent installations such as *A Free and Anonymous*

*Monument* (2003), which presented a range of sites across thirteen screens and two mirrors

creating an architectural space whose peripatetic dispersal liquidated the intensity of the

images somewhat. Early installations such as *Stasi City* (1997) engendered a claustrophobic

spatiality which was both echoed and refused in the visually stunning sequences of images,

echoed in the sense that the spectator was confronted with rooms and corridors with

no way out, refused in the sense that the camera takes an alien perspective that hovers

dispassionately over its subject.

*Stasi City* (1997) consists of two pairs of projections on walls meeting at two 90-degree

angles diagonally opposite from each other. The installation could be said to be a sculptural

object in the sense that it creates an open cube construction in the gallery, the filmic walls

of which open out onto the rooms and corridors of the Stasi former headquarters.We might

see this cuboid installation as framing a space into which we enter, a space that in turn

gives access to imaginary filmic spaces that we can inhabit visually, moving through the

rooms of the prison with a mobile gaze. This conception of space as a container into which

we enter situates space as an entity shaped by form, the frame of the cube, the frame of

the screens, the frame of the screens within the screens, e.g. the rooms and corridors of the

building.

Jane and Louise Wilson have said that their “film work is about creating a physical

environment, something which is more sculptural in its description of space” (“Statement/

Description,” unpaginated). However, given that the juxtaposition of contradictory

viewpoints in their work makes it impossible to establish stable spatial parameters, space in

the Wilson’s work would seem to be more dynamic than a conception of space as a formless

field that requires objects to demarcate its boundaries. How the viewer corporeally

encounters this dynamic space is what I want to explore in this essay.

Historically, avant-garde experimental film and video has been interested in questioning

notions of space and putting, as Nicky Hamlyn states, the “finite, 2-dimensional,

enclosing, transient” nature of the film apparatus in confrontation with space—“infinite,

3-dimensional, continuous, enduring” (121). Hamlyn is referring to mainly 1970s expanded

cinema and is quite scathing of contemporary film and video installation which he sees

as not questioning and reconfiguring the relationship between the camera and its subject.

However, although undoubtedly deploying different production values, contemporary film

and video installations such as *Stasi City* can be said to reconfigure this relationship by

putting the spectator’s sense of location and embodiment in question by means of staging

a contradictory sense of spatiality.

*Stasi City* presents images of the abandoned former East German secret police headquarters

in Berlin and a former Stasi prison, which, interestingly enough, is an externally

inconspicuous building at the end of a GDR satellite housing estate called Hohenschonhausen.

The images are projected on 1:1 scale inviting the viewer to become an actor or

participant in the scenario. However, the terms of this invitation are in question. Michel

Foucault’s adoption of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon is often cited in relation to *Stasi City*

and other works such as *Gamma* (1999) and *Parliament, A Third House* (1999). While the

notion of the all-seeing gaze of power, surveillance and control is an obvious reference to

make in relation to work that ostensibly investigates the spaces of power, surveillance and

control, albeit often abandoned ones, there is a sense in which this reading of their work is

somewhat literal.

An obverse, but equally literal reading of their work would view it as decorative

wallpaper, the spectacle here having to do, not with power, but with the aesthetic presentation

of images for consumption regardless of history, memory, and the politics of place.

However, while the Wilson’s photographs of the building’s interior architecture evince a

high gloss magazine aesthetic, the spatially contradictory juxtapositions of images in *Stasi*

*City* engender a much more embodied sense of space, scale and mass. The installation

stages a confrontation between at least two different kings of space, the one of geometric

space in which things are mapped and framed and a more extensive sense of space as an

emerging entity coextensive with movement. This other sense of space, which insists on

our renegotiation or redrawing of where our boundaries lie, could be said to counteract

the all-encompassing scopophilia of Foucault’s panopticon to which the film apparatus has

been compared.

In the panopticon, an *unseen seer* surveys a confined and controlled subject. The

panopticon produces a subjective effect, a “brutal dissymmetry of visibility” for

both positions in this dyad: the *seer* with the sense of omnipotent voyeurism and

the *seen* with the sense of disciplined surveillance [*. . .*] The panoptic structure

was then, in a sense, a “building-machine” that, through its spatial arrangement,

established scopic control over its inhabitants (*Window Shopping*, 17).

This metaphor of the panopticon prevailed in apparatus theory in film, which emphasized

the hypnotic subjection of the spectator by the film apparatus, thus in avant-garde film

theory and practice such as Hamlyn’s, this subjection has to be broken by a confrontation

between screened and real space. However, in contemporary film and video such as *Stasi*

*City*, this confrontation also occurs, but not, as in earlier debates, at the level of medium self reflexivity.

Instead, it occurs in relation to how the juxtapositioning, framing and editing

of the images engender a traversal of imaginary space that contradicts the geometry of

phenomenological space. When I encountered this installation at the London Electronic

Arts Gallery at the Lux Centre in 1997, I felt as if I was being pulled in two directions at

once, stretched out in ways that went against the verticality of the body. How might this

happen?

The shots of the prison headquarters are simultaneously alienating and absorbing. On

the one hand, they are held at a distance by a dispassionate camera that hovers in front

of its subject, and then equally dispassionately penetrates the labyrinthine corridors of

the building. One is reminded of Stanley Kubrick’s camerawork in *The Shining* (1980),

particularly the scenes shot in the Hotel Overland’s corridors, which rapidly track down

their maze-like avenues. On the other hand, the 4-screen installation has an immersive

quality due to slightly skewed perspectives that seem to surround the viewer on all sides.

But this immersion in the gallery space is in turn complicated by the physicality of the

arrangement of the screens at right angles on diagonally opposite walls. As well as the fact

that one shot might be leading us down an eerie corridor while another keeps us pinioned

to the surface as a lift moves up and down the screen, it is impossible to see everything all

at once from any point within this cuboid space. One has a sense of being looked at from

behind, but this does not necessarily induce paranoia.

Contrary to the notion that the camera is simply leading us through a labyrinth of

strip-lit passageways and vacant interrogation rooms littered with debris and remnants of

furniture, our trajectory through these images is always being inhibited by the physical

layout of the work. Our gaze is constantly being diverted and blocked. The views that we

can see from wherever we are standing mostly contradict one another according to logical

principles of space in the sense that while the camera is moving through the space in one

shot, it may be tracking in another, thereby creating two incompatible viewpoints.

One could see this disjunctive opticality as fragmenting the body of the spectator and

as thereby alluding to the internalization of discipline effected by the panoptic gaze. In

fact, Jane and Louise Wilson relate Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, its central eye to the

“relentless eye of the camera” (in “Stereoscopic Vision,” 8). However, the fragmentation

that ensues here impinges directly on the body of the spectator pulling her downwards

when the camera might be zooming inwards, stretching her co-ordinates beyond the space

that can be mapped and instead extending the parameters of the physical body in imaginary

space.

In this imaginary physicality, the body extends to inhabit a space that would be deemed

uninhabitable from the optical framework of geometric space. The disjunctive nature of

this “stereoscopic” vision generates a filmic drawing which incorporates incompatible

viewpoints as well as what is simultaneously happening on the periphery of the field of

vision—the light reflections cast at angles on the floor by the screens. Interestingly, in

relation to this point, Jane and Louise Wilson mention their interest in emphasizing two

different viewpoints and in showing peripheral vision rather than a vision that is absolutely

centered. “We’re interested in the kinds of slippages that come at you obliquely and

unexpectedly from outside the line of vision” (in “Stereoscopic Vision,” 15). It is these

slippages that intuit another conception of space.

On the one hand, the Wilson’s cameras seem to be penetrating space, but this interrogation

is deflected by the incompatible point of view of adjacent shots. The ensuing

contradictory vectors allow for multiple extensions in spatiality itself rather than the geometric

mapping of space. This invisible drawing, a composition as it were, senses space

as a kind of tactile mapping rather than a container, as if the eye, forced to take up the

irrational postures of contradictory lines of spatiality, cannot assert a dominating gaze. This

other sense of space can be termed haptic.

Writing of the Wilsons’ more recent *A Free and Anonymous Monument* (2003), Guiliana

Bruno refers to the haptic nature of the work’s peripatetic visuality (7). While the latter

notion is easily applicable to the open form of that work which consists of 13 screens and

two mirrors constructed to echo the architectural layout of Victor Pasmore’s Apollo Pavilion,

it can also make sense in relation to *Stasi City* as long as we do not confine peripateia to

literally walking about. In Bruno’s earlier Atlas of Emotion, she refers to Eisenstein’s essay

“Montage and Architecture” to undermine the distinction between actual and imaginary

peripateia, between immobility and mobility, which is relevant here.

There is a mobile dynamics involved in the act of viewing films, even if

the spectator is seemingly static. The (im)mobile spectator moves across an

imaginary path, traversing multiple sites and times. Her fictional navigation

connects distant moments and far-apart places (55–56).

This tactile mapping, where views that would be contradictory from a geometric point of

view, are instead an occasion for new vectoral tracings is an alternative to the panoptic

model of vision. As opposed to the optical one of panoptic vision, it gives the body scope

to maneuver in a spatiality between the optical and the tactile. In haptic visuality, as Laura

U. Marks claims, the eyes themselves function as organs of touch.

Haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than plunge into

depth, tends not to distinguish form so much as discern texture. It is a labile,

plastic sort of look, more inclined to move than to focus (338).

My interest in haptic visuality for conceiving of the affective spatiality of *Stasi City* is not

necessarily to rescue the tactile as a mode of looking, as the dispassionate scrutiny of the

Wilson’s camerawork undercuts this. However, haptic visuality allows us to conceive of a

kinesthetic opticality whereby the illusion of surveying a space is intersected by physical

affects that deviate from the homogeneity and coherence of that space. Extending the notion

of haptic visuality beyond a simple dichotomy between the visual and the tactile as separate

senses, Gilles Deleuze claims that the haptic occurs when the “duality of the tactile and

the optical” are “surpassed visually” and a third eye, a haptic eye is formed that is able to

perceive two positions simultaneously, “as if [*. . .*] caught ‘between’ two stories” (*Cinema*

*2*, 161). What might these “two stories” be in relation to *Stasi City*?

It is tempting to see this extensive spatiality in which the spectator is immersed in terms

of a seduction by space. One might think of Roger Caillois’ discussion of seduction by

space in “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” in which the subject loses the anchoring

point of being able to locate itself as a being in space, which has a perspective on the

world and is lured into and devoured by space itself. Indeed, writing on the Wilson’s

work, Jeremy Millar takes this approach, referring to Eugene Minkowski’s notion of dark

space, an obscurity that permeates and dissolves the ego, to discuss the sensation of being

immersed and spatially confused in theWilson’s labyrinthine constructions.We might also

be reminded of Anthony Vidler’s characterization of how “the contemporary, post-political,

post-psychoanalytical subject” relates to its architectural environment as a virtual body.

Formed by the nonreflectivity of screens, immersed in the indeterminate depth

of their spatial opacity and semitranslucency [*. . .*] as if the subject itself were at

one with the surfaces of its enclosure, its body no longer imitated, dissected, or

deconstructed by its environment, but now enveloped and dispersed at one and

the same time, its own surfaces, inner and outer, mapped by the same processes

that generate its multiple outer skins, if any “outer” or “inner” may any longer

be distinguished (230).

However, the Wilson’s stereoscopy does not allow one to become completely lost or

dissolved in “dark space” or completely absorbed into themultiplicity of simulacral images.

Rather, in the confrontation with and contradiction of viewpoints, the subject/spectator

continually has to locate themselves in relation to a shifting sense of losing and finding

one’s bearings. This shifting spatiality demands another theorization of space, which is

suggested by Deleuze’s reworking of haptic visuality.

In the light of Deleuze’s cinema books, recent trends in film studies are reformulating

how space in film might be considered. Deleuze emphasizes what he calls “pre-hodological

space,” the: space before action, always haunted by a child, or by a clown, or by both at

once. [It] does not, as in the action-image, allow itself to be determined in

relation to goals and means which would unify the set, but is dispersed in ‘a

plurality of ways of being present in the world’ (*Cinema 2*, 203).

This conception of space, influenced in part by Henri Bergson, emphasizes the spatial

configuration of continuous motion rather than conceiving of an abstract 3-dimensional

space, in which we move and act. The affective, dynamic nature of continuous motion

generates a virtual dimension of space linked to the virtual dimension of time. As Elizabeth

Grosz puts it: Space in itself, space outside these ruses of the imagination, is not static, fixed,

infinitely expandable, infinitely divisible, concrete, extended, continuous, and

homogenous, though we perhaps must think it in these terms in order to continue

our everyday lives [*. . .*]. Space, like time, is emergence and eruption,

oriented not to the ordered, the controlled, the static, but to the event, to movement

or action. If we “shut up motion in space”, as Bergson suggests, then we

shut space up in quantification, without ever being able to think space in terms

of quality, of difference, and discontinuity [*. . .*] Rather than seeing motion in

its scientific terms as distance or space over time, Bergson indicates, though

he does not develop, a different understanding, where [*. . .*] motion unfolds

and actualizes space. This kind of space can no longer be considered static,

infinitely extended, smooth, regular, amenable to gridding, to coordinates, to

geometric division, the kind of space one can leave behind and return to intact,

independent of what has occurred there. In opening space up to time,

space becomes amenable to transformation and refiguring (*Architecture*, 116–

117).

Bergson’s emphasis on space as extensity as articulated here by Grosz and Deleuze’s notion

of pre-hodological space are reminiscent of the way Maurice Merleau-Ponty articulates

the child’s conception of space prior to being placed in geometric space, as articulated

by Elizabeth Grosz. The later is useful in considering the staged confrontation between

contradictory modes of spatiality in *Stasi City*.

According to Grosz, Merleau-Ponty notes how in the transition from child to individual,

prespatiality and intuitive space are substituted by ideal space. Ideal or geometric space is

substituted for the space that clings to images, in which the subject is dispersed all over

the place in a sense. He says: “It is necessary in effect, that the new space be ideal, since,

for the child it is a question of understanding that what seems to be in different places is in

fact in the same place” (*Space, Time, Perversion*, 91). In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*,

Deleuze is interested in exploding this ideal space, discussing a perception that goes down

the path that phenomenology goes up, culminating in a perceptual chaos and innocence.

However, while the drawing in space generated by the stereoscopic vision of incompatible

viewpoints in *Stasi City* does intimate another sense of spatiality, Deleuze’s innocent

vision cannot easily be adopted for a work that presents images of past horrors and state

control. The extensive nature of the spatiality that pulls and pushes the subject into inconceivable

forms and shapes from the geometric point-of-view is all very well, but there is

still the fact that this elastic mobility is occurring in relation to a site of past terror. The

building is an historical relic that evidences that terror. We are not innocent in relation to

the extensive traversing of space that we mobilize in negotiating these contradictory and

partially hypnotic views.

However, neither does *Stasi City* make us feel guilty or implicated in the past. The

subject here is not one who is grappling with the guilt of history or with history at all in a

sense, as the latter’s emplotment is continually being underwritten by the presentation of

views that cancel each other out. The subject that is being drawn here is one whose relation

to its architectural environment is not constituted in terms of dialectics, i.e. in terms of a

space to be entered, but in terms of spaces that are constituted simultaneously with the

passage through them or in relation to them.

As if to underline this other invisible sensed spatiality, near the end of *Stasi* City, which

is screened on a loop, a floating figure wearing a GDR tracksuit, which was interpreted

by critics as being a retro fashion statement, appears on two of the adjacent screens. The

hypnotic strangeness of a figure from a time and place that one cannot quite locate adds

a science fiction element to the scenario, (one is reminded of Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*

[1972]), which comes to an abrupt halt when a flask hits the floor, the sound reverberating in

the gallery. What is highlighted at this moment is the disjuncture and continuous interplay

between two senses of space, an intuitive one that has no difficulty being in more than one

place at a time and an ideal one, which tends towards control and dominance.

This sentiment resonates with the Wilson’s discussion of how in the casino, Caesar’s

Palace, in their installation *Las Vegas, Graveyard Time* (1999). The spectator, going up

the escalators to the Omnimax cinema, is surrounded by a mirror refracting and reflecting

the interior of the casino, and thereby has the sensation of being located in two places

at one time. The ideal geometric space cannot obliterate the innocence of Deleuze’s prehodological

or Merleau-Ponty’s intuitive space, but the latter cannot be retained per se. In

the sense I had in relation to *Stasi City* of being pulled in two directions at once, perhaps

the installation stages the trauma of acceding from one space to the other.

It is here that *Stasi City’*s complexity lies. In providing the occasion for encountering

these two spatialities in tandem, a sense of leeway from the optical control of discipline and

power is intuited. This intuition preserves a remnant of agency in the face of its eradication

by the forces of control and power. In *Stasi City* Jane and Louise Wilson reverse the terms

of the abandoned headquarters as an architectural facade whose insides were protected by

the nondescript outside.

In emptying the insides and making them into a series of surface effects that transverse,

intersect and diverge, they generate another inside—an extensive vectoral drawing—that

restages thememory of having once inhabited intuitive space. This invisible spatial drawing

generates a continuously shifting spatiality that allows us to connect the past with the future,

not in terms of a progressive goal oriented path, but as a constellation of forces caught

between the “two stories” of being and becoming.

Works Cited

Bruno, Giuliana. *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, Verso, New York, 2002.

———. “Modernist Ruins, Filmic Architecture,” *Jane and Louise Wilson: A Free and Anonymous*

*Monument*, London: Film and Video Umbrella, BALTIC/Centre for Contemporary Art, Lisson

Gallery, 2004: 7–24.

Caillois, Roger. “Mimesis and Legendary Psychasthenia,” *October* 31: (Winter 1984): 17–32.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam.

London: The Athlone Press, 1992.

———.*Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans.Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: TheAthlone

Press, 1989.

———. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. London and New York:

Continuum, 2003.

Friedberg, Anne. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*. Berkeley, University of California

Press, 1993.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*,NewYork:Routledge,

1995.

———. *Architecture From the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*. Cambridge, MA: The

MIT Press, 2001.

Hamlyn, Nicky. *Film, Art, Phenomena*, London: BFI, 2003.

Marks, Laura U. “Video Haptics and Erotics,” *Screen* 39.4: 331–347.

Millar, Jeremy. “The Story So Far,” *Jane and Louise Wilson*. London: Ellipsis, 2000.

Vidler, Anthony. *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. Cambridge, MA:

MIT, 2000.

Wilson, Jane and Louise. “In Stereoscopic Vision: A Dialogue between Jane & Louise Wilson and

Lisa Corrin,” *Jane and Louise Wilson*, London: Serpentine Gallery, 1999.

———. “Statement/Description,” *<* http://spacearts.info/en/db/get artist.php?id=52*>*. Accessed

September 26, 2008.