
THE BOX

April 1–30, 2017

Stephen Connolly

Machine Space (2016)



Stephen Connolly, *Machine Space*, courtesy of the artist.

Machine Space

Interview with filmmaker Stephen Connolly
March 2017

How did Machine Space come into being?

I first attended [the] Ann Arbor Film Festival in 2006 and took in a trip to Detroit. Each subsequent time I went to the Festival, I'd visit Detroit with a different, knowledgeable local person. These informed visits to the city were made at a point when I also had a deep interest in exploring the connections between power and landscape in my films. *Machine Space* is an exploration of how landscapes privilege some activities and work against others. The film looks at how a built environment is enacted by people rather than reporting on what a place looks or sounds like. The camera takes an active role in shaping this reenactment and takes the audience for a ride. The city is imagined as a spatial machine for movement and circulation.

Detroit is a very particular city...

The city has a contested history and a difficult present. In Detroit, to pass from one street to the next is to witness the structural violence of a system of political economy that is global and very visible and present in this city. *Machine Space* takes this into account and suggests how an understanding of landscape can be represented in filmic form. In the film, we follow the red cars of the downtown transit—the Detroit People Mover. The route of this transit closely follows the historical and hidden boundary of *redlining*, the division of a city into areas where mortgage finance will only be offered at very unfavourable terms, if at all. African American residents of redlined areas found it very difficult to buy homes, leading to significant barriers

to accruing wealth. The lending decisions were [made] downtown and have significantly shaped the landscape and the lives of people in the city. In the film, the audience is taken on a journey along this boundary.

How do you position your work in relation to documentary film? Your work often draws on fictional and factual versions of history.

I tried to avoid giving "my impressions" of the city and instead I simulate the way in which most people can experience it—by car. Instead of choosing sites or events that may or may not be important, the film uses motion as an expression of the character and fluidity of Detroit. History in Detroit weighs heavily. In response, *Machine Space* looks to a history in people's memories of everyday activities and experiences in relation to movement. The events and "stages of history"—the Fordist city of industrial production that Detroit was, for instance—are offscreen. We see the city as it is now, and Julia and Marsha tell us how they experience it.

This approach owes much to the French thinker Henri Lefebvre, who suggested space is a socially constructed domain. In the early 1970s he predicted the production of spaces would displace the production of material things; arguably this has taken place in Detroit. But I hope the film also reminds us that this freedom of movement has been achieved at costs to specific communities, and to a sense of community. There is a degree of remoteness to the intimate and restricted space of the car as it moves through the city. This remoteness plays a big part in the visual language of the film—from the enclosed space of the car to the remote sensing of the aerial images. As I have framed the film as a portrait of a *Machine Space*—a place of materials and production, then people—I hope this is apparent.

Tell us about the family in the film.

They are my family and they are playing the board game of Life as an allegory for "the good life" in the suburbs. I placed this strand in the film as a way of thinking about how many of the choices we make have tangible relationships to other places—far away from us, but also at a local level. And to include my situation, as a filmmaker, in the construction of these relationships...The game was revoked during a production residency at the Wexner Center and this process has given a slightly unreal and once-removed quality to these scenes. I'm grateful to the staff at the Wexner [Center] Film/Video Studio for helping achieve this.

Stephen Connolly

Machine Space, 2016

38 mins., video

Wexner Center for the Arts

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