

MORGAN FISHER

writings

SCREENING ROOM

SCREENING ROOM,
1968 AND LATER

FILM, 16MM, BLACK AND WHITE
OR COLOR, SILENT (THE SOLE
VERSION IN VIDEO WAS MADE
WITH SOUND), 24 FRAMES PER
SECOND, FROM 2 MINUTES
45 SECONDS TO 5 MINUTES
30 SECONDS

DIRECTOR AND CAMERA
(FOR THE FIRST STATE AND
MOST OF THE OTHERS):
MORGAN FISHER

Screening Room is a tracking shot into the room in which the viewer is seated watching the film. The film is site-specific, but it can also exist in as many instances as there are places to see a film. The contradiction between the film's being site-specific and its existing in more than one instance is resolved by shooting the film (I can't say «reshooting the film») for each place it is shown. In principle all these instances already exist; it's just a matter of shooting them.¹

I chose the word «state» to describe the different embodiments of the film because I thought it suggested the film's being contingent and that the number of possible states was open-ended. Wherever the screening room, every state of the film must register the same relation to it. Each screening room requires its own state, so the film always looks different. But because each state shows the same relation between the image and the screening room, each state of the film is the same. All the states are the same film. *Screening Room* occupies two registers in time: the moment the film was conceived, and the continuing time within which each state is shot. The first state is no more the original than the most recent state. The states subsequent to the first aren't making it over or remaking it, they are simply other instances of the same film.

The film begins as a continuous tracking shot that starts some distance away from the room in which it is being shown. So far it's been a theater, with two exceptions. The shot approaches by a typical route the building in which the room is located, then enters the building, then enters the room where the film is being shown.

The room is as it will be during the projection, but no one is there. The room is dark. On the screen is a rectangle of white light cast by the projector, which is on but without any film in it. The camera remains in the back of the room and moves sideways to the center, so that it is looking directly at the screen. There is a pause with the rectangle of white light centered in the black of the darkened room. Then there is a long, slow zoom into the rectangle of white light. This is held until the film runs out. The projector is left to run for a few moments with no film in it, projecting a rectangle of unmediated white light.

The film is preceded by a title card that, as revised for the specific state, reads as follows:

Screening Room

State for (insert name of screening venue
and address here)

This state may be shown only in this screening room. For any other location a corresponding state must be prepared. No state of this film may be shown on television. The recording of this film by any means is prohibited.

The title makes clear the relation of correspondence between location and image that I have already explained, but it also suggests the implications of this relation. In theory, a film can be shown anywhere. A film can be put in a shipping case and

sent anywhere in the world. It is put on a projector, and no matter where the film is shown, everyone who sees it sees the same film. This universal viewability of a film also means that any film can be shown on television. In theory, millions of people around the world could all see the same film at the same time. And now there is universal availability on the Internet.

There was a time when the universal viewability of film could be regarded only in positive terms. Instead of being unique and therefore precious, a film is a work that can be shown anywhere and can exist in many copies. All viewers everywhere see the same film. But just this universality of film is the property that has made it possible for watching a film to become the same experience as consuming a commodity. The consumption of a commodity provides pleasure, and the consumer's relation to the pleasure of the commodity is uncritical. A movie has become no different from the candy bar you eat while watching one. (A movie seen on television is even more of a commodity than a film seen in a theater, and films on DVD are worse. Worse still are movies seen on the Internet.) *Screening Room* prohibits universal viewability and so resists being the commodity that movies have become. By not giving the pleasure that an ordinary film gives, *Screening Room* invites the viewer to reconsider in a critical way the usual relation that he or she has with movies.

An ordinary film so absorbs the viewer in the world it presents that the viewer leaves his or her body behind. The viewer is taken to other places and other times. *Screening Room*, far from transporting the viewer to visit distant lands or distant times, brings the viewer to the fact that he or she is sitting in a room watching a movie. What an ordinary movie lets the viewer forget, that he or she has a body that is sitting in a particular place and time, is the very thing that *Screening Room* reminds the viewer of. One of the great pleasures of the movies is that you can count on being taken away from the here and now. Even if *Screening Room* begins by showing you someplace that is not the here and now, it is ultimately to the here and now that *Screening Room* delivers you.

In my experience, there are several distinct phases in the viewer's relation to *Screening Room*. When the film begins, you probably recognize that you're seeing a part of the city you are in. If you don't recognize it right away, you recognize it soon enough. And further, you recognize that this part of the city is near the space where you are sitting as you watch the film. Despite what the title card has told you (the exact significance of which could remain unclear), you take pleasure in this moment of recognition. Someone I know once described seeing *American Gigolo* (1980) in a theater in a Los Angeles neighborhood called Westwood. In the

Screening Room

State for the Austrian Film Museum
Vienna, Austria

This state may be shown only in this screening room. For any other location a corresponding state must be prepared. No state of this film may be shown on television. The recording of this film by any means is prohibited.

film is a scene set in Westwood. When the audience recognized Westwood on the screen, the very neighborhood where it was watching the movie, it burst into applause. Then on the screen they saw the very theater they were sitting in. Even more applause.

As the camera continues to move forward, you recognize that you are getting nearer the building that contains the space where you are sitting. Your pleasure increases. Then the camera enters the building that contains the space in which you are sitting. What an extraordinary coincidence; and perhaps a little discomfiting. I think the feeling of discomfort could have something to do with the uncanny, but I'm not sure, and even if this were the case I wouldn't know how to explain it. Perhaps it comes from your sensing that the film is about to violate the unwritten law of the movies, that they always show you a place where you are not, a place different from the one you are in. Somewhere in this part of the film, or perhaps a little earlier, the suspicion starts to form that you know where this is going. You anticipate that the camera will enter the space where you are sitting. And then it does. So on the screen you see the space you are sitting in, just as it is now, except that no one is in it. And in the image on the screen is the screen you are looking at, but the frame is only the white light of the projector. Then, as the shot slowly zooms into the screen, the image of the empty screen becomes identical with the screen itself: on the white surface of the screen is an image of that very surface. The image becomes congruent with its original.

Then the film runs out of the projector, and on the screen is nothing but white light. This recapitulates the congruence of the image with its original in a different register. The rectangle of white light on the screen is identical to the image you saw on the screen before the shot zoomed into the rectangle of white light; you are seated in a room in which the same situation exists that you saw in the film only moments before.

The congruence that this account emphasizes occurs in space. But as the phrase «the here and now» suggests, coming into congruence in space is accompanied by coming into congruence in time.

A film is always both the past and the present. We know that the moments it shows us have to have been registered before we see them, so we know that a film always shows us the past. But when we watch what we know happened in the past, we are so absorbed by it that we see it as the present. As in life, the passing of time in a movie is experienced as a continuous present.

So *Screening Room* begins in a moment that we know is the past but that we take as the present, and it proceeds in the continuing present. But when the shot enters the room in which the viewer is sitting, the continuing present ends. The viewer sees on the screen the room in which he or she is sitting, but the room is empty. So the viewer knows that the shot has to have been made in the past. In this moment *Screening Room* does what few films do; by forcing on the viewer an awareness of its own pastness, it points to the difference between the past of the film and the present of the viewer. The film was then, the viewer is in the now. As the shot zooms into the rectangle of white light, the pastness of the film starts to disappear. When the film runs out of the projector the pastness of the film disappears altogether, leaving the viewer in the here and now.

I have made altogether, I think, thirteen states of *Screening Room*.² The shortest have been one hundred feet long, or about two minutes and forty-five seconds. The longest have been two hundred feet. Eleven states have been for theaters, and two were for exhibition spaces. They have all been silent except for one, and all have been in black and white except for one. Once for lack of time I did it as a video. I consider that a mistake, and I would not do it again.

Screening Room

Written c. 2005, unpublished; revised 2012.

- 1 See also «*Screening Room* and *Death*,» pp. 87–93 in the present volume.
- 2 The following states have been produced:
 - 1968—State for Third Independent Film-Makers Competition, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York.
 - 1970—State for Melnitz Hall, University of California, Los Angeles.
 - 1973—State for the National Film Theatre (NFT 2) for the International Festival of Independent Avant-Garde, London. (Presented again in 2011 in connection with the exhibition *Morgan Fisher: Films and Paintings and In Between and Nearby*, Raven Row, London.)
 - 1974—State for Theatre Vanguard, Los Angeles, for the screening *Thom Andersen / Morgan Fisher*.
 - 1974—State for the Los Angeles International Film Exposition (FILMEX), Los Angeles.
 - 1977—State for the Bing Theater, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, for the screening series *The Poetic Eye: Perspectives on the American Independent Film, 1923–1977*.
 - 1995—State for the Ahmanson Auditorium, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in the exhibition *1965–1975: Reconsidering the Object of Art*.
 - 2000—State for the Kunstverein in Hamburg in the exhibition *Morgan Fisher (Ich-Maschine)*; video version.
 - 2005—State for the Whitney Museum's Film and Video Gallery in the exhibition *Standard Gauge: Film Works by Morgan Fisher, 1968–2003*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
 - 2007—State for Kino Gloria in the Lichtburg Filmpalast, Oberhausen, for the program *Kinomuseum*, 53rd International Short Film Festival Oberhausen.
 - 2009—State for the Billy Wilder Theater, Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, for the program *Restoring the Los Angeles Avant-Garde: Thom Andersen and Morgan Fisher*, copresented with the UCLA Film & Television Archive and Los Angeles Filmforum.
 - 2010—State for Dundee Contemporary Arts, Cinema 1, for the film and performance festival *Kill Your Timid Notion 2010*.
 - 2012—State for Austrian Film Museum, Vienna, produced on the occasion of the exhibition *Morgan Fisher. The Frame and Beyond* at the Generali Foundation and *In person: Morgan Fisher*, a retrospective of Fisher's films at the Austrian Film Museum on May 9 and 10, 2012.