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# Space Matters in Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*

Armelle PAREY

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- <sup>1</sup> *Arlington Park* (2006) is the only novel by Rachel Cusk whose title directly points to the place where the novel is set. The volume is made up of ten untitled chapters, eight of which focus on five female characters. The stories of the characters are loosely connected but one of the things they have in common is where they live. Juliet Randall, Amanda Clapp, Maisie Carrington, Solly Kerr-Leigh and Christine Lanham inhabit the same suburb—Arlington Park—and all at some point are to be met in the private space of the home. Indeed, whereas the literary heroines of the past tend to be in search of a home, as in waiting for a marriage that will represent the end of their story and of the novel, Cusk's contemporary characters already have a home, which places them in society, but which is also where society wants them confined. They are mainly “house-wives,” defined by their relationship to a man and also to the social, economic, symbolical, cultural space that they occupy and contribute to creating. As the geographer Henri Lefebvre pointed out, “Space in its traditional sense is not a pre-existing receptacle for human action, but is created by that action; space, in turn, exerts its own variety of agency, modelling the human actors who have configured it” (West-Pavlov 19).
- <sup>2</sup> In literature, if Wesley Kort is to be believed, narrative theory has too often sidelined or subordinated space to other matters like the insistence on time (11). Yet the matter of space has become a major issue in the early twenty-first century Western world, with Fredric Jameson's often-quoted remark: “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are totally dominated by categories of space” (qtd. in Keith and Pile 2).<sup>1</sup> The idea has been developed among sociologists and geographers like Edward Soja but some of their remarks might apply here. Cusk makes the question of space undeniably uppermost in *Arlington Park* in which place is to be more than a mere “setting,” a word which, Kort says, “condemns the language of place to inherently passive and secondary roles” (15).<sup>2</sup> Cusk gives space prominence because, I believe, she understands Soja's idea that “space is not an innocent backdrop to position, it is itself filled with politics and ideology” (Keith and Pile 4).

3 The purpose of the present study is to investigate Cusk's use of space as a means for depicting her female characters—and some aspects of the contemporary female condition in the Western world. It will be rewarding to examine Cusk's use of space in relation to the literature of the past. Of course, one can hardly write about space and women without conjuring up the idea of Virginia Woolf's plea for all women writers to have a "a room of one's own," all the more so as Cusk herself has elaborated on this text in a piece called "Shakespeare's Daughters" (published in *The Guardian* in 2009). Besides, the temporal structure of the narrative, the viewpoints and themes mark *Mrs Dalloway* as an undeniable intertext of *Arlington Park*.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the very title of Cusk's novel also inscribes it in the line of a number of nineteenth-century novels that have the spatial location of the narrative as their title: to name but a few, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853). Indeed Cusk also seems to draw on the Victorians, who favoured a strong connection between women characters and spaces, be it in their ideology of "separate spheres" or in their literary representations. My hypothesis is that with this emphasis on space Cusk may be modernist in her narrative style<sup>4</sup> but she deliberately remains close to the Victorians in her choice of themes and treatment of women characters in relation to space in order to make a strong feminist statement, in the sense that her novel examines the experience of sexual difference and gendered space to denounce them as a source of discrimination.<sup>5</sup> I will start by considering the importance allotted to space (in relation to time and action) in *Arlington Park* before moving on to how space defines characters still imprisoned in "separate spheres." I will finally deal with the representation of lack of personal space as dispossession of self.

## 1. The Place of Space

- 4 Space, also called "setting," is (often) part of the narrative along with time and action. My first point is to see if in this novel, Cusk does indeed give particular prominence to space as seems to be indicated by the positioning of all characters in the same area.<sup>6</sup>
- 5 An emphasis on space is posited at the liminal points of the text. Following the title that announces unity of place and establishes *Arlington Park* as central to the novel, the incipit corroborates this with: "All night the rain fell on *Arlington Park*." Just like most nineteenth-century novelists, Cusk gives the reader the setting of the story from the outset. But she stretches the convention when she devotes the first chapter solely to a spatial description of the surroundings. The novel opens at night with a bird's eye view of *Arlington Park*, an imaginary middle-class suburb with characters left unnamed. In fact, the narrative does not stay in the suburb but follows a circular movement from *Arlington Park* to the city centre via *Arlington Rise* and back again, a movement that the reader is invited to notice because each paragraph begins with the indication of location. Within each place mentioned, other places are listed and it is through these physical landmarks that the history or the economic situation of the place is told as in, for instance, "the rain fell on the tortuous medieval streets and the grimy Victorian streets and on the big bombed streets where shopping centres had been built" (3). Yet the postmodern heterogeneity of the city,<sup>7</sup> like the differences in affluence of the various areas alluded to, are flattened out by the emphasis on the rain with an anaphoric "It fell on" repeated five times in the first eight lines of one paragraph (3), and again in the next one.

- 6 This first chapter covers and details all the places that will appear in the novel but the realist dimension one might be tempted to assign to it is checked first by the literariness of the work, then by the last paragraph that ends on the metaphor of the world as a stage: falling rain evokes “the sound of uproarious applause” and a “dark audience,” “clapping their hands” (5). The theatrical metaphor places the stories to come at a remove. This first part consequently acts as a prologue, an introduction in external focalisation before the curtain opens on narratives focalised through different characters. The whole of the first chapter being devoted to an overview of the space of the fictional world conveys the significance of this space. At the same time, covering the spatial scope of the novel in a chapter with a circular structure emphasizes both its limits and its constructedness.<sup>8</sup>
- 7 The whole narrative is told in the third person but the external focaliser of the first chapter is replaced (except in the chapter taking place in the park) by diverse internal focalisers. The detailed descriptions of cities and domestic interiors favoured by realist writers are given via various individual points of view: in a representation that is reminiscent of modernist fiction, the same suburb is thus experienced by various characters at different times of the same day and the choice of internal focalisation invites the reader to share each character’s experience and representations of space.<sup>9</sup>
- 8 The effects of a narrative offering multiple points of view and experiences that share a common geographical ground are varied. This technique may contribute to giving the reader/spectator partial, relative points of view, suggesting a multifarious world that cannot be unified,<sup>10</sup> or the events and/or portraits may also assemble to convey a larger picture.<sup>11</sup> In *Arlington Park* Cusk makes yet another different use of the modernist juxtaposition of narratives. The novel repeatedly describes different women, from varying social and cultural backgrounds, now all gathered in the same suburban space, at the same stage of life (married with young children) and who are all undergoing (more or less consciously depending on the character) the same restriction and dispossession of the self.
- 9 Indeed, despite their ordinary names and the depiction of plausible pasts pertaining to the realist mode of writing, their individual portraits merge into one big picture of the contemporary upper-middle-class housewife stuck in a suburb. Moreover, the narrative point of view adopted also allows vagueness as to space and time. The movements of the characters within, into and out of *Arlington Park* may be described in detail but vagueness marks the location in time and space: on an unspecified ordinary Friday, the characters take their children to school, have coffee, go shopping or go to work... This gives the experiences depicted an a-temporal dimension encouraged by the cyclical nature of the narrative, which unfolds from one night to the next. In a way, the narrative reaches a natural ending with the close of the day but, bearing the idea of the cycle in mind, it could also be argued that the narrative simply stops rather than ends.
- 10 If we now turn to the plot, not much happens in *Arlington Park*. From the outset, the suburb is marked by its sleepiness and emptiness: “In *Arlington Park*, people were sleeping. (...) Cars crept along the deserted roads” (1) whereas “Down in the city there were still people on the streets” (1). The pubs, restaurants, theatres, cinemas—public places of culture and exchange—remain in the distance: turning away from the centre and its implied dominant position, the space where Cusk anchors her novel is at the periphery, in a suburb from which men disappear in the daytime to go to work; Cusk elects to remain in the margins with the ones who are left behind, to highlight what is usually ignored or taken for granted and to follow the viewpoints of those who are where

life is not. This focus on the periphery accompanies a focus on the ordinary that Max Duperray has outlined in a type of fiction that deliberately chooses to erase or banish anything that belongs to the realm of the extraordinary, the sensational, the tragic.<sup>12</sup> Cusk chooses to concentrate on wives, who, unless they are miserable enough, are usually not the stuff of fiction, particularly in the nineteenth century (Heinich 91) when, in Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble's words, "the ideal wife-mother, sexless and dutiful, is *not* the central concern of the typical novel of the period. Although an ostensible aim, she is significantly displaced in favour of the adolescent girl or young woman, and the story of her progress *towards* matrimony and virtue" (15). In fact, the situation of Cusk's married characters seems to answer Ursula's worst fears about marriage in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920): "More likely to be the end of experience" (7). As Cusk's Amanda sees it: "It was her impression that the women she knew did nothing but drink coffee at each others' houses all day" (54). The reader is indeed invited to follow the characters as they go about their daily rounds. Limiting the novel to a sample of twenty-four hours in the lives of middle-class women in suburbia also means limited development both of character and of plot. In Kristin Bluemel's words, "bypassing life's beginnings, with their fantasy of self-invention or social transformation, and not claiming satisfactions from life's final moments of meaning that retroactively illuminate all previous actions, middles must appeal to readers on terms of their own" (123). Even if a few contextualizing analepses are scattered in the text, the emphasis falls on the present of the characters in all its ordinariness and lack of meaning.

- 11 It appears in the end that Cusk makes an ironical use of the three rules of classical tragedy: unity of place, time and action are used to describe ordinary lives; they here serve to convey the tragic dimension of these dissatisfied lives constricted in space.

## 2. The Victorian dimension

- 12 Despite a narrative mode and construction that may point to modernism in general and to Virginia Woolf in particular, I will argue that the characters of *Arlington Park* are represented in a way that is similar to Victorian heroines, i.e. through direct relationship to the spaces around them.<sup>13</sup> The number of places in which the main characters appear is fairly restricted and restricting: in their own homes, in shops or shopping centres or on their way to or back from taking their children to school. These places are meant to give insight into their daily lives, their loneliness and centres of interest. It is indicative of the vacuity of their lives that a shopping centre is one of the few public places where they go: Merrywood Mall (my emphasis) whose function and design are a mockery of its pastoral name.<sup>14</sup>
- 13 Characters themselves display an acute perception of space or "spatiality," a term that captures "the ways in which the social and spatial are inextricably realized one in the other" (Keith and Pile 6). Both Amanda and Christine indeed love the place as the obvious result of their climbing up the social ladder. For instance, while driving through "the lesser suburbs of Redbourne and Firley" (78) to get to Merrywood, Christine thinks these usefully "remind you why you lived in Arlington Park" (79), a reaction that establishes Christine's acute awareness of social classes expressed via their habitat. Her relationship to her husband Joe is governed by her attraction for the social status he embodies. She sees her husband in terms of territory as shown in the metaphor used when she imagines losing him: "Expelled from Joe" (215) and in terms of social values attached to particular

places: “He looked like the people she sometimes saw through the windows of what she thought of as trendy offices, people who were incomprehensible to her” (209).

- 14 Just as Christine’s satisfaction with her social status is expressed in terms of space, so is Juliet’s frustration. For Juliet, *Arlington Park* embodies her failure, her disappointment with life and with herself as she did not rise to the expectations she and others had for herself: “I don’t know why, Christine said, but I always thought of you in London. Isn’t that funny? Juliet didn’t think it was particularly funny. Actually, it was one of the least funny things she’d ever heard” (24). For Juliet, like Maisie, the suburb is a stifling place of confinement: “She could open somewhere like a flower. She could find a place less cramped, less confining, and open out all the petals packed inside her” (32).<sup>15</sup> Even Juliet’s progress through the streets of *Arlington Park* sounds like a struggle in “She laboured along the pavement, burdened, bedraggled, while the men looked at her from their cars” (33) with the alliteration in /b/ as well as the bumpy ternary structure of the first part of the sentence until the rhythm suddenly becomes smooth and easy to describe the tranquil life of men.
- 15 In fact, Juliet has a double sense of enclosure as she also resents her marriage, which, she says, has murdered her. The spatial representation of feelings of enclosure in marriage echoes Dorothea Brooke’s situation in *Middlemarch* (Piehler 103-123). It is interesting in fact to think of Dorothea as Juliet’s literary ancestor as it stresses what I believe to be Cusk’s point regarding the evolution of women. Both are wives wasting away in a disappointing marriage that does not bring them any intellectual challenge or emotional/physical satisfaction. Both are originally promising young women who make a mistaken move towards marriage in the common desire to enlarge their experience. But this common goal, for inverse reasons, ironically reflects on the progress of women’s condition: Dorothea marries Casaubon to get “access to shared knowledge. She hopes to grow *through* and *with* her husband in a partnership” (Piehler 117) while Juliet, a bright student with a PhD, has the academic success that Dorothea yearns for but pictures marriage to herself as something out of the ordinary:
- 16 One day she had met Benedict and it had risen up before her startled eyes, a great vista of challenges like a mountainrange: things she didn’t have, things she’d never even thought of! Really they were only the dreary lineaments of her mother’s life, a husband, a house, children—but to Juliet they seemed mysterious, full of foreign, ineluctable glamour. (...) It almost made her laugh now, to think of it. A woman a hundred years ago knew her life would be over the moment she got herself pregnant. But Juliet had thought it required a degree of cleverness, that there was something difficult about it. For a while she prized the idea of a house and a husband and children, as though these things were uncommon, as though they represented some new refinement of human experience. Then she got them, and the feeling of lead started to build up in her veins, a little more each day (36-37).<sup>16</sup>
- 17 The comparison with the nineteenth century is invited via Juliet’s pointed references to other novels and texts that mirror the concern for spaces and women in *Arlington Park*. Through her literary school club, Juliet tries to alert her female students to what she is convinced awaits them: “she tried to acquaint them with the nature of the beast” (154) via the stories of Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary (both dead at the end of their respective stories because they have been betrayed by their lovers). The book under discussion on the day the story is set is *Wuthering Heights*—another novel about a place of imprisonment for women—acting as an echo to the centrality of place in *Arlington Park*.

Moreover, Juliet evokes the Brontë sisters in terms of the place where they lived as an unlikely one to write “three of the finest novels in the English language” (163) – thereby echoing Virginia Woolf’s wonder.

- 18 In Victorian novels nature affords women a break from constraints, a relief at moments of emotional crisis<sup>17</sup> but Cusk’s characters live in a suburban environment where nature is domesticated<sup>18</sup> and it is doubtful we can find the same liberating association between women and nature. Nature in *Arlington Park* is in fact limited to gardens and park, and these are endowed with ambiguous qualities. There are positive links established between women and nature. Amanda’s grandmother, for instance, seems to break free when she appears to Eddie in their garden on the day she dies (75). Similarly, it is when standing in her garden that a memory of her former self comes back to Solly. Looking at new primroses (the time is March), the memory comes back to her and with it, an image of who she was (121).<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, emphasis is laid on how young mothers are constricted in the playground area: “The mothers stood in their fenced enclosure and watched people moving across the park” (147), notably with the repeated use of passive forms and verbs to insist on their lack of freedom: “The women were as though snared ... were caught ... Trapped as they were” (148). Nature does not afford comfort and solace anymore. Betsy Miller, the little girl who crops up in various conversations, was abducted in a park (149). Besides nature is made unavailable with the hostile rain pouring down.
- 19 What the comparison with the nineteenth century puts forwards is the permanence of the famous Victorian “separate spheres” – where woman is seen “as a priestess dedicated to preserving the home as a refuge from the abrasive outside world” (Altick 53). Indeed the society depicted in *Arlington Park* is not so different from the one depicted by Elizabeth Gaskell in *Cranford* and which Patsy Stoneman interprets as revealing “*Cranford* as only an extreme version of ‘separate spheres’” (61):
- If a married couple come to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears; he is either fairly frightened to death by being the only man in the *Cranford* evening parties, or he is accounted for by being with his regiment, his ship, or closely engaged in business all the week in the great neighbouring commercial town of *Drumble*. (Gaskell 5)
- 20 *Arlington Park*, like *Cranford*, is where women are mostly left to their own devices while men are away working in town.<sup>20</sup> Juliet expresses her resentment in terms of gendered spaces: “She had never expected to find herself here, where women drank coffee all day and pushed prams round the grey, orderly streets, and men went to work, went there and never came back, like there was a war on.” (22). Home is where the women remain while the men go out to work or to enjoy themselves, as attests this brief exchange between Christine and her husband. He says:
- 21 “You used to say you thought it was important that we both had separate lives.” To which she snaps: “That was before I realised that separate lives meant you going off surfing for the weekend while I looked after the children” (211). Significantly, we are told that in their Georgian house with the kitchen on one floor and the sitting-room upstairs: “It often happened on evenings such as this, that the women congregated on one floor and the men on another” (217).
- 22 Victorian writers showed their heroines as ensconced in gendered settings yet slightly transgressing these otherwise publicly acknowledged limits. Of the Victorian heroines she studies, Liana Piehler says: “As with the two previous female protagonists, Lucy Snowe and Molly Gibson, Dorothea Brooke *evolves* through striking connections to her

spatial settings" (103, emphasis added). Spaces may be "claimed" and eventually provide outlets to thought and represent self-affirmation, characters may transcend gendered spaces as a sign of their development: in Linda Piehler's words,

When claimed and possessed fully by such women of both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, these personal spaces provide outlets to thoughts and memories; to self-affirmation; and even to creative possibilities. They become a correlative symbol in representing women's development, and may lead to women's personal choice and assertion of convictions. (139)

- 23 The situation depicted by Cusk is bleaker as there is no improvement, no development for her characters who seem to be unable to claim a space of their own and remain angrily entombed in the sphere allotted to them.

### 3. No Room of One's Own

- 24 Reading *Arlington Park*, one is tempted to think that Woolf's 1928 demand that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 6) is still topical in the sense that the need for women to have their own space to write and more generally to think and develop is still disregarded. Cusk's female characters are shown as having undergone a dispossession of the self because they have no space to call their own: their original self has been taken over by marriage and motherhood.

- 25 When Juliet considers her relationship with her husband Benedict, it is in terms of space or lack of it. The main physical detail given about Juliet is that she has very long hair that she has clung to since childhood as "the outward growth of the inner conviction she held about herself, that she was exceptional" (23). Her decision to chop it off can be read as a move to a different stage of her life in which she accepts herself as ordinary, that she is not the one who will do great things. This point is reinforced with the association with the Brontës:

She'd always, somehow, identified herself with one or other of the sisters, with Emily, or Charlotte. Now, though, she found that it was with the mother that her sympathies lay. Their mother, whose dress was ripped to shreds, who did not write one of the finest novels in the English language (...). It was left to the daughters to make their mark on the indifferent world. (164)

- 26 With her amazingly long hair, she calls to mind Rapunzel, the long-haired fairy tale heroine constricted in an enclosed space and the plot is transposed to adapt to her perception of her relationship: "He had climbed to the top of the tower, to Juliet's place, and somehow he had made it more his place than hers" (23) even though "(w)hen he came climbing up her hair, she didn't detect him as a threat, not at all" (36). In the fairy tale, the girl is held captive, cut off from the world until the arrival of the young prince. In Juliet's version, she, the educated promising young woman happily lives at the top of her tower of thought and knowledge; she is not originally captive but he takes over her space and it is eventually in her life with her prince that she is cut off from the world.
- 27 Female characters see their lives in terms of space but traditional places are not the ones where they are shown to come to life. Their homes are anything but a real place of solace and fulfilment. Ex-manager Amanda Clapp thus thinks she is pleased with her newly done-up house with its immense kitchen<sup>21</sup> in the posh Western Gardens until she realises that "they had created not space but emptiness" (64). It is made clear from the outset that Amanda finds real shelter in her car which she endows with particular qualities, made to

appear numerous through the use of polysyndeton: “Her car was her true companion: it was clean *and* spacious *and* mechanically discreet, *and* it did her bidding powerfully, efficiently *and* with silent approval of her style of command” (41, my emphasis). Moreover, the space of her car is equated with a state of freedom: “in her car time seemed to pass at a remove. It passed on the other side of the window. She drove along and through her windows she saw people burdened by time while she herself remained free” (41). But rather than empowering, this retreat to a private exclusive space can also read as a withdrawal, a retreat that is self-limiting—which is exactly the type of criticism levelled at Woolf’s idea by second-generation feminist critics: Cusk seems to echo Elaine Showalter who sees Woolf’s room as “strategic retreat, and not a victory; a denial of feeling, and not a mastery of it” (285), “a symbol of psychic withdrawal, an escape from the demands of other people” (286).

- 28 Dispossession of identity expressed in terms of space is particularly stressed through the character named Solly who feels she has dissolved into her family and turns to a room to retrieve her identity, albeit vicariously. Solly Kerr-Leigh<sup>22</sup> is pregnant with her fourth child and her defining feature is that she has lost control of her body, of its limits: “she could not distinguish her own body” (122). This loss of her self, this dispossession of identity is seen in terms of space and relation to space: “she couldn’t locate a continuous sense of herself” (120). Her body is “a village” to her husband (121). In fact, she actually loses awareness of herself, completely dissolving into her role as mother, “in one of those null states she often entered in the presence of the children, when she forgot she existed, or at least forgot to act as though she did” (122). Early on we learn that “She wanted to feel a boundary with the world, before she was diffused entirely into fleshly relatedness. The spare room appeared to her as the place where this boundary could be established” (113-114). This is where she regains a sense of her past identity: “in the spare room, Solly felt she could see what her intentions had been” (113). The spare room is marked by its physical as well as symbolic emptiness, all in white and beige, with empty drawers and wardrobe, unsullied by family life. However any expectation of an application of Woolf’s prescription for a room of one’s own is disappointed as Solly does not want to keep this empty space, uncontaminated by family life, to herself as a place where to be able to retire, regain and cultivate a sense of herself. Cusk’s character is not a would-be writer or artist and does not want to use the room as a boundary between herself and her family. Rather than cutting herself off in the room, renting it out to others opens up her world just as her lodger’s belongings give her an insight into a different life. What is shown as empowering is not isolation and retreat but the attempt to embrace the outside world to nourish her own life.
- 29 In *Arlington Park*, Rachel Cusk combines the modernist focus on the characters’ inner lives with the traditional use of space employed by Victorian novelists to define the characters. Cusk deliberately narrows down her subject to an ordinary day in a middle-class suburb that is a place of confinement that constricts women’s minds. The cyclical and constraining nature of life enhanced by a limited setting in which women are entombed, coupled with the survival of separate spheres that nevertheless deny women a place of their own, illustrates Cusk’s belief that fundamental progress for women is restricted. While these gendered spheres are not so openly acknowledged in the early twenty-first century, Cusk denounces them because this private sphere is not “a room of one’s own” but entirely given up to the household. As she indicates in “Shakespeare’s Daughters,” Cusk is acutely aware that “while women’s lives have altered in some respects, in others

they have remained much the same” and with *Arlington Park*, she performs what she believes is her task as a woman writer: she wrote what she calls “the book of repetition, ... fiction that concerns itself with what is eternal and unvarying, with domesticity and motherhood and family life.” Yet, with her depiction of women in relation to space in *Arlington Park* that draws on both the Victorians and the modernists, she deliberately places herself in the line of a female literary tradition.

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## NOTES

1. Also quoted by Kort and West-Pavlov.
2. "When readers take note of the language of space in a narrative, they usually do so by referring to 'setting'. But 'setting' condemns the language of place to inherently passive and secondary roles. 'Setting' suggests background, necessary, perhaps, but never, like the other languages of narrative, foregrounded" (Kort 15).
3. For a detailed study of this point, see Monica Latham's article.
4. For Sharon Spencer in *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel* (1971), the emphasis on space (instead of temporality) marks literary modernism (Kort 14).
5. I am drawing here on Kristin Bluemel: "I have written with the assumption that feminist novels examine the experience and construction of sexual difference and gendered identities in order either to celebrate them as a source of feminine aesthetics and politics or bemoan them as a source of sex discrimination and oppression" (115).
6. In Kort's words: "The language of place becomes even more determining when (...) action or characters are restricted to a particular place" (16).
7. See Nick Bentley quoting David Harvey: the Postmodern city as "a 'palimpsest' of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a 'collage' of current uses" (*Contemporary British Fiction* 175).
8. The space the novel is concerned with is public as well as private, as a quick comparison between incipit and explicit will show. The narrative develops from the general public space of the incipit ("All night the rain fell on Arlington Park") to the enclosed private space of somebody's (Christine's husband's) arms: "'Come here' he said" (240). The metaphor of the world as a stage reappears at the end of the novel but the space has shrunk: the stage at the end is Joe's face and the world it displays is Christine's.
9. "Space in nineteenth-century realist novels emerges as a concrete and stable phenomenon, while in modernist fiction it is filtered, like time, through the perceptions of protagonists. In postmodernist fiction, the idea of a 'world' is itself destabilized, and different spaces multiply and merge" (Bridgeman 56).
10. See Maria del Mar Azcona's work on multi-protagonist films.
11. In Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982), for instance, each chapter is devoted to a specific female character living on the same street: overall, the narrative covers the different ages of womanhood, from young Kelly Brown to old Alice Bell whose encounter is described from each one's point of view in the first chapter and in the last one.
12. "une certaine fiction qui choisirait délibérément de gommer, voire de bannir, tout ce qui peut rappeler l'extraordinaire, le sensationnel, le tragique, le lyrisme" (Duperray 7).
13. See Linda F. Piehler's study of Victorian heroines in relation to space.
14. With its emphasis on the artificial, the following scene reads like a parody of fairies meeting close to water spots in the forest: "Maisie, Stephanie and Christine paused at the fountain (...) and the children strained at the straps on their pushchairs to put their hands in the cold, chlorinated water, and to explore the foliage of the plastic plants in their pebbled tubs" (88).

15. This can be read as an echo to Jane Eyre's complaint at being constrained by her role as a governess in *Thornfield* (*Jane Eyre* 140-141).

16. The ineluctable changes brought about by maternity to the previously undiscerning character is a feature that reappears in *The Bradshaw Variations*: "Claudia remembers, when Lottie was born, the prospect of self-sacrifice coming into view like a landscape seen from an approaching train, and herself inescapably bound for it; and then after a while the realisation, pieced together from numerous clues, that this was where her mother had lived all along" (51).

17. "Lucy, Molly and Dorothea are all drawn to nature, the outdoors, or private gardens as contemplative retreats and symbolic transgressions of domestic settings" (Piehler 141).

18. One of the characters quotes an extract from Philip Larkin's "Going, Going" which laments the urban sprawl (236).

19. Incidentally, the lyrics she remembers of a song by Van Morrison are wrong, which may suggest that her memory is inaccurate and that she probably embellishes her past youth. Compare the text with "We shall walk and talk / in gardens all wet and misty with rain / and I will never, never, never / grow so old again" ("Sweet Thing," Van Morrison, *Astral Weeks* 1968).

20. However, Cusk's characters do not seem to enjoy the same relations of friendship as Gaskell's: whether they are presented at home or in a public place, the main impression is their solitude. Out of the three gatherings in the novel, not a single one really evokes friendship or warmth, with the possible exception of the two unnamed women in the park.

21. The pronoun "her" is used in the text to link Amanda and the kitchen, as if this room were her exclusive realm (63).

22. The use of her own name along with her husband's is directly addressed in the novel, as another example of dispossession and annexation: "That was what she thought marriage should be: the state of hyphenation. Yet most of the people they knew pronounced it as the woman had done, as one word with the emphasis on the first syllable. That syllable was Martin's: it seemed a particularly insidious form of discrimination" (123).

## ABSTRACTS

The purpose of this article is to investigate Rachel Cusk's use of space in *Arlington Park* as a means of depicting her female characters – and some aspects of the contemporary female condition in the Western world. Cusk's use of space in relation to the literature of the past offers in this respect a fruitful perspective. My hypothesis is that with this emphasis on space Cusk may be modernist in her narrative style but she deliberately remains close to the Victorians in her choice of themes and treatment of women characters in relation to space in order to make a strong feminist statement, in the sense that her novel examines the experience of sexual difference and gendered space to denounce them as a source of discrimination.

Cet article se propose d'analyser comment l'utilisation de l'espace dans *Arlington Park* de Rachel Cusk sert à définir les personnages féminins, notamment certains aspects de la condition féminine dans le monde occidental contemporain. L'analyse de cette thématique en lien avec la littérature anglaise du dix-neuvième siècle s'avère fructueuse. Nous proposons l'hypothèse suivante : en mettant l'accent sur la notion d'espace, Cusk est certes une moderniste dans le style, mais elle reste volontairement proche des Victoriens. Le choix des thématiques et la manière dont elle observe l'interaction entre les personnages féminins et leur espace,

caractéristique de la littérature féminine du dix-neuvième siècle en Grande-Bretagne, lui permet de formuler un message féministe clair. En effet, son roman examine l'expérience de la différence sexuelle, et montre que l'espace est déterminé par les relations entre les sexes, pour en dénoncer l'effet discriminatoire.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** espace, littérature victorienne, modernisme, condition féminine, différence sexuelle

**Keywords:** space, victorian literature, modernism, feminine condition, gender

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