



Edward Munch, *Deux femmes sur la plage* / *Two Women on the Shore* (1898)



Sur le tournage du film *Persona* par Ingmar Bergman / On set of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966) : Bibi Andersson, Ingmar Bergman & Sven Nykvist.

TIMESCAPES Taru Elfving

*The lighthouse was then a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening.**

I enter the grounds of the house by the pool side. My introduction into the Maison Louis Carré is through the timeless figure of a woman reading. The camera pans slowly past smooth white walls, warm wooden doors, onto the edge of the paved area, where the woman now sits, yet again. We are back at the first frame of the film. The man standing close by turns to face her, and frames the woman into an imaginary image, seated there, on the boundary between the built environment and the woods. She appears merely a visitor now, a fleeting presence by the pool side, whereas the reading figure radiated a calm sense of belonging.

I should have approached the house along the winding driveway, landscaped so that the house comes gradually into view amongst the trees, as if organically growing on this very spot on top of the hill, commanding a view across the surrounding landscape in the old heart of France. The house was designed so as to be rooted in the landscape, following the natural forms and subtly rising above the fields and villages around it. As the trees have been left to mature and spread, the house has over the decades become ever more sheltered, enclosed in the woods. The open vistas are gone. The house has become one with its surroundings in somewhat other terms than the original design perhaps intended.

What happens to the view of the land with this perspectival shift, when there is no distance for the gaze to travel any longer? What is left of the landscape, or of the land as property, marked and measured, when the views become intimate and the surroundings thicken with the slow persistent growth of trees and shrubs following coordinates of their own, different from those assigned to them by man? As the open view disappears, the house with its garden appears to turn inwards, away from the communities around it, as if the connection to the outside world is cut, purposefully or by circumstance. Or, perhaps its relationship with the woods is now what matters.

The new film by Eeva-Riitta Eerola and Jenni Toikka takes me to these material and mental borderlines between the architectural and the organic, the constructed and the growing. The film navigates the house and its grounds along its boundaries, skimming along half-walls and pausing at the wooden grilles that open and close the flow of view as well as air between the inside and the outside of the building. All those screens, partitions, passages also reference the interlaced connections and separations between private and public, or individual and collective spheres. The house, after all, was built to intertwine two distinct realms of existence – the public life of the art collector and the private life of Louis Carré with his new wife Olga. The documents of the house hold the official memory of its public profile, the life of high society in those optimistic post-war times of radical change in the 1960's and 1970's. The private life is near invisible in these records, especially of the ageing widow dwelling in the house for over two more decades by herself.

Now the inhabitants and the art works have gone only the house exists as an ageing art work in itself that has shed all its other functions. If only the bare white walls could speak. In the film all those gaps between walls and ceilings and corners promise access between the different realms, yet somehow refuse entry after all. Instead of allowing movement through, the thresholds and frames seem to come closer and become embodied in the encounters with the viewer's gaze. The white walls blur into soft geometrical planes, while the many wooden details seem invitingly warm and worn under the touch of the eyes.

As if following the early modernist literature of Virginia Woolf, whose writing the work makes reference to, the audiovisual narration experiments with the porous boundaries not only between inside and outside of the environments in question. The events and the framed space-time also become indistinguishable from the characters and their perspectives, while these no longer serve as singular and distinct points of view but entangled, fuzzy and open-ended.

In Woolf's novel *To The Lighthouse*, the narrative is a maze formed of the meandering minds of numerous characters, whose fates entangle in the few hours traversed in the chapters that describe their gathering in a house, on an island. Their thoughts and emotions appear as if in a complex, turbulent feedback loop that challenges all notions of distinct boundaries of an individual, while recognising the ceaseless labour involved in crossing the divide separating singular minds and experiences from collective moments. The reader has only access to the events and the site of the story through the mental images and voices of the



Ingmar Bergman, *Persona*, still photo (1966)

"This juxtaposition technique is familiar from cinematic language, i.e. changing the view alternately by means of montage. The culmination of the two juxtaposed experiences in the "lighthouse" episode is the simultaneity of the reaching of the lighthouse by Mr Ramsay with his children and the completion of the painting by Lily Briscoe.

Perhaps Virginia Woolf has not planned this simultaneity only for the sake of formal experimentation, for in this simultaneity it is easy to see symbolic connotations. The simultaneous reaching of the lighthouse and the completion of the painting may be understood as symbolizing the sameness and parallelism between life (symbolized by the reaching of the lighthouse) and art (symbolized by the completion of the painting). Their parallelism is further emphasized by the similarity of Lily's two comments in the last short chapter, when she, while looking at the lighthouse, realizes that Mr Ramsay has reached the lighthouse:

'He has landed,' she said aloud. 'It is finished.' (TL, 236) This comment is a reference to Mr Ramsay and the reaching of the lighthouse, but with the following comment she refers to her painting: 'It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.' (TL, 237)"

(Kaipiäinen, Merja (2016): Virginia Woolf, *Modernism and the Visual Arts*, University of Tampere, 91)

characters, and is left with a puzzle of pieces that do not form a unified whole, but rather something more than the sum of these parts.

As in Woolf's novel, in the film the house becomes a holder, a container or a frame for memories and histories, ideas of the past as well as ideas from the past. This sense of capture is emphasised by the imaginary photograph that the male character takes of the woman, now posing and no longer reading by the pool. With all its subtle associations of times gone, this scene in the film resonates with the very contemporary experience of how our encounters with the world have become framed through potential photos, pictures to be stored and shared, the where and when framed, forever or nowhere. Maybe the photo is no longer even needed: an imagined frame suffices with its promise to fix our visits, in any time and place, one after another.

Time appears to stand still in the house, as if everything has been paused here, for the time being. Its creators and inhabitants are long gone, replaced by the infrequent flow of visitors. Not only the everyday private and public life of the people, but also the art it was built to house, have moved on. White walls appear as blank canvases yet increasingly challenging to project anything onto. Modernist universalism hovers in its own space-time, not quite one with the surrounding age-old cultural landscape and its history. Timeless and without a fixed place, it has nevertheless aged as part of the local ecosystem. Time has crept in, through the cracks in the paint and the paving, as the trees keep on reaching skyward, diverse plant life crawls across the lawn.

Meanwhile modernist abstraction, like functionalism, has become historicised. Its claims and desires for universality have been unveiled as having been built on unsustainable and exclusive ideals. Today, however, these forms and materials demand recognition as also, potentially, carriers of radically other understandings of time and space, other kinds of nature-cultures. What do the various woods in the architecture tell us, beyond their aesthetic and formal appeal?

The myriad details in different types of timber – some locally sourced, some brought from Finland – and the craft that has gone into them in this building project, remind us of how the different materials have allowed for specialised, localised crafts to develop across generations in climate-specific cultures. Today the materials and forms continue to be in ceaseless dialogue with their surroundings, its light and air quality, humidity and temperature. They are host to innumerable micro and macro scale environmental interactions, from bacterial and fungal to winds and weather, all going through accelerated and unpredictable change.

Architecture is thus also an agent, not solely a space for action, in the film as in the ecosystem. In the film it may even be the main character, opening up a pluriverse of wavering and interweaving perspectives. Who is looking from behind the woman, so unnervingly close, yet unable to see into her mind or through her eyes, or to the view in her mind's eye? What is the view hidden behind the wall or the edge of the roof? What can one see, or may aim to see, if reaching for a higher view point and climbing on the stool or the bench at the edge of the paving? Can one thus gain the perspective

of the house – once the beacon on the hill, the all-seeing eye? Even access the mind of the eye gazing once over the rolling fields?

Sounds and images do not frame together a fluid singular narrative or space-time in the film, but rather direct attention towards diverse parallel events, experiences and points of view. What fits into the frame is never all there is, yet the work suggests there to be not solely a linear reality continuing beyond the bounds of the view. What if there are layers of time, of irreducible different temporalities, here and now, within and without the captured frame?

In the end of the film the construction of the narrative, the timeline and spatial framing appear to be revealed. It is suggestive of a repetitive looping nature of the positions assumed by the characters, amidst the architectural and cultural history that now serves as a stage for rehearsals and memorials of a world that once was. Yet all the other temporalities and viewpoints persist, haunting at the edges of vision. *For nothing was simply one thing.*

* All quotes in the text are from: Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 1927.