

if you close your eyes

Salla Tykkä's *Cave* trilogy is a series of short films that manage to both shock the viewer with their beauty while confounding any easy attempt to pin down their meaning. Filmed over four years, the work seems to move backwards and forwards in time, tracing moments in a girl's early life. Although Tykkä uses a different actress in each of the three films, the complete work suggests that the stories follow the development of one person.

In the first - *Lasso* (2000) - a girl returns from jogging to find the front door of her house locked. Approaching a window at the side of the house, she sees a young man in the living room, stripped to the waist and practising with a spinning lasso. He twirls the rope in a large vertical O, leaping in and out of it's circle before striking it on the floor with a loud whipcrack. Outside, the girl can at first see only herself in the window and then the image of the young man. Watching him, tears seem to well in her eyes and she slowly backs away from the house. In the film's last shots, the camera retreats from the scene, focusing finally on the frozen ground.

Lasso was originally a scene in a larger script containing four separate stories. Tykkä realised it would be financially impossible to shoot the whole script and focused instead on the last scene of the last story. While editing the sequence she chose the soundtrack - music instantly familiar from the Sergio Leone movie, *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

In the second film in the trilogy - *Thriller* (2001) - the music is again recognisable and has it's roots in cinema. In a more developed scenario, the theme from John Carpenter's *Halloween* plays as the camera closes in on a modern house in a gloomy, autumnal forest. Upstairs a young girl lies on a bed while in the forest below her mother builds a bonfire and her father tends to the sheep. At one point the father enters the house and approaches his daughter's room, testing the locked handle before returning to his chores. He leads one white sheep down to a pathway, tethering it up before taking a rowboat out onto a dark lake. The young girl rouses herself, runs unseen by her mother down the pathway and enters a cottage. There she stares at her reflection in a mirror before noticing a hunting rifle by the fireplace. Picking it up she takes aim at the sheep beyond the window and pulls the trigger. We see the bullet hole that has cleanly

penetrated the window, and we see the dead, blood-stained sheep. The film closes with an image of the flames of the bonfire rising in front of the main house.

It is clear from the girl's age that this story takes place before the scene from *Lasso* and the time shifts continue in the final film of the trilogy, *Cave* (2003). Here, a simple story subtly references sci-fi movies and focuses on a girl who is clearly older than the protagonists of the first two films. The story begins as she approaches a house, dressed in slightly futuristic white clothes and begins to dig in the borders of the garden. Suddenly she stops as if being called to follow the sounds of the sea which can we hear on the soundtrack. Running through a snowy forest, she is forced to dive for cover at the sound of a large explosion. Eventually reaching the mouth of a cave, she enters and follows the man-made tunnel within until she reaches a shallow pool of water where she begins to search in the water with her fingers. Looking up she notices three men dressed as miners working in the distance, drilling in the walls of the cave. In the closeups of the work there is no sound of the machinery and the men appear almost spectral, appearing in another dimension. This effect is reinforced when they finish drilling and walk down the cave past the girl as if unconscious of her presence. as they pass, one miner finally turns and shines his torch on the girl showing no emotion or reaction as he does so. The scene carries an element of sexual danger which is diffused when the men move off silently. The girl continues her journey through the cave and eventually emerges on a rocky, primitive beach where the sea pounds thunderously. In the final scene we see her as a tiny figure against the immensity of the cliff and the cavemouth before the screen fades to white.

Each of the three films documents no more than a moment in a life yet they are so highly charged that they immediately generate multiple interpretations. This effect is amplified by a level of detail in each of the films that rivals any Elizabethan miniature. Critics have noted for example, Tykkä's extensive use of mirror imagery throughout the works and her use of windows as a membrane between the inner and outer worlds of the girls. The choice of architectural locations and the role of the buildings in each story also introduces other layers of significance.

Most importantly, there is a sense of fragmentation inherent in the three films. Viewers lack any context for the stories and there is none of the narrative exposition we have come to expect in mainstream cinema. The absence of dialogue removes another of

the orthodox supports for narrative coherence and the endings of the films offer little resolution to the events that have unfolded on the screen. Despite all of these shocks to our cinematic expectations, however, Salla Tykkä manages to hold our attention. The seductive beauty of the cinematography certainly plays a strong role in this - her sense of composition, colour and the choreography of physical gesture all draw on the most elemental powers of cinema and the moving image.

Within the overall narrative ambiguity of Salla Tykkä's films there is one more vital element that guides the audience and that is the music which soundtracks each work. Given the relative silence of the films the music she has chosen is bound to have a significant role to play. The choice of strong, dramatic themes from familiar mainstream movies, however, works on several levels. In *Lasso*, for instance, the lyrical and powerful orchestral theme from Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* has an immediate emotional impact. The operatic swoon of the music transforms a domestic scene into an epiphany and heightens our response to the images presented on the screen. The melancholy at the heart of the music suggests the longing and sadness of the girl watching the boy absorbed in his lasso practice and it amplifies the implications of the scene beyond what is literally happening on screen. The suggestion of loss it generates helps us to conclude that the image may even imply the sense of otherness we perceive in others and the knowledge that they are ultimately unknowable. At the same time, the slightly sentimental edge to the music also keeps us grounded and allows us some distance from the emotional surge of the work.

Inevitably too, the soundtrack to *Lasso* reminds us of its original source in Leone's movie. Coming at the end of the Western in movie history, *Once Upon a Time in the West* is one of the genre's best examples, offering an elegaic panorama of pioneering America. Against this epic background, the director cast Henry Fonda against type as a sadistic gunman and the movie plays out Leone's characteristic battle of good versus evil in one of the darkest westerns ever made. Tykkä's boy with a lasso connects us back to the west and scenes from the movie play again in our minds while we watch the him leap through the spinning rope.

In the second film in the trilogy, music plays a similar role with the choice of themes from the horror classic *Halloween*. From its opening notes, which themselves owe something to the theme for *The Exorcist*, we are prepared for the eruption of the

supernatural and, when the young girl appears soon after, we automatically perceive her in a horror tradition of that equates teenage female sexuality with uncontrollable forces of darkness. Tykkä enjoys the possibilities this allows her – the girl has only to turn her head and glare at her bedroom door for a moment of teenage moodiness to be transformed into a potentially satanic outburst. Likewise, the suggestiveness of the music colours our perceptions of the forest, the girl's gothic mother, the dark lake, and the flames of the bonfire. The film's title of course also alludes to Michael Jackson's album of the same name, reminding us of both the tongue-in-cheek horror video he made to accompany the song and of the more recent, edgier public persona of the performer.

As with *Lasso*, the reference to genre cinema and video summon up the commonplaces of those traditions and recall powerful moments in the best of those films. Most genres, though, have a sense of their own boundaries and often wryly expose them. Horror films perhaps point to this theatricality more than most and Salla Tykkä uses this to her advantage in *Thriller* where she can suggest a situation laden with confused and violent sexual emotions but give us some objective distance on the scene through these cinematic gestures.

It is interesting, then, that in the final movement of the trilogy – *Cave* – the music is less specific while still operating as a key interpretative element of the work. If there are specific cinematic allusions in this film they are in the landscape and the overall mood of 'sci-fi', particularly in the closing images of the beach which recalls movies such as *2001 Space Odyssey*, *Solaris* and *Planet of the Apes*. At various moments the music does perform a classic cinematic function – the suspense heightened, for instance, when one of the workmen turns and shines a torch on the hiding girl. In general, however, the music is practical and, in the last scenes, serene. The intense passions and internal struggles of the first two sections of the trilogy have been left behind and even the dangers of this final episode are more distant and controlled.

Given the title of this film and the trilogy as a whole it is tempting to interpret it in the light of the story of Plato's cave. Plato describes an image of prisoners locked in darkness, mistaking shadows on the wall of a cave for reality until they are released and, in the light outside, finally understand that everything they knew before was just a mere representation of the real thing itself. The trilogy also certainly has a narrative arc that traces the transition and transformation of a girl in puberty, coming to terms with

sexuality, emotions and her surroundings. One critic has already pointed out the potential relationship of the girls and their reflections to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan and the ‘mirror stage’ of child development, recognising the self as an objective image. Within each of the films in the trilogy, it is possible to construct multiple potential narratives and readings – asking what is the relationship between the boy and girl in *Lasso*, what is the motivation for the girl’s violent action in *Thriller* or what is the girl searching for in *Cave*?

There are an infinity of answers but each resides with the viewer that constructs them. Tykkä has created deliberately fragmented works that leave gaps where more conventional cinema narratives would provide bridges. The layer of cinematic allusions and the memories of other films this conjures up also interacts with the images before us. We know how the stories could go, and how they have worked themselves out before. We also know that Tykkä is presenting us with scenes that are more domestic, mundane and closer to real life than the depictions of reality in genre movies such as westerns, horror or sci-fi. Each of us constructs narratives from these elements and in the trilogy Tykkä makes us aware of how we also construct narratives of our own lives and history. The memory that retrieves movie scenes, prompted by the familiarity of the soundtrack, is the same function that constructs and reconstructs our selves on a daily basis.

Asked what was the attraction of the moving image for her as an artist, Salla Tykkä identified this process as a vital element of her work:

I think film comes even closer to realism, almost naturalism. That’s possible with film. For me the attraction is that I think this could be real life. I have wondered about the way people see their lives. If you close your eyes and then use your memory it’s like a film - the image enters and is projected in the back of your brain. I think there’s something that is inside you, built in already, innate - it’s connected to memory - so that’s why I use film.

Francis McKee
Glasgow, 2004.

Francis McKee is a writer, curator and lecturer based in Glasgow.