

Dual positions

Salla Tykkä's film trilogy *Cave*

In Salla Tykkä's film *Lasso* from 2000, a young woman in a track suit slows her pace and walks up a garden walkway while trying to regain control of her breathing in the cold weather. She rings the doorbell; when no-one opens the door, she tries the handle even though she knows it will be locked. She walks around the house where the landscape opens up towards a lake. When she looks through the window of the living room, she is reflected in the huge glass pane against the backdrop of winter-locked nature. As she moves closer to the window and her face is very close to the glass, she looks through the open Venetian blinds to see a young man, stripped to the waist and swinging a lasso with a look of deep concentration. She regards his virtuoso handling of the rope, his adroit jumps through its rotating circle. Camera cuts back to her show us her lonely figure standing outside the window, a close-up shows her eyes through two slats of the blinds, her face wet with tears. The man, however, never notices her presence or gaze. On the one hand, the man's movement in relation to the lasso is a graceful act, a choreographed dance, and on the other hand it represents a fierce exertion that obviously demands an almost brutal energy. The séance ends when he falls to his knees and slams the lasso against the floor. The aggressive, surprising snap is the first sound heard from inside the living room. The young woman slowly walks backwards, away from the window. Fascinated, almost hypnotised, as though she cannot tear herself free from the sight. Back on the window pane her breath has left a misty trace behind. The camera zooms out and away from the well-ordered garden, around to the other side of a garden wall where stones, branches, and timber lies spread on the ground. A splash of snow is left behind, a diffuse focal point for despair.

The opening picture in Salla Tykkä's *Thriller* from 2001 is a winter landscape with denuded trees reaching towards the sky in a manner both helpless and aggressive. All is silent until you hear the sound of footfalls and the crunch of branches and dry leaves cracking. A man with a reluctant sheep on a rope is moving towards a large wooden house, while a woman toils at gathering branches in a pile. In a room inside the house, a very young girl is lying on a bed, stroking her body with hands, perhaps to protect herself against the cold, perhaps exploratory or caressing. Her breathing is heavy, as though with fear or erotic ardour. While the adults continue their impenetrable activities she falls into an uneasy sleep, only to wake up with a jolt as she hears the man enter the house. He stops with his hand on the handle to her room, turns around and leaves the house, passing through the trees with the sheep after him. Coming to a lake, he launches a wooden boat into the water and rows out. Back in the house, the girl, tense, rises from her bed and looks out the window where a whole flock of sheep is now closing in on the building. She runs out of the house, continuing along the track leading down to the lake. In a wooden cabin she is confronted with a mirror image of herself, and as she stares at herself in the mirror she calmly reaches out for a rifle and shoots a sheep outside. The projectile leaves a hole in the window pane, leaving the sheep lying bloodied in the snow-covered grass as

she lowers the rifle. In the last scene we are back by the house where the woman lights the pile of branches, and a fire goes up while the silent house is seen in the background.

Salla Tykkä's latest film *Cave*, which completes the trilogy bearing the same name, is from 2003. In *Cave*, a young woman dressed in white, wind-proof clothes comes walking around a house dominated by large, geometric concrete surfaces and glass areas. In front of the villa she kneels on the snow-covered ground and tries to dig a hole with a small shovel, perhaps intended for some plants lying on the snow. She gives up, or perhaps she is interrupted? An unidentifiable sound, which could be mechanical or natural, caused by a car, running water, or a waterfall, seems to have caught her attention. She stands up and walks out the gate into a woody, hilly landscape. She moves through the snow at a half-run until a loud boom makes her duck. From her hiding place behind a protruding rock she sees an opening in the mountainside, gets up, and enters the cave. Inside the almost tunnel-like space lit by a bluish light she begins to run. She stops at a puddle of whitish, lime-filled water, kneels to rinse her hands and then eyes three men wearing working suits and helmet lights. Paralysed, she stares at them as they continue their work, boring into the rock wall. She sees their bodies shake as a result of the drill entering the rock. As they lift their gear to leave the mine/mountain, she presses herself against the rock, startled and breathless. But the men pass her by, apparently unaffected, until they suddenly stop and one man turns around, silently shining a light on her face with his torchlight. When the men turn around again and disappear, she runs out down another tunnel out of the mountain to the light and a sudden view of an ocean. A small white spot, she moves through the magnificent coastal landscape with projecting rocks and a gently moving blue ocean.

This is a brief recap of the action taking place in the three films that constitute Salla Tykkä's film trilogy *Cave*. The situations depicted in the films are actually quite simple and everyday-like, but they are presented with an ambiguity and mystique that makes them oddly extreme and wildly engaging. The universes created in these films take on an almost supernatural quality, and the result takes your breath away. The action is built up, but intensified without being resolved. It is not logical and clear-cut, but can be understood and read in many different ways. The films depict an exaggerated reality where entirely ordinary situations are removed from a wider, explanatory context.

Salla Tykkä's films are not autobiographical, but are based on experiences and play out conflict that she herself has experienced as a teenager and young woman. Her artistic portrayal of a young woman's passage from child to adult focuses attention on emotion and irrationality as narrative pivotal points and dramatic vehicles. "The personal is political," as the international women's movement claimed in the beginning of the 1970s.

According to the US feminist and critic Griselda Pollock, four concepts lay behind the feminist slogan: sexuality, fantasy, affect, and the subconscious¹. These four concepts are central to Salla Tykkä's work and seem to be incorporated as a natural and indisputable

point of departure. In this sense, *Cave* is a "late-feministic" piece that addresses the sexual, the fantastic, and the emotional in a new, open, and complex way.

In Salla Tykkä's work, the radical element that characterised the messages and content of feminist art from the 1970s seems to apply to the narrative style and structure. Salla Tykkä investigates the stage between childhood and adulthood. She is interested in the painful and delightful transition, in the psychological process that involves insecurity, an awakening sexuality, and – very importantly – a self-image in flux and in need of re-defining. This transitory phase and labile quality is accentuated by the scenarios. The action of the films takes place in all sorts of changeable weather: mists on the verge of condensing into rain; melting snow providing only partial cover; light that remains partly hidden. Similarly, the films are played out somewhere between urban and rural environments, between the civilised, modernist single-family house and the brutal Finnish winter landscape. The films also involve an interchange between outside and inside, views from the outside into houses, and views from rooms opening onto nature. All this coupled with reflections in mirrors and windows that suggest parallel realities co-existing with ours. The three films of the trilogy are also all characterised by separated worlds. Watching from a distance, the girl in *Lasso* sees a man absorbed in his vigorous play with a rope. She is powerfully affected by this spectacle, but has no contact with the world the man has lost himself in. He does not hear her as she rings the doorbell and does not see her standing right outside the window. Similarly, the two adults in *Thriller* are absorbed by their separate tasks in the grounds in front of the house. They do not communicate with each other while they work; they do not even exchange looks. The man abandons his plan to go to the young girl in her room at the last minute, thereby also giving up on the chance to communicate with her. Nor is there any real contact between the woman in *Cave* and the men she gets so physically close to in the rock cave.

In all three films, it seems as though contact is just about to be established, only to be withheld. It is stopped by an enormous emotional agitation, fear or anxiety, which is entirely disproportionate to the actions that seem to trigger it. A guy practicing his lasso skills, a man grabbing a handle, or a beam of light pointed towards a face causes an atmosphere of almost unbearable agitation, fear, and restraint. These reactions seem to point to correlations and events outside of the immediate action that would explain the powerful feelings. In this way, the actual action played out in the three films seems to be a middle phase. There can be no doubt that prior to the glimpses we see, actions of huge importance to the action and psychology of the film have taken place. We do not, however, receive any such explanation, nor do we get any follow-up or real closure. The logics of narrative have been broken down – or become irrelevant. Instead, all significance has been transferred to the mood of the moments shown. Unlike the mainstream movies that have obviously provided inspiration for Salla Tykkä, the action of her films is not self-explanatory. Rather than relating a specific story from beginning to end, Salla Tykkä's short films act as glimpses that speak of far more general states and situations.

As in classic thrillers, the scenes are imbued with a tense and unresolved expectation, full of suspense – people who do not know they are being watched; gazes that seek each other without meeting; doors that are only just *not* opened, reflections in mirrors and window that leave you in doubt about the nature of the rooms and the placing of the people inside them. As in traditional TV melodramas, the films show women holding their breath in fear or breaking down in tears.

Salla Tykkä does not only reactivate gender-related clichés from films, but also refers directly to specific films through the score of her dialogue-free films. In *Lasso*, Salla Tykkä uses the theme from *Once Upon a Time in the West*, Sergio Leone's masterful western from 1969 in which brutality and sensuality unite in a western epos with a – for the genre – unusually resourceful woman played by Claudia Cardinale at the centre of the action. The music for *Thriller* comes from two classic 1970s horror films, both with teenage girls as the main characters. Salla Tykkä used John Carpenter's music from his 1978 film *Halloween*, in which a babysitting young girl is stalked in a suburban villa by her mask-wearing mass-murdering younger brother, as well as Pino Donaggio's music from Brian de Palma's 1976 film *Carrie*, in which Sissy Spacek plays the shy teenage girl Carrie White. Triggered by her fanatically religious mother's punishments, her terrified experience of her first menstrual cycle, and her dawning sexual awareness, Carrie discovers her supernatural powers. Her ability to move objects with her mind is depicted as an extension of her extraordinary emotional capacity. The score for *Cave* comes from TOTO's soundtrack for David Lynch's science-fiction film *Dune* from 1984, written by Brian Eno and Marty Paich. This music supports the visionary, almost surreal and dreamlike quality of *Dune*, which features Sting and stars Kyle MacLachlan as the androgynous hero.

Using entirely different tools, Salla Tykkä creates a similar atmosphere of lethargically dreaming yet nerve-racking tension in *Cave* that also seems to be outside of time, placed in a dream space or "no-man's land". Salla Tykkä uses standard filmic devices, references to genre, and music in places where the stereotypical depictions of gender known from Hollywood tradition are turned upside down, letting women gaze at half-naked men and act as the active – sometimes aggressive – driving force behind the creation of a psychological mood.

As far back as the 1970s, the US film theorist Laura Mulvey defined some of the ideological structures which govern not only the language of film, but also the ways in which we see and relate to the world around us. Among other things, Laura Mulvey makes the following statement about the presentation of gender in Hollywood films: "According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the physical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification"². It is conventional structures such as these that Salla Tykkä activates only to break them down immediately.

Film theory has traditionally been an area where feminist critics and thinkers have seen Western gender issues exemplified in condensed form. As a result, film theory has

traditionally presented an opportunity to formulate more general thoughts about gender and sexuality: "It allowed us to show how the field of vision, in the condensed and specific form cinema has manufactured for cultural consumption, is a major site not only of sexual ideology, but of desires and fantasies associated with sexuality which shape and are shaped by the structure of sexual difference," said Giselda Pollock when reviewing feminist culture a few years ago³. This is to say that Salla Tykkä posits herself within a special discourse by making films in the first place, and especially by addressing some of the gender stereotypes established by the film media. She puts twists in filmic conventions, using them to tell entirely different stories. Salla Tykkä has created a horror movie about being a teenager, a cowboy film about erotic desire, and a science fiction film about a gender-identity crisis. She plays on our automatic expectations of the genres she activates. And precisely because the ideological conventions associated with these stereotypical genres are so familiar to us, her twisting become highly effective. This is to say that the logic of reading is displaced from a frame of reference concerned with film aesthetics to a social and political field.

Salla Tykkä's work has an ambiguity and a special inverted logic – a boomerang effect – in which the use of a special filmic language is used to take the very same structure apart, demonstrating its limitations even as recognisable and demonstrative clichés are, paradoxically enough, entirely open to interpretation. Where figures are simultaneously passive and active, observers and observed. This is a dual position, a paradox reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's dual position in the Western patriarchal society. The woman is a subject, thinking and acting, but she is also an object insofar as she is defined as "the Other sex", making her the object of a (male) gaze – and desire.⁴ This dual position is very characteristic of the women in Salla Tykkä's works, but they also take on the role as subjects that objectify the men they view with desire and whose existence they seem to dominate.

The feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray believes that the difference between the two genders is the most central and pressing philosophical issue of our time. Philosophy has traditionally presupposed a universal, male subject. According to Luce Irigaray, this means that women have not had the tools necessary to formulate and reflect on specifically female experiences. Luce Irigaray believes that the conventional definition of the subject must be replaced by two radically different subjectivities, male and female, which are not ordered by notions of hierarchy or opposition but exist side by side on an equal footing.⁵ In some ways, Salla Tykkä seems to establish such an equal, co-existing subjectivity. It can certainly be said that her trilogy of films contain an obvious presentation of female subjects based on an unconventional and nuanced perception of a specifically female understanding and sexuality.

In her works, Salla Tykkä explores female roles, female identity, and the relationship between the sexes. She seeks to establish a more rounded and nuanced female figure based on a female understanding and experience of the world. The world of film has always supplied some of the most well-established role models. When Salla Tykkä

creates entirely different female figures that appear in new kinds of filmic narrative she automatically gives women the opportunity to identify with the figures presented. In her films, Tykkä uses a wide variety of references in a surprising and tightly meshed web of familiar motifs and methods of representation. She makes references to the classic genres of popular film, to post-feminist theory, to art-historical iconography, and to Biblical imagery without making any hierarchical distinction between the elements. The result is a breathless and wild mix of techniques, devices, and references in which no distinction is made between form and content. This is to say that she allows herself an unconventional merging of themes and modes of representation which not only support each other, but which also operate at the same time and on common terms where form is also content. Narrative devices and structures of representation take on symbolic value and significance on a par with the many motifs, *signifiants*, and symbols. Her films create an indefinable and labile space between the traditional and the radical, between lust and aggression, and between distance and empathy.

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¹ Griselda Pollock: "Femwatching in the 1990s", originally published in *MAKE – the Magazine of Women's Art*, 1996, reprinted in Griselda Pollack: *Looking Back to the Future. Essays on Life, Art and Death*, 2001, p. 45f.

² Laura Mulvey: *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema*, 1975, quoted by Kristine Kern in an unpublished article providing an insightful discussion of the softening of traditional male roles in the works of the Danish video artist Jesper Just.

³ Griselda Pollock: "Trouble in the Archives", *Op. Cit.*, p. 24.

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*, 1949.

⁵ Luce Irigaray: *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 1984, as presented by Ingeborg Winderen Owsen in *Kvinnelighet mellom performance og makeup*, in *Passepartout*, vol. 11 no. 21, 2003, p. 82-90, *passim*.