

Gaps in Space and Time

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In 1948 Ingmar Bergman made a film which was clearly inspired by neo-realism, *Harbour City*. In *Bergman on Bergman*, an interview book from 1970, Stig Björkman, Jonas Sima and Torsten Manns question Bergman on his filmmaking where he clearly states that the film is inspired by Rossellini. Bergman explains that as he didn't have anything of his own at that point, he used what he could find from others. Moreover, he liked the simplicity and, as he puts it, the greyness, of Rossellini's films. He goes on to explain that the best thing about making the film was discovering Gothenburg where the film was made together with Olle Länsberg, who had written the original synopsis and who was now helping Bergman with the script for *Harbour City*¹.

When Bergman makes *Summer with Monika*, 1953, it is once again in collaboration with another writer, this time Per Anders Fogelström, a popular Swedish author who had previously published books on troubled youth. Fogelström had written a short story with the synopsis for the film that was transferred into a novel of the same name and published in 1951. The young couple's experiences are clearly closer to Fogelström (who also wrote the film's screenplay) than to Bergman but together they develop the story and the focus shifts from the man to the woman. The young couple's background and environment, working-class living under modest conditions, allowed Bergman to continue his flirt with neo-realism. The young couple, Monika and Harry, escape from their boring jobs in the city and spend a summer in the archipelago. When Monika becomes pregnant, they return to the city in the autumn and, after getting married, they start drifting apart. Harry takes care of the child while Monika drifts away. This fact made me interested in the film the first time I saw it, since I found it very refreshing to see a single father in a film from that period. This is also very rarely emphasized when the film is mentioned, since focus is usually on the nudity.

¹ Stig Björkman, Torsten Manns & Jonas Sima, *Bergman om Bergman*, Norstedt, Stockholm, 1970, pp 35 – 37.

On the surface, the film *Summer with Monika* is all about the pressure of society and how demands created by others destroy the couple's relationship. But Bergman isn't that interested in these mechanisms and he succeeds in presenting elements that reflect the film as media. When the couple reaches the islands in the archipelago they find themselves in an eternal landscape far away from society, and their story can develop focussing on their relationship. When they return to the city Monika becomes bored with the whole situation and starts seeing other men when Harry is away. Here Bergman creates the famous scene where Monika looks back straight into the camera. When she looks the spectator straight in the eye, one is reminded that this is only an illusion, she is not there for real. Godard has written about this scene in *Summer With Monika*, published in *Arts*, no. 680, (1958):

*One must see 'Summer With Monika', if only for the extraordinary moment when Harriet Andersson, before making love with the man she has already thrown out once before, stares fixedly into the camera, her laughing eyes clouded with confusion, and calls on us to witness her disgust at involuntarily choosing hell instead of heaven. It is the saddest shot in the history of the cinema.*²

But there is also another aspect to this gaze, with the actress flirting with the filmmaker with whom she is having an affair, since Ingmar Bergman and Harriet Andersson fell in love during filming. In the novel Monika is portrayed much more as an immature child, and we follow Harry more closely. But Bergman turns Monika into a woman, irresponsible but tempting.

I became interested in doing an update of the film and re-photographed scenes from it. These scenes were photographed in Helsinki and the Finnish archipelago since I found that this created a certain distance to the original film. I replaced the

² Jean-Luc Godard, *Summer with Monika*, Originally published in French in *Arts* 680 (30 July 1958): 6. Published in English in *Godard on Godard*. ed. Tom Milne. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972). Bergmanorama, http://www.bergmanorama.com/films/summer_with_monika_godard.htm, 7 August 2008.

environment in which Harry and Monika were living in the film with a suburb from the sixties outside Helsinki. Scenes from the city and the suburbs consist of photographs, whereas the scenes from the island were turned into drawings. Here the characters are only shown as blank spaces, in a sense they disappear into the landscape. The drawings are closer to fiction, while the photographs have a documentary quality. But I wanted to further investigate the discrepancies between Fogelström's novel and Bergman's film and felt that it was necessary to actually visit Ornö where the film had been shot and there I created a form of moving stills by video-filming water surfaces and the surrounding nature. This video footage was combined with a voice-over reading excerpts from the novel with details which had been left out of the film. The video footage links the photographs and drawings together creating a fragmented story, a short video I call *Summer after Monika*, (2007). This work can be seen as a reflection on how the passing of time affects stories preserved on film.

Conceived in the same year as *Summer with Monika*, Roberto Rossellini's film *Journey to Italy* from 1953 moves away from neo-realism and, in a sophisticated way, investigates into the mechanisms of cinema. The film is set in Naples and, all traces from past times are used in the film as a reminder of the passing of time and cinema's ability to preserve it. Laura Mulvey writes in her essay *Roberto Rossellini's Journey to Italy/Viaggio in Italia (1953)* in *Death 24x a Second*, 2006:

Rossellini was interested in the paradoxes associated with Vesuvius, the material traces of the past, the immaterial presence of the dead that haunt memory, religion and superstition".³

In the film, an English couple - played by Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders - drives to Naples in their Bentley in order to sell a house they have inherited from their uncle Homer. A lot of the film deals with their alienation in this environment, the

³ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, Reaktion Books, London, 2006, p. 105.

people from the north become lost in southern culture. This leads the couple to some introspection followed by a marriage crisis which they handle in different ways. But their confusion also reflects that of the stars themselves. Mulvey describes how Rossellini left Bergman and Sanders without much direction thus making their presence on the screen uncertain. She continues:

Icons of stardom, they are also themselves, unsure where the boundaries lies between performing stardom, performing as actors or as stars who are forced to perform themselves.⁴

This forces the spectator to reflect upon these characters in various ways thus adding a self-reflexive element to the film in the same way as Monika's gaze does in *Summer with Monika*. We are reminded that we witness a spectacle, the illusion of cinema. Rossellini's intention is not to imitate reality by creating a kind of realism, but to produce reality by documenting places, here Naples, and people, his stars as well as passers-by in the street.

By choosing Naples as a film location, Rossellini links cinema's ability to preserve time to the city's remnants, another kind of preserved time. What Rossellini explores through Katherine Joyce, Ingrid Bergman's character, is our urge to visit these places and how it affects us to be confronted with the passing of time. Katherine starts off very dutifully to visit the sights but slowly her curiosity is replaced by emotion. When she visits the Archaeological Museum of Naples the statues are filmed with a moving camera that brings movement to their stillness. But in a sense this only emphasizes their lack of motion, while it reveals the illusion of cinema. It is the camera that moves, not the statues. Katherine continues her excursions and is in several encounters confronted with the presence of the past and death in this southern culture. The climax comes when the couple is invited to witness a dramatic excavation at Pompeii. In the scene before receiving the invitation the couple have agreed on a divorce and they are subsequently thrown into this new situation while in a very emotional state. While the archaeologist uncovers the bodies it slowly becomes visible that the bodies caught in the volcanic ashes are a couple, embracing each

⁴ Idem, p. 109.

other. This affects Katherine to such a degree that she bursts into tears and the couple leaves the site. In this scene the bodies in plaster represent a hollow space of a real person, and of life. Just as cinema fossilizes persons on celluloid, these bodies in plaster have been preserved. But it is a negative space, a reversal, life disappears and, when the plaster is filled into the empty cavities, the bodies are not the same, just copies. The copy of the body from ancient times reveals film as a copy of reality. The ruins in the film are real but these are merely an imprint of something. When I produced my work *Summer after Monika* I left the characters in the drawings blank thus creating empty spaces which appeared as imprints very similar to the bodies in plaster from the excavation in Pompeii. I was not interested in recreating the characters from the film and wanted the landscape to be in focus. My work deals with how our environment affects us and, in Peter Brunette's book *Roberto Rossellini*, I found a quote by Rossellini from Arts, no 739, (1959) that describes something similar when he talks about *Journey to Italy*:

I consider 'Viaggio' to be very important in my work. It was a film which rested on something very subtle, the variations in a couple's relationship under the influence of a third person: the exterior world surrounding them⁵.

But by choosing Naples as this third person he also connected the city's traces from past times with the making of a film. This is time preserved in two different ways. The sites of Naples are to be found in reality but what is caught on film will always be a kind of preserved time. Rossellini created a fusion of the archaeological site and the film location and, while doing so, he visualises our urge to visit places that link us with the past. However, what I realised was that I needed to go to the real location of *Summer with Monika*, it wasn't sufficient just to replace it with Helsinki. So when I visited the island of Ornö where they filmed *Summer with Monika* I virtually visited an archaeological site. Our urge to visit places we have seen on film could be seen as being similar to that which drives us to visit the sites of Naples. They give us a real feeling of the passing of time while the cinematic image remains a fossilized copy.

⁵ Peter Brunette, Roberto Rossellini, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987, p 155.

If neo-realism took film out of the studios, then a generation of artists involved in land-art and earthworks took art out of the museum in the sixties. A prominent exponent for this movement is Robert Smithson who extensively wrote about both his own art and other issues related to it. In his book *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape*, (2004) Ron Graziani describes how Smithson investigated the notion of the picturesque in different ways. Graziani writes:

*The modern theory of the picturesque revolves around how a natural setting is 'staged' in artistic terms – that is, the (art)ificial mimicking the natural, yet as if the chosen latter had imitated the former.*⁶

Smithson wrote in 1967 an essay called *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*. The text describes how Smithson takes the bus to his hometown Passaic in New Jersey and there makes a tour where he points out self-proclaimed monuments, industrial sites and other things built, or to be built in the area. This description was also an invitation to either take the bus yourself, or to participate in a guided tour conducted by the artist himself. The invitation reads like this:

*See the monuments of Passaic, New Jersey. What can you find in Passaic that you cannot find in Paris, London or Rome? Find out for yourself. Discover (if you dare) the breathtaking Passaic River and the eternal monuments on its enchanted banks. Ride a Rent-a-car comfort to the land that time forgot. Only minutes from N.Y.C. Robert Smithson will guide you through this fabled series of sites... and don't forget the camera. Special maps come with each tour. For more information visit DWAN GALLERY, 29 West 57th Street.*⁷

Here Smithson makes an attempt to create art that can be experienced outside the gallery, while he also uses the written word as a medium for his project. With this gesture Smithson both questions our usual conception of the picturesque and the spaces of art. This link would Smithson further develop with his nonsites. In these

⁶ Ron Graziani, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 18.

⁷ Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, (ed. Jack Flam), University of California Press, Berkley and Los Angeles, 1996, pp. 68 – 74.

works Smithson created a tension between the original site and the gallery space in a both physical and mental way. Pieces of rocks and minerals were gathered in geometrical constructions in the gallery together with photographs of the site where they were found, along with a verbal description and a map of the area. About the nonsites Graziani writes: “With his series of nonsites, Smithson felt he had successfully accomplished the intermingling of the material/conceptual, as well as the natural/artificial, into a picturable situation”⁸. What interests me is the material/conceptual side of this work. Here a tension between the real place as such and the concept of this place becomes visible. To link this to film I would like to exchange the site with the film-location and the nonsite with the film. The location used for a film represents the material, a physical place. But when this place is shown on screen we are presented with the place as a concept. The location is chosen to emphasize a story’s development and, for some filmmakers the film’s narration is developed directly from the characters’ encounter with the environment. Smithson wrote in 1967 a short text, *The Monument: Outline for a Film*⁹ that shows his own interest in the relation between his nonsites and the filmic. This film should document a tour to his first nonsite, Pine Barrens in New Jersey. Smithson describes 12 scenes that should appear in the film, starting in the gallery director’s apartment where they plan their visit to Pine Barrens. They then drive to the actual site and, while visiting it they collect some sand for the gallery project. They return to New York and we follow the preparations for the show. The film ends with a scene from the opening and the subsequent party. Here Smithson actually suggests a link between the site and nonsite in time. In his tour, by means of the monuments of Passaic, time is reversed. However, these monuments, bridges, pipes and building-sites, are not remnants of the past. Smithson writes in the Passaic tour essay: “That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built”¹⁰. Suburbia is depicted as a land constantly moving into the future, without a past, but with undefined areas waiting to be used. The highway and traces of industry are the defining architecture here. Smithson continues:

⁸ Ron Graziani, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape*, cit. p. 28.

⁹ Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 357.

¹⁰ Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 72.

Passaic seems full of 'holes' compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures.¹¹

While treating this landscape on the same terms as the picturesque, Smithson explores the aesthetic reception of landscapes made to be looked upon as a piece of art in comparison with this unspecified suburbia without a past. Smithson ends his tour in front of a sandbox, or a model desert as he calls it. In front of this last monument he links his experience to film and its illusion of eternity:

I should now like to prove the irreversibility of eternity by using a jejeune experiment for proving entropy. Picture in your mind's eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise, but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy. Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility. Somehow this suggests that the cinema offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution. The false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity – but 'the superstars' are fading.¹²

But although the superstars will remain, preserved on cinema, we still have this urged to visit the actual site. Because here the illusion is broken, the gap in time filled with sites more or less under construction. Here I suggest that the landscape and cityscape may change, but the actual movement from a nonsite, in this case the film, to a site, where the location connects the idea - the concept of the film - with the present. The film location while revisited affects us visually like an archaeological site, connecting

¹¹ Ibidem

¹² Idem, p. 74.

us with time passed. However, these places also represent ruins in reverse, landscapes soon to be filled with the future.

Maria Finn, Copenhagen, March 2008.