

Maria Finn: Scenes of Absence

Published in SUM # 1, ed. Malene Vest Hansen, Billedkunstskolernes Forlag, Copenhagen, 2007.

Francois Truffaut demonstrates his admiration for Ingmar Bergman's film *The Summer with Monika* (1952) in a rather subtle way in his film *The 400 Blows* (1959). In the film we follow his young alter ego, Antoine Doinel, as a neglected but curious boy. He and a friend skip school, spending several days wandering around Paris. Leaving a cinema, their eyes fall on a film still from *The Summer with Monika* starring the seductive Harriet Andersson as Monika. They stop short in front of the still, admire it and then make a quick decision. The still is torn off the wall and the boys run away with it triumphantly. The still becomes their fetish, representing unknown but tempting pleasures. But it is also Truffaut's way of acknowledging Bergman for a film indicating the possibilities which a whole generation of new French filmmakers would continue developing. So a single picture, the still, not only represents the film but also has value in its own right.

Familiar stills

In her series *Untitled Film Stills*, Cindy Sherman investigates the potential of the single picture. American art historian Rosalind Krauss writes about these photographs in her essay "*Cindy Sherman: Untitled*", (included in Krauss' 1999 Bachelors collection), where she calls the series of film stills "copies without an original". Krauss describes Sherman as a de-myth-ifier, referring to Roland Barthes' use of the term. In *Mythologies*, Barthes reveals the mechanism of the myth – how it replaces and reconstructs the meaning of signs. Signs are represented in a decontextualized way, emptied of their original significance. Sherman explores the signs of cinema but instead of producing new ones, she mixes together already existing myths, thereby producing new meanings. She writes about the process of constructing the stills in her personal essay "The Making of the Untitled" (2003), published in the catalogue *The Complete Untitled Film Stills* in 2003. MOMA purchased the whole series of the *Untitled Film Stills* in 1995, 69 in all, because they found it important to preserve it as a whole, seamless work of art.

Sherman herself says that she consciously avoided linking the stills to one other. Two blonds should not be presented close to one other to avoid the possibility of the viewer seeing them as part of the same story. Every still exists on its own, detached from the others. This, of course, emphasizes the absence that the film still represents as such. Barthes investigates this further in the essay “The Third Meaning” from 1970 where he refers to the still as a quotation of the film, not a sample. To be a sample of the film would require the nature of film to be homogenous, which is not the case. This is what makes Sherman’s stills so powerful, because by remaining detached from one another they leave the story open for the viewer to fill in. In the pictures we see women in between the action: they are either waiting, or on their way to or from a meeting. It was in European films that Sherman found these women and she mentions Antonioni and the neorealists along with Hitchcock as a source of inspiration. Although she does insist that no film in particular has inspired her, Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo* (1958) came into mind when I studied some of them. In *Film Still # 56* from 1980, Sherman is wearing a blond wig and looks at herself in a mirror. Although the image in the mirror is blurred and most of what we see is the back of her head, we are given the image of a woman who is perfectly made-up. Hitchcock’s cool blonde leading actresses come to mind and the doubling image in the mirror evokes Kim Novak’s double character in *Vertigo*. In the film, Novak is hired by a man to play his wife, Madeleine, while he asks his friend Scottie Ferguson, played by James Stewart, to follow her. Scottie falls in love with Madeleine and when he meets the real girl, Judy, he insists on recreating her to look like she did in disguise. Sherman’s still with herself looking at her double in the mirror does not copy Hitchcock’s “Vertigo” but only alludes to it by raising the same questions about identity and disguise.

Stills with a third meaning

Sherman’s film stills play with our expectations. We try to recall and by means of our memory we recreate these both familiar and yet unknown images. With their singularity they reach far beyond the aspect of time. But there are other aspects to the still that Barthes has investigated further in “The Third meaning”. Here, Barthes studies stills from films by Sergei Eisenstein. First of all we read a film still on an informational level,

gathering what we can from costumes, relationships between the characters and the location. We then look for its symbolic meaning - how this information should be interpreted. Barthes writes that the symbolic meaning forces itself upon the viewer with a double determination: it is intentional but is also taken from a common and general reservoir of symbols. Together, these levels form what Barthes refers to as the 'obvious' meaning. But the film still engages us at a level beyond the obvious - and this is what Barthes calls the 'third', or 'obtuse', meaning. In order to explain this, Barthes mentions disguise and, as an example, uses an actor disguised twice over without one disguise destroying the other. He explains this obtuse meaning as a multi-layering of meaning, which always permits the continued existence of the previous meaning. As an example, Barthes uses a still from *Ivan the Terrible* (1944) showing a head leaning forward. All we see is some hair arranged in a big round knot. The image gives us no clues but refers to something that has happened previously, as well as to what will happen subsequently. Barthes writes: "The filmic is something in a film that cannot be described, the representation which cannot be represented". Here Sherman's previously mentioned still comes to mind, a mass of hair from behind, a blurred mirror reflection, a fragment of a kind of text that has not yet been written. What is before and after has never existed and yet we try to construct it while looking at the image.

Still in motion and memory

Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* (1962) opens with a voice-over that reads: "This is the story of a man marked by an image from his childhood". In her book *Chris Marker; Memories of the Future* (2005), Catherine Lupton says of the opening: "The narrative trap is sprung, with the intimation that its outcome is contained in this beginning". *La Jetée* forms an investigation of the relationship between the still and the moving image. The film's title refers to the jetty at Orly airport, a place to watch the coming and going of planes. A voice-over accompanying the images from the jetty describes a sudden noise, a crumpled body, cries from the crowd - and continues to state that we just witnessed a man's death. *La Jetée* is a science fiction fable about the world after a third world war. Paris has been bombed and its surface is radioactive so that the survivors are forced to hide underground. Since the world has become uninhabitable, time experiments are conducted

using prisoners who are sent either to the past or the future in order to determine how they can survive under the current circumstances. Because of his strong childhood memory from the jetty, the man is chosen to take part in these experiments.

The film plays with the illusion of life that cinema represents by recreating the experience of movement. Marker makes us aware of this illusion by only showing still pictures. Lupton points out the allusions to *Vertigo* in Marker's film, which also deals with memory. In *La Jetée* the man is trying to get in touch with a girl he remembers from the day on the jetty and, like Scottie in *Vertigo* he is haunted by this ghost from the past. However, after several experiments he finally finds the girl and we see her from behind, with the same spiral hairstyle as Madeleine/Judy in *Vertigo*. Marker investigates how memory deals with trauma. This is emphasized by the stills because they offer a slower less seductive and illusory reading of the narrative. Whereas a film would provide a more convincing illusion of time travel, the stills remind us that this has already occurred. But the gap between the stills offers another kind of illusion, of a seamless story pulled apart, with important gaps to be filled in. The man in *La Jetée* is doomed since he refuses to enter the future and insists on being brought back to his childhood memory. He has started to believe in the illusion of time and this becomes his fate. When he enters the jetty again he sees the woman and rushes towards her, only to realize that he is being followed. So he finally enters his childhood memory realizing that what he witnessed as a child was his own death.

The landscape of a dream

The still from *The Summer with Monika* appears as a fetish in Truffaut's film *The 400 Blows*. Bergman's film *The Summer with Monika* is based on a novel with the same name from 1951, written by Per Anders Fogelström whom also wrote the film's screenplay. I have reworked *The Summer with Monika* and turned it into a series of still photographs by reenacting selected scenes from the film. Some of these photographs have been turned into drawings, and together they form a new story, distilled out of the already existing narration. This work, *Summer after Monika*, intends to update the problems originally raised by the book and the film. The film is about a young couple, Monika and Harry,

who escapes the city in a boat and spend the summer in the archipelago outside Stockholm. When they return in the fall she is pregnant and they get married. But very soon they drift apart and he decides to take care of their baby since she is not interested. The closing scene with the single father struck me as ahead of its time when I first saw the film. What I also found appealing was the way in which the narration is expressed through the landscape. In my work I use the photographs to show the urban cityscape, while the drawings show the island in the archipelago, their dream of a summer. The film has in a way been turned into a dreamplay in which the drawings represent the dream and an escape from society, while the photographs show the existing reality. The original film was shot in Stockholm and at Ornö, an island in the archipelago. I have used Helsinki and the Finnish archipelago for my project since I found it interesting to relocate it to a place that is close to its original location, but nevertheless differs from it. By turning *The Summer with Monika* into a series of stills I am offering the viewer a more porous narration than films provide. The gaps between the stills represent an absence that trigger our imagination even more than the scenes offered by the stills. Furthermore, the stills of *Summer after Monika* will be accompanied with a voice-over reading extracts from the novel, revealing previously omitted details. Reading the novel, a number of discrepancies between the film and the novel are revealed. In the novel Monika is clearly described as being childish and immature, while the film emphasizes how natural and straightforward she is in her sexuality. What is also striking is that, although Monika is gone, Harry has no regrets and never judges her, even though she neglects their child. By juxtaposing text from the novel with the newly-produced stills, the discrepancies become emphasized, revealing how these text fragments would be too literal when visualized. Words let us create our own images, while film in a sense presents new experiences. By contradicting one another, the different layers in the narration represent a less linear way of telling stories. Instead we are introduced to a narration functioning the same way as memory - porous and contradictory.

