

The Temporal and Ecological Sphere of Eija-Liisa Ahtila's Films.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila's cinematic thinking took a turn in the early 2010s. It was not a break with the past so much as a shift of emphasis: she seems to have moved from a thematic examination of human interiority and intersubjectivity towards exploring the interrelations between various non-human entities.

The methodological key in Ahtila's work, thinking with the moving image,¹ has nevertheless retained its central status. She uses her medium to show phenomena, connections and principles of action while giving rise to new constellations of thought. These constellations of thinking – or chains of visual-verbal association – in turn spawn new modes of observation and ways to understand reality.

The “turn” in Ahtila's thinking can be dated back to her moving image installation entitled *The Annunciation* (2010). It is an exploration of the scene in the Gospel of Luke where the angel reveals to Mary that she will be conceived by the Holy Spirit and give birth to Jesus, who will be called the Son of God. The subject has been a favourite one among artists, particularly in the Renaissance. In Ahtila's film it is transposed to the present, and the scene is re-enacted at the artist's studio. As spectators, we are invited to observe the rehearsals, which end with the encounter between the angel and Mary. Alongside the main event, the film also hints at other events that take place after the annunciation but prior to the birth of Christ. In addition to human actors, the work also features a raven, carrier pigeons and two donkeys, as well as a number of stuffed animals.

The striking thing about *The Annunciation* is that it portrays humans who, while co-existing with other animals, yet do not seek to understand them or open up themselves to them. It might perhaps be more accurate to say that *The Annunciation* allows animals to co-exist with humans as others. The human attempt to understand a creature of a different species is made manifest in a sequence in which human actors visit a stable to learn about donkeys' lives. The donkeys' keeper tells them about the animals' behaviour and shows them how to behave in a trustful way with a donkey.

¹ See Bal, Mieke 2011, 54.

The Annunciation is founded on the notion that the human experience of the world is not the only possible way to perceive and experience reality. At its epistemological heart lies the concept of *Umwelt*, which was coined by biologist Jacob von Uexküll (1864–1944) in the early 20th century. It posits that animal species co-exist in parallel spatio-temporal worlds of which humans can have no experiential first-hand knowledge.

Von Uexküll's ideas provide a unique and fresh way to approach the theme of parallel worlds. As he used the term, the *Umwelt* lies between the world as it exists in itself and the world as it is experienced by living beings; it is an intermediary reality between the objective and subjective environment. And because the *Umwelt* develops through action and behaviour, it has no immediate correspondence with the geographical environment.

The environment of the *Umwelt* is constituted already in the pre-conscious state, when the organism begins to react to stimulation. As different animal species have different qualities, their *Umwelts*, too, are different. For instance, the most primitive animals do not react to their environment in any way, which makes their *Umwelt* a totally closed one, whereas the *Umwelt* of the most developed animals is fundamentally open to the environment, which also means that they actively shape their environment.

Some twenty years after von Uexküll, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses, in a series of lectures held at Collège de France in 1956–1960, the philosophical potential of the concept of work as contained in von Uexküll's thinking. He emphasises that the concept of *Umwelt* steers us away from the Cartesian dualistic opposition between mechanistic and subjective thinking. In the *Umwelt*, interrelations between consciousness and machine as well as their mutual positions are merely variations of the same thing.²

Merleau-Ponty suggests that the *Umwelt* is a radically new way of thinking about the environment, because it denounces the opposition between the nature of external things and the subject, allowing the simultaneous spatial and temporal observation of an organism and its actions. He describes the *Umwelt* as a kind of dream that haunts consciousness, or like a network that animals or humans weave between themselves and the world.³

² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 2003, 168–171. *Nature*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

³ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 2003, 177–178.

It is important to realise that several of these living spaces or networks can exist within one and the same environment, nested as it were, within each other. The human *Umwelt* contains other *Umwelts*, which allows us to become aware of other species, even if we are unable to put ourselves in their place. Similarly, our *Umwelt* exists inside other *Umwelts*. To paraphrase von Uexküll, we ultimately must admit that we live our lives surrounded by “higher” or “other” realities, even if we are unable to see them.⁴

The concept of the *Umwelt* opens up an ecological view of the world and of mutual respect between species. In Ahtila’s *Annunciation*, it also enables an experience of the sacred and the miraculous by taking up the miraculous as the subject of the work. Yet, the film never makes an explicit reference to any miracle. It comes closest in the discussion on the virgin conception of Mary right at the beginning of the film, and even then it is just one of the participants who believes in the miracle, Satu, the woman cast as Mary. Instead, the miraculous appears in Ahtila’s work in the form of coexistence between different species, humans and animals, a coexistence that makes no demands on the other.

Art theorists who have written about *The Annunciation* also point out the link between the miracle and the interspecies contact. In their view, the film suggests that an experience of the miraculous is possible only insofar as we accept the absolute otherness of other species, quite regardless of the fact that we may be intimately familiar with the animal. Familiarity is, however, familiarity only to the extent that we can know the animal. It is precisely the acceptance of this specific otherness that can open up in us an understanding of other species and perhaps also of other representatives of our own. That is why Jacques Derrida associated the animal with fiction, for what the animal is in itself can only be expressed through fiction.⁵

It is this experience of the miraculous in Ahtila’s work that Mieke Bal talks about when she writes that “The miracle [of seeing] will only happen if you allow the other to be, whether you see what she sees or not.” In another context, Cary Wolfe observes that Mary, in looking back, “sees not the approaching angel, but rather the donkey that we thought ‘beneath’ her.” Wolfe ends his essay with a kind of unity between trust, faith and miracle. He writes: “The question is not are you human or animal, divine or earthly, but rather – like the actress who exclaims ‘I’m an angel’ only to be spun around – ‘can I count on you to catch me if I fall?’”

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 2003, 177.

⁵ Lindberg, Susanna 2005. ‘Derrida eläinten jäljillä.’ In *Tiede ja edistys*. Tutkijaliitto: Helsinki.

These interpretations would seem to accord not only with Ahtila's moving-image work but also with von Uexküll's philosophical insight regarding the *Umwelt*. In his phenomenological interpretation, Merleau-Ponty underlines the fact that von Uexküll dissociates himself from the Kantian idea of freedom, whereby freedom is freedom of action attested to in a decision. Von Uexküll's thinking centres on structural freedom, which in the words of Merleau-Ponty is like "the theme of the melody"; freedom may haunt the particular realisations of an animal, but it is never the goal of its behaviour.⁶



I suggested above that a turn took place in Ahtila's cinematic thinking⁷ along with *The Annunciation*, as she began searching for ways to depict the interrelations between humans, animals and the sacred. But we could also say that a clear thematic turn already occurred in her work back in 2007 with the one-channel cinematic etude *Fishermen* (2007). The piece depicts East African fishermen who are attempting to launch their boats to sea but are pushed back on shore again and again by the waves. Focusing tightly on just one incident, the work is a kind of tribute by Ahtila to the aesthetic legacy of romanticism, which often finds its culmination in the endlessness of a seascape, the grandiose power of the sublime.

The obvious art historical reference of the film, Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–1819), is generally accepted as a key painting of the romantic period. The location of the scene in the painting is the coast of Senegal, and its political content is a comment not only on our ethical behaviour towards other people but also towards other races, towards people of different colour and nationality. Just as with Géricault's painting, so also Ahtila's *Fishermen* depicts the struggle of humanity against the forces of nature, underlining the smallness of humanity in the face of the immensity and uncontrollability of nature.

While in romantic thinking emphasis was placed on the individual who in the face of the sublimity of nature becomes aware of her own subjectivity and its finiteness, Ahtila's *Fishermen* focuses on collaboration between individuals. In neither work is the sea a subject of contemplation but an

⁶ Merleau-Ponty 2003, 178.

⁷ Bal, Mieke 2011, 52. The Moving Image as Witness. In *Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Marian Ilmestys / The annunciation*, 52–82. Helsinki: Crystal Eye.

element and a force with which one must grapple. The historical event underlying *The Raft of the Medusa* was one of struggle, exploitation and survival; the focus in *Fishermen* is on the solidarity between the men.

But these are not the only turns in cinematic thinking that can be found along Ahtila's career. There seems, in fact, to be several of them, and they can be traced back, almost work by work, right to the beginning of her career. In this exhibition, that beginning comes across with exceptional clarity in the form of *Dogs Bite* (1990). The idea of finding a "beginning" or "starting point" in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's body of work is intrinsically absurd, however, since her work represents the legacy of postmodern art in which origin is seen as a vestige of the idea of fixed identity. In Ahtila's work, meanings become possible precisely by virtue of the fact that the closer you get to them, the farther the point of origin recedes.

So it is here. *Dogs Bite* cannot serve as an official point of origin. Yet, I will treat it as one, for two reasons: firstly, it is in this piece that Ahtila for the first (or nearly the first) time articulates her voice as an artist, and secondly, it is the oldest of the works in this particular exhibition. A point of interest is also that it has not been included in any of her previous retrospective shows. But there is a logical reason for showing it here.

Dogs Bite is a fine illustration of the thematic continuum in Ahtila's work, the direction in which her visual thinking has evolved. The piece is a series of photographs in which a naked woman pretends to be a dog: she poses on a bed in various postures typical to dogs and gestures and snarls like a dog when it is attacking or defending itself. In view of the year the work was completed, it's only natural to assume that the person in the pictures is the artist herself, appearing in her own work to direct the viewer's attention to emotions that are considered primitive, or at least the opposite of reason, and also to play with the roles of artist, woman and dog.⁸ Seen within the context of the early 1990s, *Dogs Bite* is a postmodern work that participates in feminist politics through the use of postmodern irony.

The photographic suite draws a parallel between woman and dog: both can be taught to obey the voice of authority, the male. In Western thought, woman and dog are both seen as inferior to man

⁸ The work contains clear links to body art, in which artists perform by creating art with their own body, and that performance was then recorded. Famous body artists include Hannah Wilke and Cindy Sherman. See Amelia Jones: *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, 1997. University of Minnesota Press.

and to humanity in general. Or as Derrida remarks: “Authority and autonomy are, [...], attributed to the man (*Homo* and *vir*) rather than to the woman, and to the woman rather than to the animal.”⁹

Only the adult male, the strong and virile *homo*, is in possession of full subjectivity in our culture. It is hardly a coincidence that the very moment this schema of subjectivity becomes under scrutiny, those others, “women and/or vegetarians”, have increasingly begun to acquire the position of subjects in ethics as well as in law and politics.¹⁰

Ahtila’s series also shows that historical photos can acquire a new meaning in the present. For a contemporary viewer in the 2010s, the feminist content in *Dogs Bite* has hopelessly weakened, or to be more precise, has changed in character. In 1990, when Ahtila was shooting *Dogs Bite* and Jacques Derrida was conducting a dialogue with Jean-Luc Nancy about such topics as meat eating, phallocentrism and subjectivity, the issue of gender equality was urgent, as was the discussion on identity and its deconstruction.¹¹ Today, a viewing of Ahtila’s series and a reading of the dialogue between Derrida and Nancy are both governed by a postmodernist interpretation in which the boundaries between species and the sexes are fluid, and instead of subjects the issue is interspecies ethics, which is today applied to our relationship with animals but increasingly also with plants.

Nor is it hardly a coincidence that it was among feminists that the need first arose for rethinking the relationships between the sexes and species or between humans, machines and animals. An early case in point are the writings of Donna Haraway,¹² who as early as the 1970s first showed that feminist thinking is inevitably on the path towards posthumanism, the radical redefinition of the relationships between nature, sex and species. For the contemporary spectator, Ahtila’s *Dogs Bite*, too, is a work that raises the issue of interspecies existence and the similarities between humans (woman) and animals (dog) both as biological and social agents.

Since the completion of *The Annunciation* (2010), Ahtila has continued to explore interspecies communication in her latest work, *Studies on the Ecology of Drama*, as well as in the preceding piece, a moving image installation titled *Horizontal*.

⁹ See Derrida 1991, 114. “‘Eating well’, or the Calculation of the Subject: An interview with Jacques Derrida by Jean-Luc Nancy”. In *Who Comes After the Subject*. Edited by Jean-Luc Nancy. Routledge: New York.

¹⁰ Derrida, Jacques 1991, 113.

¹¹ By ‘conversation’ here I refer to the essay ‘Eating well’ mentioned above.

¹² See e.g., Haraway, Donna *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Routledge: New York and London, 1989.

These works are about a shift of scale and also, just as importantly, about the medium of the moving image. These themes, we notice again, have been present in the artist's work since the beginning. Now, however, the focus is not on the disruption or disturbance of the boundary between the inside and the outside world within us. As they direct our attention away from the human mind to the environment, the new works also deconstruct truisms on the perception of the environment.

Again, Ahtila poses fundamental and insightful questions. They are so central and obvious, in fact, that seeing them posed on the screen comes as a shock because they have never before been made visible.

In her two latest works, Ahtila also engages more deeply with the landscape as a genre, a theme that has always been present in her work but has never emerged as a theme in its own right.

In a verbal description of *Horizontal*, Ahtila tells us that she decided to make a moving image portrait of a large spruce tree, only to discover that the only way to create such an image without distorting the view of the tree was to use six separate screens mounted in a horizontal line: if the tree were shot from sufficiently far away to enable it to fit into one frame, it would not be a portrait of a tree but a landscape with a tree.

The cinematic solution of dividing the picture into six screens and placing them in a horizontal configuration is the only way to allow the entire tree to be presented in a gallery. *Horizontal* is a prime example of Ahtila's cinematic thinking, yet it also adds a new perspective on the topics of cinematic narrative and problem solving. Ahtila has previously been occupied by such issues as how to use the moving image and the juxtaposition of images to depict such topics as the disturbance of the mind, trauma, the death of a pet dog or a loved one, the innate evil in humans, the potentiality of violence and so on. This time the problem is much simpler: how to create a film of a spruce tree without violating its specificity.

Horizontal, therefore, is Ahtila's *attempt* to create a portrait of a tree. But can there be such a thing? We might very well say that the idea of a portrait is an inherently unsuitable way to depict a tree or any other plant for that matter. That same would seem to apply to animals as well. Portraits of

animals have traditionally only been made when the animal in question is a pet of some notable, in which case the animal has served as a placeholder for its owner.¹³

In the case of Ahtila's work, however, it is perhaps more relevant to compare it with species-specific presentations of a tree, a representation that in the 2010s no longer has any scientific value, unlike depictions of plants in, say, 18th or 19th century botany, when the picture of a spruce tree would have been a placeholder for its species instead of a representation of the qualities specific to a particular individual tree. Unlike a portrait, a botanical picture does not enable us to identify an individual tree in a forest.

Nevertheless, if we simply recall the early uses of portraiture, we will find that we are, after all, dealing with a portrait in the case of *Horizontal*. When portrait painting emerged in the 14th century, the genre was called *ritratto* in Italian and *portrait* in French and English, the latter word stemming from the Latin verb *protrahere* (*ritrarre* in Italian), literally to take up something, to raise up something for display. It was not until the 17th century that the word came to be applied exclusively to human portraits.¹⁴ A portrait is, in other words, a picture that specifically displays qualities or properties of its subject that were not previously visible or known.

So, let *Horizontal* be a portrait of a spruce tree, and as such it is inevitably linked to the sphere of political ecology. Instead of the singularity of a person, it raises up for our perusal the specificity of another species – a spruce – but shifts its focus away from the tree's historical or natural-historical qualities or typological properties, refocusing our attention instead on the uniqueness, or singularity, of the tree as a large spruce.

In *Horizontal*, what is portrayed, that is, "raised up for display", is not only the size of the tree but also the inability of our optical devices for viewing and recording to display objects in their specificity. Herein lies the great insight of *Horizontal*: it refuses to force a physical creature to fit into structures of existing knowledge. In this, it functions opposite to the microscope, which helped us to see more clearly while erasing the scale of things.¹⁵

¹³ Potts, Alex 1990, 12–33. 'Natural Order and the Call of the Wild: The Politics of Animal Picturing'. *Oxford Art Journal*. Vol. 13, No. 1.

¹⁴ Palin, Tutta 2007, 15. *Modernin muotokuvan merkit*. Helsinki: Taidekoti Kirpilä.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michael 2011, 138. *Sanat ja asiat. Eräs ihmistieteiden arkeologia*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Horizontal is also reminiscent of some other visual representations of trees. The very first that comes to mind is John Constable's meticulously painted study of a lone *Elm Tree* (1821, V&A), which in the words of Robert Harrison "stands detached, but not estranged, from the forest".¹⁶ Similarly, the tree in *Horizontal* stands detached at the edge of a forest yet part of its natural environment. The differences between the two works are obvious: Ahtila underlines the scale of the tree in relation to humans, while Constable calls the viewer's attention to the properties of the tree with documentary exactitude.¹⁷ In his book *Forest. The Shadow of Civilization*, Harrison examines the meaning of the forest in Western culture. In his view, the forest is a kind of shadow of civilisation, in that it was created when a clearing was made in the forest and a fire was lit in it. It has also been necessary to destroy the canopy of trees so that humans could have an unobstructed view of the heavens.¹⁸ The very same gesture of destruction towards trees and old-growth forests is present in Ahtila's *Horizontal* and the stand of old trees that surround the portrayed spruce: the tree was shot in the historical park of Aulanko, where an adventure park has since then been opened that will gradually destroy the old trees.

Ahtila's next piece, *Studies on the Ecology of Drama*, states the central question already in its title: what conceivably might an ecology of drama be? How could a drama address the interrelations between creatures and their habitats in a way that does not place humans in a hierarchically superior position? The piece is also a contemplation on the limited ways in which we perceive the diversity of the world and also on the ways in which the legacy of the moving image is able to change this situation.

Set up as a three-channel projection installation, the work takes place in everyday environments in Finland: in a field, at the edge of a forest, in the air, at a stable, in a yard, inside a house. The entire piece is constructed as a series of performative lectures given by a human actor, who is accompanied by a cast that includes human acrobats, a horse, a dog, birds, trees and shrubs. The actor states at the outset: "The core idea of the presentation is the anthropocentricity, the human-centred perspective of film." The time and the space delineated in the work and the composition and framing of the shots are all constructed from a human perspective, the very concept that is being deconstructed in the film.

¹⁶ Harrison, Robert, *Forest. The Shadow of Civilization*, 204–205. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The methods of showing and seeing in all drama are based on a human model of reality. In Ahtila's work, the lecturer, actor Kati Outinen, wants to create a presentation, a serious thought experiment, about whether it might be possible to see in other ways and to shift our attention to other living beings. As she describes her intentions, she draws the viewer's attention to various aspects of the environment using method based on composition and drama.

Right from the start, Outinen succeeds in turning the viewer's attention away from the human figure and towards events occurring in the environment, such as the motion of shrubs swaying in the wind. As the film progresses, the viewers are served more insights into the *Umwelt* of other species. Continuing her lecture, Outinen launches into an account of the common swift, which becomes the key element that transforms the perspective of her performance and that of the entire film. Outinen guides the viewer into the strange life of the bird by describing its habitat, in part by using cinematic images. The pictures *show* what it feels like to live in the air like a swift. In a later sequence, the audience sees humans *acting* the part of brimstone butterfly caterpillars as they settle in green sleeping bags in trees to try to immerse themselves in the existence of a larva.

The common swift, the caterpillar and the night star that appears at the end of the film – all these are non-human agents whose lives the human actors in Ahtila's work try to emulate in various ways. The star, the caterpillar or the swift are not seen as surfaces, from the outside, which according to Ron Broglioni is the conventional way in which our culture has viewed non-human creatures. Within that tradition, animals lack interiority and their *Umwelt* is poor, as Martin Heidegger has pointed out. *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* rejects this notion and opens up a way to consider animals from an entirely different perspective. It uses the means of drama to show other, potential, different, fictive ways of perception. Yet, Ahtila avoids falling into the trap of science fiction, keeping to the cinematic conventions of realist nature documentary.

While thematically Ahtila has moved towards an investigation of nature and the world of non-human beings, her works have increasingly begun to comment on the methods of constructing landscapes. Whereas in her earlier works, such as *Today, Where Is Where* and even *The Annunciation*, the "landscape" was the habitat of humans and animals or the setting of the action, *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* employs a more landscape-like idiom.¹⁹

¹⁹ Martin Lefebvre 2006, 22. 'Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema'. In *Landscape and Film*.

The Finnish environmental policy researcher Yrjö Haila defines the landscape in an interesting way: “The landscape is that part of the surrounding world that we feel we are so dependent upon that we attach meanings to it. That landscape is the milieu of life: a precondition of life produced by the activity of living.” Haila’s definition comes very close to von Uexküll’s *Umwelt*. It is a sphere of life predicated by action, not a view ruled over by the gaze. Haila also underlines that understanding landscape as the sphere of life does not in any way imply its “naturalisation”. Moreover, the elements of landscape have symbolic meanings, which is a material necessity, for we are a symbolic species, as Haila remarks.²⁰

Let’s return to von Uexküll. The branch of biology he created was called biosemiotics, since he observed that animals, too, use symbolic expressions. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty, in adapting von Uexküll’s ideas for his own philosophy of nature, sees the symbolic capacity of animals as an important clue to the a less mechanical understanding of animals.²¹

Studies on the Ecology of Drama borrows the expressive devices of nature documentaries or educational films, yet it changes their content profoundly. Unlike nature documentaries, which typically anthropomorphise animals,²² it turns the tables and zoomorphises human perception. It thereby succeeds in teaching us new things not only about the cinema but also about the limits of perception as determined by our senses. This is why *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* bears witness to a miracle; that film – perhaps the most human-centric artistic medium of all – is the best way to depict the *Umwelt* of other species. That miracle is founded on the ability of cinema to construct fictions, imagined realities.

Ahtila’s ecological films – *The Annunciation* and *Horizontal*, as well as *Studies on the Ecology of Drama* – challenge the viewer to undertake a journey to an imagining, to venture onto the very edge of the received and the taught, a place where the spheres of another species can begin.

Hanna Johansson

²⁰ Haila 2006, 29.

²¹ Glen A. Mazis, 2000, 234. ‘Merleau-Ponty: From Nature to Ontology’. In *Merleau-Ponty. From Nature to Ontology*. Chiasmi International. Trilingual Studies Concerning Merleau-Ponty’s Thought. VRIN Mimesis. University of Memphis. Milano, Paris, Memphis Tennessee.

²² For more on anthropomorphism, see Mitchell, Sandra D. 2005. Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modeling. In Lorraine Daston, & Gregg Mitman (ed.). *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*. New York: Columbia University Press.