

THE DEAD WALK
SIDE BY SIDE
WITH THE LIVING

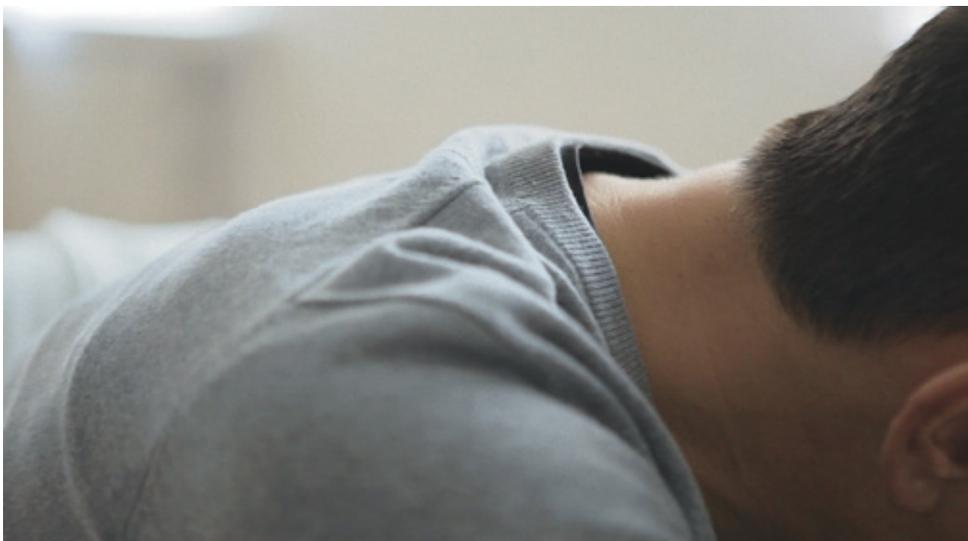
THE DEAD WALK
SIDE BY SIDE
WITH THE LIVING

Maria Ångerman













THE DEAD WALK
SIDE BY SIDE
WITH THE LIVING

John Cunningham

A MENAGERIE OF CREATURES

'You're not aware of your body, how it's reflecting outside.'

– From The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living

A black screen and the ambient, immersive sound of cicadas is suddenly cut into with a close up of the mottled, wrinkled flesh and coarse gray hair of an unknown animal. Then, another cut to a tank of deep green tropical water, the darkness of marine vegetation quickly resolved into the smooth body of a slowly breathing shark. This is followed by a close up that tracks the coils of a snake, followed briefly by what could be the sand and stone of desert, marked by the lines of either human tools or unknown claws. This image is echoed by the following close up of the contours of lizard skin in a visual correspondence between creature and environment. Slowly, the camera pans down the lizard to the tactility of paw like feet and sharp claws clutching the sand. Then, the most unlikely cut, a disruption of this sequence of animality as the screen depicts well scraped and cleansed human domesticity. A potted plant, clean and rumpled white bed sheets, a man and woman subjected to the proximity of the part-object gaze of the camera, neither of them fully in view, both obviously fully separate, alienated, bored. The man and woman are engaged in a dialogue that is in equal parts desultory and dreamlike, wherein the woman declares her intention to leave. This unhappy domesticity is a sharply juxtaposed and all too human world when contrasted with the menagerie of creatures that accompanies it. But then a torso shot of the woman unexpectedly cuts to the previously glimpsed lizard and there



is the suggestion of a more indistinct quality to the seemingly sharp duality of animal life and human life depicted so far.

Dependent upon which screen of Maria Ångerman's *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* a visitor first fixates upon the installation seems to invite immersion in parallel but distinct worlds. The three screens depict, in no particular order: the closely observed accumulation of the details of human/animal life just described; the more languorous details of two chimpanzees grooming one another and themselves; and in another the combination of an oblique, accidentally poetic voice over in an apparent disjunction with close up images of human/animal world details. The territories marked out by the installation are delineated by what appear to be distinct markers and pathways; binary divisions that become intertwined opposites. Primary amongst these is the human/animal binary but the installation also brings into play related antinomies. These include that between language and silence, one screen being subsumed in such while another features the above mentioned dialogue and a third features an outbreak of disjointed, involuntarily poetic language. Then there is the antinomy between boredom and absorption, played out between the

tension stricken humans on one screen and the contented, grooming chimpanzees on another. Another is that between the experience of tactility and intimacy with the world and a more mediated or alienated distance and separation. Additionally, there is the most awful binary division: death and life. Or what might be dead or alive, what might be the status of life in *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living*? Before attempting to answer this question it is worth returning to the relation between humanity and animality, second nature and first nature, since many of the interrelated antinomies sketched out above are absorbed within this.

THE HUMAN / ANIMAL MACHINE

'It is possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the complex – and not always edifying – economy of relations between men and animals, only because something like an animal life has been separated within man, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been measured and recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place.'

– Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*

In *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* the disjointed intimacy of the human/animal binary is glimpsed in the domestic sphere, the home, as well as through the analogies drawn between human body and animal body. For instance, in the screen described above the camera lingers over the juxtaposition of human traces and animal traces. Animal marks on sand and ground mirror the body shape of a human

body upon the bed. There are hints of a correspondence between the slightly quivering legs of an animal and the similarly depicted human body; the scaled stasis of lizard skin is placed proximate with the smooth vulnerability of domesticated human skin. In the correspondences drawn in this screen between animal and human bodies there are more than purely visual analogies at stake. Through the juxtaposition of humanity and animality the screen inscribes a much more mobile border between the two. That is, the human and animal are no longer sharply distinguished in the reiteration of close up shots of human/animal bodies and environments.

What emerges from this in the installation is the way that humanity and animality rest upon one another, and while defined against one another can also become entwined to the point of indistinguishability. The man and woman are reduced on the screen to bodies caught within an oppressively domestic environment, unable to act except within the constraints of that milieu, much like creatures caught in a zoo. The capacity to speak and act has broken down and the conversation between them serves to reinforce the gap that exists, the impossibility of intimacy. Yet, the cut in communication that emerges from this is not as stark and definitive as this would suggest. The dialogue also underlines a series of ambiguities, whether the man and woman are brother and sister or lovers, or perhaps both or perhaps both are fascinated with 'him', a figure of anxiety and attraction who the woman is fleeing to join. This ambiguity is doubled by the way the dialogue interweaves with the details of animal bodies and it is this that suggests that it is not only alienation being depicted. While both man and woman relay to one another fragments of intention and memory the juxtaposition and over laying of the dialogue upon more creaturely life suggests how





in this fraught instance this is the murmur of a collapse into lassitude that threatens the stable dichotomy of human/animal. They have momentarily slipped out of the human comfort zone by virtue of their failed attempts at communication. On this screen there is the tension of this mutual boredom and through this failure of communication they hover upon the threshold between humanity and animality, sense and nonsense, always threatening to subside into silence.

Agamben has argued that this is the moment when the animal component of humanity is most apparent in that, for him, humanity is defined through language and active creation. Both intimate and extrinsic, animality is included through exclusion in the discursive, institutional and very material 'anthropological machine' that reproduces the human. By virtue of this inclusive exclusion it becomes possible to separate life as such from the form it takes, thus opening up the bio-political governance of life through political, medical and social apparatuses. The shifting borders between human, animal, and the

bare residue of life subject to sovereign violence are constantly re-drawn according to political and economic dictates. Viewed in this way, this tense but relatively prosaic domestic scene becomes a commentary upon how porous the boundaries between human, animal and ultimately bare life in actuality are. If, as Agamben claims, the sovereign violence of the state rests upon such shifting boundaries then the political stakes of the human/animal dichotomy become all too plain. With this taken into account, *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* is a subtle exploration of contemporary biopolitics, the management of life as such through apparatuses of governmentality, whether discursive, institutional, spatial or bodily.

For instance, there is a suggestion in this screen of a mutual entrapment, human and animal both caught in the throes of environmental constraints and relations that they both unwittingly reproduce and rediscover every day as an imposition. It is not necessary to know that much of the animal footage was shot in Antwerp zoo to see the apartment as something like a human zoo, domestic claustrophobia instilled in furniture and walls. And it is worth noting-given that the space is the epitome of what is constructed in contemporary capitalism as the domestic sphere-that this claustrophobia includes the gender relations depicted, an irreducibly 'private' space marked by the tension between a man and a woman, forms of subjectivity that have an irreducibly social dimension. Rather than an abode of domestic tranquillity the space is signalled as a conflictual one. And while the woman undoubtedly desires to exit this human zoo, the intertwining of human/animal imagery, broken but constrained and constraining dialogue and the claustrophobia of alienated intimacy point to the difficulties of such an exit.

CHIMPANZEE REFLECTIONS

'... [A]n optical machine constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape.'

– Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*

In contrast to the human/animal sequence the screen that features two chimpanzees grooming one another appears as relatively restful, the camera concentrating upon the gestures, faces and bodies of the primates. The decision by Ångerman to concentrate upon chimpanzees is pertinent in terms of the human/animal sequence, given their proximity to humanity. What might be termed the spectacle of unmediated nature is problematized by the attention *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* pays to questions of tactility and immediacy. For instance, the depiction of the chimpanzees' renders problematic the relation between animality and humanity by throwing into question notions of nature, immediacy and tactility often unproblematically associated with animals. Think of the classic nature documentary that attempts to capture for the image animals in the wild and then re-present them to the spectator as examples of a more natural form of life. This is despite the presence of a film crew and the way that so called natural environments have always already been produced in conjunction with humanity, or more specifically economic relations and political structures. Such documentaries often offer to the viewer the myth of wildness for easy consumption. Ångerman throws such a construction into doubt by filming chimpanzees in captivity, in the zoo. The spectacle of nature is thus inverted and the form of the nature documentary reflected and mirrored while being thrown into question.



The juxtaposition of the conflictual domesticity of the human couple and the chimpanzees across the screens of the installation also carries a certain parodic charge. The dream of domestic happiness can only be realised in a zoo – albeit the human one of the capitalist mythos – and even then life as such is governed and assimilated through biopolitical apparatuses.

One of the key concerns of *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* is with notions of tactility and touch, the possibility of attaining proximity and intimacy with the world. The chimpanzees are almost a tactile parody of the broken separation of the human couple on the adjacent screen, a mirror image of affective animality. It is tempting to view this as a simple polar opposite and an affirmation of the animal over the human. However, this is problematised by the fact that this tactility and immediacy is of necessity viewed through the prism of the screen and hence the camera. The camera deliberately slows to catch the rhythm of the immersive, tactile life of the chimpanzees. This mediation places tactility at a distance but also emphasises that it is often only through such that something like the truth of tactile intimacy can be glimpsed. What this suggests is not so much the impossibility of a tactile relation to the world as the inherent difficulty of it, to the point when it might be better grasped through mediation.



The gaze of the camera recovers a tactile relation with the world through absorbing itself in the mutual absorption of the chimpanzees in one another and their environment. Such an absolute, distraction free absorption in what disinhibits behaviour, the weft and weave of materiality and milieu, is one of the essential modalities of the animal according to Agamben. Animals are like 'water in water' (Bataille) when caught in such behaviour, without the essential subject/object dichotomy that is more proper to the human. In utilising the camera to reflect this Angerman does not so much reclaim some lost purity of relation as recast it and grasp it through the technology of mediation. The ability to do this through the prism of art suggests a trace of the uninhibited potentiality of the human in contrast to the animal. Such a potentiality would be a set of protean capacities that can grasp the 'open' (Agamben), the possibility of a relation to the world not overdetermined by an essence or predetermined quality.

PERCEPTIVE OPACITY

'Like a big sculpture maybe, you walk in small pathways ... stairs ... metal pieces and ... and places where you can fall out of the track ... so in a way it's like a maze ... you have to kind of ... sense your way around.'

– From The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living

Much of *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* unfolds in relative silence, the soundtrack being gently subsumed in the noise of cicadas, very occasional chimes and the hint of natural elements. The screens that break into human speech do so very obliquely, whether through

the broken communication of the couple or the clumsy but astute language on the screen facing it. This screen opens with black that fades and merges into the opacity of glistening water that seems to have the capacity to swallow light. Then images on the screen slowly flit by in close ups of seemingly random detritus such as scraps of wire, the worn surfaces of concrete and rough edges of rock, steel fence railings and the blurred shapes of wet leaves. The overall impression becomes one of a post-industrial pastoral, though the footage is of compounds in the Berlin zoo. The voices interrupt and obliquely interact with this landscape constructed out of concrete and vegetation for the efficient management of animality. Relatively prosaic statements such as 'it becomes so normal that it's completely natural' and 'you just put your body differently... more... softly...but responsively' acquire the quality of found poetry. The relation of this screen to the others is encapsulated within the way that this language is used to suggest both a tactile and non-instrumental relation to the world, a relation not subsumed in the assumption of a task. Language as a tool would ordinarily negate the object by over determining it through the signifier or word. For instance, to say 'an ape' is to never grasp the singularity of the ape. However, to undo language from within-as Angerman does through this disjointed juxtaposition of word and text-is to use it in order to discover a more intimate relation to the world.

The dialogue is constituted mainly from a 'blind walk' that Ångerman organized wherein people were guided through the city when blindfolded and asked to describe sensations. In this deliberate perceptive opacity, the installation continues the investigation of notions of tactility that come to the fore with the footage of the chimpanzees. The incorporation of this in *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living*



illuminates how much the installation is concerned with the way biopolitical spaces such as the city modulate behaviour. That is, in a quietly subversive way there is a sketch here of how space is constructed in order to encourage and discourage certain behaviours, reproduce certain subjects. More than this, the way the recurrent images of the zoo are juxtaposed against the human in a constant investigation of the limits and formation of the human/animal. The reiteration of images of the zoo serve as a parodic mirror of the way urban spaces are organized for the reproduction of the 'human', mirroring the domestic space inhabited by the man and woman.

In this way *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* interrogates how within the biopolitical paradigm life as such is a problematic category, traversed by conflict. Ultimately, *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* forms a particular kind of optical machine that investigates the human/animal by reflecting one back into the other, inter-

rogating the mutual reproduction of both. That is, an optical machine wherein each screen and sequence of images are refracted through one another and through the spectator, mirroring and doubling, causing echoes of the human and animal to resonate with one another. The management of life and – as the title suggests – death within biopolitical capitalism is always approached relatively obliquely through this optical machine. For instance, a shot of a bird of prey abruptly emerges on the screen but it is dead, frozen into domesticity by the skill of a taxidermist, a fatal meld of human skill and animal body. In this, the dead not only walk parallel to the living but each is immanent to the other, shifting and turning according to the exigencies of how the human/animal dichotomy is constructed in the ‘anthropological machine’. The unseen ghost in the optical machine of *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* is that the shifting boundaries of human and animal can lead to an animalization of the human that justifies the worst forms of political control and violence, the reproduction of ‘bare life’ wholly subject to sovereign control. Perhaps, it is within this particular paradigm that the ‘dead’ – refugees but all those potentially caught in the disciplinary apparatuses of biopolitical capitalism – in actuality do brush past the living. It might also be that it is in this way that the ‘outside’ is truly folded into and reflected in the bodies and subjects of those caught within it.



All Agamben quotes and references from:

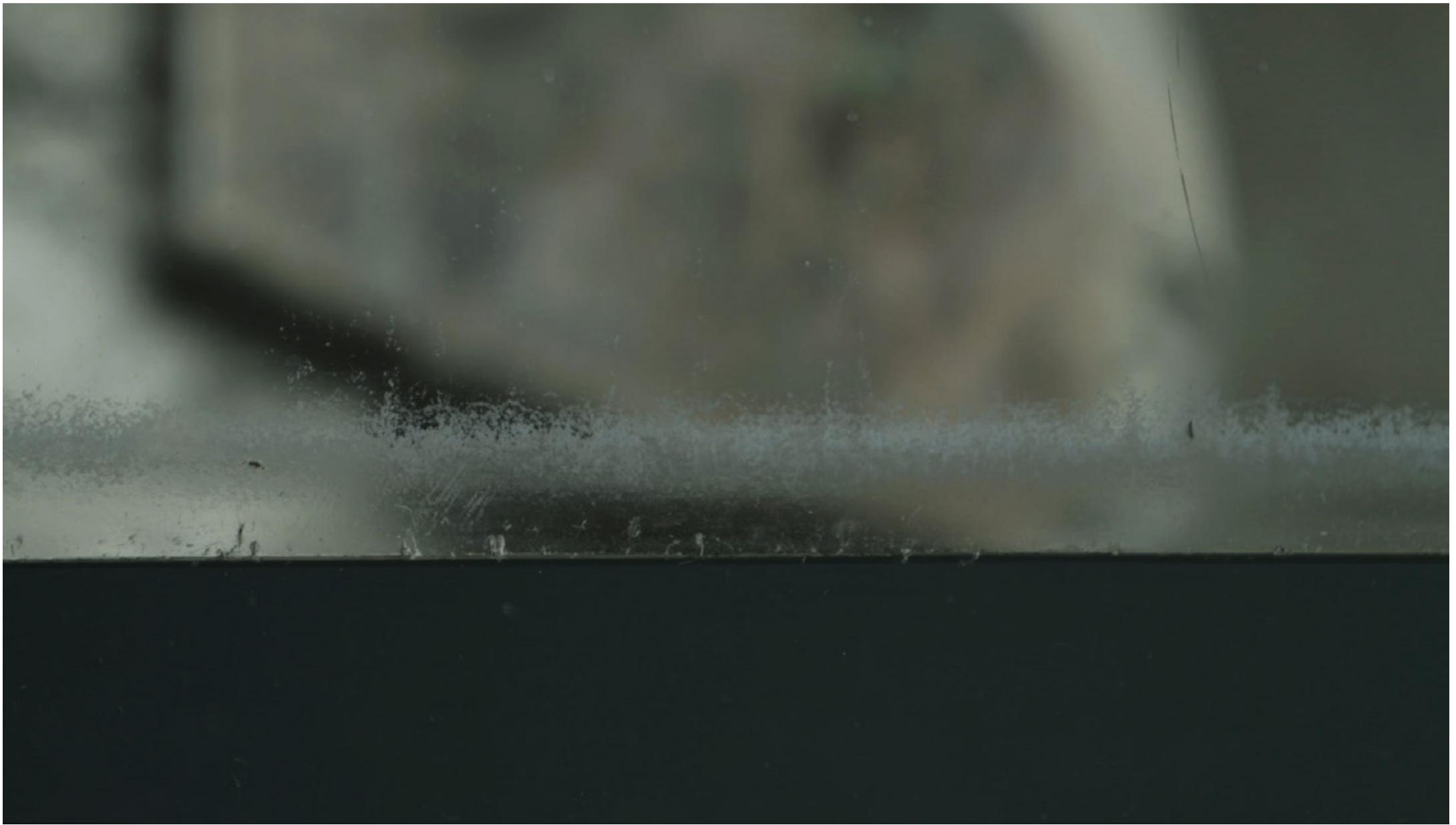
Giorgio Agamben (Trans: Kevin Attell), *The Open*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, USA, 2004.











ON THE TEMPORALITY
OF DENSE MOMENTS

Kati Kivinen

Images unfold in space, texts in time. This assumption has prevailed for centuries, and no critique of it will eradicate it, even though it is obviously false. It is based on the idea that a text needs time in order to be read; but so does an image. It also presupposes that an image takes space; but so, too, does text.
– Mieke Bal

Maria Ångerman's single channel film *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* (2016) opens up with a serene scene in which a cavalcade of exotic animals filmed at the Antwerp zoo is accompanied by the constant buzz of cicadas. Ångerman's camera follows the animals from a close-up, sweeping so close to their bodies that the whole image field is filled with grey hair, grooved skin, scaly slough and lash-like tail. Images of a couple engaged in an uncomfortable discussion about separation – following the dialogue of Marguerite Duras' play *Agatha* (1981) – are interlocked with the close-up portraits of the animals. Similarly in these images the camera comes close to the characters picking up details of their appearance; the nervously fidgeting hands, the tired-looking faces and the begging eyes that encounter the elusive gaze.

The filmed characters and creatures merge with the surrounding milieu, communicating with each other and the viewer just by being present at the same time, in the same space, sharing the moment and experience. At times, the image appears to be deprived of action and events, it appears almost abstract, and thus hard to distinguish between what has been filmed and what we perceive. Instead, the details chosen and presented by Ångerman direct our thoughts from

identifying the object of the image to sensing it in a haptic way in/with regard to time; how warm is it in the room, how does the texture of the grooved slough feel under one's hand and what does the woman see through the pale windows?

TOUCHING WITH THE EYES

Ångerman describes her film as a cinematic meditation on loss of control in three scenes or episodes; the film opens up with the above described scene from the zoo intermingled with the scenes from a dialogue between the couple. The second scene introduces an adorable pair of chimpanzees absorbed in grooming each other. In the last scene Ångerman turns her camera to the surroundings of the animals living in the zoo and accompanies the slow camera pans with a voice-over presenting various experiences of encountering urban spaces. Through the sense of disorientation – not quite knowing what one is seeing – she heightens the possibility of inhabiting a different perspective.

Ångerman's gaze is a haptic, caressing one, which sweeps and smooths on the surface of the image, and on the skin of the filmed animals, plants and characters. It stays on the surface of the image, contemplating its material presence rather than plunging into the illusionist depth of the film and its narrative wheel. Foregrounding the sedate and materialist image in the film, Ångerman invites the viewer to consider how the proximal senses are being accentuated and – at the same time – the prioritization of the vision as a sense for acquiring knowledge and experience can be supplanted.



The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living demonstrates how cinema appeals to the senses which it cannot technically represent, such as smell, touch and embodiment. Thus, Ångerman's approach to both filmic image and sound in film resembles more of that of the haptic visuality and sound. In cinema, haptic visuality, as described by film theorist Laura U. Marks, is often transmitted through such formal and textual qualities as grainy, unclear images, or by sensuous images that evoke memories of different senses or depict characters in acute states of sensory activity. Similarly, changes in focus and under- and overexposure, as well as close-to-the-body camera positions and slow panning across the surface of objects or creatures – as can be seen in *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* – are typical for filmic works that can be seen as representing haptic visuality. Ångerman's lingering images of the animals, tender chimpanzees caring for each other, empty rooms and a troubled couple present sensual moments and moods which encourage the viewer to use a tactile way of seeing and

knowing. When aiming to comprehend the cinematic image through one's own body, with the help of non-visual knowledge, the concept of haptic visuality can be of help.

Marks' formulation of haptic visuality offers a materialist multi-sensory and culturally specific approach to film. According to Marks, haptic visuality is a way of seeing and knowing which calls upon multiple senses, offering a method of sensory analysis which does not depend on the presence of literal touch, smell, taste or hearing. Marks' concept provides an alternative framework for discussing film works – such as Ångerman's – which are often seen just as visual in relation to multiple senses, affect and embodiment. Marks' haptic visuality refers to viewing which draws upon other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics. In this framework vision can be seen as a tactile sense, "as if touching a film with one's eyes".

THE SLOWLY FABRICATING IMAGE

Memory is embedded in all the senses. Our body has a visceral, mimetic relationship to the external world that is – like memory – both cerebral and emotional. Haptic images provoke sensations of touch and movement, making past events animated again; through the act of looking at film we move towards the act of sensing the film with all our senses and with the whole body, not just with our vision. In a way, the haptic image is less complete requesting the viewer to contemplate the image as a material presence than it is as an easily identifiable representational coy in a narrative wheel. Ångerman's *The Dead Walk*





Side by Side with the Living shows how cinema appeals – alongside vision and hearing – to multiple senses and their memory.

Instead of a clear and coherent sequence of events, *The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living* serves us with atmosphere and time, a strong feeling of a fleeting moment that we can share with the film in the present tense. The film represents a kind of contemplative cinema which is not in a rush to anywhere, but which similarly does not always seem to know where to head next. Rather, its path seems to follow the logic of a dream, cascading directly from the subconscious. For this reason it seems to be safer just to halt, look and think for a moment, before taking the next step ahead in the ‘here-and-now-ness’ of the film. With its long takes and serene rhythm Ångerman’s film resembles the examples of slow cinema; during the long takes reproducing the present we are invited to let our eyes wander within the parameters of the frame, observing details that would remain veiled or merely implied by a swifter form of narration. The camera focuses on the details and textures leaving the screen with very little – if any – action and events.

Ångerman’s slow aesthetics downplays events in favor of atmo-

sphere, mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality. Instead of looking for events and actions, we should aim to dive deep into the film’s cinematic images. In the last scene of her film, Ångerman takes us on a journey through the seemingly empty spaces of the closed zoo. The main animal characters presented in the first two scenes of the film seem to be hiding somewhere as the camera slowly pans or focuses-in to details and surfaces in the dimly light surroundings – we can only hear their calls and sounds in the distance. When the image is nearly empty of any action, the voice-over takes the lead. The uttered sentences depicting an experience of urban space start to direct the perception. The eye is grateful for the hints and steering offered by the voice-over which directs our focus on the image in a specific way; we start to sense the atmosphere of the space, making meaning from the monochromatic dimness, reflections on the water and the lush culture.

Despite the seeming plotlessness, wordlessness, slowness and alienation, Ångerman’s film is rich with details and serves us handsomely with both time and relaxed rhythm. The film opts towards an ambient space and sound which do not necessarily guide us through the spaces and events, but rather give us a sense of an atmosphere and moment; the warmth of the day and the blinding force of the light penetrating through the pale curtains. The subdued visual schemes of the film require certain kinds of readiness and activity from the viewer, who has to do some work in order to enjoy her film to the full. In order to understand the depth of the image and the complexities in the intervals between the seemingly apparent details, a bit of work must be carried out in order to find the content behind the appearance of emptiness.

In the end, the main subject of Ångerman's film seems to be time, as it is what she offers us for over 22 minutes – 22 minutes of wondering, watching, listening, and just sensing with our eyes, ears, touch and with the whole body. Time is manifested in films both as a narrative element as well as an element that is connected with both the experience of the viewer and the fictive characters. In Ångerman's film time is being thematized both on the level of form as well as of content; it becomes more a non-narrative matter, temporality that is being detached from the causal relations. The awareness of time from the viewer's perspective is an important, non-narrative element, detached from narration. In Ångerman's film the focus is on the here-and-now movements of the emotions and affects instead of target-objected actions.

The Dead Walk Side by Side with the Living reveals to us how filmic time is much more than just a narrative feature, as it is also the time of the experiencing and understanding of the film, and is thus always subjective. Slow and long takes depicting the landforms and verdant flora move our attention away from the narrative as they remind us of time in its purified form. In these dense moments, the temporality of the film should be analyzed as a non-narrative element; our attention is being focused more on what we see in the image instead of what we expect to happen in the near future. The rhythm of the film seals its meaning, the montage connects events and moments to one another in narration. Thus, the pleasure of the film experience is based on the experience of finding meaning between the temporal and spatially organized elements of which the film is comprised.

SOURCES

Bal, Mieke 2000. "Sticky Images: The Foreshortening of Time in an Art of Duration." In Amelia Groom (ed): *Time. Series: Documents of Contemporary Art, Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press, London/Cambridge*, 62-64.

Elsaesser, Thomas 2011. "Stop/Motion". In Eivind Røssaak (ed): *Between Stillness and Motion: Film, Photography, Algorithms, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam*, 109-122.

Flanagan, Matthew 2008. "Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema" in 16:9, #29/6. (http://www.16-9.dk/2008-11/side11_inenglish.htm)

Marks, Laura U. 2000. *Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Duke University Press, Durham and London.

Marks, Laura U. 2002. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis & London.

Mulvey, Laura 2003. "Stillness in the Moving Image: Ways of Visualizing Time and Its Passing." In David Company (ed): *The Cinematic. Series: Documents of Contemporary Art, Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press, London/Cambridge*, 134-139.

Ångerman, Maria 2014. *The Skin of My Film*. Un-published MA paper, Netherlands' Film Academy, Amsterdam.







© Maria Ångerman 2017

Printed by Wasa Graphics, Vaasa

Graphic design by Maria Ångerman

Proof read by Daniel Vorthuys and Laura Taler

Kindly supported by Eugène, Elisabeth and Birgit Nygréns foundation

