

Persephone's Revolt: Thoughts on Art and Rite in the Work of John Skoog

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Conquering the Darkness—The Lyrical Dimension

The work *Sent på Jorden* ("Late on Earth," 2011) by John Skoog prompts us to reflect on the special role of film within the history of the arts: How is it possible to conquer the darkness, shape the shadows, divine the gloom, or to immerse oneself in it so completely that all its nuances, textures, and depths are produced?

In this context, John Skoog's work can be seen as part of a contemporary artistic examination that comprises the works of Philippe Grandrieux, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Marylène Negro, and João Nisa and thus makes use of a visual language shaped by visual artists and filmmakers that extends from Francisco de Goya to Pierre Soulages as well as from Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) to Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978).

The first scene of *Sent på Jorden*, in which a young girl sits with her back to the viewer, unmoving in the evening twilight between the rustling ears of a cornfield, already immediately transposes us into a lyrical and contemplative register. In the course of the film, everything—the dull and piercing noises, the twilight, the solitude of the figures in the image detail, the sharpness with which the high definition technology detaches them from the background, the only sparingly exchanged words—coalesces into a world of trepidation and melancholy, afflicted by a distant yet powerful threat.

This first dimension of John Skoog's work becomes even clearer when one contemplates the three, long tracking shots that structure the film *Förår* (2012). In the first sequence, right at the beginning of the film, we approach a group of seven hunters, who on the way back from their hunt along a forest path make toward us smoothly from the background of the image. In the second tracking shot, in the middle of the film, we retreat before a young, red-headed girl who is going down a street alone and responds that she does not hear the driver of a white delivery truck that comes in her direction and finally drives by her. In the third and last sequence at the end of the film, we again follow in front of the same young girl, who is now walking down another street and encounters a white delivery truck driving in the opposite direction. This time the little girl is holding a heavy gun in her arms, which she is only able to carry with effort and has to grasp hold of it again and again. The rifles of the hunters have passed into the hands of the little girl. She now carries this burden. It has become the allegory for how every individual is weighed down by cares that are too great, cares that he or she nevertheless has to carry on his or her path in the endless twilight.

In the same year, John Skoog transferred the power of this allegorical elaboration to the documentary modus of the installation *Arbeiter verlassen die Samson-Werke* (Workers Leaving the Samson Factory). While he makes reference to the work *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995) by Harun Farocki, which itself in turn refers to the film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895) by Auguste and Louis Lumière, Skoog decided not to explicitly limit himself to the realm of industrial space. Skoog's work thus contrasts with those of his three famous predecessors but also with Siegfried A. Fruhauf, whose serial study *La sortie* (1998) consciously shows how it is never possible for those in a loop of walking workers to truly leave the factory. John Skoog accompanies the workers for two minutes on their way leaving the actual factory—namely followed by an Arriflex 35 mm camera, which today, exactly like the factory workers and later also the projector used for the

installation, has become a relict of industrial civilization. The heavy objects of iron and lead and the crude analogue film find a counterpart appropriate to them in a projection surface of wood—a consistent homage to the materiality of the film image, which seems to lie taking its final breaths.

Skoog's figures thus wander endlessly through the discontinuity like ghosts. Their path never leads to the goal but instead culminates in despair. The visual scream of the androgynous young girl at the end of *Sent på Jorden* responds to the deadly march of the little girl in *Förår*: the sound of the scream is replaced by the kinetic flickering of a train rattling past, another fundamental motif in the history of film, which makes reference to the Lumière brothers as well as to the elliptical lights in a famous scene from Charlie Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* (1923), to the rapes and murders on the railway tracks of Jean Renoir's *The Human Beast* (1938), to all of the trains onto which the tramps of American cinema have already jumped . . . the fragile and pale bodies of the two solitary girls become contemporary, delicate silhouettes of an age-old fear. Thus, in their anonymity, a collective rumor becomes concentrated and crystallized.

The Compound of the Singular and the Plural Individual—The Epic Dimension

Even without knowing about the history of the genesis of John Skoog's work or the ideas, materials, and stories that underlie them, it nonetheless becomes clear that in this case the relationship between singularity and plurality is defined anew.

For hundreds of years, chroniclers, historians, and anthropologists have occupied themselves with the existence of human peoples through searching for the attributes of individual groups, biological features of belonging, and cultural characteristics—through reducing the multitude of beings to the supposedly smallest common denominator, the collective. In 2007, for his installation *700 år*, John Skoog asked the inhabitants of the city of Kvidinge to each write down a story. The following three rules were supposed to be observed in doing so: “1. The story should not be longer than one A4-format sheet of paper—2. The story should have something to do with the city—3. The story should be true.”¹ In this way, he collected sixty-three stories, which he printed out and stacked up on the large table of Tomarps Kungsgård Castle so that each person was able to select stories from them and put them together to form an entirely personal montage. John Skoog thus worked both with an ethnic group as well as on it through inviting them to make their memories and ideas public: here, the community expressed itself on its own terms; here it was also possible to express the particular, intimate, anecdotal, coincidental, and the unknown. The work *700 år* deconstructed and renewed—whether intentionally or not—the principle of collective history; what remained were only aggregates of singularities that are inscrutable in and of themselves. And only the most single-minded and the most mentally lazy can still believe in the possibility of amalgamating them, of reducing them to a whole.

Like the visitors of *700 år*, John Skoog himself also selected some of the stories and used them for the narrative thread of *Sent på Jorden*. The lyricism, once a style of subjectivity, consists of vitalizing every individual phenomenon with its own plurality and making it permeable to the outer world, just as the writer Gunnar Ekelöf described the rustling silence of the night: “the wind carried nocturnal snippets of conversation from all possible directions.”^{2 3} The deepening of the dialectical relationship between the individual and multiplicity is expressed both in how each single motif is handled as well as in the overall dynamic of the work: the principal actor of *Förår* was a blond female extra in *Sent på Jorden*, and in the same landscape of the

province of Scania, she transcribes, now with hair dyed red, an anecdote from a village in Germany (“a small eleven-year-old girl who walks along the street with her father’s gun”). In the universe of John Skoog, the motivation for the plot arises from the dissemination of individual phenomena through refraction, through breaking them up and deflecting them from leveled paths: through traversing different milieus, they reveal their heterogeneity, full of bumps, or—in contrast—of black holes. Here Skoog has also remained true to Ekelöf’s spirit, “. . . perhaps a voice that was forsaken by another and no longer found its throat.”⁴ A long tracking shot in *Sent på Jorden* takes us for the first time into an interior space, where we wander through the rooms as if in a cross section, pass by surfaces of light and black wall surfaces to the sound of the voice of an old man on the telephone. Nevertheless, just as we finally discover him in the background of one shot, the sound of his voice breaks off and we are left with the vibrating sound of nature. In this way, the phenomena break in two, disperse, evaporate, and merge anew, and thus give rise to new constellations in which nothing is a matter of course. The figures exempt themselves from classification and combine numerous ontological registers in themselves—as Ekelöf’s friend Robert Desnos versified:

“It’s incredible to credit
 One’s alive, existing, real.
 It’s incredible to credit
 One’s the late, defunct and dead. It
 Is incredible to credit
 And least credible of all
 Is to credit, you’ll recall,
 One is dream, unbodied soul.”⁵

In the work of Gunnar Ekelöf, the interest in the relationship of continuity and discontinuity between phenomena leads in a spectacular way to the invention of radical breaks (see in particular “Perspektiv I” (Perspective I) from the collection ((*Sent på jorden, med Appendix och En natt vid horisonten*)) *En natt vid horisonten* (A Night on the Horizon of 1962). This paratactic development of writing, to which John Skoog’s hard cuts and all the irruptions into the darkness open the door, is accompanied by the invention of new, just as radical forms of continuity, meaning of continuities that are so strong that they cancel out any possibilities of differentiation. What is concerned in particular here is the repeated use of the word order “it is late on earth,” which is found in two different poems, *meningslöst orakel* (meaningless oracle) and *kosmisk sömngångare* (cosmic sleepwalker), and also provided the title of a collection of poems. The fact that John Skoog once again takes up this title in a slightly altered form for his own film in turn gives it a role that does not correspond to the intention of the author: “late on earth” (“*Sent på Jorden*”) springs from text to text and from title to title and thus becomes a murmur that is sustained throughout different discourses, dreams, periods of time, arts, and individuals. The work of the artist consists of allowing himself to be permeated by this chant and passing it on a bit further, like sentinels on mountaintops who send one another warning signals over the distance. In this protracted bringing-to-light of the correct relationship between continuities and discontinuities, between points of contact and isolation, between echo and caesura, nothing is left to chance: for the attentive viewer, the world is a chaos (poem *Solförmörkelsen* [Solar Eclipse]), and the twilight of this magnetic moment, in which things

melt together and ultimately lose their contours, in which they become receptive to coming together again, not in peace but rather in the shared presentiment of an upcoming event full of terror.

The Archaism of Our Time—The Mythical Dimension

Sent på Jorden and *Förår*—linked with each other by their figures and landscapes, and sometimes projected by John Skoog on screens positioned opposite each other—might be two tableaux in a fresco of the four seasons. And they do actually form a diptych consisting of one agriculture film and one hunting film. The two main figures that are linked with each other in the films reveal themselves to be modern embodiments of two archaic figures, the Corn Mother and the Corn Maiden. Both are figures in old harvest time customs, in which the last sheaf cut or the last handful of seeds is symbolically saved for the next harvest. The ethnologist James G. Frazer collected diverse rites and ritual variants that accompanied special moments of work in the fields, in particular the transformation of the last sheaf into a doll adorned with clothes and ribbons. Greek mythology allegorizes these events in rural life in the figures of Demeter and her daughter Persephone: the former is a despairing goddess who has lost her kidnapped daughter, the latter a virgin who was abducted to the Underworld by Hades, an image of fertile nature, which rests in winter and retreats into the darkness of the fallow soil and the germinating seed.⁶ How can one not recognize a reminiscence of Demeter's panic-stricken search for her lost daughter in the recurring forays of the protagonist of *Sent på Jorden* through the fields and the madness of her mute scream at the end of the film? Does the white smoke that rises around the young girl in the first shot, without one being able to see its profane source—a simple cigarette—not invoke the mystery of an “anima,” of a soul, the whirling of a supernatural being? Do the two shots in which the young girl from *Förår* lies on a bale of grain and then pulls some ears from its midst not automatically bring to mind the pagan rites of the Corn Maiden? The story of the grandmother of the girl in *Förår*—recorded in a tracking shot that functions as a counterpart to the image of the grandfather in *Sent på Jorden*—can be interpreted in a comparable way: Does her experience when she was submerged so deeply in a bale of hay that she could only be discovered and rescued as a result of the decorative ribbons on her hat not give rise to the long-forgotten image of the flitting ribbons that farmers attached to the ears to celebrate the completion of the harvesting work? Does this grandmother not embody the centuries-old figure of the “old woman” in harvest-time customs? Does the soccer-playing girl who runs into a ditch and never again reemerges not reproduce Persephone's descent into the darkness of the earth in a scaled-down form?

Every figure, every object, and every gesture is pervaded by iconographic images. Each of the present and quite obviously contemporary figures is apprehended by the murmur of vibrations immemorial to such a great extent that, for instance, in the burlesque scene of the woman who is hardly able to hold the many collected chairs on her back and arms, it not only explicitly mirrors Charlie Chaplin's universe but also a Tarahumaras ritual beginning of the celebration of the completion of work in the fields: at the end of the harvest, a member of the tribe had to shoulder all the hoes that had been used for the work.^{7 8}

In the end, everything becomes a procession: the striking procession of the masks in Skoog's film *Federsee* (which had not yet been completed at the time this catalogue was published), the profane procession of the workers out of the factory, the hidden processions of the ancestral gestures of work that pervade the authors of the collected stories from *700 år* and afterward the figures in the films. In this sense, John Skoog's work is

also connected with the constellation of those contemporary masterpieces that fundamentally reinvigorated the forms of visual ethnography such as, for example, the films of Tiane Doan Na Champassak and Jean Dubrel *Natpwe* (2004), Ben Russell's *Tryyys* (2007), and Eric and Marc Hurtado's *Jajouka* (2011). John Skoog's distinctive characteristic lies in the fact that he—where his contemporaries inspired by Jean Rouch and Pier Paolo Pasolini put the focus on the frenetic, fervid power of ritual ecstasy—concentrates in *Sent på Jorden* and *Förår* entirely on the toxic, nocturnal-cool tranquility of the process of destruction. One of the most successful and impressive forms of this is the shot of the baler, which instead of performing to its appropriate function of turning the bale of hay only eight times in order to wrap it, casts its wrapping film a total of thirty-two times.⁹ What is thus created is a proper mummy, a completely material, wholly conceptual object that might come from Joseph Beuys—monolith, projection surface, monster, and white totem at the same time. Yet at the last moment at which the cutterbars of the baler sever the film—such an appropriate word—this is suddenly transformed back into a mechanical Parca. In *Förår*, the baler, or a similar farm machine, recurs: it crosses the path of the car of the hunters, sets itself down cumbersomely in front of their windshield, which nearly fills the entire image, and threatens to engulf the driver and the young girl with its wide open mechanical jaws peering into the past century.

As in the work of Pasolini or the Hurtado brothers, it is also possible to comprehend old founding myths anew in John Skoog's works. He presents them to us in their original form, meaning in their vibrant relationship to work, to suffering, and to the exigencies of survival in the great creative freedom of pagan culture. Thus, the way in which John Skoog interlinks the critical modernism of “faite par tous, non par un” poetry—according to Lautréamont's ironic wording, which the Surrealists and after them the entire modern era has taken earnestly—with the blithe despecialization of the work of the artist also becomes more comprehensible.¹⁰ What interests him is taking up the ingrained, dull energy of ritual as Frazer describes. “Under the marks of a primitive ritual we may note the following: 1. No special class of persons is set apart for the performance of the rites; in other words, there are no priests. 2. The rites may be performed by anyone, as occasion demands. 3. No special places are set apart for the performance of the rites; in other words, there are not temples. The rites may be performed anywhere, as occasion demands. 4. Spirits, not gods, are recognized.”¹¹

In this regard, John Skoog's work clearly poses one of the central fundamental questions in art today, which strives to establish an ethnography that has become detached from ethnicity in order to consider the relationship between human beings and nature anew from the perspective of the unconscious, starting from everything that remains incomprehensible to human beings, and pervades and overtakes them. In this sense, it only seems logical that on his artistic path John Skoog encountered Stan Brakhage—to whom he has dedicated multiple readings and performances—as one of the first directors who always continued to fight against anthropomorphism and broadened our perception of the psyche.

And, nevertheless, it is an odd collective poem that should be given the final word here. In 1944, the Czech translation of the poem written by Robert Desnos in 1926 *J'ai tant rêvé de toi* (*I've Dreamed of You So Much*) was published in the newspaper as a tribute to the great poet and resistor who was murdered in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. In 1945, this Czech version was in turn translated back into French under the title *Ombre parmi les ombres* (*Shadows among the Shadows*), and it was thought that this was Desnos's final poem, which had been found in the concentration camp. This verse has thus passed through death, misunderstanding, the filter of languages, and is nourished by the awkward, despairing, and invincible devotion of lovers.

“The only thing left for me is to be
A shadow among the shadows
A shadows a hundred times more shadow
Than the shadow that comes and will come again
In the sunshine of your life”¹²

1 John Skoog’s note to the author, May 12, 2013.

2 Gunnar Ekelöf (1907–1968) is one of the most renowned Swedish poets of the twentieth century.

3 Gunnar Ekelöf, “Romeo & Juliet,” in *Es ist spät auf Erden: Gedichte*, ed. Sieglinde Mierau (Berlin, 1984), p. 11. Gunnar Ekelöf, *Dikter 1932–51*. Albert Bonniers Förlag 1956.

4 The same, “Feuillet d’album” (“Albumblatt”), in *Tard sur la terre (Sent på Jorden)* (Paris, 1932), p. 23.

5 Robert Desnos, “La Moisson,” in *Contrée* (1944), translated as “The Harvest,” in *Against the Grain*, trans. Timothy Adès, at: <http://www.bcla.org/tc2002/ades.htm> (accessed August 2, 2013).

6 “Demeter would be the ripe crop of this year; Persephone would be the seed-corn taken from it and sown in autumn, to reappear in spring. The descent of Persephone into the lower world would thus must be a mythical expression for the sowing of the seed; her reappearance in spring would signify the sprouting of the young corn.” James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, vol. VII of XII, part V: *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild*, vol. 1 of 2 (New York / London, 1912), p. 210.

7 The Tarahumara are an indigenous ethnic group that lives in northern Mexico.

8 Frazer 1911 (see note 6), p. 227.

9 Description of the manufacturer available online at: <http://landmaschinen.krone.de/english/service/spare-parts/excellent-crop-packaging-products/excellent-slide/> (accessed: July 29, 2013).

10 This figure of speech means translated: “made by all and not by one.”

11 Frazer 1911 (see note 6), p. 169.

12 Robert Desnos, “Le dernier poème” (“Das letzte Gedicht”), 1944, in Berger 1953 (see note 5).