

Sigurður Guðjónsson
Mise en abyme
by
Shauna Laurel Jones

Stumbling into a dim, dreamlike space, the boundaries of physical and psychological dissolve as our senses are met with the unidentifiable. Cryptic characters we encounter do not meet our gaze, and we are not sure if we would want them to anyway, unpleasant as they are. Vague, grotesque images and haunting sounds leave us to confront our own anxiety and confusion, and yet we have to admit that all this is not being thrust upon us. In that Sigurður Guðjónsson's videos are dark but understated, they are all the more effective in pulling us in--or, rather, in opening an eerie world we allow ourselves to be pulled into.

In grappling with unsettling ambiguities of space, place, and action, our seemingly innate urge to find or create meaning is exposed. Yet it is neither narrative nor symbolism but rather the ambient quality we experience through Sigurður's work that we ultimately take away. Mysterious and macabre, his videos, with aptly descriptive names like *Bleak* (2006), *Deathbed* (2006), and *Flesh* (2004), expose a darker side of existence in a style that can be surprisingly delicate. It can also be more overtly disconcerting, for example in *Breed* (2007) with disquieting footage of pigs anxiously awaiting their fate in the slaughterhouse. In either case, the contrast between the artist's gruesome imagery and his sophisticated style of production combine in videos that are oneiric and haunting as they are compelling.

But perhaps it is more fitting to think of Sigurður as a composer rather than a video artist. It does not suffice to say that sound plays an integral part in his videos, or that the aural and the visual cohere into a unified whole. Just as melody, harmony, and meter cannot be superimposed onto one another to create a symphony, Sigurður intertwines discrete images, music, and sound together with equal weight and consideration as his works unfold. Sometimes the sounds that Sigurður finds within a space create the setting, influencing other formal and aesthetic qualities, while other times the atmosphere--in all its sensory aspects--drives a work forward. There is no set formula he employs, save that he always allows a symbiosis of image and sound to shape his final works.

Often Sigurður's visual imagery, even if a static space or inanimate object, is suggestive of the sounds we hear, evoking a synaesthetic association. Sometimes there is a continuity of sound or music across what seems to be a logically disconnected series of shots; this uninterrupted soundtrack can suggest that disparate visual elements flow from one to the next in a rational progression. In this case, our desire to narrativize is heightened. Why this shot and then the next? Does this character's recognizable action have anything to do with the unrecognizable ambient image that follows? Sigurður's work recalls that of early Surrealist films in this regard: linear narrative is repeatedly thwarted, but sometimes debatably so, and associations can be left to the imagination. And there arises as a result a strong feeling of existentialist alienation, meaninglessness, and absurdity; we could easily picture Kafka's

Gregor Samsa casually crawling out from under the woodwork, his metamorphosis into an insect taken not as shocking but a matter of fact.

Videos such as Bleak and Host (2004), in which the question is left unresolved as to whether or not people are actually characters or merely details of their surroundings, leave us uncertain whether or not we want to find a point of entry into an air of sickly decay. As ghosts come and go around him, a man with a disturbingly ashen face sits in an isolated house in Host , methodically eating inedible objects on the table in front of him. The lament of a solo trumpet and the unmelodic sounds of bows bouncing on violin strings both haunt us and sustain a feeling of anxiousness. In Deathbed , atmospheric sounds seem equally to emanate from a bowl filled with dry ice and eggs and scenes of the preparation of a dead body by a woman who just might be dead herself. Despite these images of the grotesque and macabre, we find ourselves drawn in, perhaps connecting with the inevitable within ourselves.

Newer works, such as Ablation (2008) and Cylinder (2008), move even farther from cinematic narrative and open us to other points of connection: rather than tapping into the viewer's psychological subconscious, they appeal to a phenomenological subconscious, exploring the limits of subjective sensory perception. Shot on location in an abandoned supermarket, Cylinder consists of digitally-processed diegetic sound and black-and-white images projected onto a wall of the building itself, then refilmed. The effect is a mise en abyme , a space within a space, with a dizzying quality as we seek this time not to find our narrative footing but instead our spatial and aural orientation.

Ablation and Cylinder subtly prove a point about Sigurður's art. Content--defined in terms of characters, plotlines, thematic motifs, specificity of style, or any combination thereof--is not what defines any one of Sigurður's videos or his body of work as a whole. Rather, it is his ability to create an atmosphere that in its ambiguousness encompasses all our senses and intellect. As we grasp for something concrete to hold onto, and find that everything eludes our grip, we fall deeper into Sigurður's work and find only ourselves at the bottom of the rabbit hole.

CV

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