

'That Is Some Looking'
Knut Åsdam

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**Abyss,
Knut Asdam (2010)**

43 minutes, 35mm film to HD colour, 5.1 audio 1:1.77 aspect ratio

Producer: Filmhuset (Oslo)

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That is *some* looking!

Knut Asdam

A thickening breath, like pollen in the air,
oxygen expelled. You feel the city transform on
the walls of your lungs.

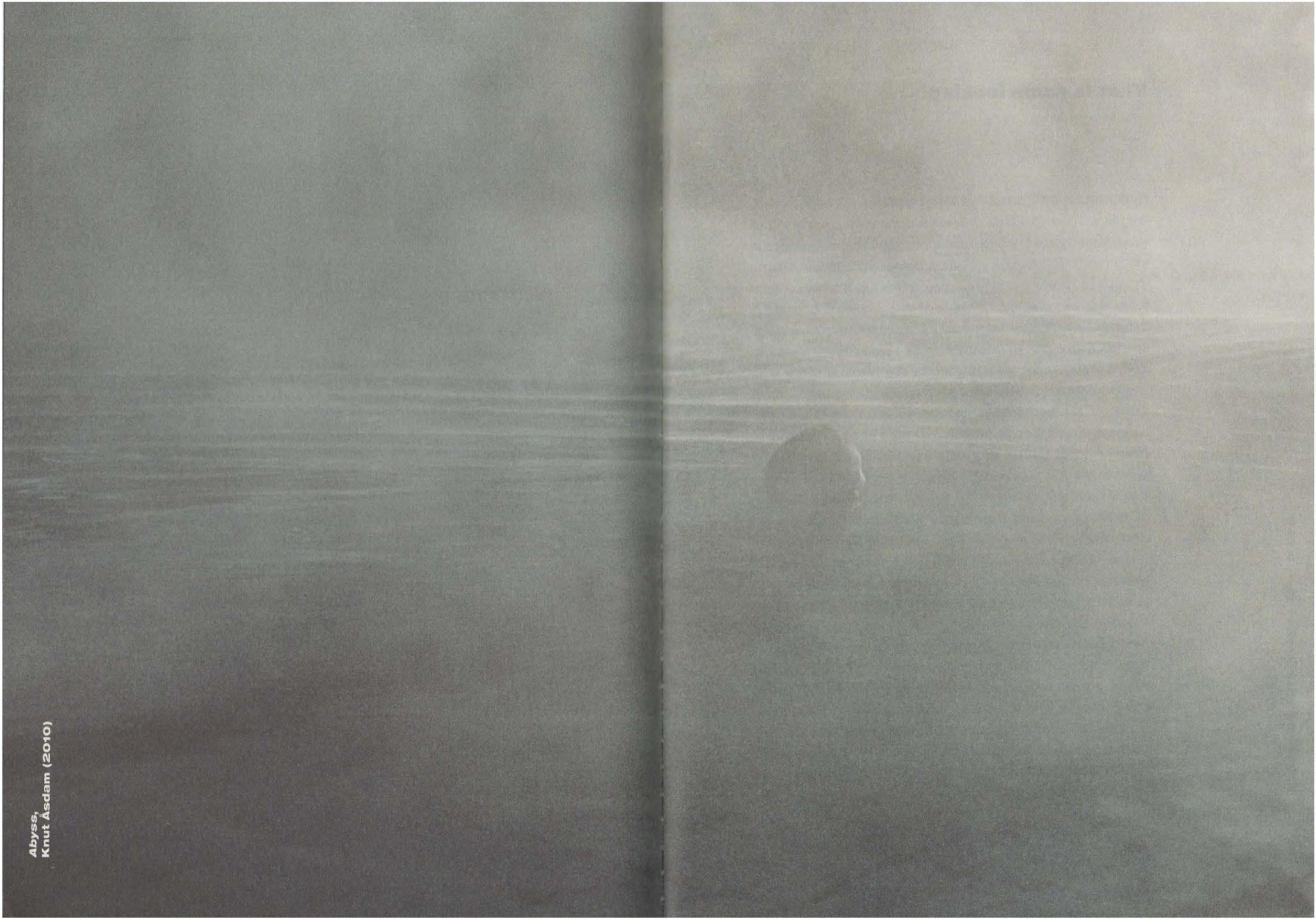
But there is also comfort in the filling of gaps.

A city transforming more than the users feel
they have control over—an exchange without a
clear idea of what exactly is being transacted.

Edited and transformed by every day speech,
name calling, humor and slang, as well as
through popular opinion—the terms of
transformation belong to the people
themselves. There are no more, or no less,
incentives to work on change than that.

Excerpt from *Abyss* 2005

Abyss,
Knut Åsdam (2010)



That is *some* looking!

Knut Åsdam

DRIFT FROM OBJECT TO NARRATIVE

In many ways, my work has come to deal with notions of gender through a questioning of authority. In the beginning of my artistic career, I left formal authority and formal concerns behind, to instead work with conventions and claims of authority given to institutions or businesses such as banks, insurance companies or universities. I took formal architectural elements that were used to create an environment of authority in the English social context I was working in at the time, and used them to create temporal architectural installations. Naturally, claims of authority are linked to societal structures that are historically founded – and so it became clear to me that a main narrative was that of patriarchal masculinity, its history and the significance of the male body. However, I found that a narration of masculinity and the male body wasn't sufficiently dealt with in my own installation works, which had a tendency to rather reveal what was already there. And so, this is how I came to work with performance-oriented video, because the moving image of a body, more than most things, tends to lend itself to representations and ideas around identity. It was a platform for me to explore issues concerning masculinity and authority at that time.

A time-based moving image of a body presented in front of you, makes you relate consciously to what it is that this person is. This is one of the basic relationships of theatre, performance and performance video. I mention this, because it is also the core of how I later developed the use of actors in narrative works, seeking to transfer this to the more complex relationships at play in a film work that has a narrative character.

THE RELATION BETWEEN PERFORMANCE, THE SINGULAR MOVING IMAGE AND NARRATIVE

When you work within narrative film, compared to a performance video, one can say that the interpretative relation to the body falls more in the background, as a result of a 'narrative expectation'. This 'narrative expectation' includes gender or sexual identifications and projections that the viewer injects into a web of possibilities concerning the directions of the film — where we think it is going, obviously driven by the projections or identifications that we make as the film is running.

It is important to understand that the interpretive play that happens when experiencing a film, is based on projections on the part of the viewer – sourcing or channeling from the viewer's experience or lack of experience, knowledge or prejudice of people or situations that s/he is confronted with. It is a reflexive relationship. This is significant when we think of how to relate to ideas of gender or subjectivity within a film work. The characters – or a lack thereof – serve as vehicles for our projections of identity —we insert meaning onto them.

In a longer narrative piece with more complex formal and sequential structures, the play of interpretation of identities within the film takes on a different kind of dynamic – it is active and moves in and out of consciousness – often 'dressed up' as a concern or concept of a person and that person's narrative position. In this dynamic, the identity issues of the main characters move from being the singular most important issue, to issues that move in and out of focus, from clarity to opacity, to obscurity and back again

I will return to how a filmmaker can use this dynamic later.

GENDERED OR SEXUAL IDENTIFICATIONS

Within the performance video format, all attention is focused on the performance and the performer. In this way one can work specifically with the signification of the body and what that body does. My work in the early and mid-nineties was very concerned with trying to open up the idea of masculinity. Deeply influenced by feminism and queer theory, and in a reaction to the abject masculinity works of the early nineties, I attempted to create an affirmative position for the male body that was not phallogocentric. The way of doing that was by queering the body, making it open to different identifications, and different becomings as well.

The performance video works *Untitled Pissing* and *Untitled Skipping* are early examples of this. In both works I attempted to make the male body signify different directions of desire, simultaneously. I also attempted to show the male body as vulnerable and contested. This assured that the same body in this case was not privileged, but at the same time affirmative and productive: productive in the sense that it produced multiple possible directions of desire and multiple sexual or gendered positions.

When moving into the narrative format, one thing I attempted to bring with me from the performance video context, was the possibility of an openness of identifications regarding the sexual axes of the "subjects" within a film.

This is a difficult task when it comes to the concept of character, and the first impulse I had was to reject the idea of character from the film, such as in my films *Filter City*, *Blissed* and *Finally*. I thought this openness necessitated an *unformed* character, one without a biography – one that we don't have sufficient knowledge of to know one way or the other: I thought we needed a sense of a 'person' within a film who's main content is that of the projection on the side of the viewer as it relates to

Untitled: Fixing,
Knut Asdam (1995)
50-70 sec. sequences repeated on 30 min programme.
DV Video to BetaSP Master. Colour, no sound.



what is contextualized by the film — and not a sense of ‘character’ that is explained within the film. What I decided to do, was to put some topics into the mix with these unformed characters. For instance, it could be a discussion of desire, sexuality or a political event, which would carry some of the content of the film, but the sense of character and its relationship to the subject matter was not prescribed.

Another attempt was to create narration where there is an uncertainty of the direction of the desire at play. E.g. in *Filter City*, *Legendary Psychasthenia*, and *Abyss* 2005, there are fragments of stories about a shifting object of desire (from a person, to place, a city, to a movement or another person) narrated by the same persons within the work and thereby related to their individual voices, and potentially, shifting ideas of character. In my audio works or collage videos, the gender or sexuality of the main character is not known. In the early film works I mention it is ambiguous. In my recent film, *Egress*, there are also different and intersecting axes of desire: The main character Y is constantly followed by the camera, but her expressions or actions do not pertain to one specific sexuality. In the ambiguous relationship with her female boss, she might equally desire her attention, even sexually, as well as engage her or distance herself from her. In a crucial scene, the normal competitiveness or antagonistic behavior towards her boss transforms into something that could be an attraction further complicating or enriching the reading of the characters. However, the attention of the film moves on to other narratives and that moment is lost, but the role of this scene is to destabilize or alternatively multiply the sexual readings of the film and its interplays of meaning.

One characteristic of narrative film is the play between the image; the scopic field in general, the audio, the cut and the performance. These aspects work together towards any kind of politics of the experience you might have. (This dynamic is

Fig.
Zgress,
 Knut Asdam (2013)
 5K to 2K digital film, 41 min, colour, 5:1 audio.
 Produced by: Knut Asdam Studio
 Co-Produced by: Vitakuben Film



quite different than what you find in the more performing arts such as theatre—particularly in term of the restriction and the scope of the image). The role of the performative within the film is important in delineating a sense of a character, while the image is not primarily interested in a person but just as much in building the context. The image, in this sense, might put emphasis on an environment or a place as much as on people.

A central concept that can help us understand notions of gender and sexuality in relation to the ideas of character in a film, is the performative aspect of subjectivity, developed

by Judith Butler, among others. As a point of departure, ‘the performative’ can be conceptualized as a process of subjectification – of ‘gendering’ and ‘becoming’ a subjectivity. Furthermore, that subjectivity has to be performed – it is a process of change or maintenance. The idea that gender and sexuality are performative includes an understanding of these notions as linguistic constructs, which is not to deny the actual existence of the body, nor that it constitutes an actual site of agency. But the body needs to be understood as already present in language in as far as we understand it and designate gender and sexual values to it. The performative plays a central role in the practices of any gender formation, of how we understand its meaning or limits.

To the extent that gender and sexuality are roles in our world, they can never be performed quite as instructed, and their character never quite contains the ideal you are trying to approach. The embodiment of such a role happens through repeated practice, and repetition can be understood as precisely that which undermines the stable authority of the subject; consequently, as something that opens up the way to different possibilities of sexualization.

A person’s performance in a film isn’t the “real life” performance of identity, of course. But it has a reflexive relationship to how we know the performance of gender identities in our everyday life, and this is at the core of an actor’s work. Within my films, was particularly interested in the possibility of constructing subjects that were unstable, subjects that were vulnerable to – and in a dynamic relationship with – their surroundings and other humans.

One of the questions I have asked myself within my film works has been whether it is possible to both keep an openness of identification – make the possibilities of a kind of ‘multidirectionality of desire’ exist within the films – and at the

same time put limits to subjectivity by creating a contained or pronounced subjectivity that could have an agency within the film. Because dealing with limits would allow me to bring forth specific issues in *that* particular work. In my work, this question has led me to develop a fragmented attitude to narrative: This fragmented narrative allows social or political topics to be placed in relation to notions of subjectivity without having a narrative arch dramatizing or resolving this relationship to the social or political issues I wanted to deal with.

One dramatization of gender we know is of course that of drag. It is an example of the challenging of heterosexist boundaries exactly through exaggerating conventions and dramatizing the limits. At the same time, drag refers to a theatricalization and melancholy of gender roles, and as a masquerade it leaves the “character” incomplete or unknown as far as biography goes.

This notion of drag can also be associated with Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas about minor languages, in which the subjectivities at stake in such minor languages connect to the performative. According to these thinkers, the minor language – e.g. the way a minority group might use a dominant language, one that does not quite fit, as something to dress in and transpose new or different meanings into. Inevitably, this appropriation leads to a contribution to the major language in which for example gender or sexuality is understood by the larger population.

For example, an attempt to become gender unspecific would perhaps be something that can never be attained in today’s society. Yet the attempt itself, or the failure thereof, opens up more possibilities for what that gender can mean. Thus when performing masculinity, one is placed in a position that is traumatic for traditional notions of masculinity, and its notion being that masculinity is not performed but is the site of the person who does the performing. This traumatic position obviously brings with it the possibility of openness, because it has already

cracked open the conventions of the stable masculinity. In any case, young men today are quite occupied with the body as a potential object for others; old men today have grown used to new notions of subjectivity and deviation from their own experiences, thanks to contemporary media, meaning that this is already an obvious aspect of people’s everyday practice and experience.

**THE CONVENTIONS OF THE EVERYDAY NARRATIVE
STRATEGIES WITHIN THE FORMAT OF FICTION.
STRUGGLE, CHARACTER AND ENVIRONMENT –
THE SCOPIC FIELD.**

This interplay between the performance of subjectivity and the performance of social order has been a key aspect to how I work. Understanding subjectivity as culturally constructed, as feminism and queer theory have elaborated, reveals that it is something that exists within language, is performed in our world, inscribed within our culture and is connected to the struggles of the everyday – the everyday contestations that we all take part in willingly or unwillingly.

Gramsci said that it is necessary or even unavoidable to take part in struggles. One’s life is defined by the contestations that occur within one’s own social group, one’s own body, relationships, welfare or profession. Contestations that have resonances and alliances with those of others. In many of my works I attempt to narrate and articulate relations that are political in the way they relate to an everyday existence that can be recognized in many different urban settings. It might be small or big conversations, rather unimpressive meetings in ordinary settings, but it is in the relations between all these things – the architecture, the place, the subjects and characters – that there is a political resonance, one that brings out the social and economic uncertainties of today.

In our everyday lives, we struggle both with and against structures of power or an issue. In the psychology of language, there is the struggle between, on the one hand, working with language, using it as a tool of one's own, making it "meaningful," and, on the other hand, rendering language unintelligible and risking a decline of the "self." None of these strategies works in and of themselves, but in their conjunction or interplay we find the development and definition of struggle as such.

Clearly, this can be put into the actions and performances or text of the actors, but the idea of struggle or political contestation is also present in what one puts into the frame of a film work—what constitutes its visual material world. As I will get back to, ambivalence is important in my work, and as such, it would be a restriction of the process of reading the film, if all social and political aspects are clearly spoken or acted. In our own lives our conversations might be pathetic and imprecise but the political is embedded in those clumsy attempts at speech in relation to the social and material world we inhabit. Similarly, in my films I attempt to locate the political somewhere in the poetic dimension between speech, action and the material world. Whatever is in the frame is important. It is not always noticeable, but the details of buildings, clothes, consumer goods, street signs, skin and litter that exist within the visible world, the scopic field of the film, give the protagonists something they are asked to respond to and from which they both give and take, struggle and enjoy. In a film, the scopic field is not a static world, but rather a visual dynamic, something that can change quickly – in a cut – or slowly, developing throughout the film, and through these dynamics change the relations between a character or a viewer and their worlds. It can push the character or the viewer out, or conversely break down barriers and pull the viewer into an assimilatory world.

THE BODY

The body goes through similar processes as the everyday, the material and the social in my films. The body in my work experiences, struggles and suffers. These are bodies that age, carry disease, and attempt without success to repeat themselves and to keep stable.

The bodies in these films are also sites of struggle, not only the struggles of their own upkeep, but vehicles that attempt to live and meet the demands of the everyday, and thus experiences fatigue. It is the body that meets the struggles of poverty, or political power. It is also the body that allows us to experience happiness, bliss, sexual ecstasy or drug-induced shifts of consciousness. The body is what the psyche meets the world with, and what negotiates the world around us, even when it retorts to words that might not always be so easy to pronounce, through fatigue or illness, or one might stumble or stutter. The body then, as much as language or thinking itself, is a psychological mirror to the demands and struggles of the everyday. This is why I impose small restrictions, or health problems in my work – perhaps not so dramatic ones, but like slight cancers in the characters themselves. This is also of course, why the body is so political.

PLEASURE AND CINEMA

I think the category of cinematic pleasure is too large to contain one kind of meaning. The thing is, we don't all take pleasure in the same things, and we don't all attach pleasure to the same situation or the same objects. Even if you are in a group with a large degree of consensus you don't have to venture far off before you encounter perspectives or experiences that are incompatible with your own. This is not some statement for individualism, but rather to understand that the collective orga-

nizations or social machineries we have, encompass divergent desires and positions.

Another important aspect is to understand a film as a processual experience, which is not isolated from other things. You might be watching a film and feel hungry or tired, or thinking about a conversation you had, or what you are going to do later on. Your phone might ring or vibrate or you might be occupied with somebody else—and all this happens as you are building your experience of the film. Your world announces itself in fragments and intersects with your experience even as it recedes in the space of the cinema.

What this means, is that the psychological axes that exist in the process of viewing a film are not singular nor static.

So if pleasure is a relational or experiential category that can move in all directions, how can we as filmmakers make use of it, to the degree that we can make people be drawn into feeling pleasure? I think the key thing here is to understand a) the relationship between pleasure and the topics that are brought forth or discussed within the film, and b) the relationship between pleasure and the emotional or intellectual position of the viewer. And c) seeing pleasure as a state of involvement in the film that involves a particular emotional and intellectual concentration.

These aspects are tied together, but I thought they were useful to describe separately as they might oscillate. If you take pleasure in the topics or environment of the film, what then is the relationship between your sense of pleasure and the political or intellectual position you have as a viewer? For instance, is the pleasure so technically constructed – as in certain mainstream blockbusters that makes you cry or laugh while you feel manipulated, and do not actually want to cry or laugh. Or is pleasure only the pleasure you accept, even if you are moved to some sort of enjoyment by the scenes you sit through?

One last point is the most important for me as a filmmaker: cinematic pleasure. When a film draws you into a state of enjoyment it is a position of loosing distance to the film, but also a point of immense concentration. This is within the possibilities that the cinematic medium gives us, and this becomes interesting when you relate it to a particular subject matter: if you work with different degrees of involvement – of being pushed out into the distance by the film, or being pulled into a narrative illusion even only for a minute or two, this can be used to create an active position for the viewer and even used in order to create potentially difficult positions for the viewer: for instance in a way that a very assimilatory scene might be a celebration of capitalism.

So instead of finding visual pleasure inherently problematic, I would say that it is a relational problem – one that cannot be solved, but that can be activated and used to political effect. So it is with positions of gender or sexuality within the film.

The problem of Laura Mulvey's critique of the cinema as an apparatus, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", is that it is based too much on a binary heterosexual axis. Obviously we still live with the remnants of 19th century bourgeois ideas of citizenship and institutionalized power, but these models do not describe how people desire and how they invest their desire – even structurally. And as people's multitudes of identities – even within a gendered category such as the heterosexual male – find more openness and narration in the public today, the sense of who the audience is and what that audience sees is also changing. And so is the understanding of what the audience produces of relations of meaning in the experience of a film. If we remember that as de Certeau writes, it is "the walkers who transform the street to the place of the walkers" – that practice defines the identification of a place, also in terms of sexualization or gender signification. That deviation is a key

element in how people react to given structures – like for example in de Certeau’s theory concerning the shopping mall – it is clear that the audience of the cinema is as much prescriptive themselves of the critical possibility of the cinema, as a place, the cinematic apparatus or the content of the film is. To work on the political within film is then to work on the interplay between those three agents of viewing: the viewer, the place and the film. Barring a sociological limitation of the cinema as a place, for example if it were exclusive to various groups (e.g. the role of the theatre balconies in the time of the segregationist US) one cannot control the investments of desire and how people involve the film and its content in given or deviant desires.

Another critique of Mulvey’s concept of the cinema, concerns the lack of understanding of what happens in a dark space. In the situation of darkness, one is not perceived as clearly as one would be in daylight. This means a slight erasure of signification and a lack of subjectivity. This allows also for you to both put on another role, and to project onto the unfilled spaces of the faces or bodies of other people. It is a narrative relation of desire, and if there is not something that can be quelled by suppression, then it is desire. (It always pops out in another form somewhere else). There is a reason why night clubs and sex clubs have really low lighting, it is exactly that of the possibilities of both ‘a becoming’ for oneself – a performative possibility to practice another subjectivity than what you can practice and obtain outside of that space – and the possibilities of projecting subjectivity onto other bodies within that space. What this means is that it is too limited as a reading to claim a singular gendered or sexual relation of the dark space of the cinema.

Therefore my attention to the politics of film has been mostly on the representational level, and in the assimilatory dynamics between the film and its topics and the viewer, including what is discussed within the works themselves. (This also both

constructs and brings particular audiences that might deviate from the traditional heterosexual structures one is given.)

There is another important aspect of cinema that creates a different political confrontation between the performative and the linguistic, namely the role of the gaze. In this case it is necessary to look to the later works of Lacan. Here, the gaze is nothing like a look or an intent stare, it does not belong to any subject or subjectivity. Rather, the gaze is a sort of blind spot in the scopic field, a sort of linguistic crisis point, a crisis point in the field of meaning: “the gaze is not the vehicle through which the subject masters the object, but a point in the Other that resists the mastery of vision.”

One can say that the prime aspect for the gaze in this sense is that of both constituting a relationship to the real – that which is outside of language, the linguistic order – and also something which necessitates an impossibility of having a ‘relationship’ to the real – since it cannot be grasped by the linguistic field. The gaze in this way is a kind of crisis point, a semantic dead end.

Since it is a crisis point of linguistic or semiotic coherency, the gaze also activates a crisis for the subject and meaning, since the subject is a linguistic construct.

Within a renewed Lacanian film theory then, the uncontrollability of the next frame, the blind spots that breaks the coherence of the film’s meaning, are important. As a filmmaker, this becomes interesting and useful when it relates to the topics or narrations of the film, its societal or political issues, and economic or identity claims. Seen in relation to the issues narrated in the film, this creates an active process where the linguistic coherency of the viewer’s understanding or the subjects of the film are threatened or even collapse. It is a dynamic with much at stake, of participation and interpretative play that temporarily pushes out between conventions, before meaning again solidifies.

**Tripoli,
Knut Asdam (2010)**

A film, color, 96 minutes, HD 1080i, aspect ratio
1.85:1. Produced by Knut Asdam Studios (Oslo) and Bergson Kunsthalp (Bergen).
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