Paths in Shifting Flashes Karolina Bergman Engman

During my childhood, summer was about spending time where my paternal grandfather grew up in Estonia. Back then, many Estonians were revisiting their homeland anew, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. We'd usually travel on the Stockholm-Tallinn ferry, but some summers, we'd take the Stockholm-Paldiski connection. The ferry ride was always a bit of a mystery to me—the boat itself and the intermediary space the boat represented, being between two places. To be surrounded by what felt like an endless horizon, completely at the mercy of the sea—a tension that vanished the moment I finally caught sight of land. I was also travelling through the bygones of my grandfather's past. Parallel to my own journey, his stories were in the back of my mind, details about stories of a homeland that had fallen behind the Iron Curtain. Fragments and sequences of memories, which I tried to piece together when I was present in the places my grandfather had described. In a way, history was as intangible and fleeting for him as it was for me. As such, his past catalysed a searching in my own life.

Taking the ferry today, I'm automatically transported back to my childhood; little has changed inside the ferry. Noisy Jack Vegas slot machines, wall-to-wall carpeting, an interior architecture of dark wood and metal. Like a time capsule, I travel back to a period in my past. Past sequences are evoked in the static interior as well as fragments of images created during the journey between two countries. The ferry thus becomes a transit that opens doors that allow me to jump between sequences of time. Its rooms contain fragments of stories—fragments of memories told to me by my grandfather and shards of memory that I've experienced while being transported between places.

Michel de Certeau refers to the concept of "metaphorai," which means transportation.¹ He suggests that stories are structured in a similar way: the episode of transport organises, selects, and puts together sequences. Forming complete sentences and itineraries, the stories are like spatial connections. He argues that every story is therefore a travel story, in which we journey through times and places—a spatial practice of inner and outer space. A room is more than a physical place. It is also a sphere that can contain a dream or a sequence of a memory. For example, when I walk down the street towards the home I grew up in, I often find myself visiting other times in my life. I'm reminded of thoughts and episodes that were once present as I was travelling along this same

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 115–20.

path. Stories are anchored in this street, and when I walk through it, I travel in time. The street becomes the starting point of the journey and merges the experiences I associate with it. It is a sphere that contains an interior.

In Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, she travels through downtown New York and the environments she used to move in while living there.² The cityscape goes by as Akerman's voiceover reads letters from her mother. These letters sent to her during her years in New York give us an intimate insight into a mother-daughter relationship, while the image shows the opposite and expresses an absence. In a way, the anonymous cityscapes say as much about Akerman's life as a postcard, yet we glimpse the life she had been living through the letters and her movement in the city via the camera. We're taken back to a past, and the route we're allowed to partake in is a sphere of stories. A time capsule where past and present meet.

The sea between Sweden and Estonia is called the Baltic Sea in English, which translates into Swedish as Östersjön (the Eastern Sea) and in Estonian as Läänemeri (the Western Sea). From Sweden's geographical location as a landmass, the sea lies to the east, and from Estonia, to the west. Surrounded by the endless sea, I'm placed between two identities and two spheres of memory. I face the gap between my adult life and my childhood, a period I can access by visiting places and stimulating my memory. But I'm also confronted by two sides of a life, my grandfather's Estonian and Swedish identities. A gateway between two identities and a state of mind that can arise when standing between them.

As a child, I felt that these summers in Estonia gave me direct insight into my grandfather's life. The coastal village of Elbiku, near the town of Haapsalu in western Estonia, was one of the places that became part of a closed military zone during the Second World War. As a result of this history, the development of infrastructure in the area was put on hold, and so the surroundings felt frozen in time. Many homes were left to stand empty, as monuments to a bygone era. Visually, the history I knew from my grandfather was still present, in the Soviet-era buildings and abandoned houses from his time, for instance. The train station in Haapsalu from which my grandfather travelled to Tallinn before leaving the country is still in the same state—inactive since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The eras seemed to line up in front of me and the whole village became a gateway to my grandfather's life, giving me access to the landscape of his visual memory. He stood beside me,

² *News from Home*, documentary film, directed by Chantal Akerman (Belgium/France: Paradise Films, 1976).

telling stories, and I got to see for myself the environments I'd been told about back home in Sweden. He took me on the journey of his life.

Now, as an adult, I'm documenting the memories my grandfather has relayed to me of the Estonian mainland in order to connect the chain of images that arises when I travel by boat. I'm archiving this chapter of my life, as soundtracks and images. I show my grandfather what I've filmed, and he puts the images together with his stories. A dialogue arises between us, and I hope to get close to a moment of shared memory that belongs to his past and mine.

Collecting What Is Transient

When I take my place behind the camera, I access a more intense form of presence, a focus emerges that makes me fully immersed in the moment; the camera frames the present. I follow the contents of the frame with my eye until the subject has completed its movement. Every detail achieves its own intensity as I search for those details that, when off camera, are lost over time. A sunspot gets my full attention as I follow its slow movement across the walls of a room, until it falls outside the frame. With this act, I approach the transience of the moment. A rhythm of time is captured on film, which builds a plot in my collection of sequences. Through the camera, I find out what I actually see in an environment. I investigate a perception and a shortcut to my interior. I archive my gaze in the material and save my moments. Sometimes I stand and wait with the camera, for a sense of something familiar to reappear.

Andrei Tarkovsky writes that the sense of time in the moving image is about active tension.³ The experience of what's being filmed continues outside the frame, and therefore it's not limited to what's being depicted. The image carries thoughts, ideas, and associations beyond what the storyteller consciously includes. Just as life is constantly changing, the viewer interprets each moment in their own unique way. It's a two-way process, capturing a sense of time while leaving room for the viewer to imagine what's happening outside the frame. This material is always alive, birthing new associations and images.

The story is under constant construction for me; the plot continues to evolve as I edit. Each sound acquires new meaning when I put sound recordings together with the images; they form new sentences in this assembly. It's a constant search in which I experiment with chronology and connections. Not having a predetermined narrative is important to me; rather, the narrative is excavated as part of the process, from beginning to end. In film, as Tarkovsky describes, poetry

³ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 113–14.

arises from the spontaneous fusion of film clips;⁴ they edit and unify themselves. You need to be open and receptive to how they shape each other and lead each other forward through the story. Slowly, you get to know the material and find out how the images work with each other. I feel a kinship with how Tarkovsky describes his editing process—an intuitive search from start to finish. Tarkovsky's film *Mirror*,⁵ which includes sequences from his childhood, is one of the films that I relate to most. It includes sequences that Tarkovsky says he felt compelled to film, as they were fading with time. Before he found the structure of the movie, the images of memory he filmed were cut and recut into twenty different versions. *Mirror* is as vivid each time I watch it; I keep seeing new details, which cause new impressions and stories to take shape for me.

The act of collecting images has become a lifelong task in my attempt to revisit parts of my life, where my interest lies in how their representation changes over time. It creates space for remembering. I'm working against a clock where the past is forever receding. I'm afraid of losing every single moment that is meaningful to me. I collect because I want to understand, and, out of fear, I try to take control. This isn't about finding accurate representations of my past; it's about showing the volatility of the past. As quickly as the moment occurs, it slips through my fingers. My collection becomes an archive of the moment and its volatility, its emergence, and its disappearance. The photographs become like artefacts, or details of previous events and episodes from a life. Susan Sontag describes the photograph as being more than a representation of what we see; it is also a trace stencilled from reality, like a footprint or a death mask.⁶ A photograph suggests a sense of what was once experienced. For me, I use this material as a door to the past.

In my film *Rootless*,⁷ I took pictures of my childhood home, then fused the photographs into a three-dimensional environment. The fusion of the images expresses errors and mistakes, like when we try to relive something from the past—a sometimes faulty representation made from memory, since we can't control the amount of detail present at any given moment. Depending on the number of images, different depictions of the environment emerge, and I'm fascinated by the element of surprise. For me, the unpredictability speaks to the transience of memory. It offers insight into the mind. Similarly, when I expose my analogue photographs to sunlight, the image appears differently depending on the time it has taken to make them. The result is something other than an accurate portrayal, where fading and mistakes become a method by which a moment is represented. I treat time as a material in my work.

⁴ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 116–17.

⁵ Mirror, feature film, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (USSR: Mosfilm, 1975).

⁶ Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: RosettaBooks LLC, 2005), 120.

⁷ Karolina Bergman Engman, *Rootless*, 2021, HD animation, colour, stereo sound, 5 min.

Stockholm – Tallinn – Stockholm

The ferry line between Stockholm and Tallinn was established by the company Nordström & Thulin, on the initiative of Estonian-born managing director Hans Laidwa.⁸ The line opened on 17 June 1990 under the Estline shipping company and was the first ferry between Estonia and the free world in half a century. The event occurred on the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet occupation of Estonia. The connection took on great importance during the liberation process of the Baltic states; the "White Boat" was seen as a lifeline and a hope for a future free from the Soviet state. During the Second World War, some forty thousand Baltic refugees came to Sweden, constituting the largest wave of refugees in modern Swedish history. Laidwa was among them, as was my grandfather and his family.

The new ferry line opened up economic cooperation between the countries. The ferry became a crossing and a cruise. For those who were forced to leave, it was also an opportunity to connect with the past. Passengers travelled side by side as Estonia gradually began to build a new identity as an independent state. The capitalist system that had been in effect outside the Iron Curtain suddenly had a given place, and the system was aspirational for the newly free republic. A market economy is mirrored in the tax-free shops, Jack Vegas slot machines, and dining options on board—one new ideology is quickly replaced by another.

Similar to how the state was undergoing an identity shift, ex-Soviet citizens were searching for ways to navigate an alien system that had become normalised in the West. Some travellers look for a return to a past, located in a constructed and fluid imaginary world. An inside (a subjective seeking) and an outside (an economic interest) meet.

The Ferry as a Placeless Place

Philosopher Michel Foucault coined the term "heterotopia,"⁹ a place that describes discursive sites that are somehow different: disruptive, intense, incompatible, contradictory, or transformative. One world inside another, reflecting and representing the reality that goes on outside. These places have more layers and relationships than meet the eye and seem like an interstitial space that the visitor only moves through temporarily, en route to elsewhere.

⁸ Hans Laidwa, *Ett liv på Östersjön - som båtflykting och färjeredare* [A life on the Baltic Sea: As a boat refugee and ferryman] (Stockholm: Sellin och Partner Bok och Idé AB, 2003), 7–9.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 23, https://doi.org/10.2307/464648.

Foucault describes the boat as a prototype of heterotopia because it is geographically unbound to an actual place.¹⁰ The boat exists in a floating sphere, which cannot be localised to an address. At the same time, the boat itself is an actual building, a constructed and active world that has its own constructed principles and rules. It's uncompromising, as it can be anywhere on the surface of the sea, but still be a universe unto itself.

Like a mirror image, the ferry reflects an outside society while being a fictional place. Subjective imprints are also reflected here. Foucault refers to the example of the mirror image.¹¹ A mirror is an actual object that also creates a virtual image, a reflection of the surrounding environment. The ferry reflects an inside and an outside: what goes on outside in the constructed environments as well as what goes on within the walls of the ferry. It is a closed, sensory space for passengers in transit. The place becomes a gateway that represents being between two different states or two identities. Surrounded by the open sea, sequences between the past and the present are triggered. One presence is replaced by another—one belongs somewhere and nowhere.

Shards as Movement

In my film *Ekon från den andra stranden* (Echoes from the other shore),¹² the material cuts between being within the architecture of the ferry, the stagnant time capsule that takes shape within the walls of the ferry, and sensory moments, fragments from the past. The viewer is transported through the ferry's rooms as if through a game of association, where memories are occasionally glimpsed in the interior. Meanwhile, time passes outside the ferry's imaginary world. We jump between different sequences in the subconscious in order to be present in the stagnant interstitial space.

The evening rain intruding upon the deck of the ferry recalls a distant memory of a rainy gravel road in the home country that one is travelling away from. The image tells us small details of a whole that can no longer be represented in memory: as fleetingly as the image appears, it disappears. The soundscape takes us back to where we just were. Machine sounds merge as we are transported around the ferry's space. Time passes, but we don't know where we are on the surface of the sea. Day turns to night as the story transports us into a dark corridor. The corridor takes us on a search through the subconscious and the episodic memory.

¹⁰ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 27.

¹¹ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 23.

¹² Karolina Bergman Engman, *Ekon från den andra stranden* [Echoes from the other shore], 2024, digitised 16 mm film, black and white, stereo sound, 16 min.

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust writes that he is searching for visual memories of the past.¹³ Encountering a familiar object or environment can trigger something deep in the subconscious. He explains that you abstract yourself from the world around you until something that quakes comes to the surface: something anchored at a great depth that has now been released. What emerges is an image, a visual memory associated with the place. It struggles at an obscure distance, glimpses and reflections in the form of abstraction. Like swirling colours, mixed with each other.

And so even to-day in any large provincial town, or in a quarter of Paris which I do not know well, if a passer-by who is "putting me on the right road" shews me from afar, as a point to aim at, some belfry of a hospital, or a convent steeple lifting the peak of its ecclesiastical cap at the corner of the street which I am to take, my memory need only find in it some dim resemblance to that dear and vanished outline, and the passer-by, should he turn round to make sure that I have not gone astray, would see me, to his astonishment, oblivious of the walk that I had planned to take or the place where I was obliged to call, standing still on the spot, before that steeple, for hours on end, motionless, trying to remember, feeling deep within myself a tract of soil reclaimed from the waters of Lethe slowly drying until the buildings rise on it again.¹⁴

My collecting is a search through which I'm trying to reach something familiar. I record the images and details, fearing they'll disappear as quickly as the sense of them has appeared. I navigate in my subconscious. The search makes me feel like I need to put myself behind the camera, to be as receptive to my inner moments as possible. I'm afraid that the already abstracted images will take on impressions from the outside. It's a journey I need to make together with the camera.

Composition of Sound and Image

Analogue black-and-white film suggests to me an abstraction of time, as the visual material jumps between different eras, and it becomes difficult to place the narrative within a time frame. The choice of the medium suggests to me an emergence and disappearance; it leaves room for the unexpected. In the darkroom, the images swish around in their chemical bath until they're developed and see the light. They're hard to remember unless I've written down in detail when they were shot. A moment of surprise occurs when I look at the developed material and a sense of the

¹³ Marcel Proust, *På spaning efter den tid som flytt 1 Swanns värld* [*Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, *Swann's Way*] (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1993), 58.

¹⁴ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, *Swann's Way*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7178/7178-h/7178-h.htm.

moment returns. Light damage and traces of chemicals become part of the material of the developed film—the volatility of the moment leaves an impression. The graininess of the medium suggests a blurring, something that isn't concrete in the visual narrative.

In John Skoog's *Shadowland*, locations in California that have been used as sets in Hollywood movies are shot with a 16 mm camera.¹⁵ The images convey melancholy and nostalgia because of the grainy black-and-white film, which is haunted by the sounds of older film productions. As such, the combination abstracts the image and evokes uncertainty in the viewer. We don't know exactly which era to locate ourselves in, on set or in the aftermath of the productions—there's an absence of information. The landscape images are timeless; this moment of them could have been filmed any time across various decades. What we're looking at is both unreal and real. Their mystery suggests a shortcut to something in the past.

The dialogue between sound and image is an aspect of creating that interests me. For example, in *Ekon från den andra stranden*, imagery from different eras mingles, memories are interspersed with images of static interiors. Similarly, the soundscape moves between sounds from my archive, which I recorded on the Estonian mainland, and suggestive sounds of machinery recorded with contact microphones on the ferry. The combination suggests to me various spectrums of time, where the sounds of machinery are an inroad to the interior. The inner sound of the ferry's machinery becomes a middle ground, opening a door to an inner space of images. The dialogue between sound and image is very important to me, as I attempt to approach a soundscape in which different sensory impressions interact.

In creating the soundscape for the film *Eraserhead*,¹⁶ David Lynch says he was inspired by the post-industrial history of Philadelphia, where he lived during his studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The city's atmosphere made him feel a constant sense of tension, of being in danger, as many of the abandoned buildings were in slow decay. Bass frequencies and the whir of industry inspired the film's soundscape, which is largely based on abstracted machine sounds, drawing the viewer into the headspace of a psychological thriller. For example, a humming leads us to a nightmare sequence, experienced as the main character, Henry Spencer, is trying to sleep. Lynch's time in Philadelphia became a source of inspiration for the development of *Eraserhead*'s plot, with the cityscape as a backdrop. My process is inspired by Lynch's method of

¹⁵ Shadowland, short film, directed by John Skoog (Sweden: Plattform Produktion AB, 2014).

¹⁶ Eraserhead, feature film, directed by David Lynch (US: American Film Institute, 1977).

working with sound and his involvement in every detail of a place. I want to understand every nuance in order to build up a mood and get fully involved in the place.

Perception in Solitude

In Tova Mozard's film *Psychic*, we are taken into a visual world of neon signs and shopfronts for psychic readings along Los Angeles sidewalks.¹⁷ The businesses are often filmed as empty, and the viewer finds themself in a kind of limbo in the search for guidance. Passing cars suggest the usual passage of time outside the world of the story. The still, dark setting invites the viewer to search the street corners at night. Her imagery suggests an alternative explanation to the documentary material. With her camera, she explores a perception, where one sits between documentary and staged forms. We're taken into what is hidden as linked to the environments being narrated. The filmmaker is seeking answers to what she does not understand, in relation to herself or other people—that which is hidden below the surface.

I'm drawn to environments in which the viewer has space to construct their own interpretation of what's being shown, which, in its solitude, depicts an aftermath of what once was. This enables an abstraction of the documentary, leaving the viewer to weave the threads together on their own. An empty chair suggests that a person has previously moved through that space and spent a fragment of their life there. Automatically, this space becomes scenography, which leaves room for a personal gaze. The viewer finds themself in the middle of a story and is left to uncover a beginning and an end. This solitude gives me space to narrate what's behind the image; in this, I examine my perception, usually linked to places that have had an impact on my life.

In Robert Wilson's installation *A House for Edwin Denby*, the viewer is introduced to a wooden house built in the forest of Wanås Sculpture Park.¹⁸ The atmospheric sound of the installation can be heard in the distance before the house is glimpsed. This sound, which resembles notes being played on an organ, merges with the live sounds of the natural environment; depending on the season in which the piece is viewed, the work takes on a different character. Instinctively, I seek out the source of the sound and make my way through the park to get closer to it; the sound of my footsteps as I walk towards the house adds another dimension to the soundscape. My steps suggest a search for something familiar, as does the end of their sound when I stop to take in the work once I've reached it. Time seems to stand still, and I'm revisiting a familiar work as well as different times in my life and the thoughts I've had on my way to visit Wilson's piece. I traverse different lines of

¹⁷ Psychic, short film, directed by Tova Mozard (Sweden/US: Picky Pictures, 2019).

¹⁸ Robert Wilson, *A House for Edwin Denby*, 2000, installation, in the collection of Wanås Konst.

thought in my past. As the viewer approaches the work, fragmentary words being read by Robert Wilson are audible, and the words are coming from inside the house. Looking through the window, one sees a chair and a table with an open book, the last book Denby is said to have read in his life.

Light and Shadow

In an attempt to explore her identity, Tova Mozard immerses herself in her subconscious during her performative video installation *Abduction*.¹⁹ The installation shows two events: Mozard cuts between a scene in which she is digging into her past with a psychologist and another in which she is walking alone in a dark forest. Patches of light from the outside penetrate the dark forest, revealing sensory impressions and memories that colour the subconscious. Here, she examines events and a past that influence her conscious mind. The forest becomes a scenography that mirrors her mind, and we move between being in Mozard's conscious—in the office where she plumbs the subconscious—and in the forest. While this is playing on a screen, Mozard rolls around in a pile of dirt in the gallery, in time with the atmospheric sound of the film. Her movements in this meditative state extend the digging she's doing in her subconscious.

In my work, the passengers on the boat are filmed as silhouettes; their movement on the walls of the ferry suggests a shortcut to the subconscious. The shadows make a journey, physically while en route as well as internally in their search for a bygone part of themselves: they are searching for their roots and an idea of the past. Their search takes place in interstitial space, a temporary sphere, in anticipation of arriving at their final destination, as well as in the aftermath, the actual searching that we don't get to experience in my film. During the journey, there is an ever-present tension, an excitement about finally getting to encounter images from the past that can still occasionally be glimpsed in their interior. In this sense, the movements on the boat reflect the searching that many passengers engaged in on the ferry in the 1990s and 2000s. The light moving outside the boat occasionally penetrates the dark environment and leaves traces in the screened-off imaginary world.

Shadow is a recurring theme in my work; it often moves in environments that relate to the past. I want to emphasise shadow as a seeker of what no longer exists, travelling in a flash from the past—abstracted through layers of time. Shadows moving in spheres of time and space.

¹⁹ Tova Mozard, *Abduction*, 2024, performative video installation, in the collection of Lilith Performance Studio.

Bergman Engman, Karolina. Rootless. 2021. HD animation, colour, stereo sound, 5 min.

Bergman Engman, Karolina. *Ekon från den andra stranden* [Echoes from the other shore]. 2024. Digitised 16 mm film, black and white, stereo sound, 16 min.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Randall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Eraserhead. Feature film. Directed by David Lynch. US: American Film Institute, 1977.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27, https://doi.org/10.2307/464648.

Laidwa, Hans. *Ett liv på Östersjön - som båtflykting och färjeredare* [A life on the Baltic Sea: As a boat refugee and ferryman]. Stockholm: Sellin och Partner Bok och Idé AB, 2003.

Mirror. Feature film. Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. USSR: Mosfilm, 1975.

Mozard, Tova. Abduction. 2024. Performative video installation. In the collection of Lilith Performance Studio.

News from Home. Documentary film. Directed by Chantal Akerman, Belgium/France: Paradise Films, 1976.

Proust, Marcel. *På spaning efter den tid som flytt 1 Swanns värld* [*Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, *Swann's Way*]. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1993.

Psychic. Short film. Directed by Tova Mozard. Sweden/USA: Picky Pictures, 2019.

Shadowland. Short film. Directed by John Skoog. Sweden: Plattform Produktion AB, 2014.

Sontag, Susan. On Photography. New York: RosettaBooks LLC, 2005.

Tarkovsky, Andrei. Sculpting in Time. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Wilson, Robert. A House for Edwin Denby. 2000. Installation. In the collection of Wanas Konst.

Further Reading:

Aleksijevitj, Svetlana. *Tiden second hand: slutet för den röda människan* [Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets]. Translated by Kajsa Öberg Lindsten. Stockholm: Ersatz, 2013.

Pramis / The Ferry. Short film. Directed by Laila Pakalnina. Latvia: Film Studio Kaupo, 1994.

Under, Marie. *Vigilia: Dikter* [Vigilia: Poems]. Translated by Ivar Grünthal and Ilmar Laaban. Stockholm: Wahlström och Widstrand, 1963.