

A Sentimental Journey to the North

— SABINE FOLIE

*Displacement*¹ was realized as the result of a production-in-residence on Gotland, the largest Swedish island in the Baltic Sea.² The work was planned from the outset as a remake of Roberto Rossellini's 1954 film *Viaggio in Italia* (*Journey to Italy*).³

Ana Torfs' version connects not only with the film's content, but also with its rhetoric, using a medium that occupies a special place between photography and film, that of slide projection. The elements of the film—image, sound, movement—are abstracted and separated; movement is replaced by a sequence of photographic images; sound as a further expression of temporality is available to the viewer via headphones.

What story is told in *Displacement* and how is this storytelling done in formal terms? Let us begin with Rossellini. At the time, his film drew heavy criticism because its idiom alienated the critics, although in it, some rightly identified new elements of style as would be later developed by the Nouvelle Vague. Rossellini's work was more like an intimate chamber drama, and the film's "form of reality" could be conceived of, in the words of André Bazin, as "dispersive, elliptical, errant or wavering, working in blocs with deliberately weak connections and floating events."⁴ In this, reality becomes a symbol, relinquishing its representative function. The scenes and shots in *Viaggio in Italia* are indeed loosely linked, and the objects, landscapes, and events prove to be meaningful in connection with the experience of the female lead, whose inner monologue runs through the entire film alongside the dialogue, letting the viewer know that this is an inner journey, the journey of the "woman," a journey catalyzed by fateful encounters on solitary excursions and by conversations with her husband, which act as a mirror of

her mental state. The result is an ambiguous, disconcerting realism with undercurrents: pictures become the bearer of a message that goes beyond mere surface.

Travel, a couple, and that couple's experience of alienation as reflected in perceptions of the world are also the subject of Ana Torfs' work. The journey functions as a shifting, or displacement, of learned patterns of perception, and thus as a catalyst. The media of the slide installation, and especially the separation of image information and listening experience, serves alongside other techniques to explore inner and outer experience, projection, and introspection. Torfs breaks the original down into its individual components and reassembles the film's spoken text. The chronology is maintained, but the length is condensed from 80 to 55 minutes. The slide projection format demands a focus on essentials, and the less numerous images as compared with the visual abundance of film take their time to develop an impact. Standing for the passages in *Viaggio in Italia* featuring strolls through museums, catacombs, and architectural excavations, Torfs inserts into the text passages from, amongst other sources, travel guides to Gotland. Sometimes a few sentences are moved for dramaturgical reasons; in some cases, cuts make the transitions rather abrupt, underlining the disruptiveness of that which is not said or shown, that which is only perceptible as a smoldering undercurrent. In other places, there are quotations from philosophical texts, for example, in the opening and closing sequences when the narrator explains the meaning of the word metaphor,⁵ which stands for "transport," hence also journey, introducing the journey of the "woman" and the "man" who travel, as in Rossellini's film, to sell an inherited house. Few landscapes are better suited to such an inner journey than the remote, sometimes rough and barren, unreal but breathtakingly beau-

tiful terrain of Gotland. It is the appropriate matrix for a powerful experience of loneliness and alienation that pushes the couple to the brink, and which ultimately helps them find their way back to each other.

These events are being transferred to the exhibition space: from the center of the space, two different image sequences are projected onto opposite walls. The archetypal embodiment of "woman" and "man" on the one hand, and pictures of what they perceive, what offers itself to them as a surface for the projection of their emotions, on the other, form the two perspectives of Ana Torfs' slide installation. This outward gaze constitutes a kind of travelogue in pictures: landscapes, a hotel, a villa, and various "monuments" (leftover military hardware from the Cold War⁶), are shown in black and white, reinforcing the images' abstract feeling and underlining the stark contrast between idyll, the sublime, and human intervention. Although the pictures are static, in sequence they add up to an episodic narrative that may appear fragmentary and brittle, but has a beginning—the start of the journey—and an end. And this in spite of the fact that the work is shown as a loop, with the viewer free to enter the room at any time, wander around, and decide when to use the wireless headphones to enter the piece's sound dimension. The spaces in the pictures are almost entirely devoid of people, only placeholders such as chairs refer to them in their absence. The seven days of the action—time of day, and location, as well as concise references to the action—are superimposed over the images as textual information. Some sequences are, in addition, introduced on the audio level by a few notes from Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. For the entire duration of the loop, the slide projection on the opposite wall alternates between a "man" and a "woman" in a full-frontal, half-length portrait. They are naked, without make-up, their expres-

sions all but emotionless. These slides alternate periodically with a text slide stating: “Every story is a travel story.” The close-ups, which in silent movies serve to articulate emotions, come across here as entirely free of affect, contrasting with the arousal and agitation conveyed by the recorded text. The pitch of the five off-screen voices⁷ remains relatively unchanged: rather than declaiming, they read as if from a script—with marked distance, as in an elocution exercise, yet emphatically.

The quiet, subdued suggestive force of the pictures suffices. Or rather: their stasis actually creates conditions in which the mind can free itself from distracting impressions, allowing the essence of emptiness to take effect, giving emotions space in which to manifest themselves.

In a monumental installation and with great formal precision, Ana Torfs has realized the masterstroke of developing a melodrama full of tension that, paradoxically, derives its forcefulness, poetry, and melancholy from a muted formal idiom in black and white.

From the German by Nicholas Grindell

NOTES

1 The notion of “displacement” primarily relates to the Jewish Diaspora, substantiated in Torfs’ work in the figure of Mr. B., introduced as a refugee who immigrated to Sweden in 1968, thus at a time when many Jews fled from the newly rising anti-Semitism in Poland. *Displacement* also hints at the dislocation or displacement of goods by mentioning gold coins found in Gotland that originated from Arabic countries. A further, fundamental “dislocation” is that of the site of action; from Naples to Gotland. But first and foremost, the work is about the temporary uprooting of a couple effected by a journey that becomes the touchstone of their relationship.

2 Gotland lies roughly 90 km to the east of the Swedish mainland and roughly 130 km from the Baltic states, of which

Latvia is the nearest. On the genesis of this work, see also Gabriele Mackert’s interview with Ana Torfs in this book, p. 180.

3 The film was shot in the Naples region in the spring of 1953 and premiered in September 1954 in Milan. The original dialogue with the actors Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders is in English; all other versions, including the Italian, were overdubbed.

4 Quoted from Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 1.

5 The following text is an adaptation from Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (orig.: *L’Invention du quotidien*). “Every story is a travel story. In standard Modern Greek the word ‘metaphor’ means transport. It denotes the act of moving people or goods from one place to another. Stories can also be considered as metaphors. Every day stories traverse and organize places, they select and link them together, they make sentences and itineraries out of them.”

6 Until 1989, a big part of Gotland was a military zone with few areas accessible to international tourists.

7 The five voices are those of the “man,” the “woman,” Mr. B, Ms. C, and the narrator.