

**Mathias Poledna**  
“A Village by the Sea”

A Village by the Sea (2011) is a 35mm film by Mathias Poledna. It is just under six minutes long, and it is shot in lush black and white. In a luxurious apartment or hotel suite a man and woman in formal evening clothes perform a musical duet. The song is a version of “Que reste-t-il de nos amours?” (1942) by Léo Chauliac and Charles Trenet, with adapted and additional lyrics by Poledna. A new musical arrangement, written for a thirty-piece ensemble, was recorded at the Eastwood Scoring Stage at Warner Brothers Studios in Burbank, California, one of the last remaining scoring stages for full orchestration. The hand-painted backdrop that provides the view outside the windows comes from the Warner Brothers archives. Every single detail of the film was planned out and scripted in advance: every movement by the characters, every tracking and master shot, every cut.

It is an undeniably lavish production—more than eighty people are listed in the credits—yet the film does not engage with the kind of conspicuous spectacle endemic in contemporary art. The scale of the production, rather, was mandated by the inexorable demands of the work itself. The elements of artifice and escapist fantasy that are central to the film have to be balanced by other elements that are realized with painstaking authenticity. While the shimmering skyline of the city by night is as convincing as it would have been in a film of the 1930s, it is nevertheless clearly artificial, a painted cloth hanging close to the windows. The interior set, on the other hand, is built out in every detail, and fully furnished with period pieces and props.

The combination effect produces a certain style: a meticulous arrangement of elements that bring together appropriation, reconstruction, as well as sincere appreciation and historical detachment. As points of comparison we might think of Bryan Ferry’s invented self, blending Hollywood glamour with vintage rock ‘n’ roll and Continental gigolo charm; or even Charles Trenet himself, author of the original version of the song, a writer and performer of sophisticated yet extremely popular songs that combined the French chanson tradition with American swing rhythms, who cultivated a highly artificial persona as a kind of singing tramp.

These elaborate combinations must be executed perfectly if they are not to fall apart. The same can be said for Poledna’s film, which must remain consistent in all its details to produce its larger effect. He is distanced from his material (Hollywood, history, French and American popular music) but he also takes the craft of working with and within these forms very seriously thus avoiding cynicism and or irony. Likewise the title itself, A Village by the Sea, does not suggest a contemporary work of art or an art film, at least initially; instead it has a mainstream, almost timeless quality.

Poledna’s interest, here and elsewhere in his work, is in what has been described as “vernacular modernism.” He explores the various tropes of particular periods and genres, the elements that send certain signals to us as viewers that we know how to receive and interpret because we have already internalized them. Poledna has suggested that he consciously aims for an “alien” relationship to each of his projects. When they succeed, they function almost like a readymade, something that “could have been there already.” They could have been there already, but they were not. This ambiguity suggests an element of the uncanny, a destabilizing uncertainty about what we might be seeing. Yet that penthouse and the people in it are still on some level deeply familiar to us, even if we have never actually encountered them before.

The female protagonist is played by Alison Pill, known for the role of Zelda Fitzgerald in Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011). Allen’s film is historical pastiche as comic travesty. Poledna’s work points to something much more complicated and unsettling. His sequence of shots—from the opening scene to the male character looking into the mirror—renders Pill’s character both absent and present at the same time, a spectral presence whose identity and even existence remains ambiguous. Besides the obvious relationship to Depression-era Hollywood musicals, Poledna’s general *mise-en-scène* also evokes comedies of mistaken identity from the same period. In films such as Gregory La Cava’s *My Man Godfrey* (1936) or Preston Sturges’s *Easy Living* (1937) and Sullivan’s *Travels* (1941), no one is guaranteed to be quite what they seem. The entire structure of society, it is often implied, is a mere façade in which everyone simply pretends to believe.

In his approach to this material, Poledna is interested in what he calls “relations and antithetical moments.” Thus in his new lyrics, we have the couplet: “A picture captured in celluloid / Words idly spoken into the void.” This kind of listing fits perfectly with the broader genre of elegant songcraft, reminiscent perhaps of the thirties standard, “These Foolish Things” (“A cigarette that bears a lipstick’s traces / an airline ticket to romantic places”). Yet within Poledna’s re-working of such motifs we find in the first line a self-referential description of the work we are watching at that very moment, immediately followed by a reference to the Viennese architect Adolf Loos, whose collected writings were published under the title *Spoken into the Void*. Loos has been a

recurrent presence in Poledna's work, most notably in the film *Double Old Fashion* (2009), a close examination of a crystal bar set he designed in 1929.

The title *Double Old Fashion* could apply to much of Poledna's work, evoking as it does both a period receding into the past and the potential double meanings that can now be read back onto it. His engagement with a particular historical moment and a very specific manifestation of its mass culture—as escapist as it is seductive—takes on a new meaning in a work made now, as a kind of epitaph for the Bush era: entertainment against a backdrop of systemic political failure and economic breakdown. As the camera pulls away from the characters in the final shot, leaving them behind in their world, it is easy to be reminded of Karl Marx: “All that is solid melts into air.” Or perhaps of Heinrich Heine: “From my great sorrows I make small songs.”

Russell Ferguson