

TYTTI RANTANEN:

VIBRANT SPACES, INTERWEAVING SURFACES

EEVA-RIITTA EEROLA AND JENNI TOIKKA: *W IS FOR WAVES*

(2024)

W Is for Waves (2024) by Eeva-Riitta Eerola and Jenni Toikka is a continuation of their previous collaboration *Lighthouse* (2019). Both are filmed on 16 mm film and explore space, observation and presence. An even more important common element in them is Virginia Woolf. The novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by the beloved English modernist is present as literary material in the dialogue in *Lighthouse*. The film also features an actual copy of the book. *W Is for Waves* includes segments from Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931) that are read aloud during the piece. According to Eerola and Toikka, they attempted to combine Woolf's literary techniques with moving image in both works.

Site-specificity and certain filming locations play an important role: *Lighthouse* was filmed in the Maison Louis Carré, a villa designed by Alvar Aalto located in Yvelines, France. Two very different spaces are aligned and bleed into each other in *W Is for Waves*: most of the scenes were filmed at Kalervo Kallio's atelier in Munkkiniemi, Helsinki, but the images also weave together scenery from the home shared by Woolf's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, the painter Duncan Grant and the author David Garnett located in Charleston, Lewes, in East Sussex. It also features scenes filmed in the surrounding gardens and on the nearby shoreline.

Woolf is known as a true pioneer of modernist stream-of-consciousness prose alongside James Joyce and Marcel Proust. The work by Eerola and Toikka, however, can be placed within contemporary interpretative practices where Woolf's prose is viewed from the perspective of new materialism and philosophy of perception. It focuses less on the relationships between the people Woolf describes. The rich descriptions presented by Woolf's stream-of-consciousness prose and its many intertwining affects are born and live among various spaces and objects; they are not merely supported by the family dynamics or love affairs of the characters. Readings of the work that lean more towards new materialist interpretations bubble up especially from the more experimental parts of Woolf's oeuvre, such as *The Waves* or the segment "Time passes" in *To the Lighthouse* where the view is dominated by a building emptied of its inhabitants.

The Waves does describe the growing pains of a group of friends from childhood to old age and crisscrosses among the doubts, dreams and disappointments of the six main characters

Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny and Louis. However, it assumes a form resembling a collage of various internal speech acts that are paced by descriptions of the sun traveling from dawn to dusk as the days draw to a close. *The Waves* is not a clearly plot-driven work like *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) where events take place over a single day or *Orlando* (1928) that experiments with the laws of nature, time, aging and sex within a straightforward adventure narrative. Both *The Waves* and *W Is for Waves* are open to what could be called, following the new materialist Jane Bennett's notion of "thing-power" (Bennett 2010, vii), the power of spaces: the power of surfaces that frame and open up to each other, which is a part of the vitality and vibrancy of matter.

INTERMEDIAL TENSIONS

In conversation, Eerola and Toikka said they started with the idea of a book-like video piece that experiments with structure and ways of looking. *W Is for Waves* is quite an interdisciplinary and multimedial film: it features the architecture and interiors of two different spaces, Woolf's literature, the paintings of Eeva-Riitta Eerola and Vanessa Bell, the performance art of Samuli Niittymäki and Hanna Ahti, the cinematography of Ville Piippo, the sound design of Kasper Laine and Jenni Toikka's editing. Cinematic works are often joint efforts of many artists, but *W Is for Waves* brings to the fore to an unusual extent the cooperation of various art forms. It is artists' moving image about the arts, motion and image.

The German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing separated space and time in the arts in his Laocoön essay. According to Lessing, poetry is a temporal art, while painting is a spatial art (Lessing 1766/1887, 109). The film scholar Henry Bacon, on the other hand, noted in his book *Seitsemäs taide* (The Seventh Art): "On the surface, cinema could be considered to be further from painting than any other art form" (Bacon 2005, 195). Bacon's point is derived from Lessing: painting as representation is outside time, unlike the art of the moving image.

However, Eerola and Toikka explore ways of combining painting with moving images and, in doing so, playing with the friction between time and timelessness. The most pressing tension reveals what happens to the materiality of a painting when it is captured on film. That is, how the surface of a painting is mediated, or how the camera can animate a painting – or as is the case here, how moving a painting can be both combined with the motion of the camera and the framing of the scene.

FROM MODERNISM TO NEW MATERIALISM: NEW INTERPRETATIONS OF WOOLF

Woolf's position as a master of modern stream-of-consciousness prose was secured by the

German philologist and literary critic Erich Auerbach in his study *Mimesis* (1946), a work that traces the description of reality in the history of Western literature. Auerbach claims that the essence of Woolf's stream-of-consciousness prose is that it does not limit itself to the confines of a single human mind, but shifts, sometimes swiftly, from one character to another. Thus, reality is not rendered by only one but several interpretative minds: it is the product of several subjective impressions received by various individuals at various times (Auerbach 2003, 536).

Posthumanist and new materialist narratologists of the 2020s such as Laura Oulanne and Marlene Karlsson Magnussen have added to Auerbach's classic anthropocentric interpretation by paying attention to the centrality of spaces and objects as the sources and fellow co-vibrants of the various impressions. In Oulanne's reading, the space being inhabited can be an evening dress that is too tight, as is the case in Woolf's short story *The New Dress* (1927). Emphasizing spatiality and materiality triggers empathy, according to Oulanne, because such descriptions of experience provide a space where one can look for a shared and entangled form of existence between the human and non-human (Oulanne 2022, 27, 33).

Whereas Oulanne examines the kind of knowledge Woolf provides us about being inside an evening dress, Karlsson Magnussen distances herself from Auerbach's choice to emphasize the interiority of Woolf's prose and focuses on the vibrant spaces of Woolf's works. Following Bennett and Timothy Morton, Woolf's spaces can also be read as attempts to liberate oneself from the dominance of the anthropocentric perspective (Karlsson Magnussen 2022, 48). Especially the aforementioned "Time passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* provides possibilities for doing so. Here, space assumes an active role specifically due to its "unruly" (Karlsson Magnussen, 38) materiality instead of remaining passive matter or setting.

As I mentioned above, *The Waves* does not lack in emotions or descriptions of relationships and their disruptions. However, *W Is for Waves* by Eerola and Toikka intentionally leaves out descriptions of the relationships and the characters' self-reflection and focuses on fragments of texts that emphasize the effects of observing spaces and the sunlight's effect on them. As moving image art, it also utilizes unruly materiality in various ways.

INTERPRETERS IN SPACE

Although Auerbach's classic anthropocentric reading of Woolf has been criticized and augmented in the 2020s, one can also see links to Eerola and Toikka's piece in it: in addition to its new materialism, *W Is for Waves* is a kind of presentation of the simultaneous existence of multiple observers described in Auerbach's *Mimesis*. In conversation, Eerola and Toikka said that they wanted to continue exploring their ongoing collaboration and

the collective mind. At the same time, Eerola and Toikka noted they wanted to draw attention to the collaboration between Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, two professionals of text and image.

Hanna Ahti's and Samuli Niittymäki's cooperation in the space described in the work is another reflection of artistic collaboration and the collective mind. Their choreography was developed during an improvisation workshop on set at the Kalervo Kallio atelier in Munkkiniemi. The characters lounge among Eerola's paintings, move them around and observe them individually and together. The spaces and characters are woven together intuitively: we observe them observing as they pose themselves in various arrangements. The characters' costumes also melt into the color palette of Eerola's paintings and the pale colors of the studio space.

Niittymäki and Ahti take turns reading fragments from *The Waves*. Their tone is soft, exploratory, curious, sensitive. The latter section of the work contains a scene where Niittymäki watches Ahti reading from a short distance. Two interpreters in the same space, watching each other interpret: the composition also bears a slight resemblance to Toikka's previous moving image piece, *Prelude Op. 28 No. 2* (2022) inspired by Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* (1978).

UNFURLING

The paintings in the work act as mediators between two separate spaces: Eeva-Riitta Eerola's color palette is combined with Vanessa Bell's: tinted blues, apricot, rose, purple, mint green. Eerola's paintings also bring Charleston's organic unruliness to Kalervo Kallio's atelier's minimalistic poise. Charleston's grounds and its garden's greenery amplify the contrasts.

The paintings are also made to participate in tasks normally assigned to the camera. They frame spaces and the screen. They are used like a montage to transport the audience from one space or situation to another. Occasionally, the camera moves in tandem with a large painting behind the performer, which appears to duplicate something like the dolly zoom effect used by Alfred Hitchcock in *Vertigo* (1958) and creates a passing feeling of dizziness. Slightly before the midpoint of the work, Eerola's painting acts as a gateway to the first shot of Charleston: the yellow and rose hues of a detail in Eerola's painting repeat in Bell's art and interior design. They are reflected concretely in an image of Charleston's salon, but also appear between shots. When we return to Munkkiniemi from the garden gates in Sussex, we first see only two large paintings inching towards each other. Only then we see the atelier space or human figures.

In this scene, we hear the voice-over of Hanna Ahti and Samuli Niittymäki reading, but now it also includes the birds in Charleston's garden. The sound design reinforces the feeling of things overlapping, with both the text weaving into the images and the spaces weaving into each other. Eerola and Toikka say they pursued the timelessness and parallels of creative space and were not necessarily interested in Charleston as a museum-like space. Nevertheless, the

parallels do not exclude a certain hauntology present also in the fragment of *The Waves* read at the end of the work: “The looking-glass whitened its pool upon the wall. The real flower on the window-sill was attended by a phantom flower. Yet the phantom was part of the flower, for when a bud broke free the paler flower in the glass opened a bud too.” The vibrancy of the spaces may be a memory or premonition of the space and its phantom counterpart.

CONCLUSION

While pondering the relationship between cinema and painting, Henry Bacon (2005, 177) says that many painterly films are “liminal films where narrative and non-narrative elements interact to pursue the type of freedom painters have to manipulate images.” *W Is for Waves* is precisely this type of “liminal film,” much like Anita Thachers *Loose Corner* (1986), an exhilarating American experimental film that plays with spatiality, the perception of size and unruly materiality using a single corner of a room as its setting.

In Eerola and Toikka’s film, the camera frames only parts of the paintings in the spirit of unruly materiality. The same applies to the human body in several shots: the head is sometimes left outside the frame. The focus is not on faces and their expressions, as is often the case in traditional cinema, but on how clothed bodies become matter in space. Occasionally, the performer hides behind a large painting and moves it as if they were an invisible force moving the paintings. The invisible moving force may also be liberating or jerk collectively observed and experienced spaces into new positions.

On the other hand, the work also puts Woolf’s novel into new frames: the passage of time and the span of human life, the relationships and development of people from childhood to old age, are not in the forefront, but space, materiality and observations are. Thus, as an interdisciplinary and new materialist artwork, *W Is for Waves* is an ambitious interpretative contribution to reimagining Woolf’s novels.

Translation Tommi Kakko

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