

RISING ENERGEIA

Tuomas Laitinen's short film and installation *Rising* (2010) was shot in a derelict thermal power plant, whose long-abandoned spaces awaken to new symbolic life in the work. The building comes across as an intermediate space for energy generation, and its various rooms have been fine-tuned using croppings, lighting and colours, and with the aid of music, to produce a fascinating visual drama.

A young girl leads the viewer into the rooms of the power plant. Around its corridors there moves a dark figure, reminiscent of the spectre of some form of energy or raw material, awoken from the depths of the earth to be put to practical use. Later on, we meet three other characters, perhaps the most significant of whom, in terms of the overall experience, being the old man dressed in blue overalls, who operates a control panel on the instrument deck that serves as the power plant's main command centre. The use of this constitutes the work's most important ritual, and seems to affect everything that happens in the power plant. The major change that takes place in the work happens right at the end, when the man hands over the instrument deck to the girl.

There is not even a single frame in which the building is shown from the outside, and nor is the interrelationship between its parts shown in a single frame or diagram, either. The characters move about its rooms as though unaware of each other. This emphasizes the hermeneuticness of the space as a kind of alchemical vat seen and experienced from the inside, in which the ordinary spatial and temporal coordinates cease to exist. Depending on the viewer's background, the power plant could be compared both to the abandoned rooms in "the Zone" charged with unpredictable energy in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), and to the island in the TV series *Lost* with its mysterious centre.

Also moving around the rooms in the power plant are two wanderers, one on skis, the other with a shopping trolley, collecting rubbish from its floors, who are reminiscent both of the members of the violent youth gang in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and of the absurd, existential tramps in Samuel Beckett's plays. These, too, have clown-like features, but in the dissociated manner of someone who has lost their community and their audience.

These existential clown-tramps enact a microwave-oven burial ritual, which is reminiscent of Wolf Vostell's action of burying a television set at New Jersey's YAM festival in 1963. There, Vostell modified an on-air television transmission by throwing cream cake at it, and covering the TV screen with a painting that left only part of it visible. He then wrapped the set with barbed wire, onto which he stuck a frozen TV dinner (turkey), and buried it in a grave that he had dug during the performance (Farmer 2000, p. 55). In Laitinen's work the satellite-like microwave oven radiating a strange light and placed at the bottom of the grave is finally covered over with earth. As with Vostell, *Rising* is not just about destroying an object, but about a kind of ritual transformation of its energy.

The burial ritual reminds us that our 'rational' world is full of technological symbolism and magical technological realism. As a historical 1990s 'energy appliance' the microwave oven is organically

linked with the theme of energy generation and paradigmatic change addressed by the work. This device, whose primary technology involves moving food molecules with the aid of changes in an electric field, represents the new technological innovations developed in the second world war, which, like television and the home computer, found their way into people's homes (Hammack 2000, p. 48-56). The microwave oven, once marketed as a "space-age wonder", has also inspired many urban legends.

The politicians and engineers who decide on new forms of energy are not free of magical thinking when faced with substances and materials representing new technology, especially when they are potentially dangerous. Apart from using the necessary protective measures, people protect themselves against them with the aid of symbolic rituals. In Finland the inauguration ceremony in September 2010 for the Onkalo permanent nuclear waste repository quarried out to a depth of 400 metres resembled a kind of Freemasons' ceremony, with its tarring rituals, protective equipment and memorial plaques. The ritual carried out by the existential clowns in Laitinen's work can also be seen as reminiscent of this.

Rituality and symbolicness link *Rising* with the film genre that the underground chronicler P. Adams Sitney, at the start of the 1970s, called *mythopoeic film*, particularly defining it at that time as a special feature of certain post-second world war American experimental films. According to Sitney, mythopoeic film differs substantially from *trance film*, in which the protagonist's inner world is projected around him or her. In mythopoeic film the seemingly hypnotized main characters of trance film are replaced by protagonists who aspire to mythical status, and by the maker of the work's own mythological envisionings of the state of the individual, the world and society. This is no longer a question of seeing dreams with the inner eye, but of using this new tool to create a mythological relationship with the world (Sitney 2000, p. 136).

The relation of internal, personal mythology to the external world had indeed already been considered in avant-garde art before. The industrial culture of the 19th and 20th centuries caused a breach with an earlier time, with the dominant paradigm rapidly giving way to another, as though in a single leap. The railways reset local clocks that had shown different times to a single, standard time. The new rapid speeds changed the concept of time and space, causing traumatic accidents (Schivelbusch 1996). The production of new, duplicable images and narratives went hand in hand with the shift to industrial urban culture.

The art avant-garde greeted these changes with interest, observing the birth of the myths of industrial modernism and itself participating in their creation. Film played a central role in this. We have to remember that, for example, in Jean Cocteau's *The Blood of a Poet* (*Le Sang d'un poète*, 1930), the whole fantastic, symbolic journey into personal mythology and archetypal imagery is situated between two fleeting images depicting a toppling factory chimney. These images imply that the rise of every new technology and form of energy production, in its expectations of a new paradigm, always also holds within it the seeds of its own ruin.

In the 2000s, people have started asking new questions. The earlier transitions from wood to coal and from coal to gas and oil have been difficult, lengthy processes, but, now, humankind has come

up against the finite nature of the biosphere and the impossibility of economic growth. The power plant was at one time Finns' municipal heat and energy plant, and a source of livelihood. It is a reminder of the shift from agrarian culture to the era of factory and office work, and of the way that, in common parlance, the word *growth* – once associated with biological processes, and, later, with mental development and education – began almost solely to mean abstract GDP or economic growth. If the global economy were now to break free of the profit-seeking ideal, and switch to one of *degrowth*, this might perhaps operate more realistically in relation to the Earth's available resources (Latouche 2009).

In Laitinen's work the girl who comes from outside the system brings to the vat a new activity, a new energy. Around her there happen withdrawal, cooling off, disappearance and forgetting. The law of entropy organically linked with the main propositions of thermodynamics thus also appears to be reflected in the lives of the characters. What becomes the primary symbol of change is the superimposed image, in which an image of the girl's eye turns into an image of the mouth of the enormous factory chimney. The rising smoke acts as a sign for the start of new energy generation.

The ceremonial quality of the work also takes our thoughts to the new interest in the concept of energy in the 19th century, which at its most extreme led to the *energetism*, developed by Wilhelm Ostwald out of Lord Kelvin and Hermann von Helmholtz's thermodynamics, into a view of energy as a power that replaces the mechanical explanation of the world, as a kind of secular religion (Hakfoort 1992). In this regard it is interesting that the shot in *Rising* taken from inside the chimney is reminiscent of the visions of the graphic artist Gustave Doré, who was active during the early days of industrialization, in his illustrations for *Empyrean* from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, of the brilliant light and fire, with its rings of angels, of the outermost circle of the highest heaven. Ultimately, *Rising* leaves its viewer alone, faced with this vision, and nor does the work make any more definitive statement on either choices of energy forms or the mythological characteristics associated with them. The picture of the chimney is distilled into a single image of the power plant's fascinatingly hermeneutic vat, in which the emergence of the new – the future – takes place.

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Translated by Mike Garner

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