

# Eija-Liisa Ahtila's Affective Images in *The House*

By Tarja Laine

In the current media landscape—"in the age of the post-medium condition"<sup>1</sup>—the cinematic image is no longer understood as a frame, mirror, or window to a fictional world. The cinematic image is no longer enclosed within the frame but it explodes it; the image has become a process that assumes networks, not subjects or objects (of the look). This is why we 'see' these images not with our eyes but with our affects; this experience is "qualitatively different from (...) the 'verisimilitude' or 'illusion' of the cinematic image (Hansen 39)." Our perception is very much an emotional experience, an affective processing of the cinematic image that has the effect of meaning-making for the spectator, and that mediates between the self and the other, the inside and the outside, the subject and the object. Perception is always 'contaminated' with affection, since it is "a factor determining the selection of images" and "a constitution to the resulting perceptual experience" (Hansen 100). Affection, then, becomes the contact space between the internal experience and the external world, the way in which we 'mix' the 'here' of the spectator's world and 'there' of the cinematic world. This essay considers the affective processing of film by examining the 'affective attunement' that underlies and conditions all cinematic experience in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's digital video installation *The House* (2002).<sup>2</sup>

Eija-Liisa Ahtila is a Finnish video artist who describes her video installations as 'human dramas', fictional narratives (even though her work often adopts the techniques of documentary film) about human relationships and the powerful emotions that underlie them. The relation between the 'self' and the 'other' is often investigated in her work as the viewer is invited to engage with the mind of a subject caught in a moment of psychological and emotional vulnerability. In *Me/We, Okay, and Gray* (1993) she (re-)defines the borders of subjectivity through collision of visual and aural information. The words and thoughts of the 'other' are put in the mouth of the 'self' in order to portray "the manner in which power is wielded in human relationships" (Yli-Annala 221). In *Today* (1997) the physical time and space occupied by the spectator is fused with the fictive time and space of the installation. As a result, a cinematic site emerges where the self and the other, the inside and the outside can interact. In *Consolation Service* (1999) the spectator follows the divorce process of a young couple. They are invited to reach out to the cinematic world by reacting to it emotionally, incorporating the cinematic expression to their own emotive and bodily presence. Ahtila's later artworks, such as the installation *Anne, Aki and God* (1998) and the film *Love is a Treasure* (2002, of which *The House* is the fifth episode) examine the question of what happens to the individual when his or her relationship with the others is permanently disturbed. In these works, the co-existence of the self and the other has become impossible, and therefore they can be seen as a logical consequence of the themes developed in Ahtila's earlier work.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of Krauss, Rosalind. "A Voyage on the North Sea." *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Affective attunement is a term coined by the psychoanalyst Daniel Stern, and it refers to a non-verbal communication process between a parent and a child so that the child becomes affectively attuned to stimuli that are new.

Ahtila's three-screen video installation *The House* (2002) is a fictional narrative based on actual interviews with women who have developed psychosis. It deals with mental illnesses, human relationships, and the powerful emotions that underlie them. In a gallery setting, the installation is set up as a triptych: three aurally and visually non-linear, adjacent images create an audio-visual flow on three enormous screens. The non-chronological, non-linear narrative fabric unfolds through both parallel and contrasting movements across the screens. The three screens may show a different perspective on the setting, or may converge in order to form a single image. The sound is projected from where it appears to emerge, and the soundtrack echoes the horizontal, simultaneous movement between the three screens of the triptych.

The installation opens with a shot of a car driven by a woman called Elisa moving along a road. The car drives across the landscape at the edge of a forest, until it arrives in a garden. Elisa gets out of the car and walks into her house. She sits at the kitchen table, eats a sandwich and reads a newspaper. Her voice-over declares: "After the hallway I usually go into the kitchen, where I make food, eat, and sit and read the paper at the table. What is there to read in the newspaper? In the living room the TV is on. All this is routine." The installation starts off in a normal and relaxed atmosphere. But it turns gradually into a generator of hallucinations and, in the end, psychosis seems to have contaminated the (mental) space that is *The House*, thereby raising numerous questions about the affective bonds between the spectator and the work of art. Elisa, the woman around whom the story evolves, starts hearing sounds from other places, and shuts out all images by covering the windows of her house, so that she can be in the space where the sounds are. For her, "seeing hinders being, or hearing, and seeing can no longer occur simultaneously with hearing" (Bal 33). The sound takes on a centrifugal force of its own, and resists the spatial magnetization of the visual, preceding the image and forcing it to leave its likely context. As a result, "everything is now simultaneous". The spectator, too, gets caught between screens, which causes confusion about where and how his or her mental state (the inside) meets the outside world. We are positioned inside Elisa's head.<sup>3</sup>

This becomes an experience that only the state of psychosis can explain, a sensory (aural) perception in the absence of an outside (visual) stimulus. The spatial dynamic of *The House* as 'internally outside and externally inside' can be interpreted as a severe breakdown of Elisa's mental apparatus as a whole. But the importance of the sounds in this work, that absorb images and magnetize them spatially, raises questions about the nature of emotion and subjectivity as well. Namely, when the inside/outside distinction is no longer valid, we are no longer subjects of emotion either.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> To apprehend a work of fiction as if one was surrounded by it like this is an effect known as telepresence; the extent to which one feels present in the mediated environment (rather than in the immediate physical environment. In 'cinematic telepresence', the spectator must be able to move around (as is the case in the gallery setting) and to apprehend it under various points of view (as is the case with a three-screen projection). At the same time, however, the spectator remains aware of the film as a representation, and is never under the illusion (like Godard's foolish carabineer was) of being physically in the film diegesis (Steuer 76; Sheridan 58).

<sup>4</sup> This does not mean, however, that there is no distinction between the individual and the environment. We all have our distinctive bodies with distinctive nervous systems, as well as our distinctive identities.

Needless to say, there is some kind of inconsistency in discussing emotions without a subject, since emotions and subjectivity seem to be deeply connected. The fact that emotions are interpretive and expressive, and that they therefore require 'subjects', is the normal way of understanding the emotional engagement with the world (Terada 2-5). Yet according to Rei Terada, the discourse of emotion itself describes emotion as post-subjective. In other words, if we were subjects, we would have no emotions. In the 'state' of emotion there is no centered subjectivity; instead, emotion drives intentional subjectivity to its self-undoing by demanding 'self-difference'. This opens up an exchange between the inside and the outside: "Emotion is not expressive, not subjective, it is the difference between subjective ideality and the external world, appearing within experience" (Terada 44). Emotion exists in intersubjective relations rather than in the subject or in the world.

The 'house' in *The House* represents the absence of subjectivity by privileging sound to image. The external world enters the house, but it is impossible to say whether the inside substitutes for the outside or vice versa, because of the constant fluctuation between the inside and the outside. This is why Elisa hangs the thick, black curtains on all the windows—it is an attempt to shut out the images and to be in the space where the sounds are. The spectator, too, is simultaneously inside a room and outside in the city, among other people. This is similar to the state of fear since it not only expresses the inner state of the frightened person, but forms a hypothesis about what is present in the outside world as well. When in state of fear, a person constantly fluctuates "between the suspicion that the reassuring outside might or might not conceal a dangerous inside" (de Man 169). An illuminating example from Sartre illustrates such a fluctuation of emotions in fear. In Sartre's example, a grinning face suddenly appears flattened against the window, striking one with terror. At first, we do not take the face as belonging to a man who might open the door and come right up to us. On the contrary, the man is passive, acting at the distance. It is only with our body that "we live and undergo his signification, and it is with our own flesh that we establish it. But at the same time it obtrudes itself; it denies the distance and enters into us. (...) The behavior which gives emotion its meaning is no longer ours" (Sartre 1993: 86). Emotion then is "a new consciousness facing the new world and it establishes this new world with the deepest and most inward part of itself, with this point of view on the world present to itself without distance" (Sartre 1993: 76).

There is, however, no sign of fear in Elisa's face, even though the hallucinations experienced in a state of psychosis would commonly cause fear and distress. In fact, with Elisa the opposite is the case, her face is free from all signs of emotion. Usually emotions can be understood by linking them to facial expressions, which give them their significance. According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "the face is the icon proper to the signifying regime (...) the face is what gives the signifier substance [and fuels its] interpretation. (...) The signifier is always facialized" (Deleuze and Guattari 115). But this would seem to suggest that emotion belongs to a subject after all. Yet for Deleuze it is precisely emotion which can 'overflow' the face and end its 'signifying regime'. In cinema, the face is usually associated with three roles; it is 'individuating' (it allows us to recognize or distinguish the person), 'socializing' (it manifests a social role), and 'relational' (it ensures communication between people). The dominance of the face leads to Deleuze's definition of the close-up as an 'affection image'. "The affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face" (Deleuze 15). In close-up, the three roles of

the face are eliminated, since the face is treated as though it was no longer part of the body. This process of abstraction turns the face into ‘pure affect’.

Elisa’s face is not only frequently in close-up; it is also expressionless. It does not express affect, it *is* affect, without reference to anything else, and completely independent from interpretation. In the final close-up her voice utters: “I meet people. One at a time they step inside me and live inside me. (...) They set up whenever they want to and take my facial expressions or my leg’s resting position and put their own in their place.” The inside/outside distinction in Elisa’s personal experience has disappeared. Her face no longer serves as a means to distinguish the inside from the outside; by contrast, it has become an *interface*. This idea is further supported by the juxtaposition of point of view shots and close-ups (and medium close-ups) of Elisa, as well as of internal diegetic sounds and external diegetic sounds. The car is parked outside, but the sound of the car can be heard inside. On the TV a cow eats grass, lifts its head and looks at the camera, and then walks towards it, promptly walking into the living room towards the door. A dog runs on the road below the window, then around the room. The sounds in each environment begin to intermingle and merge (a cow bell from the cow, a bark from the dog) so that everything is at once inside and outside of everything else—like an interface. Elisa says:

It came closer and sniffed me. By chance. It came into the room, into the same space, where there were no longer any walls. Outside a new order arose, one that is present everywhere. Everything is now simultaneous, here, being.

The interface structure in *The House* is reminiscent of Luis Buñuel’s legacy for digital media narratives. As Marsha Kinder has shown, Buñuel uses common objects to move from one narrative realm to another, such as the cow lounging on the heroine’s luxurious bed in *L’Age d’Or*, the friendly dog in *The Phantom of Liberty*, or the sound of the bells of a horse-drawn carriage in *Belle de Jour*. These elements function as interface devices, as ‘hot spots’ that provide entry points into the realm of fantasy (Kinder 10). In a similar manner, the sounds that we hear in *The House*—and we hear all sorts of noises from various places such as the sounds of a shopping centre and a harbor—enable fluctuation between the inside and the outside. As a result, a subject position opens up for the spectator to enter into; a subject position where there is no centered, privileged, ocular point of view but a peripheral and embodied contact space which the spectator occupies as a random participant (instead of a privileged witness). Mieke Bal writes about *The House* as follows: “Standing amongst the screens, surrounded by the sound of the boat, we are inside that sound-generated space. But, like Elisa, we lose our hold of our subjectivity [and are] kicked out of that newly created inside space” (Bal 34). When sounds and images enter our (and Elisa’s) mind like this, without the distinction of outsides and insides, it may indeed be frightening, since the source of our emotion is ambiguous and circular, oscillating and unsteady, instead of being organized by our interpretation of the situation. Our emotions do not belong to us, they are deeply embedded in the objects of the world, and the person experiencing an emotion is a subject lost in objectivity (Terada 56).

The affective bonds in *The House* then do not assume subjects, but networks. What really is at stake here is the question of subjectivity (and this brings us from psychosis as disorder to psychosis as insight): to what extent is it possible to speak of

individuality at all? To what extent are human beings composed of webs of relationships and experiences, in which we can no longer identify the origin of subjectivity? The stir of echoes in *The House* reveals the constitutive role that objects on the outside play in our inner experience of subjectivity. By shutting out the images in order to be where the sounds are, Elisa makes herself passive in relation to the sounds, which she then apprehends from the point of view of passivity. The sounds become a means for her to find her being and her reason for existing. What was external and public becomes internal and private, and vice versa. In the postmodern world, this experience of the convergence between private and public is commonplace. It would therefore seem no accident that television plays such a central role in *The House*, mediating between the house's interior and the exterior of the world. The first indication of this convergence occurs when Elisa stands in front of the living room window and looks out, while the TV on the little table in the corner shows a programme about Japanese architecture. When she is sewing some black fabric on a sewing machine by the window, the TV is still on, showing news of a crisis in Europe. The TV programme catches Elisa's attention and she turns to look, after which the cow quietly walks into the living room. This suggests a different understanding of the relation between the subject and the object, the self and the other, the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the individual and the collective—an understanding where these relations seem to have dissolved totally (the 'Moebius effect'). Furthermore, the television connects the artistic discourse in *The House* with larger social processes; namely those that constitute "a mediated version of an already textualized and 'discursivized' socioideological world" (Shohat and Stam 180).

*The House* then may open up a useful avenue for theoretical discourse about the postmodern condition of displacement, where "the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha 9). As Pierre Levy has noted, the cultural evolution of displacement (and virtualization) has begun to affect our physical presence of the world and our modalities of being. When a person is displaced, when a person is 'not-there', he or she is detached "from conventional physical or geographical space and the temporality of the clock or calendar" (Levy 133). In *The House*, spatial and temporal specificity are torn apart. The narrative unfolds from any temporal point; past, present, and future are in constant redevelopment. "Things that occur no longer shed light on the past. No place is just one any more" says Elisa. We see her floating among the treetops, gripping on to the trees and bushes to move closer to the house, then holding on to the roof of the house in order to get back to the ground. After this, we catch her fixing weights to her ankles, as though she were unable to stay firmly on the floor. Here Elisa escapes herself, she acquires new ways of sensing the world and moving through space. This involves a transition from the located to a dislocated subjectivity, where the boundary between the inside and the outside is never clearly defined.

This kind of displacement, however, is not imaginary. It has effects and produces affects. These affects are located primarily in the unsettled, uncertain boundary between the inside and the outside. Affects involve an interweaving of the inside and the outside; affective interiority of the subjectivity is open to external influence. Subjectivity therefore is "never closed but always in a state of

disequilibrium, openness, receptivity, and change” (Levy 133). According to Levy, affect transforms the exterior into interior and vice versa:

The subject is its world, the world here being understood as everything that affect envelops. Thus to say that the psyche is open to the outside world is something of an understatement. It is nothing but exteriority, but an exteriority that is infiltrated, energized, complicates, transsubstantiated, and animated by affectivity. The subject is a world bathed in meaning and emotion (Levy 135).

Affect then is at once individual and social, private and shared, continually shaped and reshaped by dialogic interaction. Our affects are continually transformed by, and responding to, the affects of the other (Tomkins 285). There are many ways to respond to this ‘becoming other’. We can resist it by making ourselves an object for the other, a state which is often bound up with a profound sense of shame (Sartre 1957: 471). We can resist it by converging on the threatened territories and identities, in a state of fear (Levy 186). In the late-modern context, according to Teresa Brennan, the sense of self has come to depend on boundaries and territories that are formed by projecting and introjecting affects, by sealing off the heart and dumping negative affects in the other in order to know who the self is. These territories and boundaries have come to matter, both socially and politically, precisely because there is too much affective stuff that is directed away from the self with no place to go:

The reality of [the increase of affect] makes the Western individual especially more concerned with securing a private fortress, personal boundaries, against the unsolicited emotional intrusions of the other. The fear of being ‘taken over’ is certainly in the air, although the transmission of negative affect generally is not recognized for what it is. Boundaries, paradoxically, are an issue in a period where the transmission of affect is denied (Brennan 15).

But we can also learn a sense of openness to others, to open ourselves up to the displaced modes of identity. Near the end of *The House* Elisa says: “The ship you see on the horizon is the same ship as all the other ships, and this ship is full of the refugees who come to every shore.” One ship is every ship. One person is every person. One shore is every shore. This is the logical consequence of the expansion of displacement, making, according to Mieke Bal, “all people, including all refugees, everyone’s concern. All people exist at the same time, and all are inside Elisa” (Bal 36). This is about subjectivity as being-with, everyone being part of everyone’s world, and the contingency of identity boundaries being a common experience (Nederveen Pieterse 238).

According to Levy, “the dialectic of being requires that we mutually integrate the point of view of the other, that we reciprocally signify one another in negotiations. (...) By putting ourselves in the other’s position, we accept the dialectic of substitution” (Levy 116). Self and other, interior and exterior, are continuously transformed into their opposites. From a different point of view, one could consider the current interest in displacement as a blending of the functions of seeing and feeling, which often results in linking together exteriority and interiority. Like a

Moebius strip this continuous transition from inside to outside characterizes the cinematic experience in general. For in order to see a film, the spectator must 'enter' into it. The blending of the inside and outside is total, because the spectator and the film are both simultaneously inside and outside. By traveling from the outside to the inside space of representation, the spectator allows the cinematic text to inhabit him- or herself. The spectator is filled with the representation, in a similar way to how we are filled with affect by its individual, psychological force. The cinematic experience is therefore not to be found outside in the 'universe' of cinema, or inside in the 'essence' of the spectator, but in the texture of the whole intersubjective operation between the inside and the outside. Sartre has shown that there exist pure affective qualities in the world that we can realize within us without feeling them concretely.<sup>5</sup> These affective qualities can be surpassed by affective projects through which we constitute our contingent point of view in the world. In a similar way (to emulate Levy) cinema provides an external form for affects "that are felt in the innermost recesses of subjectivity" (Levy 99). The 'task' of artistic filmmaking, then, is less a question of the artist interpreting the world than of allowing the affective dynamics of the world to speak in us directly so that we may be able to grasp them as they emerge in concrete situations.

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**Dr. Tarja Laine** is assistant professor at the Department of Media and Culture, University of Amsterdam

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<sup>5</sup> For Sartre, affectivity is consciousness of the world, intention is directed towards the world and it apprehends it as such (intention is affection). However, this intention must be distinguished from pure affective qualities (as intention is not the whole of affectivity); 'emotional abstracts' or 'affective images' where we direct ourselves towards an emotion but empty (Sartre 1957: 435-6).

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