

INTRODUCTION

The present double issue of *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* has two sections. The first comprises five articles of different scope, whereas the second is a dossier on Swedish film director Ruben Östlund guest-edited by Sven Anders Johansson of Mid Sweden University.

The two articles opening the issue stem from the annual conference of the Nordic Society of Aesthetics, which was held in Paris May 31st – June 2nd 2018 under the heading “Conflicts – Antagonisms, Agonies, Affects.” In close dialogue with a number of images from the last two hundred years of art history and visual culture, curator of the grand exhibition *Soulèvements* (Uprisings) at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, Georges Didi-Huberman, in his article “Conflicts of Gestures, Conflicts of Images,” presents a sketch of an anthropology of political imagination. Focusing on a shared desire for uprising across this vast image-material, he analyses the gestures of uprising and points out how the demonstrators not only produce sounds with their mouths but also, with their arms and hands, brandish all sorts of images. Also addressing the question of social imagination, and opposing the often-assumed autonomy of the spheres of the aesthetic, the moral, the political, and the factual Joseph Margolis, in his “Hobbesian Turn,” argues in favour of a recovery of collective holism of cultural life. Based on an analysis of Picasso’s career and four hundred years of Western political history, he emphasizes the existential historicity of the human career and explains his pragmatist position against strict universalism and any form of transcendentalism.

The article “The Promise of the Index in Contemporary Documentary Performance: On Pixelated Images and the Politics of Listening in the Works of Rabih Mroué and Lawrence Abu Hamdan” by Solveig Gade investigates the notion of indexicality and its inherent truth-claims in relation to global visual culture, where digital images have become an increasingly important part of warfare. Gade shows how performance artist Rabih Mroué and visual artist Abu Lawrence Hamdan, both of whom make use of evidentiary material as well as fictitious strategies, point to the differing statuses and meanings assigned to documents depending on the particular knowledge systems and spaces in which they appear and are perceived.

As the title indicates, Konstantinos Vassiliou’s article “The *Kunstwollen* of the Scientific Era and Alois Riegl’s *Stimmung* Essay” is a reading of Riegl’s essay “Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen

Kunst” from 1899 and how he conceives of the relationship between art and science, arguing that modern spectatorship is affected by natural sciences. Vassiliou shows how art in Riegl’s notion of *Kunstwollen* in “the age of natural sciences” is combined with cognition and affects. Though not summoned under a shared theme, the articles mentioned above may be said to share an interest in the work, status, and politics of images. The last article of the first section, “How to Frame Edible Art” by Adam Andrzejewski, however, shifts to a different field of interest in that it subjects the question of whether food is or can be art to an analytical treatment and develops a model of understanding that involves a hypothetical form of art, which he proposes to call “edible art.”

Within a very few years, the Swedish film director Ruben Östlund has gone from being a minor, slightly controversial figure on the Swedish film scene to a Palme d’Or winner (2017) and Oscar nominee (Best Foreign Language Film, 2018). The academic attention, however, is so far limited – consisting of a small number of articles, and a dissertation that was defended in the US a few months ago. This is the background to the dossier on Östlund’s films constituting the second section of this issue of NJA.

The work was initiated within the frames of a more extensive ecocritical project. Even though it may not be that obvious, there is a recurring reflection on nature and the natural in Östlund’s films. What this “nature” is, where it is situated, or if it exists at all, is difficult to tell though. This difficulty is arguably a specific aspect of Östlund’s aesthetic: there is, in his films, an ambivalence or irony which is hard to come to terms with. Should the viewer feel sympathy with the characters? Laugh at them? Identify? Feel estranged? Are the happy endings really that happy? And is this confusion a quality or a shortcoming?

Östlund’s films have been related to Scandinavian forerunners like Ingmar Bergman, Roy Andersson, and Lars von Trier, but perhaps a name of another kind is more important: YouTube. One of the hallmarks of Östlund’s films is that they appear to have their origin in a contemporary digital media ecology. This is an aspect that is investigated in John Lynch’s article “‘Please leave a message’: The Media Ecology of Ruben Östlund’s *Play*, *Force Majeure*, and *The Square*.” Lynch demonstrates how contemporary communication technologies play important roles, both on the level of content and aesthetically in Östlund’s oeuvre. For example, mobile phones work both as devices of communication and as plot devices that drive the story forward in the films. Often the stories involve a communicative breakdown, which places the subjects in

vulnerable positions. This vulnerability of the subject is a recurring theme in Östlund's work.

But even if there is such a pattern, it is also the case that Östlund's films often move "from the disruption of order to the restoration of order," as Roger Edholm puts it in his article on *Force Majeure*. Edholm focuses on the framing of the family. On the one hand the film thematises the breakdown of the frames presupposed by the family constellation; on the other hand, the film or story itself – from the first scene to the last – is framed by the family portrait. To understand all this, Edholm turns to Northrop Frye's theory of the comedy. According to Frye, the happy ending of the comedy is related to the rise of a new social unit. Edholm demonstrates how this idea may enlighten the enigmatic happy ending of *Force Majeure*.

The strange ending is discussed by Sven Anders Johansson too. His essay, "Cartesian Subjects Lost in the Alps. Reflections on Ruben Östlund's *Force Majeure*," is mainly a reflection on the notion of the natural in *Force Majeure*. Johansson focuses on what he sees as a central ambivalence: while the film mocks certain middle-class norms, it simultaneously confirms and leans on the same kind of norms, the same ideology. Johansson tries to understand this ambivalence as part of a Cartesian heritage: The subjects in the film are split between an "inner nature" and external demands, and since there is no God that can legitimize their existence, they are forced to find other ways of coping.

Nature is important in Anders E. Johansson's article, "Uncontrol. On Ruben Östlund's *Force Majeure*," as well. His contribution is an attempt to understand *Force Majeure* in relation to the serialism of Pierre Boulez et al. In Östlund's case, serialism is about breaking down "natural" relations, stereotypes, habitual connections etc. This also implies a critique of the predictable and controlled. "Serialism is a method of uncontrol," Johansson writes. This intentional uncontrol implies a potential opening, an opening not only of the presumed natural, but also of an enlightenment that has become cynical in Sloterdijk's sense.

How Östlund's films should be understood and valued is hard to tell, but it is our hope that this dossier demonstrates that they in any case generate interesting questions regarding modernism, control, subjectivity, and nature. The images from Östlund's films are reproduced with kind permission and assistance of Plattform Produktion.

Jacob Lund and Sven Anders Johansson