

Citizen, Cinema, Sci-fi

By Janna Graham

After weeks of following clues through the circular streets of San Narcisco only to end up where she started, Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49, scribbles the words: "Shall I project a world?" into her notebook.

Against her fleeting sense of the city on repeat, of fragments and dead ends continuously looped, the inscription marks Oedipa's search for stable coordinates, a way in which to position herself in a city that for her has become an endless maze of mirrored encounters. After several cups of dandelion tea and the coaxing of her therapist, Dr. Hilarious, Oedipa decides that this grounding can only be found in a parallel place: a space of representation, a scene, a cinematic fantasy of her own imagining.

For those living among the contradictory sediments of the contemporary metropolis, Oedipa's desire to posit a space, her attempts to grope at an outside world, and her belief in the possibility of her own efficacy are conditions we might know well. It is both the hope and impossibility of such propositions, that we encounter in Knut Åsdam's Scenes I.

Upon entering the gallery, we are confronted with a black wall, a theatrical curtain that cuts the gallery space in half. We pat, fumble, and push our bodies into the fabric to find its opening. We stumble into a screening chamber, a hallway, an enclosure bordered by another black curtain. In this claustrophobic, transitional zone, we shuffle to find somewhere to stand, careful to avoid the projector that juts from the ceiling into the middle of the room, and trying not to step on anyone's foot. We turn ninety degrees to face the screen and look around, nervously, to see who else is in the space.

The world projected at one end of the enclosure is familiar though difficult to place. The scenes are seven projected photographs of actresses in a series of gestural tableaux. Taken from shifting viewpoints the mise-en-scene is framed by the architecture of a residential complex. The rhythmic, cyclical, clicking progress of the slide carousel, suggests a never-ending choreography of bodies in a place where nothing much seems to happen. The women appear to loll about, talk, shift their weight from foot to foot. Suspended in time, they are trapped in the angular austerity of gray concrete, in a layered location that reads as both utopian project and fallen dream.

At first glance, the women look like they might be teenagers. One is tall, black. The other is short, white. They are dressed in clothes that might be described as 'urban leisure'. In the way that they hover around this place, you think that they have been here before – on their way home from school or killing time before dinner. As this circular progression of images continues, we notice that they are older than we thought, likely in their thirties. Their movements are not casual but tense – one woman runs her hands through her hair, they hover close to one another, not chatting, but conspiring. They are waiting for something, someone to return, a drop off, a pick up. It is getting late and still no one arrives. As the women fade in and out of the shadows cast by the driveway's rooftop, we lose sight of them. For a moment they disappear. They – we are lost.

When light is restored, we realize that we are in awkward dialogue with others in the room, with the women on the screen, with walls that move with each attempt to find support where there is none. Whereas the shifting scenes frame, even script, our readings of these two women, the viewing space creates a stage for our own negotiation of a tense and anxious spatiality. We become aware of our discomfort – in the space, in observing the women on screen, but also of our bodies – the ways in which our own

gestures converse with the imposing structure of the enclosure and with those of the women we observe.

This combination of spectatorship, situation in time, and location, replicates the scenario of cinema. Though something is horribly wrong. We are not lulled into darkness, reclined in the comfort of a plush red seat. We are jarred by a narrative that does not take us anywhere. We encounter images in which we are constantly reminded of the cinema's own framing in the architecture of the modernist city, its sharp division between spaces of leisure and fantasy and spaces of work. This reference is underscored by Åsdam's restriction of the women of his 'scenes' to a housing complex on New York's Roosevelt Island. The complex, developed by architect Jose Luis Sert — Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design from 1953 to 1969 and proponent of modernist urban design — was part of a transformation of Roosevelt Island. Designed as a "mixed residential traffic-free community", offering green space and numerous leisure options for the workers of New York, the complex tried to shake off its nineteenth and early twentieth century reputation as "Welfare Island", a repository for the unproductive poor and the outcast. .

The women, born in the era of the housing complex that frames their every move, sit somewhere between this ideological separation of work and leisure. It is clear

that they are not involved in any kind of traditional work, nor are they involved in a space zoned for play, such as parks, dance floors, or sex clubs, sites that have featured prominently in Åsdam's past work.. The women are not active or idle. Their class is unknown. They could be designers or artists (many, in fact, live in this building). They could be students, activists, we are uncertain. While in a housing complex, they are not nestled at home. They are at a corner. This ambiguity in the context of the imposing viewing structure and its marked claustrophobia further complicates the cinematic scenario, the gallery in which it is situated, the housing complex, and their associated constructions of use.

These designations -- work/leisure, work/home -- are indeed outmoded. We are told this even by the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation, who have designated both the complex and the era of its construction to be 'failed projects' and plan for 'aggressive development' of 'residential, commercial and mixed use' property on the island.<sup>1</sup> These legacies and contradictions are not erased, however, in the world of Scenes I. They are lived by its inhabitants, who can neither escape nor rest comfortably in the architecture's place and time. We feel this tension as parallel occupants in the viewing enclosure -- a bipolar spatial experience in which we are both drawn in and out of

the staged images of these women and made aware of our own awkward positioning.

In this interplay between the screen and the space of the viewer, Åsdam has created what Henri Lefebvre describes as a dialectical 'counter-space': a space or project that "simulate[s] existing space, parodying it and demonstrating its limits, without, after all, escaping its clutches."<sup>2</sup> Akin to Lefebvre's description of leisure space, this is a space that is both dominant and hierarchical while also one in which the body calls for revenge by being recognized as generative.

At this corner where our spatial orientation meets but remains separate from that of the women we observe, a series of oscillating representations are at play. In simultaneous moments, we experience both the intense control exerted by this environment, its separation from the surrounding world, the tight framing of the women on the screen, our own entrapment, along with the possibilities that might be found in the performative aspects of our mutual spatial orientations.

It is at the point of collision – where the body both shapes and is shaped by its environment, where the collective and the relational create the possibility of agency while reinforcing the most violent characteristics

of spatial domination and homogeneity – that we are situated in Scenes I. Such a collision might be understood through Lefebvre, who further explores the body's capacity "to behave as a differential field...in other words, as a total body, breaking out of the temporal and spatial shell developed in response to labor, division of labor, to the localizing of work and the specialization of places."<sup>3</sup>

Åsdam constructs a device in which such a differentiated field might be generated, replicating science fiction's dual pre-occupations with both the enclosure (holodeck, spaceship, pod) and, through the repetitive interplay between body and screen that threatens to dismantle the separation between them, the creation of a total body like those proposed by the technologies of teleportation and drug-induced euphoria.

If, within this device, spatial inhabitants and producers are, like Oedipa, to project a world of their own, it will only happen in the liminal zones between the movements and sounds of the slide carousel, and between two walls where differential reactions, experiences and contradictory possibilities intersect. These spaces are small: a slit in a curtain, our brief construction of narrative, a performative moment. They exist only as improvised and provisional structures of participation. Beyond them there always persists a corner, a hint, or an

overt sense of something restrictive, manipulative, awkward, difficult, lewd.

Such a dialectic is internalized, embodied in a series of tentative moments that are both circular and repetitive. In these moments, spatiality is experienced as a screen that seeps between the corporeal and visual. The unraveling and multiple narratives and experiences of space do not allow us to rest: They produce a spatial surface that is on endless repeat, like a meeting place we return to day after day.

As we emerge from this circular place and adjust to the bright light of the outside, we are firmly planted in a gallery, in a city that we know. Having exited this cornering of body, space and image we are left with the prognosis that these transitional moments in Scenes I, conjured by our own projections of narrative and negotiations of space, might be where we insert our location. Rather than the fixed coordinates for which we initially yearned, it is at this corner - where the competing architectures of urban life meet our generative enactment of a spatial imaginary - that we might inscribe ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> From the Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation Corporate Overview. <http://www.roosevelt-island.ny.us/>



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<sup>2</sup> Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 1991), 382.

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