

THE GIRL AND THE GHOST

ABSTRACT

By guiding our attention to the emotional responses of a little girl and her darkly lit surroundings, Jude's film explores human existence in the face of death. Informed by existential philosophy in the vein of Heidegger, this article investigates the difference between fear of death and fear of the dead.

KEYWORDS

death
fear of the dead
off-screen space
off-screen sound
existential philosophy
Heidegger

The problem of off-screen space in cinema has a certain similarity with the problem of death in the life of human beings. Isn't this what André Bazin suggested in his description of the screen as a *death mask*? 'The screen is a mask, whose function is no less to hide reality than it is to reveal it. The significance of what the camera discloses is relative to what it leaves hidden.' (Perez 1998: 26). What we see on the screen, often a trace from a past reality, has an *unseen dimension* (a past reality that was chosen not to be shown during shooting, or simply a constructed off-screen space) that can be downplayed, actualized or stressed by any film.

It Can Pass Through the Wall belongs to this last category. Loosely based on Anton Chekhov's short story 'In the Coach House' (Chekhov 1887), the film portrays how a little girl responds to the death of a neighbour and a ghost story told in its wake. The girl witnesses this death through the grieving sounds of the dead man's relatives, seeping through the walls separating their rooms; but, staying in an apartment with her grandfather and his friends, she also 'witnesses' this death through the older men's comments, stories and interpretations of these sounds.

Just as the cries and comments threaten the young girl's safe, comforting world, and broaden the dimensions of her existential field, the film's distinct use of off-screen sound *destabilizes* (while simultaneously enlarging) the visual world depicted. Since neither the girl nor the viewer knows the source of the sounds, but nonetheless feels their presence as real and pressing, an imaginative sphere of uncertainty is commandingly evoked for both. By focusing on the use of off-screen sound and a camera work stressing its own limited perspective, we will suggest how the film organizes our perception and attention so as to evoke the girl's experience of the situation, and how this relates to the film's thematization.

THE GHOST

Throughout the whole film, we are placed in the apartment of the living. The atmosphere is tense, in a span between the everyday boredom of a game of cards and the unsettling feeling of being surrounded by tragedy and death. In the ghost story, a corpse must be dug up and moved for the dead person to stop

howling at night and thus afflicting the living. The story conveys a warning of what happens if you do not follow the rules for handling dead: if you're not doing it properly, the deceased will bother us with gloomy howls at night.

The problem of death is extensively treated in existential philosophy, most prominently represented by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)(SNL 2016). In Heidegger's terms, Sophia's anxiety can be classified as *inauthentic* – as opposed to *authentic*, which represents more of a reflective and sincere attitude towards oneself and one's choices, as a consequence of confronting the brutal facts of life (ibid; Heidegger 1995). Being only a child, Sophia does not seem to acknowledge or be anxious about her own mortality; she seems afraid of death as something manifesting itself in other people, as an event in her social world, not a critical part of her own facticity. Just as the family dog cannot comprehend why we laugh or cry, but perceives the tension and relates to that, Sophia is frightened by the grim sobbing of the suicide's relatives, but perhaps even more by the doldrums that hang in the air between her grandfather and his friends, finally topped by the blind man's reckless re-telling of a ghost story. Here it is suggested that it is fear of the ghost, i.e. of the dead person, that her fear is all about, and not fear of one's own death.

On a side note, if we take a closer look at Anton Chekhov, the author of the short story on which the film is based, we see that this philosophical link is no coincidence. Reading Chekhov in an existential perspective (and not the traditional social-political perspective) is of rather new date (Coptseva 2008; Kharina 2008). But in Chekhov's works, what later would become existentialist philosophy is staged in flesh and blood. In our context, we find this highly relevant because we believe this aspect can easily be transferred to Radu Jude's filmmaking in general, and this adaptation in particular.

But how does the film manage to give us an empathic connection to the girl's experience in the face of death?

OFF-SCREEN MYSTERY

Being, as we interpret it, a thematization of the fear of *death as something outside of oneself*, the film plays with the ambiguity of the 'death mask' of the screen, and persistently emphasizes the limitations of its frame. Instead of a masterly controlling *découpage* (a scene broken down into smaller shot units) or montage operations, the film is based on a fixed camera position. Yet, not without a certain flexibility, the camera is dictated by this moving figure: it pans whenever the girl moves. We are continually placed in front of her limited freedom of movement, our gaze focalized on her presence in the room. The camera *distance* is also fixed throughout the film – a medium to long shot, relative to the girl's movements – so we constantly see the girl in relation to the small room she is in. This, along with the darkly lit *mise-en-scène*, gives room for an indefinite, secretive, even enigmatic depth-of-field aesthetics, emphasizing two or three planes of action at once and suggesting something concealed and indeterminate in and around the presently visible.

Furthermore, the camera is not aligned with a particular storyteller and has an invisible presence for the character; as viewers, it is as if we inhabit the walls as an observing, anonymous ghost watching over the girl. This positioning in an anonymous gaze adds to the secretive mood of the whole film. Yet, shot in a single long-take, the film lets us feel the *duration* of the situation, anchoring our temporal experience in a certain human phenomenological field. This, coupled with the camera's spatial boundedness, perspectival height and relative movement, places us in a *limited perspective* akin to that of a human body. The darkly lit mise-en-scène reinforces this sense of limitation. Placed for some time in this tiny, cramped and darkly lit space, we are positioned in the same perceptual environment as the girl and have much time to contemplate the affective meaning of the situation.

Furthermore, the film's use of off-screen sound invites our imagination to wander into a sphere of uncertainty, ambiguity, 'otherness'; to what lies beyond the image, beyond our view, beyond the life we get to see. This auditive counterpoint to the visual is key to the film's thematization of death as otherness. The off-screen sound, evoking the neighbours we don't see, not only widens the spatial world of the fiction (the diegesis), but lets their *loud absentness* create a sense of fearful mystery that *aligns itself* with the ghost story. At the same time as the film thematizes the girl's fear of the ghost, it stresses a certain ghostliness of cinema itself.

In his book *The Material Ghost* (1998), Gilberto Perez stresses a filmic quality he believes to be inherent in the film medium, but which nevertheless gets *amplified* in the work of certain filmmakers: 'Like Murnau and like Mizoguchi,' he writes, 'Antonioni often renders things at a ghostly distance, in airy, eerie long shots that call upon the viewer insecurely to fill in what the image falls short of embodying.' (Perez 1998: 144). In our film, this 'ghostly aura' is particularly and vividly evoked by the sound: the off-screen sound marks a rupture in the diegetic universe and the self-enclosed composition of the image; it rips open an uncertain, affective dimension in the visual field and makes room for a suggested corporality forever unavailable to us. In our own life, hearing a sound from the neighbour, we know, because we have a body, that we have the ability to seek out the origin of the sound. In cinema, we are restricted to our seats, and off-screen sounds will forever evoke a mystery. Jude's film endorses this quality, using it to let us empathize with the girl in the story – confined as she is to the apartment and to her inauthentic fear of death.

CLOSING REMARKS

In this article, we have argued that *It Can Pass Through the Wall* in a formally rigorous way places us in a mysterious position, while nevertheless aligning us with the little girl of the story, disturbed by what she hears but cannot see. In the film's audiovisual gestalt, we feel the opacity of the world, and, to borrow Bazin's notion, the screen as a death mask. Stressing this ghostly quality of its own materiality, Jude's film evokes in us a sense of mystery both connected to the fictional girl's phenomenological experience of the situation, and to the phenomenology of the film experience itself. We are faced with the grave void always co-existing with the ghostly images of the screen.

REFERENCES

Chekhov, Anton P. (1887), 'In the Coach House', Translated by Marian Fell. url: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/In_the_Coach_House (retrieved 07.08.2016)

Coptseva, Natalia P. (2008), 'A.P. Chekhov as a Philosopher: «Game» Phenomenon and «Existence in the Face of Death» in his Dramas' in *Journal of Siberian Federal University - Humanities & Social Sciences* 1: 22-38.

Heidegger, Martin (1995), 'The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: world, finitude, solitude', Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Kharina, Alla (2008), 'Existential boredom in Ibsen's and Chekhov's plays', Master thesis - Center for Ibsen Studies, University of Oslo. url: <http://urn.nb.no/URN:NBN:no-21424> (retrieved 07.08.2016)

Perez, Gilberto (1998), 'The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium', The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London.

SNL (2016). Store norske leksikon, url: <http://snl.no/eksistensialisme> (retrieved 07.08.2016, own translation)