

Lena Maria Thüring:
Unseen Subjects and
Faceless Words —

“Extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy,” wrote Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Storyteller” in 1936, “but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader.” Through detail, not interpretation, “the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.”^{/1} Lena Maria Thüring employs such accuracy in the texts of her precisely crafted videos, but she is just as attentive to what is withheld. The works’ considerable amplitude derives from her refusal to elaborate on any connections beyond the facts themselves. Crucially, her works are built from facts drawn from interviews she has conducted with their anonymous, unseen subjects. Detaching the spoken narrative from the subjects’ bodies and even their voices, Thüring creates a fissure between seeing and hearing, identity and biography. Within this space we can consider the nature of memory, the power of words, and the significance of all that remains unsaid.

Thüring’s tightly edited, elliptical scripts define the tone of her earliest works. “Das Haus” (2008), “Der grosse Bruder, der Bruder, die Schwester, die kleine Schwester” (2009), and “Im Garten” (2010), form a loose trilogy that investigates archetypes and hierarchies in middle-class life. Thüring studied photography at the Zurich University of the Arts, and her early videos are infused with the stillness of photographs. She does not use the film camera to capture action or even the flickers of emotion across a face, preferring smooth tracking shots or a fixed camera position that matches the narrative’s deadpan delivery. The medium is used as a documentary tool for the recording of static evidence, while its time-based nature emphasizes the way in which a story can develop at a gradual pace and accumulate meaning over time.

In “Das Haus”, a spoken narrative uses simple language and short sentences to sketch the history of a typical nuclear family. As the family’s story is related, the camera tracks smoothly through the generously proportioned rooms of an empty house, panning across parquet floors and chandeliers, a gloomy cellar, and up the carpeted stairs into the empty bedrooms. The opening phrase, which stakes out the parameters of the family unit—“The parents. The first-born child, a girl. The son.”—occurs four times, becoming an increasingly oppressive litany. Meanwhile, mundane facts are related with pointed accuracy, the loaded phrases left to hum with disconcerting resonance. In the gap between the spare, rational statements of the slow-paced narrative and the neutral, sparse images, a portrait of a family emerg-

es that is fraught with the pressures of discipline, suppressed emotion, disappointed expectations and loneliness.

Thüring’s subsequent film, “Der grosse Bruder, der Bruder, die Schwester, die kleine Schwester”, continues to explore the subject of family structures and the shifts that occur as one generation succeeds another. Although the script consists of similarly clipped, factual sentences pared of emotional expression or extraneous description, here the narrative is related in the first person. Not by the brothers and sisters themselves, however, but by actors reading scripts and speaking into a large microphone. A story unfolds of alcoholic parents and the four siblings’ attempts to navigate their unhappy family situation. The holes in the narrative echo the culture of repression that prevented this family from escaping its own vicious circle, while the siblings’ overlapping memories reveal the complex relationships and hierarchies between them. Its bleakness, however, is offset by the controlled manner in which it is related. As these are actors speaking borrowed words, a reflective distance is established within which the narrative hovers, freeing the viewer from the burden of emotional identification.

The dislocation of words and identity is exacerbated in “Im Garten”, as a script is spoken by several different voices. As we see nothing but the flowers, bushes and shadowy trees of a garden, it is hard to establish the relations between these voices, or how many characters there are— who is meant by “us”, “my wife”, “the neighbour”? Though the voices are ostensibly talking about their gardens, conflicts gradually become apparent, squabbles over property lines or planting etiquette, even as the root cause of the disputes and the identity of the aggressor are lost among the different points of view. The shared love of the gardens or delight in nature cannot overcome the differences that derive from fundamental mutual misunderstandings.

There is a misleading clarity to the pictures we see in these first three films: each element—image, sound, and text—is handled with great precision, but it is in their misalignments and the gaps between the elements that a generative complexity arises. The neat neutrality of the house’s interior bears no trace of the troubled events that occurred within it; the mature composure of a middle-class man or woman in his or her fifties says nothing of the difficult childhoods they may have experienced; the lush garden contradicts the petty fights and antagonisms between neighbours. Though these stories are rooted in fact rather than fiction, we are nevertheless acutely aware of how carefully shaped they are. Their precision becomes a self-reflexive device that points to the laborious editing process involved

in transforming a bundle of personal reminiscences into a work that reaches beyond the specifics of individual biography. In Thüring’s lucid and finely chiseled works, the obsolescence of the nuclear family with its prescriptive gender roles glints menacingly from within the narrative. The shifts of generations and expectations, the disappointments of old age and the bitterness they can bring, all become sharply evident. The freedoms assumed to go hand in hand with the traditional job–house–family formula are proved to have an oppressive underside.

Three films Thüring made in 2011, another trilogy of sorts, offer the flipside to these close-to-home dilemmas. Turning to focus on the young, dispossessed, and diasporic, Thüring discovers three narratives, this time told in the first person by the subjects themselves. There is still no sign of an individual speaking directly to the camera, however. The voices again are disembodied, severed from their visual identity. The first film, “Strings”, focuses solely on a man’s hands, gesturing as he talks. In a heavily accented English littered with curses, the protagonist describes the accidents and fights that caused the scars on his hands. Bit by bit the context of these colorfully told memories emerges: he is Palestinian; the clashes he ends up in are more politically fraught and consequential than those of your average teenager. When, halfway through the film, the hands begin embroidering a piece of fabric, this activity is hard to reconcile with the previous tales of stone-throwing and fighting. The narrative softens, becomes more reflective, as he remembers the difficulties of being a teenager in Palestine, the dispensability of human life there, and how the risks that went along with political resistance also offered an easy way out of personal or collective anxieties. The hands, now holding a needle rather than throwing rocks, have found a way out of this circle of violence.

“ZUP” (2011) similarly thwarts the viewer’s expectations, as various groups of tough-looking lads act up to the camera in an underground garage, showing off their clothes and adopting the standard poses of hip-hop attitude. While the individuals we see change, the voiceover remains constant: a young man relating the story of his Algerian family background, his love of music, and his own life so far. We never know to whom if any of them this voice belongs, but by implication its nuanced and moving narrative—which contradicts all the belligerent posturing—could belong to any of them. These studied gestures are revealed to be a form of camouflage, compensating for an upbringing compromised by the real problems that immigration, unemployment, and institutionalized racism bring.

In “Gardien de la Paix” (2011), another story of immigration unfolds. But this time, while we hear a man describing his life, the images we see are of

jellyfish and fish swimming in an aquarium. The speaker comes here regularly because it reminds him of his family’s homeland of Guadeloupe and his own inherited love of the sea. As the jellyfish undulate and drift across the darkened screen, the narrative suggests similar semi-conscious drifts, in particular the narrator’s decision to become a policeman. Our idea of a policeman as a figure of authority and representative of national security is doubly undermined, first by the narrator’s family background, and secondly by his evidently peace-loving nature and attachment to the ocean.

In these three films, automatic stereotypes are unmoored. Their experiences show the lives of these protagonists to be as bound up in family circumstances as those spent amid the comfortable trappings of middle-class Europe. Prejudices on both sides no longer stick. The distancing techniques Thüring employs paradoxically bring the viewer closer to her unseen subjects. Their dilemmas, no longer fixed by the indices of face, place, or time, float free to be experienced in and of themselves.

/1
Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 88.