

Magnus Wallin's Elements: Realism and Romance

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Realism has many guises. In 3D animation images are often made that resemble those we are familiar with: bodies move like they usually do in rather ordinary rooms or spaces. This is the outcome of a kind of second-hand realism that imitates already-established techniques depiction of reality – for example, to focus on the image as if it were done with an analogue camera. Another way to achieve a realistic effect is to induce the feeling of reality by having the image itself acquire the same sort of presence as an object or a body. This has been successfully done using light boxes, large-scale images and low positioning of pieces, or in the form of video installation that extends the image space into that of the viewer. However, in Magnus Wallin's film, *Elements*, realism appears in another way: it is neither reality that is given presence in the image or the image given presence for or around the viewer. Instead, it is the viewer that is drawn into the film and is given presence there.

It is primarily with the help of sound that the presence of the viewer in the film is established. The images themselves would hardly suffice. What the sound breaks down is the distance which an optical relation presumes; sound lies, so to speak, closer to the subject than what the image would be able to be and still remain visible. The film's sound is directly in my absolute proximity. This happens in a few particular moments, for instance, when a bodily organ swishes by the ear into the visual space, or when the sound of two kissing crania, with organ-filled chests slurp close up in the soundscape. Yet more generally and actually more powerfully, if also more discreet, this closeness happens with time when the "murmur" or "buzz" of the events in the film creep closer and closer, to suddenly seem to be created inside my head. The film has the same effect as a slightly off high on hallucinatory drugs: the boundary between the inside internal and external wobbles, wavers. Did I hear it – or did I think the sound? Do I remember or do I merely expect it? Outer and inner, before and after, from the world or from myself – everything becomes uncertain. One wants out of this situation, but how and where to when there seems no longer to be any distinct external world?

The reason for exposing the view for such a remarkable closeness and experiencing the sundering of one's own boundaries, one's own body's definition and integrity, is that Wallin wants to illuminate situation of the body in society. Not least with reference to organ transplants, but also generally, bio-politics consists of controls that penetrate under our skin and regulate our bodies through patterns that we ourselves understand in terms of spontaneity and freedom. We know about this situation, discuss it a little distanced. That distance must disappear; it is not enough to know about the situation, know about the controls, they must be lived, we must be affected – after all, they threaten our integrity every single minute of the day. As an image of the level and range of bio-politics, there is the surgeon's increasing ability to move organs between bodies and the smuggler's over borders. The fate of bodily organs is not different than ours and the limbo in which the organ in the film finds itself, while waiting to be utilized, is perhaps not so very different from the situation a person in a refugee centre exists in. We move around in what Wallin calls "the body of society", not in the environment and in relation to the tasks that suit us (the organ) best, but according to what society needs. The image of the organ and the parts of the skeleton in space is the image of us as individuals – it is that image that approaches, comes all too close to, the viewer. Towards the end of the film, the viewers have come so close to the organ that they must understand themselves to be one organ amongst others.

In the same ways as the space in *Elements* lacks given directions (up, down, right, left, etc) because it is totally limitless and has no fixed reference points, life in society or the present lack direction and goals (want above all to be only "now") and their powers are rendered increasingly invisible. As Boris Groys writes: when society or the present time no longer see themselves as a passage towards a future better condition, the incorporation of the individual in society loses all meaning for the individual him/herself – one's private life is lost when it is sold to working life in society. The individuality of the individual becomes, for society, only pure workforce in the same

way as my organs are for me pure functions. This is what threatens the organ in the film: the possibility of becoming merely and exclusively a function in the body of society.

The closeness created in the film leads the viewer into to a special hysteria: things come altogether to close and one cannot get out of the situation. It is in relation to that predicament that Wallin twists and turns the space. What is up and down, right and left, constantly shifts because one's own body, with its porous boundaries, is no longer a sufficiently determined point of reference. What is above is sometime in front, and we do not understand how. *Elements*, for example, contains a *danse macabre*, where skeletons furnished with organs mechanically and cheerfully move around in a ring like one great living catastrophic carousel. In the next moment, it looks to be moving vertically, like a ferris wheel. Roughly, one might conceive of Wallin's films as constructions of respectively horizontally and vertically organized spaces. In the two room- types, the bodies have two different, repetitive patterns of movement: linear (as in *Exit*, 1997; *Skyline*, 2000; *Exercise Parade*, 2001 and *Anatomic Flop*, 2003) or circular (Limbo, 1998). (And amongst the circular, we should include the films that in themselves constitute a circular movement and in this way bend the entire space. They also show that Wallin constructs space by way of movements and not as a form of pre-existing vacuum.)

There are bodies in the horizontal that slide or slither in an arena-like corridor, chased by fire (*Exit*); bodies that monotonously play leap-frog over each other, threatened by the living walls that belong to the insides of the social body (*Exercise Parade*). However, in the horizontal organizations of space, bodies move on their own steam but are started up and steered entirely by external circumstances. If the body's driving force is natural in *Exit*, in *Exercise Parade* it has acquired a trace of obeisance. Generally, the horizontally organized worlds look like this: closed, rectangular oblong rooms; repetitive patterns of movement that occur within a compulsive order. The vertical constructions are most pure in *Skyline* (2000). From a trapeze that swings through limitless space, exemplary bodies throw themselves at a high tower. The ones that succeed land in the tower, those that land outside become parts of bodies and organs for a laboratory. The power that moves the bodies lies totally outside them, and the film's light touch could make one think that the bodies understand the power as something they want to be part of. Thus, eleven years after the film was made, it is surprising to see that what was previously so absurd and possibly could be thought to reference a past Nazi society, today looks like a rather transparent picture of a new and contemporary society of ruthless expulsion.

These types of constructions are mixed together but remain nevertheless distinct. Wallin's two primary ways of mixing dimensions have been to twist space so that the horizontal becomes vertical, as in *Anatomic Flop* and *Elements*, and to mirror space so that the rectangular or elongated structure swells in width and height and the bodies there are both beside themselves and above and underneath in the mirrors (for example, *Mission* and *Colony*, both from 2009). If Wallin has always worked with mixing the two spatial organizations and even taken himself into outer space and to unknown worlds, it may be because the dominating power in the spatial constructions (gravitation in *Skyline*, the instinct for self-preservation in *Exit*) functions mythologically in relation to the powers that control bodies in the world – these are too general, too natural to be able to dominate a social and political context. It feels as if with *Elements*, Wallin has reached the point where he asks himself why people in general are drawn to each other, live in groups instead of alone, and create these circular and linear patterns of movement we encounter in the films – the mechanical movements and the coercion behind them. If one looks beyond explanations in terms of self-preservation, the question concerning the human need for community opens up a universe of dark powers.

We may be able to take these dark power on by returning to *Elements*. We are in an endless spatial vacuum, and our eye falls on the spectacle of body parts, which we approach until we are absorbed into it – like one organ amongst others. The population there resembles Empedocles' vision of how things are before they become entities in the world: no bodies, but heads without necks and faces, arms without trunks, etc. So also with Wallin's work, where we see that the body parts can sometimes put themselves together into a body with the head both up and down, or into something resembling a centaur. Impossible bodies in the world, but not in the limbo of organs. In

Empedocles, the parts go together and are separated by two external principles, love and hate. With Wallin, it is therefore an important signal when we see two bodily fragments kissing each other. We are far from the frenetic, bellicose copulation that went on in *Colony*. Here is love and it exists in or between bodies. We are also rather far from the instinct for self-preservation that was portrayed in *Exit*— especially as this is neither a sexual nor reproductive instinct, but simply love. Love is there without any wider purpose, but neither without the function of allowing an organ or body fragment develop itself without adaptation to an organism, an organization dominated by a controlling power – ie a body of a higher order. It should be observed that the two kissing fragments do not compose a common body, as many others did in the film. Each common or complete body, each entity or unit, has arisen through one of the parts overpowering the others and subordinating them as a inferior organ. This is exactly what does not happen here: the kissing fragments remain separate, intimately connected, but not a unity. In the limbo they find themselves in, while waiting to be taken into use by the societal body, relations of love arise. This is not bad. Love is not God, ie an external and universal principle, neither is it a sublimated form of the instinct for self-preservation or reproduction. Love is simply a relationship between two who do not wish to become one.

It is the lovers that reveal that the self-organization's amusing forms (carousel, ferris wheel) are similar to the societal body's power structures.

Not that the two kisses can remain outside: the movements of the bodies drag them into the carousel. However in that movement, they move around each other, only for each other, organized but without participating in and reproducing the mechanics of the organization. There is something prodigious about the image. A body part in contact with another without trying to create a whole and a unity; an organ interacting with another without being parts of a body or an organism. Organs without bodies, that is, organs that are themselves independent bodies – and together! Wallin's work would seem to suggest that love can make us into bodies that are well out of the reach of bio-politics. And get us to feel closeness to just that, as well as to the true objects of realism.