

## **Narratives of physicality in "Through the supermarket in five easy pieces"**

**Anna Maria JOAKIMSDOTTIR-HUTRI**

DIRECTOR / [www.tottemoproduction.com](http://www.tottemoproduction.com) / [annamaria@tottemoproduction.com](mailto:annamaria@tottemoproduction.com)

---

### **Abstract**

*The article reflects on the problems of definition of genre and about negotiating a language for documenting movement.*

*Moreover it treats the origins of the story and how this generated the the movement material. It describes the underlying narrative pattern translated into the moulding of the characters.*

*The article also treats how transcended mythical archetype can be found in the most banal life situation and raises the question if you treat the subject of spiritual wholeness through the physicality of the characters and the impact they have on each other.*

---

### **Biography**

*I am a filmmaker and storyteller based in the heart of Scandinavia. With roots from both the Icelandic sagas and the Danish new wave drama I've been nourishing my talent of storytelling in the compelling silence of the Finnish marshlands.*

*I have films, theatre play, scripts and short stories as well as some commercial videos. With a base in the field of Photography I have a strong visual language that emphasises on atmosphere and moods. My strongest tool for creating something is a deep sympathetic emotional connection to the surrounding world and the people and life within it.*

*Directors short-film filmography:*

*2017 / Through the supermarket in five easy pieces*

*2011 / George & Lydia*

*2009 / Blue Dolphin*

*2009 / the Apple Thieves*

*2006 / SAM*

*2001 / Lilja*

## Introduction of the challenge

In this dance film a family tries to manage through the weekly grocery shopping without disintegrating. The moment they enter the supermarket the children go off in separate directions and the parents face the overwhelming load of merchandise under the time pressure of a closing store. Will they be able to gather the supplies for existence and still come out of the store with all the children? The story is also a metaphor to the five classical elements earth, air, fire, water and aether, of how they strive into different directions but still keep together as one.



As a traditional film director I faced the challenge of integrating choreography and narrative with the risk of everything becoming a mimetic illustration. I wanted to know how to work with the physicality of the different character's energies to tell the story. Moreover I wanted to avoid the movement material to "step out of the fiction" and become something separate from story. I wanted to research if the physicality of the five different characters could tell the story holistically.

## Choreography and movement: negotiating a framework

I had a close process together with the choreographers Andrius Katinas and Maria Saivosalmi. During the preproduction of the film we were asked about what we were doing and I usually spoke up describing our project as being a "dance-film". It always felt a bit strange because the connotations of this either makes people think of musicals with song and dance numbers interwoven with a narrative as a parallel world. Films with two modes of expression that rarely feel integrated. The other association made people think of something abstract, arty and in worst cases an expression-form withdrawing itself from interpretation. One day when we had been asked again what we were doing I started delivering the standard phrase, that we are making a dance film, just to avoid the awkwardness and insecurity of not having a definition. Andrius started laughing and interrupted me, "You're not really expecting

that we are going to dance are you? We're not working with dance at all, we're working with movement material. This is more a movement material film."



Fig. 1. Jenni-Elina von Bagh is trying out the costume made by Janne Renvall.

Fig. 2. Andrius Katinas is making a joke of what we are not going to do in our movement material film.



Fig. 3. The Mother and Father caught in indecisiveness by the overwhelming possibilities of choice at the oil and vinegar shelf.

### **Choreography phase one - moving from script and locations to creating a language of movement.**

We talked about the qualities of physicality for each characters. What generates movement in each scene? Sometimes it was as simple as a need for transportation from one place to another but at other points it could be a threshold to be overcome like "doors not opening" or an inner constraint like "indecisiveness" or "staying awake although sleepy". We looked a long time for the qualities of the family's togetherness versus their disintegration. There was a need to convey the original strife of the children to separate and go one's own way and explore the world and the struggle of the parents to keep the family together. The first scene happens in the car and for that we developed "the meat grinder". The family tries to get out of the car but needs to collect personal items or help each other out all done with the principals of a grinder.

The inciting struggle of the parents is to keep everyone together. This struggle we called "the lump". We wanted to convey the parents collecting the children and winding the energies together like yarn.

## Narratives of physicality

*"He recognised a shared attitude about myths that they are not abstract theories or quaint beliefs of ancient peoples, but practical models for understanding how to live"*

(From *The Writer's Journey, Mythic structure for writers*, Christopher Vogler 2007)

I was interested in the archetype of energies that can be found in ancient mythology and I wanted to work out a system to adapt this into a modern story. I had written the Sister and the Brother working with contrast like fire and water. The girl is everywhere, all over, exterior physicality and the boy lives within his game world, interior physicality. In the rehearsals we wanted the Sister to work with spontaneity and haphazardness so we gave her many different tasks. Dramaturgically the Sister functions as the engine's active spark. For instance she sets the melon in motion that rolls through the chaos into the end scene to be eaten, nourishing the family. We worked out moments where she would pass by and her energy would "pull the rug" giving the other characters new direction. She even triggers us on a meta level making the camera move in a new way. She supplied us with an abundance of material and we wished we could have fit everything in the final cut. The Brother with his battle against falling asleep, melting down on the ground eventually makes the parents carry him out of the supermarket. Dramaturgically he is a passive action triggering the changes in the story.



Fig. 4. Edith plays around while waiting for the camera to get ready. The natural inventiveness of her made us believe she would bring in the energy we were looking for when we casted her.

Fig. 5. Risto was just the teenage boy with his slender and kind of uncoordinated constitution that had to work hard on the soft and slow movement of melting down.

Fig. 6. Andrius placed in the action of catching Johannes. We did the exact same set-ups of the camera with the mother so we could intercut seamlessly between the both parents.

The Toddler had a different task. If the whole story worked on the principle of managing to do the grocery with the time limit before the shop is closed then the Toddler acts outside of time and space. His actions will bend time, prolong it or condense it. His presence is sometimes forgotten by the parents and sometimes they both need to let everything drop and take instant action to prevent a disaster. Being the youngest, the Toddler is the one that requires the attention of the parents but instead he takes the opposite task of watching over the whole family. He is the only character that seems to know where everyone is and what they are doing. These qualities suggested an alternative speed of motion and was the reason why we decided to shoot all his scenes in slow motion.



Fig. 7. The Mother and the Father collapsed under the groceries. This was the starting point for our side-tracking shot.

### **From rehearsals to camera choreography and editing**

We all agreed on working with natural movement within a given narrative framework that constrained the improvisations in the rehearsals. We could improvise the lifting up Risto's body for tens of minutes but in the end we knew we would only be able to use a small part of the action. This was sometimes quite disappointing as we saw how well things worked on the floor. But the film language does not allow for those prolonged

actions or then the narrative breaks, something I had set a goal to be able to balance. By this I mean keeping up the story tension and the feeling of a dramaturgy moving forward. It required not letting a scene collapse beyond where the narrative point is made, just because something looks nice in the choreography.



Fig. 8. The preparations for the side-tracking shot where the Sister cartwheels into the shot and motivates the camera movement.

During the shooting new ideas of camera choreography came up. I had visioned a seamless inward or outward movement and planned everything with the cinematographer to take place in the depth with the action either approaching or distancing itself in relation to the camera. But then we found the multiple aisles shot and decided to do one shot that worked in a completely different way. We had the parents collapsed under the groceries with the Sister cartwheel into the frame and we would dolly between three aisles with her motivating our action. I thought we could bend the rules as we could motivate it with the Sisters transformational powers. This was the only sidetracking shot we did but it gave a refreshing break in the otherwise stringent camera work.

It is easy to become formal and fall into gesture when working out the movements for a narrative process. Like in the scene "collecting the groceries" there is a goal of filling the shopping cart while increasing the pace and tempo. We decided to work on the

principal of improvisation for every take. This doesn't mean that we didn't rehearse the choreography for the scene. We devoted a complete day for solving the scene in all kinds of ways and came up with an atmosphere that we connected to in every later improvisation. In reality, from one perspective, we didn't improvise at all. The dancers knew exactly to what inner motivation they would connect to and this liberated them of constraint and made them able to renew the action in every take.

This was also the case with the scene where the family enters into the supermarket. In this case we had to work out parameters with the children so that they would feel confident that they were doing the right thing. This was of course a greater challenge. How to keep the improvisational freshness and still give them something they could relate to and rehearse towards? We gave them the possibility for "escaping" out of the group and the struggle against the parents "holding them at place." This seemed to be a comprehensible dynamic. At the shooting we did some takes but quite quickly realised that the first shots always were far greater than the later, that the children got exhausted at an early point. This was probably due to the fact that we had to film everything in the middle of the night because of the opening hours of the supermarket. Facts of reality one just have to embrace as a filmmaker.



Fig. 9. The rehearsal of the scene where the family enters the supermarket. We called the choreography "The lump".

## Screenwriting challenges

*"I really don't understand the problem with the artist's so called "freedom" or "lack of freedom". The artist has no freedom. There aren't anyone as imprisoned as artist, they are jailed by their talent."*

(From *Sculpting in Time*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1993)

## The origin of the theme

I started out in with an urge to do a dance film. Quite soon came the topic to me in the form of a question: at what banal everyday situations do I get the most stressed? The weekly shopping together with my small children came to me immediately as a picture where my nerves, patience and level of exhaustion drives me into despair.

I have an interest in alchemy and its dramaturgical applications. The foundation of the story is the family that can be seen as an earth element. The family needs to step into the unknown and face disintegration. We see the family in its parts as Mother, Father - earth and air, the Brother - water, the Sister - fire and the Toddler - aether. On a subconscious level I relate to the character's energy but at the conscious I perceive them as representation. I wanted to use the narrative to set up a subconscious microcosmos and lead the viewers from earth to aether - from material to spiritual. The Toddler is the one that brings them together. At the end scene of the film the family enjoys a piece of melon - integrated again they are all nurtured by the same sphere.

## The problem of getting movement translated into text

*"How can the choreographic process be translated into other media? How could we discuss and envision the possibilities of Futurebody? How would this projected body react and respond in spontaneous situations? // How can we accurately document touch and the sensation of movement?"*

(Programme note excerpt, *A Choreographic Laboratory*, Antwerp, September 1999, from *Are we here yet?* Meg Stuart 2010)

I asked myself how to write a screenplay for a dance piece? No use writing out the action, I guessed. But I would need a piece of writing to describe my ideas to the financiers and as a Director I knew they were very strict at what kind of format a screenplay can have. I decided to challenge this tradition and wrote out the concept in very short form: Family enters supermarket facing disintegration. Will they get out in one piece? Instead I concentrated on outlining the characters, how they differ from each other and what main energy that drives them. So the script took the shape of five character descriptions. As I suspected, when we presented the idea to the film industry,



I got my document back and was asked to rewrite it into the right format with scene headings of place and time and clear action and plot points.

Instead of immediately rewriting the screenplay I wanted to approach translating everything in another way so we went on location scouting. Not until I found the actual supermarket did I rewrite the character descriptions for the final screenplay. At this point I had clear visions of where we would be at each scene. So I could be very specific on one level and still leave a lot of air for the choreography to unfold. This seemed to be sufficient and we got the financial support we needed within the framework of narrative filmmaking and still preserving the freedom of a dance film.



Fig. 10. How to translate movement into text? How to predict spontaneous reactions into a future body? From the rehearsals two weeks before shooting.

## **Conclusions**

We had asked the question if it was possible to blend choreography and narrative so that you couldn't tell the difference. What would happen to the piece? Would it fall into a genre between chairs and not find it's audience if neither story-lovers nor dance-enthusiasts would feel familiar with it? On an internal level we also faced the difference in language within the work process. We approached the expression sought after with different set of tools that sometimes lead to unexpected results. In the end though we seem to have reached both levels. The film is invited to both narrative oriented film festivals as well as dance oriented ones.

We also tried the borders where the physicality of a process touched the gesture of an expression. To what extent could we stretch the repetitious movement and still preserve the quality of life and individuality? We found an aesthetic in the natural movement that was true and still feel like dance.

Moreover did the story of the family facing the ordeals in the supermarket transcend to a story about what energies hold the family together? Did our experiment of using the most banal everyday situation bare fruit on a subconscious level to touch something spiritual?

## **Acknowledgements**

I thank Paula Kesäläinen for the beautiful photographs: fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

## **References**

### ***Bibliography***

Meg Stuart (2010), *Are we here yet?* Page 195-196, 202.

Christofer Vogler (2007), *The Writer's Journey, Mythic Structure for Writers*. Preface: xiv.

C.G. Jung (1986), *Dreams. Part IV: Individual dream symbolism in relation to alchemy*.  
Page 111-298.

M. Siivola (2011), *Understanding Dreams, The Gateway to Dreams Without Dream Interpretation*, page 137-160.

Andrei Tarkovsky (1993), *Sculpting in Time*, page 183-195.

Mike Williams (2013), *The Shaman's Spirit*, page 24-27.

Bonnie Glass-Coffin, Ph.D. and Oscar Miro-Quesada (2013), *Lessons in Courage*,  
page 71-72

### ***Filmography***

Wim Wenders (Directing) & Piña Bausch (Choreography) (2011). *Piña*, [Documentary]