

An Irish Odyssey – Per L-B Nilsson

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What actually constitutes seeing? In a photographer, or in an individual? Perception, as we understand it, seems to be partly a socialised act of volition. We see what we want to see. We see on the basis of given formats, patterns and templates. We tend to see that which confirms our conceptions of the world. We reflect ourselves in reality. We see through our culture's veils, our culture's arrangements for – and of – seeing. Arrangements that build up, create and dominate the visual world.

Shocking, unusual impressions and events can break the pattern of habit in these arrangements, opening up a tear in the ingrained automatic approach and shifting the underlying conditions for what we see and what we experience. But at the same time, perception – what we see – is a glimpse into what lies outside the control of consciousness, steered by a language of unconsciousness and connected to desires which, to a varying degree, are hidden from us, both as individuals and as photographers.

Per L-B Nilsson, Senior Lecturer at the School of Photography, has been taking photographs in Ireland since 1967. During this time he has approached the Irish landscape – and those who inhabit it – from many different approaches, altering his photographic position. These approaches are dependent on the different roles that he has assigned himself as a photographer. And these roles, the differing perspectives that he creates, tell a narrative on the basis of, and engage in constant dialogue with – bracing themselves against, confirming – the differing contemporary times and their arrangements for seeing.

From 1967 right up to the present day, Nilsson had used a photographic idiom that has come to be known as *street photography*. He takes photographs in Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Clifden and Westport. Street photography can be read as an expression of a growing urban society, in which more and more people move in close proximity to each other, within public spaces, without coming into closer contact with each other. The genre often emphasises temporary constellations, encounters which are almost choreographed in their nature, between people's gazes and bodies in streets, on pavements and on pedestrian crossings, or in public places, pubs and betting shops. It is not uncommon for the genre to convey expressions of different feelings in the human face: arrogance, sorrow, joy, suffering, tenderness, etcetera. These expressions are often ambivalent and absorbing, and often have an evasive existential dimension that creates different types of living conditions – everything from yearning to despair – against the backdrop of the urban environment.

Nilsson's version of street photography connects to a multifaceted dialogue with many different photographic role models, including



Walker Evans, Paul Strand, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Christer Strömholm. The latter forms a natural partner to Nilsson's photography, depicting the street children of Dublin. But in contrast to Strömholm's images, in which children are often given a passive role, sometimes as strange, exotic beings and sometimes as victims, the children who appear in Nilsson's street photography radiate a sense of self-assuredness, self-confidence and intrinsic value.

Between 1971 and 1995, Nilsson took photographs on Inishmaan, a small, isolated island without a harbour. The group of islands to which Inishmaan belongs lies in the Atlantic, off the west coast of Ireland. Inishmaan has had a significant cultural impact, both historically as a Celtic place of worship and more recently, in the 1930s, as the setting for *Man of Aran*, a documentary produced by the American film-maker Robert J Flaherty. Another important cultural reference is John Millington Synge's plays *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Riders to the Sea*, inspired by stories from his visits to the island between 1898 and 1902. Synge also took photographs, and some of his images are published in the book *The Aran Islands*. A more recent cultural reference is 1996's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* by Martin McDonagh, a play with a postcolonial toolset and postmodern logic, which deconstructs and dramatises the making of Flaherty's documentary.

Together with a number of Flaherty's other films, *Man of Aran* came to have a significant impact on the documentary concept as a method and aesthetic attitude within film-making, and on documentary photography. Flaherty's breakthrough film, *Nanook of the North*, about the Inuits of north-east Canada, was a commercial success and enabled him to repeat the concept elsewhere in the

world. Criticism has been levelled against Flaherty's Canadian project in recent years for a number of reasons, such as his censorship of contemporary fishing methods in favour of traditional methods, his unwillingness to help some Inuits who faced great danger while he continued to film them, and his life-long denial of and dissociation from the son he fathered with one of his leading Inuit actresses. However, Flaherty also created a methodology that is still used by photographers with documentary pretensions. He took equipment with him – a not entirely simple process – in order to film on location and then show his films to the performers. And Flaherty did not film actual events, instead staging them with real people after having considered how they could be dramatised most effectively. This method has come to be known as docu-fiction, and formed the starting point for what was later established as a field of knowledge within anthropology: visual anthropology.

It is easy to understand Flaherty's and Nilsson's fascination with Inishmaan. Although their visits are separated by half a century, the island is still described as being as close to a time capsule as it is possible to find in Ireland, perhaps mainly due to its isolation. 160 people are now said to be permanent residents on the island. The weak soil has been created by generations of mixing seaweed and sand. Farming and fishing are still carried out using methods that, in some cases, are attributable to years gone by. Celtic remains the dominant language.

Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* has also been subject to recent censure, both in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* and in George Stoney's 1978 film, *How the Myth was Made*, which criticises Flaherty's cinematic and dramatic tendencies. For example, it is pointed out that he







chose the most photogenic people to make up an ideal family, thus disregarding their true relationships, and that he persisted in showing only older fishing methods.

Stoney's criticism is, perhaps, borne fourth in the light of the spirit of the time. In the 1960s and the 1970s, the ideal in terms of documentary claims was, for many photographers and filmmakers, to depict the unstaged, the spontaneous, the untouched – what could be said to be the truth. The meaning of the term “documentary” had thus shifted to some degree away from the dramatised and the formed since Flaherty and others had created it or undertaken it some decades previously. However, a question that was avoided during the 1960s and the 1970s – and which would encounter a strong backlash in the language-critical and postmodern discussion that followed – was that of how the photographer chose, positioned himself within and influenced the environment he photographed. The most extreme conclusions from this criticism would be that no depiction of reality was possible unless that reality was the photographer's own, and that the clearest and most sincere form of narrative was that which is staged or fictional – the form that makes no claim to speak on behalf of anyone else.

When Nilsson *documents* Inishmaan, he takes different approaches to these arrangements for seeing and photography. In keeping with the spirit of the time, he does not begin his documentation by directing the people in his subjects – he acts differently to his predecessor Flaherty. Instead, there is a dialogue with other photographic depictions of islands: Paul Strand's *Outer Hebrides* and Chris Killip's *Isle of Man*. The American David Plowden's way of working with the narrative by putting together images

in sequences is another point of reference. The few people who appear in Nilsson's photographs from Inishmaan act according to their own preferences. Like Flaherty, he gives his images back to those whose reality he documents, creating trust, contact and dialogue. But unlike Flaherty, Nilsson establishes a lasting relationship with the landscape and its inhabitants – contact which lasts for decades. Nilsson's attitude is close to some of the classic ideals of social anthropology: sympathetic observation, prolonged communication, the low profile of the observer and the intense attempt to understand the other party.

Nilsson's version of Inishmaan is primarily a classic narrative project. Living conditions are shown and expressed. The endless days of toiling in the struggle against the elements, protected by stone walls, is depicted unobtrusively. The sense of exposure at the mercy of the sea is portrayed. The relationship between the people and their relationship with the landscape are clear. But in this narrative about the lives of others, there is also – as with every romantic landscape painter – a subject that speaks, expresses and affirms. It can also be assumed that, to some degree, Nilsson reflects this barren, isolated, harsh, unfamiliar and naked, vulnerable landscape.

After completing his documentary series on Inishmaan, Nilsson began working in 1997 on Connemara Pictures, a project that would take him ten years. This represented a major change in terms of approach, subject and aesthetics. The subordinate attitude that a documentary photographer takes in relation to his subjects and his narrative can be discerned and identified even in the first photographs in Connemara Pictures. But there is soon a distinct shift towards other values. The sense of realism becomes more preoccupied by atmosphere. Something mysterious, maybe even threatening – certainly something unspoken. Edward Hopper announces his presence as a frame of reference.

But Nilsson does not come to a halt with Hopper – in a language which many more subjective documentary photographers have made their ideal – but continues his journey into a more dramatically pared down, disbanded, unformable, hardly – as yet – linguistic experience of reality. A stage set appears, where ordinary buildings and normal objects take on an unreal character, as if made from paper; alien, yet eerily familiar. Fragile and fabricated. In contrast to Inishmaan, there is no transparency here. The fragment is the constant centrepiece, and the onlooker is united with the photographer in decoding the emotional status of these fragments. This is not an assignment with a clear outcome or an obvious answer. But Nilsson's photographs feel particularly relevant to our time, our experience and our situation. And nor is he alone in formulating this contemporary arrangement

for seeing, for our perception and an aesthetic that we can recognise as our own. The ambivalent feelings that Nilsson's fragment awakens and his way of photographing them is shared by many of the School of Photography's students. They share the same subjects, working in a similar way and presumably on a similar basis.

As if to resist all simple categorisations, Nilsson has worked since 2007 on yet another narrative project entitled *The North, Derry and Belfast*. Like many photographic artists he deftly changes his approach, to the distinct annoyance of those who conservatively crave predictable development and consistency. In this series the focus is on political history, through Nilsson's interpretations of charged environments. The photographs show locations from Northern Ireland such as *Derry's Bogside* with *Free Derry* – the Catholic area that declared itself independent in 1969 and where the Catholic protests, the uprising against discrimination, began. In Belfast, Nilsson has photographed *Falls Road*, where the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants have led to deadly flare-ups, the Protestant *Shankill Road* and the absurd *Peace Wall*, a wall several kilometres in length that divides the Catholic and Protestant areas – in reality, 40 separate walls and barriers.

This most recent Nilsson project also connects to the introductory question in this text, but in an expanded form. What actually constitutes seeing? In an epoch? In a time? In a society?















