

Migrating Meaning

By Kathleen Smith

Kathleen Smith is a Toronto-based writer, filmmaker and web designer. Smith co-founded the Moving Pictures Festival of Dance on Film and Video, which she directed for fifteen years. She has been editor of *The Dance Current*, dance reviewer for *NOW Weekly*, and still writes regularly about performance and other interesting topics for many online and print publications. Smith also works with the collective initiative *Dance + Words*, which aims to expand and encourage discourse within and about the Canadian dance landscape.

Traduit de l'anglais par Camille Lantagne

Although we don't always recognize mature artists in their early work, we certainly do with the talented filmmaker and visual artist Laura Taler. Her luminous film *the village trilogy* was produced in 1995. Ostensibly her first major work, it stands alone in a kind of ageless perfection—but also serves as an artistic grandparent (or mentor?) to her current work in multidisciplinary installation. The lineage is clear and the thematic commitment thrilling, even though Taler has moved on technically and conceptually to deeper and more complex explorations of several recurrent themes: identity, dislocation, migration. Decades later, the film retains its purity and power, somehow still seeming fresh and current while harnessing sensations and recollections from history, or perhaps from someone's memory—many not directly familiar to the viewer, others quirky and personal.

Shot in black-and-white 16 mm film by director of photography Michael Spicer and directed by Taler, *the village trilogy* runs twenty-four minutes and consists of three distinct yet clearly related chapters. The first—*casa* (house)—is set in and around an abandoned building overgrown with vegetation. Through broken panes of glass, we first glimpse the child-like character performed by Taler, clad in dark baggy clothes, a tightly knitted cap obscuring her hair. She yawns, puts her finger in her mouth, and beats a hand against her armpit.

Tracked by a moving camera, Taler navigates her way through a vast destroyed industrial environment with care, shuffling and jumping to sound editor Phil Strong's ambient score of vinyl-record scratches. Moody soundtracks of a male tenor singing Schubert's *Die Lindenbaum* and a small child babbling and reciting in Romanian begin to overlap, reinforcing the feeling of filmmaking from another century—as does the light reflecting off Taler's pale face and hands, Spicer's nod to the masters of cinema—F. W. Murnau perhaps, or Fritz Lang. There is something reminiscent of early cinema, too, about Taler's movement vocabulary. External physical details, facial expressions, and body language reveal cycles of inner turmoil. Taler silently channels sadness, anger, yearning, and then defiance as she seems to confront invisible demons. Her hands shrink up into her sleeves in one tight close-up, and form elegant claws in another. She describes flight patterns, with hands or arms rapidly beating the air, a fledgling, then tiptoes toward something unseen but beloved, like a toddler glimpsing its mother in the distance. In the final shots of this section, Taler bends over with arms outstretched like a hawk riding air currents, gazing down at the land. The sound of wind picks up as Taler stops and sets her direction skyward.

Taler was born in Romania and migrated first to Italy, then to Canada, as a young girl. She studied choreography and performance before focusing on film, then

sculpture, finally amalgamating all of these disciplines into a practice that is notable for its rigour, charm, and thoughtfulness. She holds an MFA from the University of Ottawa and has been an artist in residence at the Banff Centre for the Arts, the Carleton Immersive Media Studio in Ottawa, the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires, and the Institute for Cultural Inquiry in Berlin. Her films are now mostly single-channel loops or embedded, along with performance, into hybrid multidisciplinary creations shown in art galleries. *the village trilogy* was made as a cinematic experience at a time, in the mid-1990s, when all media were undergoing seismic technical changes; it is meant to feel archaic, intentionally employing old-school production values and techniques. Yet conceptually, it has set the tone for Taler's lifelong exploration of being caught between two places, of embodiment in strange metaphysical spaces.

In much of Taler's work, split emotional allegiances and a sense of displacement—the kind that remains long after settling into a new environment—evoke some of the instabilities of the immigrant experience. However, Taler has remained close to her home country through family ties—her late grandmother especially—and extended family. This relationship with her Eastern European heritage resonates in most of her work, tangentially with titling, settings, costuming, and objects, or more specifically in location, song, and folk dance, as in *the village trilogy* and other dance and film works. Her interest in forms as diverse as photography, sculpture, tai chi, and tango also inform her practice, making some of her more recent creations time-travelling global tapestries of references, ideas, and influences.

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The second chapter of *the village trilogy*, *copii* (boys), is set in a forest in fall or early winter. It begins abruptly with the stomp of a boot in time to the chords of a martial-sounding piano concerto). Two men in old-fashioned coats and caps (José Navas and Luc Ouellette) move through the woods, hiding behind trees, sometimes sleeping. They're furtive when awake and look like lifeless bodies when they slumber among the fallen leaves in collapsed postures. This could be child's play or some grim reality—it's hard to tell. We see that they may be brothers; each wears the same ageing photo of two young boys pinned to the inside of his coat. As the two performers cautiously approach each other through the tree trunks, we glimpse vestiges of the movement vocabulary from the film's previous chapter: a shuffle-walk, a yawn. The fluttering of hands is repeated here, a kind of mechanism for curiosity, connection, for comforting or calming. This suggested narrative is fully gestural, not spoken, a moving riff on duality and twinship. In one shot, the pair are separated by a tree trunk that runs vertically through the centre of the frame. In others, they mirror and copy each other's movements with a rough and boyish physicality, push and pull, playing back and forth. Finally, the pair collect sticks and, together, lay out the shape of a simple house on the forest floor. Here, they can whisper secrets, share their cherished hidden photographs, and, after gently shutting each other's eyelids with their fingers, finally rest.

It's impossible not to think about the global displaced in this section: families torn apart and losing track of each other as they flee oppression or conflict or poverty, as they have for millennia, as they did by the millions during and follow-

ing the Second World War, and as they have been doing on a grand scale in the modern era. The two men here may be real or metaphorical brothers; perhaps they are from the same village or share a religious background. On the run and scared, whether it's an imaginary scenario or not, they find comfort in each other's existence.

In much of Taler's work, including *the village trilogy*, emotional connections are made obliquely, triggered by an object or a snippet of audio. Adding materiality and layers of meaning using artefacts, textiles, costumes, and carefully chosen objects, especially photographs, is a Taler hallmark that was gestated in her early filmmaking days. A preoccupation with spoken and sung language, including Yiddish, Spanish, and Romanian, has been another thread running through her work over the past three decades, and it dominates her current multidisciplinary practice.

In 2022, the installation *Three Songs* at the Carleton University Art Gallery employed language, re-enactments of personal history, and vocalization to evoke a lost personal past. In fact, Taler often links language to crafted personae when she centres her practice around her own considerable performance skills. In *Karanfil* (carnation), a 2021 site-specific performance film created roughly within the same timeframe as *Three Songs*, she assumes a variety of personae—responding to a Man Ray photograph of Bronislava Nijinska, examining a Janus-like sculptural portrait of herself looking off in two directions, and posing as a rock-star-like figure in a fuzzy greatcoat. Another new work, *Hex: Begin Again*, a looping single-channel video, was exhibited in 2019 at the Ottawa Art Gallery. Here, Taler channelled female artists such as filmmaker Maya Deren, nineteenth-century author Susan Coolidge, and French surrealist photographer Claude Cahun, all of whose texts she collages as part of the work. Taler the artist and Taler the performer have an interesting relationship, one that no doubt arises from the splits, disconnects, and dissonances of her own life experience. If there is a whiff of feminism to Taler's work around identity, it's not a politicized or self-conscious feminism, just an organically acquired lens, the by-product of being a female artist, a daughter, a mother.

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The third chapter of *the village trilogy*, *famiglia* (family), begins with a kiss, a young woman tenderly kissing a white-haired man on the cheek (Kim Frank and Donald Himes). As the camera pulls back, we see that the pair are part of a group sitting around a table in a paddock or farmyard. The diners mime sharing food and feeding each other. They laugh and smile as the camera starts to circle them. The movement gets bigger and slower, more theatrical, as some of the performers lean back and disappear under the table, popping back up to reach ecstatically for the sky. At the same time, the speed of the camera movement picks up. The human movement becomes circular, as the performers dance, sing, and clap to cheer each other on in what resembles a hora or some other folk dance. The picnic table becomes a staging area for a series of swirling high lifts by performers Jane Townsend and Jim Allodi, white sheets on a laundry line blowing all the while in the background. The camera spins one way, the performers the other; the action never lets up or slows down. As the brief segment progresses, blown-out light exposures (suggesting sunlight, the

sky) mingle with the white shirts of the performers to emphasize the airiness of the setting. The mood becomes buoyant, the dynamism of the performers and camera infectious, and the message quite obvious: there is endless strength and joy in roots, song, family, togetherness. The dance ends with the group seated and consulting a photo album as a child's voice, seemingly the same one heard in the first chapter of the film, speaks and then sings. Sharp-eyed viewers might notice a void in the album where a single photograph is missing.

After the fact, *famiglia*'s exuberance and joy inform the previous two darker sections of the film, creating a kind of palimpsest of love and anxiety. Taken together, the three parts of this gorgeous trilogy support what Taler was recently quoted saying is her current artistic statement: "I always say my work is about how the body carries the past, without being oppressed by it. But that weight is hopefully tempered by the lightness of possibility and a playfulness with cinematic craft."¹ Back in 1995, with the release of her remarkable black-and-white trilogy, Taler was already investigating loss and embodiment according to this potent logic.

When it premiered in 1995, *the village trilogy* was well received. The film was televised, invited to events all over the world, and won awards: Best Experimental Film at the Toronto Worldwide Short Film Festival, the Gold Hugo for Experimental Short Subject at the Chicago International Film Festival, and the Cinedance Award for Best Canadian Dancefilm at the Moving Pictures Festival of Dance on Film and Video. It is programmed to this day, often in conjunction with Taler's other film works, notably the documentaries *Heartland*, *A Very Dangerous Pastime*, and *Dances for a Small Screen*, or as a sidebar to her visual art exhibitions and installations. This enduring popularity seems natural, the subject matter more timely than ever, as global migration sparked by conflict and environmental disaster intensifies. Nonetheless, the film is intimate. Like most art that lasts to resonate with a new generation, *the village trilogy* seems personal, with playful moments that twinkle amidst the monotonal registers of the striking cinematography. The film doesn't dictate its narrative; rather, it plucks the viewer's strings of memory, individual and shared, referencing collective histories, both official and unofficial. This is artistic transculturation on a delicate scale, mysterious and bittersweet.

NOTES

- 1 Marianne Brown, "[Time Well Spent Together, Carnations, & Making Friends with Your Demons: An Interview with Laura Taler](#)", *Nosy Mag*.