

A short paragraph from the laboratory

Patrik Eriksson*

I found myself in a peculiar place where I questioned the very foundations of my belief in the art of film. This was not an ideal situation, especially since I had started working in a new way. I had felt that the essay film form was an oasis of possibilities, and I wanted to see how it related to my idea of “film as thinking,” which is also the title of my doctoral project in artistic research. The critical spirit of essayism had got me in its hold before I had come very far, or was this merely a phase common to any kind of creative process, or maybe just the consequence of having time to doubt? I do not know really, but I think I came out on the other side—at least for a moment anyway.¹

In Eric M. Nilsson’s essay film *I skuggan*² from 2011, the following statement is voiced a couple of times: “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll end up somewhere else.” This statement is sometimes alleged to be a quote from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*; however, this allegation is incorrect. Nevertheless, this statement still remains thought-provoking, and I find it hard to decide whether I perceive it as positive or negative. This depends on how I interpret the first phrase in this sentence: “If you don’t know where you’re going.” If I interpret this phrase as: I can have a certain goal in mind without knowing how I’m going to get there, and doubts can pop up in my mind during the course of my journey as to whether I’m on the right track or not. And then I probably will indeed end up “somewhere else.” This “somewhere else” can, in turn, prove to be a better or a worse place than the intended goal, that is to say, ending up somewhere else can, if I’m lucky, be to my advantage or, if unlucky, be to my disadvantage. I can also lack a specific goal and

therefore not know where I want to end up; and in a case like this, I could not be on the *wrong* track, since no track can be said to be the right one. Likewise, I could not end up “somewhere else” since I had not intended ending up somewhere specific from the start. I then have to consider and make up my mind whether the outcome is positive or negative, and do so on the basis of other grounds than a comparison between aim and result. The statement used in Nilsson’s film is ambiguous or, should I say, has a number of different meanings, and this both fascinates and irritates me. I found another turn of phrase with a similar message but of a more affirmative nature, quoted by Per Wästberg in his memoirs. It was the African proverb: “If you don’t know where to journey, every road can take you there.”

Maybe this is a suitable motto for my own work, both with regard to filmmaking and pursuing artistic research. Detours and wrong tracks are not detours and wrong tracks but are parts along the way that lead us the right way; they are indeed necessary in order for us to find the right way. It’s interesting to see how remote paths, in a seemingly accidental way, can lead us back and also join what we now discover as appearing to be the main track—making it a truly enjoyable expedition. This is how one discovers new things, new ideas, and new ways of thinking, or how one gets to know filmmakers and authors that one did not know anything about before.

Whilst working on my essay film, I needed to find my way on the subject of melancholy, which is as equally a classic subject for interpretative inquiry as a timeless and ever-present human feeling. I came across a book with the interesting title

*Correspondence to: Patrik Eriksson, Valand Academy, Box 132, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden. Email: patrik.eriksson@akademinvaland.gu.se

*Förtvivlans filosofi*³ by Tobias Dahlkvist, a scholar in intellectual history at Stockholm University. This book is about Giacomo Leopardi, the 19th century Italian poet and philosopher, who was noted for his pessimism. (The connection between a pessimistic outlook and melancholy cannot be avoided.) To be precise, the book is about how Leopardi's work was received in Sweden. Vilhelm Ekelund, who, during the 1910s, found himself in a transitional phase, that is, he was going from writing poetry to writing essays, was among those who wrote about Leopardi and also translated his works. I had always thought that Ekelund only wrote poetry, and I think he is still regarded as a poet by the majority of Swedes. This is rather strange since he only devoted himself to poetry during the first 6 years of his literary career. During the remaining 42 years, he mainly wrote prose in the form of essays and aphorisms—or so called thought-books. When Ekelund writes about Leopardi, he stands out as being an ambivalent melancholic, reflecting and reasoning on a hyper-melancholic. One reason why Ekelund abandoned poetry was that he wanted to free himself, and resign, from destructive, bittersweet melancholy, which, for him, had become the life-giving air of poetry. My eyes were opened to Ekelund's works, and I quickly got hold of his complete works.

In *Concordia Animi* from 1942, one of the last books to be published by Ekelund, I found the following sentence: "Där forska är verka, verka är forska, där är människolifvets fullhet."⁴ There is no English translation of this book. It's a literary text and extremely difficult to translate. The word "forska" could mean "to research," but also, and more likely in this case, "to search into," "to inquire into," "to investigate," or even "to explore." And the word "verka" is even more difficult; it could be translated "to work," which would be partly correct but would not give the right associations. It has more to do with "verk" in the meaning of making an "oeuvre" or a "body of work." A rough translation could maybe be: Where to explore is to act, or even enact a work, and to act, or to enact a work, is to explore, there is the "fullness of human life"; the last two words can at least be translated without any great difficulty. Anyway, even in Swedish, the sentence made me reflect on what Ekelund really

ännu icke funnit. [...] 'Scholar',—'essayist'—såsom i en särskild betydelsefullhet detta begrepp en tid försväfvade mig. Mannen som söker att *se vägen*."⁵ My attempt at a translation of this quote is as follows: "Essayism. I still haven't found *my* essay. [...] 'Scholar', 'essayist'—this concept—as it were of particular meaningfulness, for some time seemed to be for me—for the man who's seeking to *see the way*."

Ekelund had found the English word and concept 'scholar' in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American essayist and poet, above all in Emerson's essay *The American Scholar* from 1837. Here, Emerson describes in detail the three major aspects that influence his "American scholar": nature, the mind of the past (something you assimilate best through books), and action (that is, being a "man of action"). Nature was of great importance to Ekelund, and to assimilate "the mind of the past" was for him a question of gaining knowledge and perspective, of acquiring an intimate knowledge of the finest art and thought in history, combined with the task of conveying this knowledge to others. In one of his diaries, Ekelund writes (and I translate), "At the thought of Emerson, these lines of Tegnér come to mind: 'On the heights of humanity he stepped, and, as proud as a king in his kingdom, looked far, far out into the world'. These lines could be used as an epigram to convey the concept of 'scholar' in the Emersonian sense."⁶ Ekelund's quote referring to Tegnér makes me think of the music video for the song *Enjoy the silence* by Depeche Mode produced by Anton Corbijn. It depicts the singer in a king's cape with a crown on his head walking up a mountain peak with a sun lounger chair to sit down to see the view and enjoy the silence . . .

The idea of action being a factor that influences a scholar may seem a little odd; I mean, what can be done at all without some form of action? Ekelund, who was inspired by Nietzsche, understood the idea of action as the idea of a man of action with a will to power. But what kind of power is Ekelund referring to here? According to Kjell Espmark, who has analysed Ekelund's concept of the scholar in one of his essays, it is the power of writing, the power of the word, and also something that can make others strong. It is the will to strengthen others with one's truth.

translation): “Writing must be an action—a living, persuasive and suggestive action. The kind of philosophy that isolates you cannot be the right one. If truth makes you strong, then its power lies in you being able to make others strong.”⁷

It struck me that I finally not only fully understood but also somehow bodily perceived the potential of practical philosophy, thanks to Ekelund. The thinking of Vilhelm Ekelund was of the practical, therapeutical, and philosophical kind, and I think the following passage illustrates this in an explicit way; I translate the Swedish original in the following way: “What should I do to *live*? Seek everything that makes it easy to *l e t live*. Truth, objectivity: through loving *your* terms for truth, for height, for freedom, for love.”⁸ I understood why I had intuitively sought back in time, to 19th century philosophers, to the Romantic era, to the French Moralists, well, ending up in the company of Stoics and Skeptics. For me, it was all about life, that is, how life is to be lived, should be lived, or rather how it *could* be lived. Was not Albert Camus right when, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he asserted that man’s determining whether life is worth living or not is the answer to the most fundamental question of philosophy, and that all the rest is just a pastime? (Or when Alain Badiou in his *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* claims philosophy’s ultimate question to be: what is a life worthy the name?). I realised that for me this complex of thought was also the fundamental meaning of film. When I asked myself what it was about the essay film that appealed to me, I could not answer the question in explicit terms. However, I thought that essay film was a form that could give expression to this meaning in a particular way—by seeking and creating meaning through nearness to another “I”. I saw it as an encounter between images and words, where

thoughts and emotions met through the directness of a temperament—enabling an open coming into being of a relationship between the inner and the outer.

Notes

1. This text was originally a talk given at Lilla Filmfestivalen in Båstad, Sweden, 2012.
2. The title of the Swedish film “I Skuggan” is ambiguous, that is, the Swedish word “skuggan” can mean both “shade” and “shadow.” *I skuggan* was shown the previous year, 2011, at Lilla filmfestivalen, in Båstad, Sweden.
3. Ellerströms förlag, Lund, 2010. The book is published in Swedish only; English translation of the title: *The Philosophy of Despair*.
4. From *Concordia animi*, Helsingborg, 1942, p. 98.
5. From *Ur en scholaris’ verkstad*, Lund 1974, p. 57. The book is published in Swedish only; English translation of the title: *From a Scholar’s Workshop*.
6. A quote from the article “Vilhelm Ekelund och Emersons ‘Scholar’” by Kjell Espmark, published in Swedish only, from *Svensk Litteraturtidskrift*, vol. 30, 1967, p. 165: “Vid tanken på Emerson ha för ögonen dessa rader af Tegnér: ‘På mänsklighetens höjder steg han och såg långt ut i världen, så stolt som en kung kring sitt rike’. Dessa rader äro ett godt epigram på begreppet *scholar* i Emersonsk mening.”
7. Ibid., p. 167: “Skrifva måste vara en handling—levande, viljebevekande, viljesuggererande. Den filosofi som isolerar dig kan icke vara den rätta. Gör sanning dig stark, så är dess makt däri att du kan göra andra starka.”
8. *Ur en scholaris’ verkstad*, p. 56: “Hvad skall jag göra för att *lefva*? Söka allt som gör det lätt att *l å t a lefva*. Sanning, objektivitet: genom att älska *dina* villkor för sanning, för höjd, för frihet, för kärlek.”