

Elina Saloranta

## **A VIDEOWORK AS A GENRE PICTURE**

### **I**

#### **MORNING**

A view through a kitchen doorway. On the right-hand edge of the picture the doorframe, behind it a table covered with a white waxcloth, and three chairs. At the table are three people: a woman, a five-year-old boy and a newborn baby. The baby is in a sling at the mother's breast. On the table are a newspaper, mugs, plates, a tub of margarine, a roll of sticky tape, airplanes and a space rocket made from kitchen roll. In the background a fridge-freezer, a dishwasher and kitchen cupboards. On the sink unit a small white bowl and a mirror. The mirror is leaning against the tiled wall.

The mother is feeding the baby, while reading a newspaper on the table. Her gaze is turned to the right of the picture, towards the light. We can imagine that there is a window there. The soft light from the side brings out the woman's features: high forehead, small chin, and sleek hair tied at the neck. One breast is uncovered, but the baby's head modestly conceals it.

The boy is sitting at the end of the table. He has his feet up on the chair and is fingering his toes. The boy's T-shirt and underpants are white. His hair is fuzzy at the back.

Suddenly the boy turns his head towards the viewer and it turns out that he is crying. "Mum, do you know why tears are coming from my eyes?" the boy asks. The mother does not react immediately, it looks as if she does not want to tear herself away from her

newspaper. Finally she turns towards the boy and asks if the boy was thinking about something sad. The boy shakes his head. The mother's gaze veers towards the newspaper for a moment longer, then she again asks the boy what he was thinking about. "When I was little," the five-year-old begins, "and when you left on a trip... I wanted to come with you."

The mother stands up and hugs the boy. She strokes his head and says that sometimes she has been on work trips where she couldn't take a child with her. Then she leads the conversation to the previous summer's holiday. The boy cheers up and starts remembering the biscuits he had on the journey. He momentarily turns to face the camera full on, but does not appear to be bothered by it.

"When I was little, you said I shouldn't eat treats," the boy says, once again with the full force of his life experience. He carries on worrying away at the subject, and the mother goes back to her newspaper. A long silence follows. Then the mother says that the baby had gone to sleep, and lifts her onto her shoulder. The boy asks if he can hold the baby. The mother says yes, and lowers the sleeping baby into the boy's arms.

This idyllic moment ends when the baby breaks wind. "Yuk," the boy says and leaves the room. The mother carries on reading. The scene, as it were, freezes into a tableau: the woman is so motionless that the video looks almost like a still image. The silence is broken only by a shout heard in the background: "Attack!" This is followed by laughter and the sounds of a play battle. Apart from the boy's clear voice, the voice of a man can be made out in the game.



The above scene is from my videowork *Aamu* (Morning, 2013), which was shot in my home one Saturday morning in November 2011. The woman in the picture is me, the voice in the background belongs to my partner, Ari, and the children are our son Elias and our then as yet nameless daughter Tilda. They were all used to the presence of the camera, as it had been standing in the kitchen doorway for more than a week. I had set it up there so that I could film first thing in the morning, as soon as I had woken up, and so as not to spend time on arranging it. Since the camera was standing ready on its tripod, all I had to do was turn it on — like a coffee maker or dishwasher.

Mornings got chosen as my time for filming simply because I like them. They are splendid, bright moments of a new beginning. Perhaps the choice of subject was also influenced by the fact that morning is quite a common subject in the history of visual art. In any case, I decided to concentrate on morning activities, and to film them over a period of several weeks or months. Nevertheless, the material I got on that November Saturday was so perfect that I decided to stop the filming sessions there and then. It felt like I had in my hands an almost complete whole, one with a beginning, middle and end. Especially the end — when the boy bursts into tears — felt rare in its authenticity.

#### A CONTEMPORARY GENRE PICTURE

Before I had time to start editing the material, I reached a turning point in my research, one that affected both *Morning* and the way I see the whole of my way of being an artist. For this turning point I can thank two artistic-research events, at which I presented my works. The first was a seminar held at the Sibelius Academy in spring 2012.<sup>1</sup> For the event, presentations were requested of works that were still in progress, and I showed a nine-minute excerpt from the raw material for *Morning*. The excerpt was from the second half of the tape, more or less the same footage that I described at the beginning of this text. My idea was to ask the audience's help in analysing the video's meanings and possibilities. What can be seen in the picture and what should be done with it? To me personally the only thing that was clear at that stage was that I wanted to turn the material

into a piece of art — a beautiful, touching tableau, regardless of what its research significance might be.

The video's painting-likeness and "beauty" were topics that were touched on in the discussion. One thing that particularly stayed in my mind was the artist and researcher Piia Rossi's comment about the way that the details of the video were far too deliberate-looking to be true — right down to the colour of the underwear. "As a researcher I do not believe a word of what is said in the picture," Rossi said, and added that the video reminded her of the paintings by the Dutchman Jan Vermeer (1632–1675).

A few months later, Vermeer's name came up again, even though the material I was showing was quite different from *Morning* — in it a bunch of boisterous little lads were trying to stay in line at a dance lesson. On this occasion, the event at which I was showing my work was a Nordic Summer University (NSU) summer school in Denmark. I have been part of the NSU's artistic research network since 2010, and it may be that the comment referred primarily to my works *Room* (2008) and *Two Rooms and a Kitchen* (2010), which I had previously shown in the study group. In any case, my work seemed to contain something that invited comparisons with the Dutch painting tradition.

As a consequence of these comments the idea began to smoulder in my mind of my videoworks as kinds of contemporary genre pictures, i.e. as "interior paintings" depicting everyday life. The term "genre picture" comes from the French word "genre", which means category or type. It emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and was originally used to describe painters who specialized in specific subjects, such as flowers or animals. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the term "genre picture" has referred to paintings that contain scenes from everyday life. These can equally be highly comical depictions of ordinary people, as well as the subdued interiors of middle-class homes.<sup>2</sup> When I talk about the genre picture, I am thinking of the latter subgenre. Some of its most famous exponents are the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch masters — apart from Vermeer, for example, Gerard ter Borch (1617–1681), Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–1678), Gabriel Metsu (1629–1667) and Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684). Their paintings often show a view of everyday life

opening out behind a doorway or a curtain, the light comes from a side window, the colours are bright, the composition geometric, and the mood is harmonious... Just like in my works.

The genre-picture idea brought the realization that the context for my works is not video or film, but painting. This claim is a provocative one and some may disagree, but for me personally, right from the start, it has felt right and true, and downright self-evident. Being like a genre picture explains the aesthetic of my works — what they look like — but above all it describes how I *think* about pictures, how I construct them. Despite the fact that I make moving-image works, I actually think in static images. I make various kinds of moving still pictures. When I look through the camera's viewfinder (or to be more precise, at the little screen on the digital video camera), I see my subject as “a painting”. I look at the light, the foreground and background of the space, the relationships between the objects. Just as Rossi suspected, I am particular about the colours, and I go in and adjust details. I am not a documentarist who attempts to portray reality as it is. I am a painter who constructs her pictures.

#### A SUSPECT IDYLL

The need to contextualize one's work springs from the academic research tradition, but finding a context can also be inspiring for artistic work. When I was editing *Morning*, it was a relief to think that I was making not “a movie”, but a painting. It seemed to give me more room to manoeuvre in relation to the duration of the work, and to allow moments when nothing happens. Contrary to what is generally the case, the display context for the work was also known before I even had time to start the editing. This was the Nordic contemporary-art show at the Turku Biennial at the Aboa Vetus & Ars Nova Museum in summer 2013. The theme of the exhibition was the Idyll, and it seemed like I could not have got a more delicious display forum for my suspect genre picture!

For the exhibition I went through the one and a half hours of video material again and edited it down to a compilation about 22 minutes long. This is divided into seven episodes, separated by fade-through-black transitions. At the start of the work, the mother is sitting at the table eating porridge, the baby is sleeping in the sling, and the father is buttering bread at the sink unit. From out of shot we hear the boy's voice: "Mum, I've got my very own superball!" Soon, the boy comes in to show off his ball. He remains standing in the doorway, his right hand raised. The arrangement is perfect: the boy in the foreground, the mother at the back, the hand holding the superball in a golden section. A moment later, the child starts bouncing the ball. He passes in and out of the frame made by the doorway. "A really fine day, have to go out..." the mother says in a barely audible voice. The father looks out onto the courtyard from the window in the side wall, which is hidden behind the doorframe.

In the next scene the boy is sitting on a chair at the head of the table. The father is reading a newspaper, and the mother suggests that she read to the boy Astrid Lindgren's life story. "Let's read the cow book first," the boy says, "We've never read it." The mother does not appear very enthusiastic: she lingers, takes another sip of coffee, glances at the newspaper over the father's shoulder. Finally — when the boy is already quite breathless from repeatedly asking — the mother gets up. "Let's see if I can find it," she says and walks through the doorway out of shot. The boy goes after her. Still from behind the black rectangle we hear a clear voice: "Mum, I'm going with you."

When mother and son are again sitting at the table, the "cow book" has turned into *Cinderella-Timo*, Mauri Kunnas' version of the classic fairy tale. The mother reads patiently, even though the newspaper might be more tempting. The boy listens with only one ear. He turns around in his chair, then finds a metal tape measure on the table and makes a gun for himself out of it. From somewhere further off we hear the sound of a telephone. The mother goes to answer it, and the boy is left alone with his father. He points the gun at his father: "Hands up, don't move!" The father lifts his gaze from the newspaper and smiles. It looks like he might be about to say something, but the scene

ends before he does so. If it did not end there, the viewer would see that the man glances at the camera.

In the fourth episode, a space rocket made out of kitchen-roll tubes has appeared on the table. Once again, if viewers saw the edited-out material, they would know that the father has helped the boy to build it. Now, however, the father has returned to the newspaper, and the boy is sitting in his mother's lap. "Look what I made," the boy says and shows her the patterns he has drawn on the rocket. Then he announces that he is going to draw on his leg next. "Don't," the mother stops him. "OK," the boy promises, but goes under the table with the pen. From there he asks whether the mother can see what he is doing. "Yes, I can see," the mother replies. The boy says that, in that case, he is going under the bed, but, as he gets up, he bangs his head on the edge of the table. Momentarily the boy ends up right at the edge of the shot, almost outside it. The mother, too, steps out of frame. I remember well when this happened: I realized that I must be too far out, and took a step inwards. In so doing, of course, I got the boy to follow me.

At the start of the fifth episode, the boy is again drawing on the rocket. "This is Laika," he says. "Oh, look, how lovely," the mother praises him. "What do you mean lovely?" the boy asks. There follows a conversation about how a dog can fly in a rocket, even if it cannot steer, and about whether the story is true. The mother assures the boy that it is true, and the boy proposes that they, too, travel on a moon rocket one day. "You may get a chance," the mother replies, "when you're grown up." The boy says that the mother will have to come with him. "Fine," the mother grins (even though in fact the idea is no more imaginary than a dog flying in a rocket). At this point, the father, too, joins in the conversation: "You can go now if you have a few million." "You can?" the mother says in surprise, and corrects him, saying surely you can't go to the moon, but only into space.

When we next shift forward in time (via a fade-through-black transition), the father has gone and the mother has sat in her place to read the newspaper. The boy announces that he is finally going to eat the toast on the plate, but points out that there is no butter on the bread. The mother sighs and says (articulating extremely clearly) that the bread has been

battered, but you can't see it, because it has melted. This reasoning does not convince the boy, and he demands that the mother put more butter on the bread. If the camera had not been on, at this point, I would very probably have snapped: That's enough! But because the camera was on, I got up and took the butter dish out of the fridge. I was still annoyed enough to tell the boy to put the butter on himself. Or was it that I realized that the butter dish had some dramatic potential? In any case, the following sequence ensues, which always makes the audience laugh: first, the boy carefully takes some butter on the knife and, having made sure that the mother is not paying attention, puts the knife into his mouth.

The work's seventh, i.e. last, episode is the one that I described at the beginning of this essay — the one that begins with the boy in tears and ends with the mother frozen into a tableau. When we look at the scene together with the other episodes, the boy's tears take on the significance of a kind of climax or turning point. Before that, the work is filled with talk and action, but now the pace slows, until the motion stops almost completely. I believe that the association with Vermeer arises specifically here. Vermeer did not depict families, rather his *metier* was women sunk in thought. Contemplation and silence are otherwise among the most characteristic features of the Dutch genre picture of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

## A REAL GENRE PICTURE

When I was editing the video, I had the idea of juxtaposing the work in the exhibition with a “real” genre picture and, in the absence of any Vermeers, I began looking for a suitable painting in Finnish art history. The genre painting arrived in Finland via the Düsseldorf Academy of Art during the 1800s and was very popular until the end of the century.<sup>4</sup> The first to catch my attention was Elin Danielson-Gambogi's (1861–1919) *After Breakfast* from 1890. In it a young woman “slobs about” at the breakfast table smoking a cigarette. At the time the painting was made, a woman smoking was a provocation that was associated with the women's movement and a bohemian lifestyle.<sup>5</sup>

In my mind I could already see that defiant feminist hanging on the museum wall opposite my family idyll, eyeing it suspiciously. Or perhaps she would simply be indifferent and say: “No thanks.” In any case the painting would contrast with my video and would bring in a critical note.

It was not, however, possible to get *After Breakfast* for the Biennial, since it was going to another exhibition at that same time. So, I carried on looking, and finally settled on a work by Adolf von Becker, *A Mother's Joy* (1868). I didn't find it so interesting as a painting as *After Breakfast*, and nor did it contrast in any way with my video. On the contrary, the theme was exactly the same — a mother and son at the breakfast table — and the mood idyllic. Nevertheless, I thought that by juxtaposing them I would be able to convey to the audience my idea about the genre picture. The aim was to get the viewer to view my video through art history, as a painting. Von Becker was splendidly suited to this purpose, since he is known specifically as a genre painter, and *A Mother's Joy* clearly represents this type of picture.

In practice it was easy to bring the pictures together, since *A Mother's Joy* belongs to the Finnish National Gallery's collections, and the painting was obtained for Turku under an inter-museum loan agreement. In the exhibition a small room on the museum's upper floor was given over to the works. The walls of the room were painted bluish grey (this shade was picked out of the mother's apron in von Becker's painting) and the works were hung on opposite walls. The video was shown on a small flat screen, which accentuated its painting-like quality. The sound came from headphones. Also fixed to the wall in adhesive lettering were the words: “*Morning* is a video work and also a contemporary genre painting – an ‘interior painting’ depicting everyday life. Genre paintings had their roots in the Netherlands of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but they were popular up until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this exhibition *Morning* is paired with *A Mother's Joy*, a genre painting by Adolf von Becker from 1868.”

## II

### THE WRITER GUEST

If we view *Morning* in relation to my research as a whole, we might think of it as serving as a transition to the genre picture. It is not linked to my original research topic (the interaction between the image and the word or the sound), but offers a new viewpoint and context. Genre-picture-likeness is a quality that describes my works aesthetically. A genre picture is also a means of getting away from documentarity, which is easily associated with video as a medium. It helps make clear, both to the viewer and to me personally, what the aim of my works is.

The later stages of *Morning* are, nevertheless, linked with a detail that affects the interaction between the image and the word in the most concrete possible way. This is a text that the author Riina Katajavuori wrote about the work for the Turku Biennial exhibition catalogue. The choice of writer was mine, and it was underpinned by my own experiments with writing — I have for a long time been interested in using the means of literature in my research texts, and I wanted to see what kind of text a poet and novelist would produce about my work. Inviting Katajavuori to be the writer was thus a way of conducting a dialogue with literature, of placing the image and the word in mutual interaction, and of learning to write. One of the pre-examiners of my thesis, the researcher Mika Elo, has seen in this an analogy with my work *Room* (2008), to which I invited a sound designer as my guest, and with my *Reflections in a window pane* (2012), in which a number of other artist-researchers were guests.<sup>6</sup> Quoting Elo, we could say that “inviting in guests” has become a research method for me, and Katajavuori was my first writer guest.

What kind of guest was Katajavuori, then? What did I learn from her, and did the experiment reveal anything about the interaction between image and word?

I take out the catalogue once again and start reading the text. I have read it only once before, when the exhibition curator sent it to me for approval.

Then — as now — I had no problem “approving” the text. I liked it right from the first sentence: “The kitchen table is an airfield, the kitchen table is a launching pad.”<sup>7</sup> That is not how a promotional text (or an academic study) starts, that is how a picture starts.

Katajavuori’s picture is concrete and tangible. At the table sits a Madonna, with a straight back and high ideals. She “over-articulates everything she says”, discusses and participates. In the background we see the silent hero of a Wild West film, who “slaps his thighs”. The man tries to grab the newspaper, but the Madonna “scowls” at him. Their son bombards his mother with questions until his very manner of speaking has him struggling for breath. When the mother’s gaze is averted, the boy licks “a lump of butter” from the point of the knife. The baby hangs at the mother’s breast “like a fruit on a tree”.<sup>8</sup>

The text is not a research text, but in the coolly stylish catalogue the scowls and lumps of butter alone stand out. It seems as if the writer is intentionally disrupting the different registers of writing. Scowls belong to the family circle, not to where people try to behave objectively. The lump of butter, meanwhile, offers up to our gaze an image of something unpleasant, something that we don’t want to touch. With these everyday expressions the text becomes somehow three-dimensional, material. It appeals to the sense of touch, to the skin, to the body.

At the same time as the image is palpable, it draws up a diagram of the role division between the family’s members. In this diagram there are lots of lines running between the mother and the boy, but the father is set apart. Around him there is a drawn a circle, an “aura of peace”.<sup>9</sup>

Paradoxically the silent father wedges his way in Katajavuori’s mind into the leading role. “Why does silence take up so much space?” she asks. The writer seems to be really

annoyed. She describes how the man “mumbles”, scratches himself and “stares out of the window with a glazed expression”. The last straw is when the phone rings and the man does not get up to help. “Is he incapable of doing everyday chores?” Katajavuori wonders. “Does he have higher things on his mind?” Finally, the writer speculates that the man has a hangover.<sup>10</sup>

The work has, nevertheless, been made by a woman, Katajavuori says — it is a piece of reality cropped and selected by a woman. It seems that this affords her some relief. And at least that woman has succeeded in making art, despite her family, Katajavuori muses. For a moment, it feels as though the person speaking here is not the writer Katajavuori, but the character Tuulia in her novel, a researcher on childcare leave from work in *Lahjat* (Tammi 2004). I read the novel when I was myself at home looking after my first child, and it inspired me in my efforts to combine art and family life. The novel was also one reason why I specifically wanted to invite Katajavuori to be my guest. Another reason was the picture book *Mennään jo kotiin* (Tammi 2007), which Katajavuori made together with the illustrator Salla Savolainen. When making it, Savolainen sat in people’s homes, drawing, and on the basis of the images Katajavuori wrote texts in which she allows the children living in those homes to speak. The book could be considered an heir to the art of the genre picture. It has also been compared to the Swede Carl Larsson’s (1853–1919) home interiors — with the difference that the homes portrayed by Savolainen and Katajavuori are messier and have more stuff in them.<sup>11</sup>

Against this background it is understandable that Katajavuori mentions Larsson as one of the models for *Morning*. This does not flatter me in the same way as Vermeer does — what am I supposed to have to do with that hackneyed cookie-jar artist! Nor does Larsson’s coiled line seem to fit with video art as readily as Vermeer’s illusionism does. On the other hand, I have to admit that the Scandinavian home ideal created by Larsson and his wife Karin can be seen in the aesthetic of my home, too. Larsson also offers a good opportunity to think more closely about the concept of the idyll.

The word “idyll” comes from Greek and means a small picture.<sup>12</sup> To my mind this reflects the character of idyllic moments well: they are small pictures constituted in the midst of the everyday. The initial set-up for *Morning* is one such moment: an unhurried day off, the whole family together, the home tidy, the sun shining... The picture does not, however, necessarily last long, it is shattered when something unexpected happens, when the child starts to get on your nerves, when your spouse takes the newspaper... It may also be that not everyone in the picture shares the experience of the idyll. It may be that what is idyllic to me is in fact unpleasant to someone else.

As with all pictures, idylls, too, have their precedents. When I place myself and my children at an idyllic breakfast table, I put myself into a joint image shared with Larsson’s. When I turn my gaze towards the Ikea cupboard standing in the corner, I see behind it the kitchen in Lilla Hyttlös. In idyllic moments, I, as it were, step into those images or spaces created by my predecessors, and live in them for a moment.

In an artistic sense idyllic moments are quite uninteresting, if they don’t have an edge to them. Nor would *Morning* be very interesting if everyone behaved well the whole time, if the boy did not burst into tears, or if the pure whiteness of his underwear did not arouse suspicion in the viewer... This last feature in particular — suspicion — fascinates me. It is in the eye of the beholder, but it makes any picture intriguing. Your gaze starts looking for signs of something hidden, something dirty, something ugly. The idyll becomes a riddle. Katajavuori, too, has given her text the title *The Secret of Breakfast*, but is compelled to admit that the riddle is not solved. The idyll keeps its secret.

Apart from Larsson, Katajavuori mentions as a point of reference for *Morning* Vermeer’s *The Milkmaid* (1658–1660) and the self-portrait genre. The former appears to back my theory that *Morning* is a genre picture, but for honesty’s sake, I have to admit that I may have mentioned Vermeer myself in one of the e-mail messages that I sent to Katajavuori... The comparison with self-portraits, in contrast, supports my arguments in a roundabout way. Even though I appear in my own works, I specifically do NOT see myself as making self-portraits. I don’t see myself in *Morning*, either, but rather “a

woman” or “a mother”. In that sense I am an authentic genre-picture painter, who does not try to portray individuals, but types: women (virtuous or wicked), children (obedient or wayward), servants (faithful or treacherous)... One of the favourite categories in the gallery of characters in genre pictures has been “the good parent”, among which the nursing and reading mother in *Morning* clearly also belongs.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that Katajavuori uses the word “Madonna” about the mother further takes our thoughts to one particular tradition in painting: to the religious pictures in which The Holy Family is shown in an everyday environment. This tradition is also one of the precursors of the genre picture. As examples of this we could mention, for instance, the Flemish Petrus Christus’ (c.1420–1472/73) painting *The Holy Family in a Domestic Interior* (1460). In the painting Mary and the baby Jesus are depicted in a bedroom, where we can see a bed, a chair and other objects (even a chamber pot). The family’s carpenter father is situated in the doorway seen in the background, as if he were only passing by. The same arrangement, in which the father is separate from the rest of the family, was later transposed to genre pictures — and also to my art.<sup>14</sup>

Katajavuori was an inspiring guest, who made detailed observations about my work. Discussing with her has also added to my self-understanding as a reader and a writer. I now see more clearly what I mean when I say that I am interested in literary devices. The aim is not to go over totally to fiction, but to bring to the research text a pictoriality, a physicality and an engagement. I like texts in which the writer can say that she is annoyed — if being annoyed serves reflection. I also like it when a writer does not try to be intellectual or high-flown, but uses simple, everyday language. I get more interested in images than in assertions, I enjoy lumps of butter and scowls or other transgressions against good manners. As someone who does artistic research, I am strongly biased towards art. Nor will my research necessarily produce any “revelations” or arguments as an end result, but what it will produce is new artworks — new combinations of images and words.

Sometimes, constructing an argument, nevertheless, means the same thing as constructing an image. For example, when starting on this text, I realized that everything depends on how I describe *Morning*. Am I capable, using the right choices of words and the right emphases, of evoking an image of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century genre picture, even though this is a contemporary videowork? Do I get the viewer to think of Vermeer, before I have even mentioned his name?

When practising these skills, I have noticed that writing gives me pleasure. One of the “discoveries” of my research could be considered to be that I have found the writer in myself. I have also realized that writing about works involves to the maximum possible extent studying the interaction between image and word. Even when the work itself does not seem to be connected with my research topic — as with *Morning* — writing brings me back to it.

### III

#### CONVERSATION PIECE

In the summer of 2013, I got more visitors to my kitchen, when I showed *Morning* at the NSU summer school in Norway. Judging by appearances, the audience reacted as I had expected: they laughed in all the right places, and went quiet at the end. In the discussion that followed the showing it, nevertheless, became evident that, like Katajavuori, many of them had been annoyed by the passivity of the man seen in the video. One of the viewers, the Irish visual artist and researcher, Tom McQuirk, blamed me for this: he said that just when the man opened his mouth to share in the conversation (about space travel), I shut him up by showing him he was wrong!

This criticism bothered me, as I had not realized that the man would have such a major importance in the work. Nor had I seen him as being as passive as the viewers had, perhaps because I knew the material that had been edited out. For example, the bit where

the man glanced at the camera, to me clearly indicated how the camera was making him hold his tongue. I regretted that I had not left that glance visible, and I felt that I had failed in other ways, too.

Luckily for me the summer school is set up so that we returned to each presentation on the following day, for a “post mortem”. At the post mortem each presenter was given ten minutes, and instead of just a discussion, I decided to use it for a little exercise. It went broadly like this:

*After the discussion we had yesterday, I realized that there is a problem in my family. My partner is not speaking — or I am not giving him a chance to speak. So, I'm asking you to help us. Please give him (or me) a line.*

I thus placed the participants in the role of playwright, god or therapist, and I asked them to change the flow of events. In response, I got fifteen hand-written bits of paper, containing one or more lines of dialogue. Most of the bits of paper were anonymous, so I will also show those lines here without the writers' names:

The Man

*I'm not in a communicative mood today. I need a moment of silence. Is it OK if I just sit here reading the newspaper for a while?*

*I will find the book.*

*Please tell me what my role in this is.*

*Help me please, I don't know what to do.*

*Can you just be quiet for a bit.*

*Hands up! Oh, indeed!*

The last two lines were directed at the son of the family. Also, in one piece of paper the woman was urged to turn to the boy and say: “Ask your Dad.” Otherwise, the woman's lines go like this:

The Woman

*Speak to your child.*

*Will you please talk to your son!*

*Can you hold her for a while?*

*Could you give me a massage? The shoulders.*

*Yes. I think you are right.*

Three of the bits of paper had suggested not words, but actions for the man: he could smile at the woman when their child does something amusing, help the woman pour more coffee, do housework or other minor chores.

On a few of the slips of paper there had been written a short dialogue between the man and the woman. One of these was set at the point when the phone rings. In it, the man reacted in a way with which Katajavuori, too, would have been satisfied: "I'll get that." And the woman replied: "Thanks."

In another dialogue the woman asked the man: "Did you sleep well? What's been happening in the world?" The man replied, saying that he had not been able to sleep because the child had slept restlessly, and then he read out a news item aloud from the newspaper.

The author of a third dialogue had the woman ask the man "What would be your first 10 words today?" and ordered the man to reply: "Yesterday, the Finnish Ice Hockey Team lost vs. Sweden... AGAIN!" At the bottom of the paper was a further message to me: "Good Luck!"

Among the answers was also one slip of paper, whose author did not see any problem with the work, but an ordinary situation in which the camera induced a lack of responsiveness. The author, nevertheless, suggested a line for the couple that I think is one of the most important in real life: "How are you today?" But I couldn't have imagined it in my work. It would have changed the genre picture into something quite

different — a chamber play or human-relationship movie. Genre pictures do not ask, How are you? Nor do they accuse, demand or start arguments. In matters of love they are reserved, even a little inhibited. Emotions are not expressed directly, but by means of gazes (or scowls). Of all the lines of dialogue suggested by my guests the most genre-picture-like is: “I need a moment of silence.”

As one outcome of the exercise we can say that, even though the division of roles in my family is problematic, it fits the genre-picture paradigm. What a comforting thought! The feedback from the public also demonstrated that *Morning* is not only a genre picture, but also a *conversation piece*. This term is particularly associated with 18<sup>th</sup>-century English family portraits, but in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland it was used to refer to genre pictures showing groups of people.<sup>15</sup> In both cases attention is focussed on the interactions between people. Who is talking to whom, at what are gazes directed, how are the characters situated in relation to each other?

#### A PEEK INTO THE ARTIST’S STUDIO

After the summer school, the muteness of the man who appears in *Morning* got yet one more, realistic-feeling explanation. This was suggested by my supervisor Elina Heikka, who has been observing my way of working (and my life) for several years now. To Heikka, the video does not so much say what the man is like as a father or as a human being, but rather how he relates to what his artist-spouse does. The man does not take part in his spouse’s art projects, but agrees to be there in the background. He does not start “acting” or portraying anything, but lets the woman do her work. This is, in fact, also the role that I offered to the man. I don’t remember precisely what words I used, but the idea was this: “Is it OK if I film a bit in the kitchen, you don’t have to do anything...”

Thus, *Morning* is not solely a view into the kitchen, but also into the artist’s workspace. What is being made here is a “painting” that shows a family of four at the table. The main role is played by the five-year-old boy, in the background the artist paints the father

reading the paper (quite a cliché, I must admit!). The artist herself plays the (suspiciously patient) mother, but at the same time acts as director. By taking a step to the left she gets the boy to stay in shot. By taking the initiative in the conversation she gets the boy's torrent of speech to continue.

From this viewpoint even the camera on its tripod begins to be reminiscent of a painting easel. Or maybe it is actually a camera obscura, of the kind that the Dutch painters are supposed to have used... In any case it is a heavy, hard-to-move object that you can't always be bothered to shift out of the way once the filming is over. And so it has become an almost permanent part of the artist's home. Whenever a suitable situation comes up, the home turns into an atelier, studio or laboratory.

Stepping into the flat along with the camera is the audience. This is something that adults are well aware of, but children are incapable of being on their guard in the same way. The five-year-old boy in *Morning* does see the camera (he even looks at it occasionally), but does not know that he can be judged on the basis of the image, that the camera is like a microscope that magnifies (or exaggerates!) things. We could say that the child sees the camera, but not the viewer behind it.

The most oblivious of all is, of course, the newborn baby, who is asleep most of the time. When writing about the work, I have noticed that I don't always even remember her. She is, as it were, like a part of her mother's body, something that the sling further accentuates. To Heikka, specifically the fact that the mother does not notice the baby makes this significant. It looks as if the mother is trying to respond to her first-born's needs just as if the baby did not exist. She tries to get the boy to feel that nothing has changed, even if her arms are filled with another child. Thus, one more theme can be discerned in *Morning's* scheme of human relationships: sibling rivalry. Katajavuori sees this, too: she says that "The air is filled with the electricity of a new family situation". Not only the baby, but the whole family, according to Katajavuori, is "new-born and still finding its way".<sup>16</sup>

## TO FINISH

In this essay I have tried to persuade the viewer that I am fundamentally a genre painter. As an example, I have used my work *Morning*, in the face of which this realization has emerged. Nor, however, did the thought yet exist at the time when the work was being shot, but rather it only came up when I was getting feedback from viewers. For me personally, specifically this is convincing. I have not invented the notion that I am Vermeer, rather other people have noticed our affinity.

In the first part of my essay I described *Morning* and set out the concept of the genre picture. In the second part I brought in the writer guest and the theme of the image and the word that is part of my research plan. The third part brought in more guests and more words. In retrospect, it is amusing to notice that a work that at first sight did not seem to have anything to do with my research topic has produced an enormous amount of talk: annoyed criticism, ironic quips, confidences, gossip, psychological interpretations... Within my research as a whole, *Morning* is perhaps not only a transition, as I wrote at the start, but part of a continuum, in which the images produce words or new verbal images.

Before I end, I will redirect my gaze to the stack of books that sits on my desk. Those books have not specifically appeared in my texts, but their beautiful pictures and equally beautiful verbal descriptions have helped me form a sense of *Morning's* genre-picture-likeness. My favourite is a worn, grey-bound volume that contains an enthusiastic description of Vermeer's soft light and "fairy tale poeticness" (*Sisäkuva Alankomaiden taiteessa*, 1951).<sup>17</sup> Beneath it can be seen a newer, red-bound book *An Entrance for the Eyes — Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (2002), which prompted me to focus attention on *Morning's* spatial elements, such as the doorway typical of the Dutch genre picture. The blue-bound *Vermeer's Women — Secrets and Silence* (2011), in turn, tempted me to accentuate the contemplative aspect of the mother in the work, and *Paragons of Virtue — Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (1993) her virtuousness. I know this is not a traditional academic way of using sources, but I want to mention it, because it is my way — and perhaps the way of some other artist-

researchers. Especially when the argument is based on description, the visual, material or the “poetic” aspects of the sources can be just as important as their information content.

Among this stack of books there is one more that deserves mention. Its title could be *Vermeer — the famous Dutch film director*. The volume is actually simply called *Moving Pictures* (1989), nor does it call Vermeer a film director, but a *proto-cinematic* painter. This viewpoint is intriguing, in any case. In my own texts I have tried to see the videowork as a painting, but now a painting is being seen as a film. And sure enough: *The Milkmaid* starts to move. The milk begins to flow from the jug into the bowl, from the window we hear the sounds of the street. I am already waiting to find out what happens in the next scene. According to the book’s author, Anne Hollander, specifically this waiting is evidence of Vermeer’s filmic quality. His paintings seem to carry on in temporal duration longer than we are seeing. They invite us to participate and to complete what we are seeing. Another thing that links Vermeer with film is intimacy. By this, Hollander is not solely referring to Vermeer’s themes, but also to the way in which he speaks to the viewer. Conversely, for Hollander film is an intimate artform in the same way as the Dutch genre picture is. Even when shown in large theatres, films engage viewers on a personal level, one at a time.<sup>18</sup> When talking about film, Hollander is clearly thinking of major narrative films, and not the small-scale vehicles of expression represented by *Morning*. In her own way, however, she seems to be on the same track as I am when I see a connection between the moving image and the genre painting.

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<sup>1</sup> *Taiteellinen kokeellisuus/kokeellinen taiteellisuus tutkimuksena* 5.5.2012. The theme of the seminar was experiment in art and research.

<sup>2</sup> *Taiteen pikkujättiläinen* 1995, 362–363.

<sup>3</sup> Wieseman 2011, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Konttinen & Laajoki 2005, 228–229.

<sup>5</sup> Konttinen 2010, 199.

<sup>6</sup> Elo 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Katajavuori 2013, 90. The quotations from Riina Katajavuori's essay are taken from the Turku Biennial 2013 exhibition catalogue, translated into English by CapriCommunications.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Kangasniemi 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Konttinen & Laajoki 2005, 150.

<sup>13</sup> Franits 1993, 111–160.

<sup>14</sup> Hollander M. 2002, 167.

<sup>15</sup> Palin 2004, 288–289 and Praz 1971, 33–34.

<sup>16</sup> Katajavuori 2013, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Lindström 1951, 146–147.

<sup>18</sup> Hollander A. 1989, 4–5.

Translation: Michael Garner