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Jón Bjarki Magnússon's documentary feature film *Half-Elf* (2020) bears witness to his grandparents' last years and concludes with his centenarian grandfather's passing. Trausti (grandfather) and Hulda (grandmother) are a likeable pair, aesthetically old (wrinkles and alike), but full of vitality, like that of the sea beating against a cliff. Trausti was a lighthouse keeper for four decades. He comes from an isolated part of Iceland and has felt a communion with elves – a well-known folkloric creature in the country – all his life. At the age of ten, he dreamt of one telling him he would never drown at sea (Magnússon 2021,9). As Trausti approaches his 100<sup>th</sup> year and his thus increasingly inevitable demise, his desire to be connected with elves intensifies, as he seeks to be recognised as a "Grand Elf," or at least re-baptised as "Half-Elf." Is this desire a ridiculous request grounded in a dream – as his wife seems to think –, a rite of passage away from life, or is it a reflection of who Trausti has somehow always been?

*Half-Elf* is a beautifully filmed, meditative reflection on aging. It is an Icelandic fairy-tale: steeped in folklore, mythical creatures, old Icelandic poetry about faraway times and tales about being lost and maybe found at sea. Yet, its settings are predominantly those of contemporary Iceland (and thus of generic Western modernity): a small domestic house, streets with passing cars, funeral homes, offices. Viewers thus find themselves between the known and unknown. We start feeling akin to the uncanniness of elves, who are, according to folklorist Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, "distant strangers in the very vicinity of home" (2000, 89).

This atmosphere is achieved not only through narrative choices, but also through the film's technical sophistication. Magnússon uses sharp and precise shots throughout. Nevertheless, the fairy-tale seeps through in the cinematographic choice of white colour grading that permeates most scenes, even those depicting contemporary or institutional realities. The white light is not that of a lighthouse beam but reminds rather of the light of dreams. The director similarly integrates a dialectic between close-ups of hands, instruments, rocks – and wides of the spectacular landscape that defines Iceland. The dual style implies an intimate relation between the different things of the world, both when zoomed in (the patterns on our skins and on rocks), and when zoomed out (our shared belonging to a singular encompassing landscape, for instance).

*Half-Elf* convincingly evokes that aging is not a destination, but rather a state of becoming, arguably beginning at birth, despite its normative association with the years following retirement and the raising of a family. At the age of a century human life spans like that of Trausti start resembling those of other, lengthier natural processes. Magnússon's work reflects this similarity as it orchestrates montages of human skin, stones, and landscapes fading into each other. It is the visualisation of this delicate truth that remained in my mind after the film: images of different materials and scales pulsing as though to

the rhythm of the lighthouse beam whose glow bookends the film, guiding travellers of this world and the next, alongside Hlín Ólafsdóttir's beautiful accordion soundtrack.

The journey to the next world is not shrouded in sadness for Trausti, but almost in joy. The man sings – screaming to Hulda's ears – throughout the film as if to voice this excitement. Actively dying, Magnússon seems to say together with Trausti, is not just that last stepping stone to the beyond. It is an activity: a thoughtful if tiring engagement that manifests our identity as any other act does. Trausti's joking and unabashed demeanour at the funeral home, where he visits what he terms his "home" – the wooden coffin he has selected for himself – denies death its typically gloomy and secretive mantle. It even questions the status of death as an end. The sanded and engraved wood of the coffin is merely degradable material, as Trausti is himself. Trausti however, not only revitalizes death, he also gives (an aged) life to seemingly 'dead' materials. Our protagonist collects rocks and personifies them, speaks to them. Towards the beginning of the film, we see him standing in cold white light on his balcony, stroking one particularly large black rock with hefty winter gloves. "He's like a senior citizen," Trausti lovingly comments, "an old man with a grey beard, a dreamer."

In a written reflection on his film, Magnússon (2021) reveals that Trausti suffered from dementia towards his last years, including during the making of the film. This was the cause of friction with Hulda, who felt that Trausti's illness was behind his fixation with becoming an elf. Magnússon (2021, 14) reflects on his decision not to include the diagnosis and his grandparents' discussions in the film – his was a "caring camera", the choices he made considerate of their subjects, considerate of not letting one condition define Trausti.

In *Anti-Oedipus* (2013 [1972]), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari develop the theory of "becoming-animal" and "body without organs." They articulate these analytical concepts to reveal the imposed and artificial nature of all the categorisations we employ to embrace instead a reality of flux more open to discovery and intermingling. They revel in particular the undoing of the united rational entity that is the "subject." Their prized specimen, subject of "schizoanalysis", is the schizophrenic, who represents the ability to disarticulate, experiment, and avoid incarcerations of any kind by *refusing* identity – bringing into relief the porosity of lived experience.

Perhaps Trausti, with his dementia, exhibits this potential of *refusing* identity, of veering off the edge of fixed identities and evading their constraints. Towards the end of the film, after his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, Trausti easily talks about boys in his childhood who hated the elves and avoided the dangerous "enchanted rock" as they herded cattle. Rocks, elves, humans – all are connected, layered. And in his last speech, he finally proclaims himself "Grand elf." On the "borderlands of biomedical and mystical categorisations" (Magnússon 2021, 20), of living and dying, dreaming and waking, human and non- or more-than-human – or rather, beyond these lands altogether, in the state of becoming any one of them – may we, perhaps, Trausti asks us through his active dying process, recover a sense of freedom and openness?

Such freedom is inevitably imperfect, for even experiments in openness demand recognition at one point or another. Trausti, for instance, in his attempt to escape the limitations of his body and species, nonetheless seeks the official stamp of authoritative bodies to legally rechristen him "Elf." He does not even pull this off. A question the film poses is, however: would he have even attempted this imaginative escape were it not for his vulnerabilities – his age, his condition – which lent him a kind of shape-shifting power and the ability to easily slip between, and thus belie, those categories ('man,' 'human,' 'adult') that are in some way failing him.

In conclusion, *Half-Elf* contains a shimmer of Deleuzian-Guattarian thought, of the excitement born from the potential and unknown beyond categories. The Icelandic landscape is awe-inspiring enough on its own to open up many imaginations, as the poems and stories created there attest. But we are reigned in from total abandon by the precision of the film's shots, the comfort of the urban settings, the scepticism of dear Hulda. One of the film's last scenes, before the final takes around Trausti's funeral, features Hulda alone, reciting Icelandic folkloric poetry outside in a whitened landscape. Unlike Trausti who enthusiastically engaged with the outside world, until that moment we had only seen her confined to interior spaces: a homebody managing the house, preferring the comfort of books to rocks. But there she is, unexpectedly resembling the singing husband she had previously criticised.

After being immersed in the process of death as becoming throughout the film, Hulda's own steady arrival towards death, which we term aging, seems now, however, nothing more and nothing less than one of the many facets of the maddening, whitening, shifting reality of being on this Earth. Viewers – especially, perhaps, aging people and those who surround them (caregivers, partners, children), as well as students of documentary – will appreciate the softness, compassion, and even joy with which this species-defining theme (age) is explored in *Half-Elf*.

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