

# Lighthouse



# *Lighthouse*: To the Lighthouse

Jean Wainwright

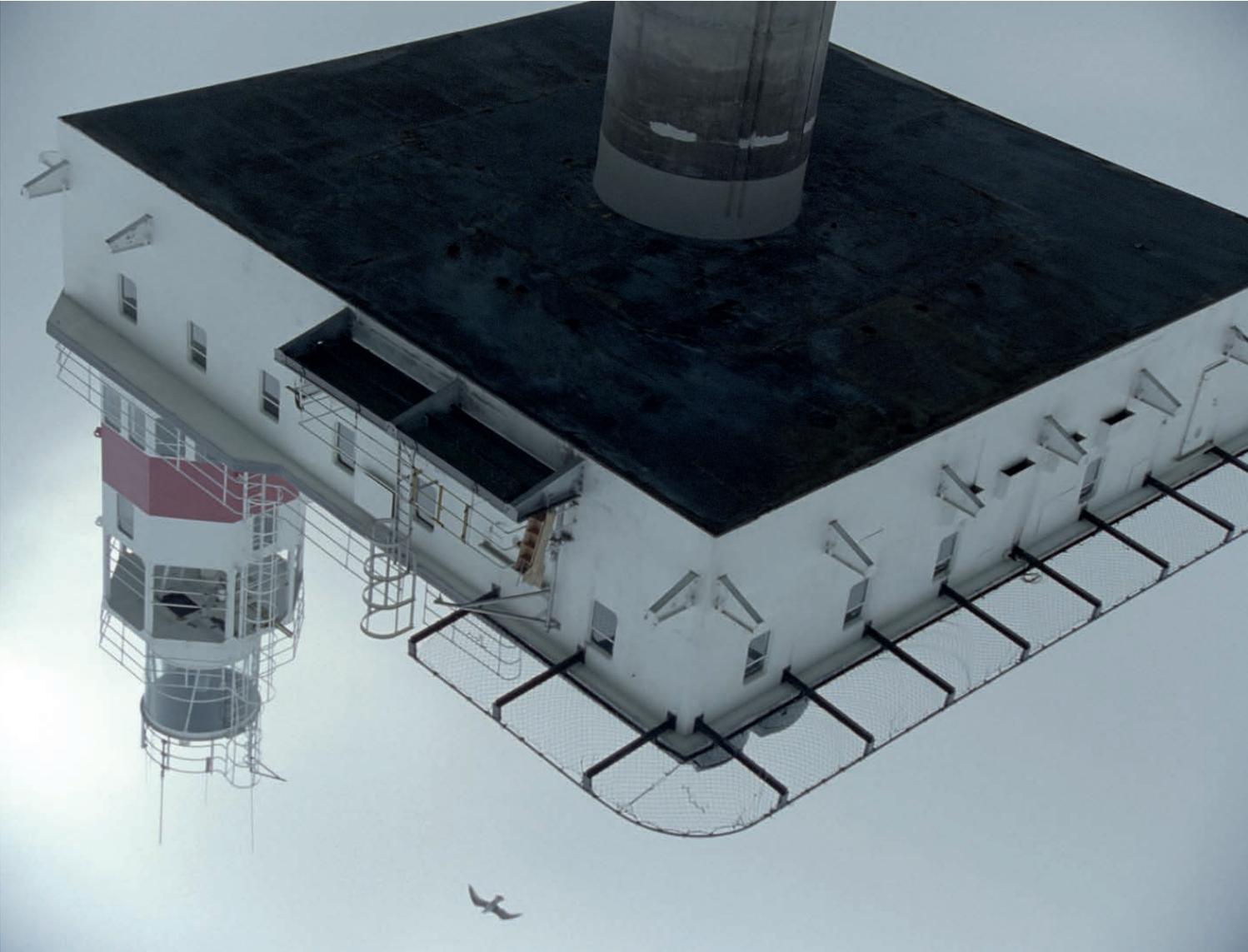
Turning, she looked across the bay, and there, sure enough, coming regularly across the waves first two quick strokes and then one long steady stroke, was the light of the Lighthouse. It had been lit.<sup>1</sup>

Designed to withstand battering by winds, pummelling by waves and magnificent sea sprays, catching the light on their white reflective surfaces or shrouded by sea mists, lighthouses are both monumental and seemingly precarious. They are the subject of myths and romance, continuously warning of impending danger, waves breaking against their structures ‘in white splinters like smashed glass upon the rocks.’<sup>2</sup> As a teenager, the sound of the North Foreland Lighthouse booming out its repetitive and compelling warning of dangers lurking beneath the sea’s surface in disorienting sea fog provoked in me an imaginative reverie.

Catherine Yass’s fascination with lighthouses began with her interest in the design of some of their structures: she was ‘attracted to the way that the lighthouse standing in the sea was supposedly saving people’s lives, which is aspirational but it is not always going to work – as if they are trying to control the waves.’<sup>3</sup> This, coupled with Yass’s dreams of drowning and her previous films focusing on

vertiginous experiences, such as *Descent* (2002) and *High Wire* (2008), kindled in her a desire to complete a trilogy. But it was not until she was offered a commission by the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea and discovered the Royal Sovereign Lighthouse, a distinctive and surreal looking modernist structure in the shallow waters of the English Channel, five miles off Eastbourne, that she found her subject for *Lighthouse* (2011). The strangeness and beauty of the Royal Sovereign design intrigued her, it was ‘almost alien to its surroundings’. It had been deserted since 1994 when automation removed the necessity for three lighthouse keepers to live, for up to three months at a time, in the middle of a churning sea. Yass studied The Royal Sovereign’s distinctive construction and, observing that its large platform supported on a column faced north, south, east and west, began thinking of how she might film it ‘like a temporal drawing’. She was also fascinated by the feat of engineering that had gone into its design and completion in 1971, the long and painstaking clearing of underwater boulders and the preparation of screeding on the seabed to make the solid foundation. Replacing the previous lightship that had marked the Royal Sovereign shoal since 1895, the structure was towed and floated out in sections and, once the central column was in place,





the telescopic inner section was jacked up in an ingenious way.

In *Lighthouse* Yass wanted to acknowledge both her fears of falling and drowning and her thrall of the sea; she also wanted to evoke her fascination with leaning over the side of boats and being mesmerised by the 'suck and wake' as the vessel slices through the waves, but at the same time, how boats or helicopters (both used in her film) would bring on her motion sickness. Yass described the effect as feeling as if 'something in my body is resisting the disorientation and it's very physical... Maybe the sickness comes out of a fear of displacement'.<sup>4</sup> To evoke a psychological portrait of the Royal Sovereign as well as acknowledging the feat of modernist engineering that the lighthouse represents, she deployed clever cinematography and editing. Her idea was to begin the film in a controlled way and then

break it down as if you were drowning, or you were thrown off-balance and fell into the sea, how in those circumstances your bearings would disintegrate... for me, it's like a parallel with dying: you would maybe forget the logic of things and maybe time and language would start to get all jumbled up, or come undone. You know, if you have a flat spiral made out of paper and you cut it and you pull the bottom out and it goes into another dimension – I was thinking in that direction.<sup>5</sup>

Yass's meticulous planning left nothing to chance, which when dealing with the vagaries of unpredictable seas and changeable weather patterns was challenging. To fully realise her vision, she needed a cinematographer (Franz Pagot) skilled in underwater and stunt filming; she had to frustratingly wait months for the perfect weather conditions and needed to grapple with the logistics of filming from a helicopter. The underwater sequences also proved challenging. Firstly they could not take place when originally planned due to the amount of sea algae; additionally both the stunt rider on the underwater bike and diver had to carry knives in case they became entangled in fishermen's nets or other debris which were lurking underwater hazards.

Yass's vision was very different from those images that are familiar to us of tempestuous seas pounding against the traditional red and white Bell Rock lighthouse designed by the engineer Robert Stevenson in 1810 or JMW Turner's painting for a frontispiece to promote Stevenson's revolutionary design in 1819. Nor is it like Edward Hopper's 1927 paintings of Cape Elizabeth Light (also known as Two Lights), where he focused on depicting the stark form standing silently and magnificently on land from different viewpoints and lighting conditions. Yass instead staged a drama for our bodies and our imagination. She proactively evoked the psychological dangers that lurk in the depths and

shallows of seas, and the effects on architectural space pitched against the power and unpredictable nature of currents, the challenging upwelling and downwelling.

Yass's original sketches for filming portrayed a circulating helicopter on one level above the structure, then a cut to a close-up also circling round the lighthouse, but this time with the image itself turning on the plane of the screen. The turning theme would be maintained when the camera goes on to the boat:

although the image isn't spiralling any more the confusion is continued, because rather than doing a straight spiral I opened it out, going down the post, so it was as though the spiral was losing its own logic and coming undone. When the camera goes underwater there's another spiral: it goes around the post again, but upside down. You don't notice it at first, but there's light coming from the bottom of the image which gives a sense of having lost your balance or orientation.<sup>6</sup>

Yass's initial plans are beautifully executed. Citing Kristeva as an influence, she 'dances' round the structure transferring her vertiginous experiences into our tumultuous journey, as our bodies become the camera lens and we experience 12 minutes 42 seconds of being tumbled and turned around the

lighthouse and its platform, circling, spiralling, being suspended upside down and submerged. We begin our disorientating experience on the sea's surface at eye level, our horizon pitching and rolling with each wave, the sound of the wind in our ears. Sunlight suddenly emerges illuminating the grey sea surface with dancing silver highlights. We are then taken on a dizzying swoop above the Royal Sovereign as we are rotated around in a bird's eye view. Our eyes are not allowed to rest as the lighthouse is circled constantly until we are pitched upside down, disorienting us and causing us to lose our centre of gravity. We are then flung down to sea level again, seeing the waves swirling above us rather than below. The film continues with increasingly destabilising camera angles as we are rotated around the structure like a clock and are moved up and down the circular column into the swirling whirlpool of waves which threatens to suck us down to the sea bed. The beautiful camera work captures the idiosyncrasy of the Royal Sovereign's design in all its modernist splendour; the light, the tower, the accommodation, the ladders, the helipad platform.

As the film progresses the camera becomes more unstable, moving constantly from pan shot to close up, the editing seamlessly catapulting us from above to below through twists and reversals viewed from the boat and the helicopter, although we see neither. The strange structure seen from above and beneath



becomes even stranger as we are constantly rotated. We do not see the treacherous rocks beneath the surface or the hazards of the shallow shoal waiting to run a ship aground, but rather are caught in the centrifugal force caused by the lighthouse itself and are sucked underwater. The sound changes at this point to that strange muffled sensation that one gets when suddenly submerged. We can just make out though the green murkiness, sea lichen and barnacles clinging to the structure's column, its central core holding steady while all around water seethes.

As Yass suggests, most of her shots were pre-planned but she only thought of being upside-down underwater when she saw the light coming through the surface of the sea. We are poignantly reminded of scenes of drowning, of seafarers or migrants, of lost lives, but her film is executed with not a body or shipwreck in sight, rather we are the ones being tipped upside down and caught in currents which we cannot conquer. The entire film is designed to upset

our balance, disorient us and make us feel what Yass experiences: it reminds us of the fragility of our bodies and our instincts to try to keep equilibrium. There is perhaps a poetic potency in this loss of orientation provoked by the film, in our current climate, her film as a metaphor for our human condition.

At the time of writing, the Royal Sovereign Lighthouse is in the process of being decommissioned, its expected deterioration over fifty years increasingly presenting a hazard to those it is trying to protect. It is waiting to be dismantled piece by piece: another challenge to be fought against the unpredictable sea which is both our ally and our enemy. While lighthouses stand like watchtowers guiding and guarding us, we fight over our territorial rights to the sea. Yass's film will remain as a poignant reminder that, however sturdy, these distinctive structures are eventually overcome by the relentless, emotionless and often brutal power of the waves. Yass has created a requiem, a swansong, a powerful reminder of precariousness and balance.

### Endnotes

- 1 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* [1927] (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), p. 58.
- 2 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (2018), p. 314.
- 3 Author's interview with Catherine Yass, SeaCity Museum, Southampton, 21 January 2014.

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