RS: The really special look of the film is instrumental in this regard too, so let's talk about that. Together with your cinematographer Barton Cortright, you made a custom camera, a digital-analog contraption, in order to get these super beautiful images, which are brilliantly colored but also very vignetted and a little hazy.

GS: I'd wanted to do a film using this technique basically from the first moment I used a large format camera, in university, and saw the image on the ground glass—I don't know if you've ever used one?

RS: No, you're going to have to evoke the experience...

GS: If they were a little smaller, I would carry one around with me so I could show people. So, there's this diffusion to the image projected on the glass. The glass has this inherent texture, and the way color looks on it is not natural... it's not quite like Technicolor, maybe more like two-strip Technicolor, or even some early hand-colored things. But from the first time I used one of these cameras, I was like, oh my god—I would almost be frustrated by the photograph that came out, because I'd want it to look like the image on the glass, but the photograph itself would be sharp. The glass is the thing that I was really interested in.

I did make some short films a long time ago, like in 2009, with a little consumer digital camera, trying to record things off the back of glass. It was just way too limited, because you lose a huge amount of light, and you have to deal with all these reflections, you have to deal with moving two objects. I could tell that it could work, but I also understood that I didn't have the resources to make it work at that moment. When I was writing this script, though, I thought, this is the one. This script can synergize with this type of image. I wanted the film to feel like it was on a set, even though we didn't have the ability to make sets. Essentially, I wanted the thing you're usually fighting against—usually you have a set and you're trying to make it look real. I wanted to make reality look like it had been constructed; again, that it was maybe sort of in someone's head. So, I pitched it to Bart, whom I've known for a very long time—he shot my previous film, and I've worked with him on films I've produced, too.

RS: Do you feel particularly drawn to hermetic worlds?

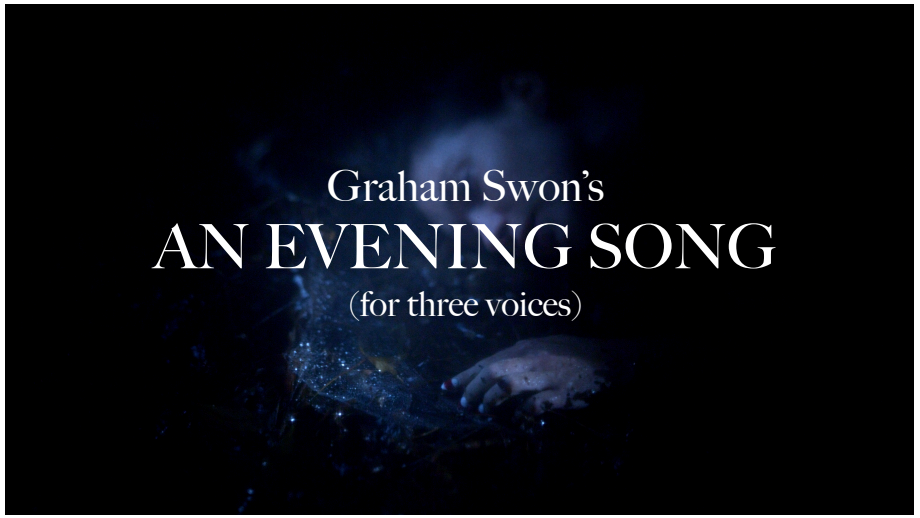
GS: Well, I think it's probably a couple things. One, I come from a theater background. I wrote a lot of plays before I ever tried to write a screenplay, so I'm sure some of that quality comes from thinking of the stage in a certain sense. But also, I like to do variances within a set thing—so, if you have this setting and these characters, you look at the different arrangements: these two together, these two together, the three together in this room, and what happens each time. I like a chamber drama.

And then, of course, since I'm also a producer, I really don't separate the creative from the business elements of making something. In film, money and time are such massive factors in what you can do creatively. It's very hard, at any budget level, to separate them. I try not to do this too much when I'm writing, but to a certain extent, you think, okay, if we limit the number of performers, then we buy time with those performers. If you limit the number of locations, you have more time in the locations. All it takes is doing one film where you have a bazillion locations to understand how inefficient that is—even if you only have to drive five minutes, even with a small crew, it basically takes an hour to move from one location to another. That's an hour you've lost rehearsing with an actor, rehearsing a camera movement, exploring a lighting decision. I understood that I was going to have fairly severe financial and, by extension, time limitations. So, you pick your battles. ◆

Coming soon to Acropolis

- A More Perfect Union: The Films of Roberto Minervini—Complete retrospective, June 13-23 at 2220 Arts + Archives and Brain Dead Studios, with Minervini in person

Acropolis Cinema presents:



May 29, 2025 – 2220 Arts + Archives

ABOUT THE FILM

1939, somewhere in the American Midwest: to combat former child-prodigy writer Barbara Fowler's (Hannah Gross) debilitating agoraphobia, she and her pulp-fiction scribe husband, Richard (Peter Vack), move to the countryside where they become entwined in a love triangle with their deeply religious maid (Deragh Campbell) in this trance-like examination of a world destined for extinction. *An Evening Song (for three voices)* is the second feature by acclaimed producer (Ricky D'Ambrose's *The Cathedral*, 2021; Joanna Arnow's *The Feeling That the Time for Doing Something Has Passed*, 2023) and director Graham Swon, previously featured at Acropolis with *The World Is Full of Secrets* (2018).

TRT: 86 min

How to Disappear: An Interview with Graham Swon by Keva York

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published by Reverse Shot, March 16, 2024

"Some things exist and over time, fade away to nothing. Other things hover at the edge of being but never quite manifest," intones a woman's voice at the beginning of Graham Swon's second feature, *An Evening Song (for three voices)*. "I couldn't say which I am." A grainy image of a full-length mirror fades into view, but no figure is reflected in it, leaving open the question of the speaker's materiality. The voice, the viewer comes to learn, belongs to Barbara (Hannah Gross), a poet who has abandoned her pen, though not, evidently, her berth as narrator. She and her husband, Richard (Peter Vack), a pulp writer, have recently relocated to the rural Midwest, where they have taken an interest in the demure and pious Martha (Deragh Campbell), recruiting her as a maid. Their voices braid together in Swon's tone poem of a melodrama, a rhythmic incantation overlaying woozy, coruscating visuals that look as if they could have been conjured in a crystal ball.

It's a heady cinematic concoction likely to strike as sui generis, unless you've seen Swon's directorial debut, *The World Is Full of Secrets* (2018). Though both *Secrets* and *Evening Song* share a formal rigor and a distilled, heightened quality with the work of certain filmmakers he's collaborated with as a producer—Ricky D'Ambrose, Joanna Arnow—they zero in on the quotidian where Swon is drawn to the fantastique. ("We don't have a good, non-pretentious way to refer to it in English," he says—though, happily, he seems like someone who cares very little for prescribed hierarchies of taste.)

RS: You first described the idea for this film to me a few years ago, and I remember you speaking about this tantalizingly marginal historical figure, Barbara Newhall Follett. I thought we could begin there: who is she, and how did you first encounter her?

GS: So, Barbara Newhall Follett was a child prodigy writer. She wrote a book called *The House Without Windows*—it's a little vague how old she was when she wrote it because I think there were numerous versions that she told orally and recorded with her father, but I believe the final version was written when she was nine and published when she was maybe 11—she was very young, anyway. It's about a young girl named Eepersip who goes on this journey through the woods and, I don't want to spoil it, but it has this kind of diffuse ending where the character, in a certain sense, ceases to exist. It's fascinating, because it's really not a children's book, but it has a child's perspective. It makes for a very different experience than reading a book by an adult who's trying to synthesize a child's viewpoint.

Follett did some other writing too, but mostly just in her childhood and adolescence—before her parents got divorced, and before she got married. Then, in 1939, when she was in her mid-twenties, she left the house one day and was never seen again. No body was found, no indication that she committed suicide. She took money when she left the house—I think $30, which is a not-insignificant amount of money in '39. You can speculate about whether she died or changed her identity or was murdered, but it's this open-ended, weird little literary mystery, and at a certain point, she became much more famous for this mystery than her writing.

RS: It's quite seductive, this apparent mirroring between her book and her life.

GS: Yeah, it feels written, like a story—but then, of course, you have to wonder, are you interpreting her disappearance through her book this way because you have a desire to create a satisfying narrative? But the mystery was how I first encountered her. For a while, my, like, coffee reading was going systematically through the massive Wikipedia list of people who disappeared mysteriously. When I read about her, I was like, oh, this is really interesting—but then I read the book and became fascinated. Years later, I was given several reels of 35mm motion picture film by my friend Ted Fendt when he was moving from the U.S. to Germany. I was trying to write a very short script that I could shoot with these reels, and I had been reading about endlings—which is the term for the last known individual of a species.

RS: That's a great word.

GS: It's a nice word—and usually you don't have an endling; usually there is no known "last individual." It's just in certain cases, like with the Tasmanian tiger, and the passenger pigeon. So, I was working on something on this subject and then I started connecting it back to the idea of a type of person who couldn't continue to exist because of the ecological-sociological circumstances around them. Initially, I had wanted to make something without humans, but, you know, it's easier to construct a narrative when you're dealing with humans. I ended up coming back to Barbara Newhall Follett—even though, as I worked, my story became more and more fictional.

RS: Right—one of the three main characters is called Barbara, and she's drawn in Follett's image, but the film isn't in any way a biopic.

GS: It's really a fantasy film that's come out of me thinking about these kinds of things—Follett as well as the last passenger pigeon and this plant that went extinct, Thismia Americana. These thoughts just kind of naturally turned into a melodrama, so I ran with it.

RS: Barbara, Richard, and Martha's narration courses through *Evening Song*, while *The World Is Full of Secrets* is bookended by voiceover—one of the protagonists, now much older, reflects back on the night the film takes place. In both films, there's this temporal distance between narration and narrative. What is it about this retrospective mode that attracts you?

GS: You know, it was only after I finished *Evening Song* and watched it that I realized how many similarities there were between the two films that I wasn't aware of, exactly—and, okay, I knew that there was a long story in this film and there were long stories in the previous film; that there's framing narration and there was framing narration in the previous film—but it's not a conceptualized thing. I think it just comes down to my inclinations. The crossfades in both films are similar—I just end up framing things that way. I mean, I like old radio a lot, and also *The Twilight Zone*, that style of television—I love when a narrative is inside a frame. I don't know if I have a deeper answer.

RS: But also, with this storytelling approach, there's a degree of subjectivity baked in.

GS: Yeah. I wanted this film to feel to a certain extent like it was in first person—in the sense that when you read a book that's written in first person, not even necessarily when you have an "unreliable narrator," you understand that the information being presented is coming from this character's perspective, and that it may not be 100% objective. In cinema, since you're looking at things with a camera, the default is a feeling that you're being presented with a concrete truth: "This happened this way." I think there's a bit of a slipperiness in *Evening Song* since the narration is so constant—the scenes you're seeing are, in a way, being told to you by somebody whose perspective you're in at different moments.