

Blending light. Filmic discourse and non-filmic narration in the work of Ana Torfs

At the outset of this session, the convenors of this panel defined the common qualities of contemporary art work dealing with conventional narrative cinema, i.e.: working with actors and a *mise-en-scène*, with large scale projection and a – more or less – causal narration. All of this we find in Belgian artist Ana Torfs' installations – except, *nota bene*, an all too coherent narrative strand and – in the first place – a moving image.

One might argue that the *kiné*, the *movement* counts for the most essential feature of the filmic medium. Yet, as I will try to show, by working with the *still* rather than the *moving* image and by deconstructing *and* expanding structures of narration, Ana Torfs not only creates installation work that draws upon the aesthetics of cinematography, but literally opens up a discursive space to reflect on our perception of different kinds of images and stories.

Since the early 1990s the artist has produced one 35-mm-film, 4 photographic series, one web project, and six installations consisting of video images or slides, among them two installations that displays a mix of both media, and four that exclusively show slides.¹ This seems a rather limited output for a period of seventeen years for a contemporary visual artist, and it is due to the extensive preliminary research in the preparation of each work along with a painstaking realisation that includes, with regard also to the slide installations, script writing, casting and photography. **(fig./foil 1)**

For this talk, I will focus on two works in which the artist's critical reflection of the visual language of film is most palpable. First the 35-mm film *Cycle of Trifles* from 1998, which has a duration of 86 minutes and is exclusively shown in the film theatre – not in the black box of an exhibition space –, and thus basically conforms to commercial film standards. Second the slide installation *Displacement*, which was created eleven years later and explicitly conceived as a photographic “remake” of a movie, namely Roberto Rossellini's famous film *Journey to Italy*. **(fig./foil 2)**

¹ The most comprehensive overview on Torfs' work so far is given in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition “Ana Torfs – *Album/Tracks A + B*”, Kunstammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen Düsseldorf/Generali Foundation Vienna 2010, ed. by Sabine Folie and Doris Krystof, Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2010 (German/English).

By contrasting these works I hope to draw attention not only to the cinematic aspects in both of them, but also to highlight the relation between filmic and non-filmic qualities and their effect on the spectator's perception and imagination.

“Cycle of Trifles”, 1998² (figs. 3, 4)

The black-and-white film *Cycle of Trifles* is based on Ludwig van Beethoven's [1770-1827] so-called conversation books. After becoming deaf in old age, the famous composer asked his family, friends and colleagues to communicate with him through these notebooks which contain only *their* “voices”, so to say, not his own as he was deaf but not dumb.

The film is based on a selection of text from these 139 books dating from 1818 until Beethoven's death in 1827. As the film's title suggests, the conversation books contain not so much sophisticated artistic reflections, but quite profane and everyday observations concerning the composer's domestic life, especially the difficult relationship with his nephew Karl, and the cultural and political situation in early 19th century Vienna as a whole.

Let's see two short clips from this film, one quite from the beginning (2:44-3:53), one at about 19 out of 86 minutes (19:22-20:40):

... (2 film clips)

The dry excerpts from the conversation books evoke a strong atmosphere giving insight into Beethoven's socio-psychological situation at the end of his life and form the clear-cut core of a complex visual narration. The formally reduced, dense pictures appear moving and somewhat suspended at the same time. We see performing actors yet their voices come from the off. In fact, what we hear is not *their* voices, as the artist worked with a double cast of on- and off-screen actors.³ While Beethoven is at the centre of the filmic plot, we do not see nor hear the famous composer. His strong presence in spite of his complete physical absence is brought about by a camera position that sometimes seems to mimic a subjective camera, facing the opposite person as if through Beethoven's eyes.

However, an actual point-of-view shot through the composer's eyes is never really taken.

Rather, the viewer feels as if he was sitting *next* to him, thus somehow involved yet strangely

² Original title: *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*; technical data: 35 mm feature film, black and white, 86 minutes, dolby SR, German spoken with English, French or Dutch subtitles.

³ A working principle that occurs in a number of slide installations, e.g. *The Intruder*, 2004, *Anatomy*, 2006, or *Displacement*, 2009.

distant to the conversation on the screen. **(fig. 6)** Distance is also created by the black-and-white character of the images and the different settings of the scenes: Scenery and costume design are no ‘authentic’ reconstructions of Beethoven’s time, but inconspicuously display a mix of historic and today’s furniture and clothing that makes it difficult to historically classify them. Culturally loaded as they are through disparate iconographic references – I’ll come back to that later –, the settings reach beyond the specific historical context of the source text and make us read it on a more anthropological level instead of a biographical anecdote.

The filmic action unfolds around the ‘blind spot’ of the figure of Ludwig van Beethoven **(fig. 7)**, and from the treacherous spoken and written language alone it becomes lucid that the composer’s deafness, as well as his genius, ultimately made him an archetypal outsider. His very own distance to the world around him is audio-visually translated by means of dehistoricisation and fictionalization. **(figs. 8, 9)**

Many art historical references contribute to these effects, most notably references to pictorial conventions such as the so-called “conversation pieces” from the 18th and 19th centuries that show group portraits of friends and families in intimate settings **(fig. 10)**, baroque kitchen still life, French history painting **(fig. 11)** or 19th century *plein air* painting **(fig. 12)**.

Yet, despite these art historical references, the images in *Cycle of Trifles* are deeply bound to the aesthetics of film: For example, different from the painterly tradition, which most commonly depicts the subjects of a conversation piece in full length, the filmic mise en scene mainly operates with Medium Close Shots which create an even more intimate atmosphere of dialogue **(fig. 13)**.

The picture repeatedly fades out into the blank white screen, thus indicating not only a change of time and place, but also hinting at the inherent function of the cinematic screen as a surface for projection and imagination. The mise en scene, *cadrage* and a sometimes harsh lighting **(figs. 14, 15)**, as well as the exclusive use of sequence shots with a static camera confront us with clearly staged images, the highly artificial nature of which is even more stressed by their hovering between stillness and movement. In this quality they remind us of *tableaux vivants*, living pictures that were a popular form of entertainment in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, that is, during Beethoven’s lifetime and in the dawn of modern visual culture that would see, shortly afterwards, the rise of photography.

The historical *tableau vivant* displayed a group of costumed amateur actors impersonating a well-known painting in an accordingly staged and lit scenery. While it was, from its very beginning, an intermediary art form between theater, painting and, later, photography, it held a particular attraction for its audience as a live performance of a, if I may say so, dead subject, that is, painting. With such a paradoxical visual status, it has been argued that the *tableau vivant* had a specific impact on 19th century aesthetic discourses, inasmuch as it contributed, as a painterly remodeling of life, to an aestheticisation of the real.⁴ **(fig. 16)**

The performing actors freeze for a short moment imitating *not* life, but stillness, thus submitting to an ideal of artificiality which results quite obviously from an aesthetic construction. This “constructed” nature of the image may well be described as a basic principle in the work of Ana Torfs. Yet, while the cinematic reflection of the *tableau vivant* in the films of Luchino Visconti, Pier Paolo Pasolini and others has recently been the subject of a study by German film historian Joanna Barck,⁵ an exclusively iconographic approach in regards to explicit visual references seems little promising when it comes to the discussed film. **(fig. 17)**

Cycle of Trifles is constructed as a succession of stills, each of which has, as Steven Jacobs has counted, an average shot-length of 43.3 seconds.⁶ And while he has also pointed out, like some other writers, that Torfs’ film is quite obviously indebted to a concept that Gilles Deleuze calls the “Time-Image”, and that it owes much to a tradition of European modernist cinema including figures such as Robert Bresson and Carl Theodor Dreyer, I would like to address another reading of the film, one which focuses the intermediary status of its pictures. **(fig. 18)**

⁴ Cf. Norbert Miller, *Mutmaßungen über lebende Bilder: Attitüde und „tableau vivant“ als Anschauungsform des 19. Jahrhunderts*, in: Helga de la Motte-Haberer (Hg.), *Das Triviale in Literatur, Musik und Bildender Kunst*, Frankfurt/M: Klostermann, 1972, p. 106-130: 109, n. 4.

⁵ Joanna Barck, *Hin zum Film - zurück zu den Bildern. Tableaux Vivants: „Lebende Bilder“ in Filmen von Antamoro, Korda, Visconti und Pasolini*, Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2008. The following image (fig. 17) is taken from this book.

⁶ Cf. Steven Jacobs, “A Conversation Piece”, in: Ana Torfs – *Album/Tracks A + B* (see note 1), p. 177-178: 178, n. 2. The following year, the still photographs and texts from this film formed the basis for Ana Torfs’ book *Beethoven’s Nephew/Le neveu de Beethoven/De neef van Beethoven/Beethovens Neffe* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert Publisher, 1999).

This double nature might be read, with Roland Barthes in his essay “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein” from 1973⁷, by paraphrasing Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s [1729-1781] idea of the “decisive moment”, as a moment of condensed narration. Barthes identifies this quality in image concepts such diverse as Diderot’s identification of theatrical scene and pictorial *tableau*, Bertolt Brecht’s idea of an “Epic Theatre” and Sergej Eisensteins technique of filmic montage. As Barthes points out, all of them are indebted to the idea of “absolute significance” and “aesthetic perfection” – that is, that in the picture of a “decisive moment” the inherent sense of a gesture or an action – even of a most trivial one in *Cycle of Trifles* –, the deeper sense for past, present and future times is given in exactly this correspondence of formal or aesthetic conciseness and narrative density.

“Displacement”, 2009⁸

(fig. 19)

Although Ana Torfs had an artistic focus on film and video while she studied at the Sint-Lukas University College of Art & Design in Brussels, *Cycle of Trifles* remains her only 35-mm-film so far. For *Displacement*, a slide installation with projections on opposing walls, she deliberately chose to translate an explicit “original”, that is Rossellini’s movie *Journey to Italy*, from 1954, into the static photographic medium.

Given the ‘slot’ for this presentation it seemed inappropriate to show an excerpt of Rossellini’s film as well, and I hope that most of you will know the film or remember it clearly enough for the following remarks.

Displacement was created on the occasion of the artist’s residency in the history-ridden Swedish island Gotland in summer 2007. Again, the artist edited a given text, that is, the movie’s original dialogues, which she shortened, adapted and supplemented using text fragments from Gotland tourist guides and newspapers.

Giant, frontal portraits of a man and a woman on one side are facing the visual narrative unfolding on the opposite wall. Structured into a chronology of seven days, the altogether 225

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein* (1973), in: id., *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn. Kritische Essays III*. Frankfurt/M. 1990 (French ed. 1982).

⁸ Technical data: Installation with black and white slide projections on 2 opposing walls (2 loops of 50 minutes), 2 projection socles, wireless headphones, sound, English spoken, digitally controlled, variable dimensions.

slides offer the minimum requirements for a dramatic plot, that is, a written indication of time and *diegesis*, and photographic images of landscapes and interiors as potential settings. **(figs. 20, 21, 22, 23)**

The slowly alternating close ups of the motionless male and female faces form a static counterpart to the changing panoramic views and text slides, and while it remains unclear if the man and the woman stand for the story's couple or the installation's beholders, the visual arrangement is, again, complemented by a voice-over sound track. **(fig. 24)**

Speaking from the off, an anonymous male narrator introduces to the couple's story which unfolds in dialogues between these two and two further 'actors'. Being performed in a rather emphatic and professional attitude, the off-scene conversations stress even further the incoherence of image and text. As Catherine Robberechts remarks, the actors "seem to be reading rather than speaking and you sense that – like the photos in the travelogue – they 'allude' to a human presence rather than representing actual characters."⁹

(figs. 25-32 (voice over: "They reach their destination ..."), rather quickly as a sequence)

The plot evolving from the dialogues is only very loosely connected with the photographic settings. These show pine woods, coast lines, limestone quarries, an Italianate villa, several Bronze Age grave yards, a military defence museum, and so forth. A sort of desertedness seems to be the strongest typological connection between these rather incoherent places. While the sites are abandoned, they nevertheless often show traces of a human presence, be it an abandoned military infrastructure, archaeological remains or an idiosyncratic furnishing. **(fig. 33)**

The structure¹⁰, plot and dialogues of *Displacement* are clearly borrowed from Rossellini's movie. Yet, while the Italian director named the married British couple in his movie Katherine and Alex Joyce, the couple in *Displacement* remains nameless. For both couples, though, the death of an uncle is the reason for their journey, during which they realize that they have grown apart. The experience of another country and the psycho-geographic mapping of an unfamiliar setting results in a reflection on their marriage as well.

⁹ Catherine Robberechts in her text on *Displacement*, see <http://anatorfs.com> (10.4.10).

¹⁰ The structure of seven days is also inspired by Dante's *Divina Commedia*, see Ana Torfs/Gabriele Mackert, "Never Trust the Artist. Trust the Tale." An Email Correspondence, in: Ana Torfs – *Album/Tracks A + B* (see note 1), p. 180-187: 181.

The different sites that Rossellini's couple visits in Naples and Capri such as Pompeii, the lava fields of Vesuvius, or the Catacombs unmistakably represent a sensual culture of emotional expression completely contrary to their own rather uptight social background. **(fig. 34)** In *Displacement*, however, the plot and its psychological subtext are not so much characterised through means of cultural dichotomy and unfamiliar social manners. Rather, the alienation that the couple experiences results not only from their very own estranged relationship, but from the fundamental strangeness and desertedness of the country they encounter. Different from Rossellini's film, not only the characters, but also the island remains nameless, and the title of the work is much less precise in regards to the journey's destination, and far more telling when it comes to the psychological aspects that travelling and the experience of moving in space may entail.

The unfamiliar look of many buildings in *Displacement* is further stressed by the inner structure of the visual travelogue: The camera, and thus the viewer, slowly moves around and towards those particular sites. The images suggest a deliberate and gradual, not a linear approach, and thus an intrigued and, indeed, a pristine gaze. The camera becomes an active tool, an 'actor' taking the viewer on a rather deviating than determined route.

(figs. 35-40 (voice over: "Look, we're just going for dinner ..."), as a sequence)

Here the work's visual aesthetics meet the camera work in Rossellini's movie, as the director shot in extreme long takes, turning the camera into a "travelling eye" that make especially Katherine's experience all the more perceptible. **(fig. 41)**

As is well-known, Rossellini's film was sharply criticized at that time for its highly original narrative structure and visual language, or, how André Bazin puts it in his championing writings on the director, for a "dispersive, elliptical, errant or wavering" narration that worked "in blocs with deliberately weak connections and floating events".¹¹

It is quite obvious that these qualities must be highly attractive to Ana Torfs, who in her work in general deals with different possibilities of telling a story. Accordingly, she deconstructs Rossellini's "weak connections" even more, and she liberates the image even more rigidly from any superfluous details, and from its all too close link to language. The "dense and

¹¹ André Bazin, quoted from Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Minneapolis UP, p. 1.

elegant structure” of Rossellini’s film – to quote Bazin again¹² – is translated into the gentle rhythm of a succession of stills, and it is quite important that the spectator is able to move around in the exhibition space.

Unlike in cinema, he or she may change position and perspective, and watch the visual travelogue *or* the alternating portraits of a man and a woman. They can decide to listen to the dialogues on the wireless headphone audio track, or to create their very own travelogue by just watching the landscapes and interiors. The story of a couple’s journey to an island in the Baltic sea is therefore just *one* narrative that the artist suggests: We are invited to loosen the connection of text and image even further, to skip the one or the other; to imagine what might happen to the couple that we see in the large portraits, or what will take place in the empty settings on the opposite wall. It is thus, in a metaphorical *and* literal sense, an *open* space for reflection and narration that the artist offers in this filmic installation, or installative film.

(figs. 42-44, rather quickly)

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¹² André Bazin: *Was ist Kino? Bausteine zur Theorie des Films*, Köln : DuMont Schauberg, 1975.