

A PLACE IN THE WOODS: SOME FILMS OF JÜRGEN HEITER

by Claudia Siefen-Leitich

Jürgen Heiter's films talk about something already shaped – about places. The bookshop “König“ in Cologne, the Rolandseck railway station – or the small town of Olevano in Italy. They do not present these places in a documentary way, but rather investigate the forces at these places: structures, movements, what the places do with the people and what the people do with those places. Heiter told me that before he went to a place with the camera, he had spent weeks observing this place in order to get to know its interactions and effects. Only then does he approach them with the camera, with actors, with texts; in other words: he creates new arrangements, brings together ideas that are far apart in order to express the “truth” about a place, and to allow his films to “express the essence” of places. I think, thus, a parallel could be drawn between Jürgen Heiter's films and the literary genre of the essay.

The emphasis on subjective fantasy, musically flowing transitions, the cross-connections of ideas for which discursive logic seems to have no room, an irony that – despite its proximity to the object of film – enables a sovereign handling of the object of the film. There must therefore always be self-irony, a confrontation with the changing, the ephemeral, the transient, in which individual existence is depicted. In the end, Adorno's *dictum* about the essay form also applies to Jürgen Heiter's films: their inner being is heretical, they are provocative, challenging in the face of the viewing habits that are shaped by cinema, this superficial illusion that pretends to be reality. Jürgen Heiter's films constantly refer to their status as artificial, do not lock the viewer in an illusion, like in a preserving jar, and do not limit his thinking to this small space.

With **10 pm Lincoln Boulevard** (2012) Heiter presented his second film with or about Raymond Pettibon. With his ink drawings plus text montages about everyday madness on the American West Coast, Pettibon is one of the most famous contemporary artists. The punk scene loves him for his SST album covers, the “bars” logo of Black Flag, the “Goo” album cover of Sonic Youth and recently again for his OFF! drawings. The film lasts about 90 minutes. If you watch the DVD and speak German, German subtitles are selectable and meaningful, because Pettibon speaks a slightly unclear lingo. Locations included Los Angeles and Cologne. You can see Pettibon at different activities and he talks about them, like when he sings “Wooden Heart” by Elvis in its German version (“Muss I denn...”). He also performs a piece called “Burma shave” with a distorted voice. The subject is the sand and the two Brian Wilsons: one is the Beach Boy, a longtime vegetating in his private sandpit, and also the baseball player of the same name, on a sandy baseball dump hill. Pettibon drinks a schnapps, he waves a gun around, wears a pirate's eye patch. He analyses TV excerpts about himself at an exhibition opening and ponders what all of this has to do with Kafka. Because of the overall calm scenes you get to know a lot of details about Pettibon; his favorite song by Elvis is “Suspicious Minds”, he tells us so. And that's very unusual, as Pettibon (by his standards) shows himself to be very informative. A lot happens here, just because not much happens at first:

*“It is the image that explores the material.
The film that explores... what the fuck.
If I'd known who God motherfucking was,
Samuel motherfucking Beckett said,
I would have shown you.
I would have shot him.”*

Jürgen Heiter treats his pictures like a photographer tries out the right exposure in the darkroom for a long time. Before he carries his film into an editing room, he already finished countless rough cuts, which he made with two video recorders in a long homework. With Reinhard Wulff he met one of the few editors at WDR who was quite impressed with such an ethos, and who could also rejoice at the impossible broadcast length of 134 minutes. In any case, the cinema is the ideal place to get involved in this unique film: As sensual and playful as it is conceptual, it conveys the theme of art in unheard-of aspects. So in his film **Der Photograph** (2006) Heiter

gives the artists and curators the opportunity to portray the portrayed-in-detail in words: Benjamin Katz himself naturally also portrays the artists and curators.

Johannes Blume, for example, happens to be jealous of Christoph Schlingensiefel and says something very clever about the context of contemporary art: An artist comes from the theater and also remains a director in the practice of art. "We artists don't walk over other corpses, only over our own ones. It goes over the others". Such a sentence has a lot to say about photography, of course. Not only a war photographer constantly walks over corpses, observations with the camera are always impositions that can only be endured by mutual agreement. The great philanthropic photographers of the 20th century found ways to never degrade their subjects to objects. This applies to Katz as it did to Brassäi, Chargesheimer or Robert Frank. The only danger is to make the art world appear more likeable than it possibly is. Heiter's film leads us to the interface between photography and the art world, in which he follows the heels of a man who for many years has been balancing on it like in a tightrope. Benjamin Katz is one of the best-known artists portraitists and anyone who has noticed his fine, quiet appearance suddenly sees him everywhere!

Jürgen Heiter does not tell stories in his films, at most he approaches the possibility of a story as a probable possibility of reality, and thus of history in general. In **Die Strassenbahn am Meer** (2007) nevertheless, the material of the film can be briefly summarized: Alberto, still married, sets off for the Belgian coast to become Luisa's lover. But at the time of his arrival in Oostende, Luisa dies of the consequences of a traffic accident she had the previous day. Love is therefore already the future past, before it had begun. This reveals the complicated relationship between present and past and future as a central phenomenon, from which further inequalities and incompatibilities can be derived. The characters in the plot do not speak directly, their voices are only occasionally off-screen; in most cases, however, an invisible speaker, who once portrays himself as 'I, the Factotum', comments on the scenes. In most cases, his information does not coincide with the images. It sometimes precedes or stumbles upon them. But words and images are by no means congruent in content either; for example, when the protagonist in the opening scene complains about the sultriness of a thunderstorm in a warm sunlight.

Later in Ostende, rain sets in. Here, however, in this peaceful, almost purified evening mood, Luisa, and later Alberto, look down on a river bank standing on the same wall; of course, they do not meet at different times, the same thing appears in different ways; time and place differ. Both persons are recorded here as *Repoussoir* figures, a typical Heiter camera shot. They distance themselves as doubling viewers between the viewers of the film and the scene. However, the commentator largely relieves the recipient of the role of reflecting on the events, not only explaining the course of the action, but also adding poetic visions and philosophical insights to and from it. They wonder around, although presented in such a density that the viewer can only follow them with difficulty. As an example of his own state of suspense, Alberto explains offstage that a mistress should be presented differently than a wife and that Luisa currently belongs to a transitional phase – an observation that is as amusing as it is essential. Alberto even experiences memories every day as if he were remembering for the first time; this gives the memories a quality in moments that seems superior to the present. He cannot give up the memory or his luggage, placed in his locker. The fact that Luisa dies in such an activity shows how naturally Jürgen Heiter interweaves the here and now and the levels of high and low, the tragic and the banal.

In **Ende des Imaginären** (1996), co-directed with Helmut Banz, we see pictures of rehearsals for a feature film. And we hear music. A hit, because the longing for opera and great emotions is great. Also later, like a conclusion of the structure of the dramatic plot, Sven-Åke Johansson sings *The Old Cuckoo Clock*.

We find the new utopias are simply the old ones, only presented differently. At the end of the video, after the final titles have been spoken, the story continues for a short moment: "One" (the painter Nino Malfatti) speaks into the camera: "The poet sees to the same extent as he shows himself. And vice versa. One day each person will show what the poet has seen. The end of the imaginary". Assembly and disassembly: picture and soundtrack have short moments of identity. Here Balzac's text could be related to the respective pictures, but then everything falls apart yet again. You can't get it together, in the long run, it's like a successful moment where its image and its reality overlap for a moment, then immediately shift back against each other. The misfortune begins. Or continues. Images and sounds touch each other, diverge, hardly bearable, because, the longing for context, for stories, for the opera, is great. But life is difficult and loud. Assembly and disassembly.

Die Stelle im Wald (2004) tells the story of two couples, superimposed, interspersed with essayistic moments that, in their own way, deal with cinematographic modernity – the realm of the researcher/lover. In this context, the film explores some aspects of fascism and, contrapuntally, modernist Italian architecture – in Rome, the EUR district, Sabaudia, Casa Malaparte on Capri. This essayistic film also contains conversations that one of the

fictitious characters of the film, the researcher, conducts with two real protagonists of modern film. First, a conversation in Paris with Raoul Coutard, the most important cameraman of European auteur cinema. Coutard photographed **Le Mepris** for Jean-Luc Godard in 1963, which was largely shot on Capri in the Casa Malaparte, an exemplary building of modernist architecture. The second interview was in Rome with Paolo Brunatto, an experimental and documentary film director who made a short film with Pier Paolo Pasolini about the architecture of the Italian cities of Sabaudia and other places in 1973. Here Pasolini formulates his position on the decay of Italy and beyond through neo-capitalism. Brunatto gives us an approximately 3-minute sequence from **Un' anima bella**, which is incorporated into this film.

“But maybe there is no more cinema, only films, the thread is torn and the forms are broken. We don't know the place in the forest anymore, we don't know how to light a fire and we don't know prayer anymore, but we can still tell the story.” JH