

"It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight" writes John Berger at the beginning of his essay series *Ways of Seeing*.

Vision and visibility are by no means the simple matter we often think they are in everyday life. Not only knowledge, memory too affects our vision, both creating as many blind spots as they create images. Thus, it is not surprising that film makers, being visual artists, are as preoccupied with the inadequacy of images, the discontinuities of perception and the blind spots as writers are with the imperfection of words, the breaks of syntax and all that, which confronts them between the lines. Each art form has its own specific problems with representability. This may be one of the reasons why film makers turn towards other forms of art and representation: the desire to explore the problem of representability and of the un-representable within the process of artistic creation in general.

For 10 years, DOKU.ARTS pursues this artistic desire and the subsequent pictorial work of film makers. Hence, it is not at random that the festival opens with a fascinating essay film on blindness: Peter Middleton's and James Spinney's *Notes on Blindness*. That this film tries to translate blindness into images and the way it breaks new ground shows the complexity of the subject: blindness is not simply not-seeing or the contrary of seeing, instead blindness and seeing are interwoven worlds.

This year, our film festival celebrates its 10th anniversary. Focus of our jubilee program is the essay film. On the one hand, our intention for this program has been to direct the attention to a film form that has grown into an independent genre in the 21st century. On the other hand, it has been our wish to create a program that is able to represent and reflect upon our work with DOKU.ARTS, a work, which quite rightly could be called essayistic, too.

At this point, I would like to say some words on this peculiar genre of the essay film:

Peculiar because, first of all, the essay is a literary form. Which is why text plays an important role in many essay films, be it in the form of a literary model like in the film *The Great Wall* which works with Kafka's short story *The Great Wall of China*, or in form of philosophical reflections like the film *Absent God* that portraits the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, or in form of a film maker's own text as in the case

of Johannes Gierlinger's meditations on happiness in *The fortune you seek is in another cookie*.

But beyond that, the film makers' essayistic work extends to the visual as well as to the tonal space. This quality becomes arrestingly obvious in all the films which will be presented here, but the most visible it may be in the two contributions on blindness; both films, the opening film *Notes on Blindness* and the film *Black Sun*, by reason of their subject matter alone, had to find an unconventional approach to creating images and sound.

Now, why is the essay such an attractive form for some film makers? I think, it is the fact that the essay is an impure form, a peculiar hybrid: neither is it exactly an academic-scientific form, nor is it an art form even though many artists have repeatedly worked with this form over the last decades. Somehow, it seems to be an unburdened, liberated form which doesn't have to serve scientific or artistic requirement; of course, with all possibilities and all danger such freedom may entail.

Here is what Adorno writes on the essay as literary form:

"The essay, however, does not let its domain be prescribed for it. Instead of accomplishing something scientifically or creating something artistically, its efforts reflect the leisure of a childlike person who has no qualms about taking his inspiration from what others have done before him. The essay reflects what is loved and hated instead of presenting the mind as creation *ex nihilo* on the model of an unrestrained work ethic. Luck and play are essential to it. It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about; it says what occurs to it in that context and stops when it feels finished rather than when there is nothing to say: hence it is classified as 'allogria'." (Adorno, *Notes on Literature I*)

The essay neither creates theory nor does it give final explanations, instead it contemplates with surprise, excites, horrifies. Film maker Chris Marker, who is regarded a pioneer of the essay film, has expressed this concisely in a letter on his film *Sans Soleil*:

"Why? If I knew (if we knew) why things are done, this world would look quite different. I'll just try to deal with the "How?"

The term "allogria", which Adorno uses seems to me illuminative: the term belongs to the ancient Greek and means "foreign" or "alien". In Greek philosophy it referred to all, which distracts man from the essential.

It seems that the essay form ironically accepts the impossibility to speak about the essential. But it recognizes the essential within the unspeakable, the gap, the void, the abyss; the distance between gesture and meaning. Its interaction with the essential is ironic, because the essay dances around it, lures it and hopes for it to appear, despite the knowledge that it is ungraspable. To quote once more Chris Marker, who wittily captures this irony:

"It is a great asset in life not to know what you are talking about."

Hence, rather than providing answers, the essay asks questions. And rather than advocating theories, it creates a space of possibilities. While the essay shares these qualities with the arts, it borrows its methods to explore a subject matter from academic research.

As one can see from the program, essay films can be quite multifaceted and varied. However, all of them share a certain dissatisfaction with images as answer or final point. Rather, images are understood as gestures which point towards the essential and yet, at the same time, they distract from the essential and so ultimately each image ends with a question mark. But maybe dissatisfaction is not the right word here: the essay form, especially in its cinematic molding, has nothing agonizing, nothing inhibited, instead it has a searching, sometimes playful, attitude, and maybe the wish to cultivate a particular gaze: it is the gaze of someone who searches for tracks, a pathfinder. Would someone looking for tracks focus exclusively on the sighting of a bear, he would hardly ever find it: mind you, the bear belongs to the forest and together they are always smarter than the one who is looking. But if the pathfinder lets his eye wander he may catch sight of the bear as it prowls between two trees. And even if he doesn't find it, he will at least have seen the trees and, along with them, the possibility of the bear, instead of groggily leaving the forest without having seen anything at all. One should not conclude that seeing the bear has something to do with chance or luck. Rather its is about a gaze and an awareness that have to be learned. A gaze like in this Budo saying:

"A gaze is like autumn leaves. Never fixed. Open. Aware. Looking at everything. And nothing."

The hope persists that DOKU.ARTS is and remains a place where this gaze can be trained. All the films you are able to see here, I also understand as a form of resistance: resistance against the visual noise that we are exposed to on an everyday basis, as well as against the, maybe understandable yet unfruitful, moralistic reaction to this situation. In the meantime, these films manage to create a very different structure of time and perception which recovers a space to not only reflect critically and attentively on one's own practise but also to engage oneself in recognizing the blind spots and rifts of any perception. These blind spots and rifts are sustained within this year's films and they remain urgent as they take the form of hopes, claims and questions.

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