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### CLEMENS KLOPFENSTEIN'S NIGHT & TRANCE FILMS/ THE LONGING FOR TIMES LOST

Several films projected during the 1979 Solothurn Film Festival, have marked recent Swiss film history. There were no films by Alain Tanner, Claude Goretta, or Michel Soutter, but in their stead, *Les petites fugues* by Yves Yersin, *Die Schweizermacher* (*The Swiss Makers*) by Rolf Lyssy, *Behinderte Liebe* (*Hindered Love*) by Marlies Graf, and *Gösgen* by Fosco Dubini, Donatello Dubini, and Jürg Hassler had their premieres.

And then there was also *Geschichte der Nacht* (*Story of the Night*) by Clemens Klopfenstein—who was born in Täuffelen in 1944—an experimental film that is difficult to classify, that transgresses all the principles of the new Swiss cinematographic miracle, and is wonderfully irritating; a genuine precursor to the “dogma” films.

For some time now, growing international interest has been lavished upon Klopfenstein's night story along with subsequent films, *Trances – Reiter auf dem toten Pferd* (*Trance Rider on the Dead Horse*) from 1981 and *Das Schlesische Tor* (*The Silesian Gate*) from 1982. Retrospectives in Mannheim, Berlin, Moscow, and Amsterdam are evidence of this. A film still showing the portal of the main station in Basel was even used a few years ago for the catalogue cover of the *Biennale Internationale du film sur l'art* at the Centre Pompidou, as well as for the book edited by Beat Wyss, *Art Scenes Today*, about Swiss contemporary art in the *Ars Helvetica* series. [1]

[1] Beat Wyss, *Kunstszene heute*, *Ars Helvetica*, Band XII, Disentis 1992.

Clemens Klopfenstein occupies a special position among Swiss cinematographers. He is one of the few who came to film from a fine arts education. Already during his training as a drawing teacher at the Basel Commercial Art School, he had begun making short films with his two colleagues, Urs Aebersold and Philipp Schaad. They founded the Aebersold-Klopfenstein-Schaad film co-operative, AKS Basel, and, starting in 1965, realized astounding film studies oriented toward film noir and the nouvelle vague such as *Umteilung* from 1966/67 and *Wir sterben vor* from 1967 (actors include Rémy Zaugg, Emil [Emil Steinberger], Max Kaempf, Lenz Klotz). The first films were pure “cinéma copain”; they had no money, but they did have good contacts, colleagues who were enthusiastic about film, and lots of ideas. When the Zurich Commercial Art School offered three courses on directing and camerawork from 1967 to 1968, Clemens Klopfenstein attended courses one and two on camerawork in film. During this training he realized the short detective film

*Nach Rio* (*To Rio*) in 1968, with Fred Tanner, Samuel Muri, and Georg Janett as actors. The short films, however, were only a passing stage. He dreamt of cinema, of the big screen, of stars, and success. In 1973 the AKS group launched a big production and made the detective story, *Die Fabrikanten*, which takes place among watchmakers; an ambitious project that ended in a financial debacle.

After this bitter disappointment Clemens Klopfenstein, the artist and qualified drawing teacher, went abroad. Thanks to a grant, he could spend a year at the Suisse Institute in Rome. He has been living in Italy since then. During his time in Rome, from his studio on the top floor of Villa Maraini, not far from the legendary Via Veneto, Klopfenstein observed the changing light on the colorful walls of neighboring houses, and accordingly drew and painted serial views of the changing and shifting daylight. The sequences of paintings were given titles such as *Der Tag isch vergange* (*The Day Is Over*), *Langsamer Rückzug von einem fremden Gebäude* (*Slow Retreat from a Strange Building*), and *Les terribles cinq heures du soir*. His experimental color film, *La luce romana vista da ferraniacolor* deals with the same subject.

He looked for lost moments, the famous “temps perdu,” and the most mysterious light, a search that he also took up in his photographic work and later in his films.

At the same time, during his somnambulant excursions after bar closing time through sleeping Rome, he took countless black-and-white night photographs. The fact that the perspectives on nocturnal Rome seem to be more French than Italian is explicable. In Klopfenstein's world of images a connection can, without doubt, be made to Piranesi's horrifying *Carceri* images with their wondrous lighting, or to Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical buildings and squares. But Klopfenstein's great models of our time are Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Grumbach (alias Jean-Pierre Melville).

Impressed and influenced by Godard's nouvelle vague films such as *A bout de souffle* (1960), *Le mépris* (1963), *Pierrot le fou* (1965), and *Alphaville* (1965), as well as by the films noir of Jean-Pierre Melville (particularly *Le deuxième souffle* from 1966 and *Le samourai* from 1967) and especially by Alan Barron's 1961 film, *Blast of Silence*, made during his one-year stay in Rome, Klopfenstein went in search of nouvelle vague and film noir moods. With his Pentax reflex camera, loaded with sensitive black-and-white film, and riding a Velosolex, he emerged himself in the nocturnal light, fascinated by the incomparable atmosphere of Rome. From these expeditions he brought back numerous photographs with surprising nighttime moods. The sensitive black-and-white photographic emulsion recorded the residual light of the night differently and more mysteriously than the imperfect human eye. In contrast to our brain, the eye of the camera does not know what it would see in the light of day and only records photographically what comes through its lens. And artificial light leaves behind a different trace on the photographic film than on our retina. These photographs make this visible.

Of these nocturnal research tours, several voluminous photo albums and, in particular, 12 photographs remain, the series *Paese sera* (Bernische Stiftung für Fotografie, Film und Video), whose last photograph bears the title *Filmidee* (*Film Idea*). Even though there is no real story told in it, the series is nevertheless a legible film sketch that evokes excitement and emotions: “The early films of the AKS film group already allow an inkling of Clemens Klopfenstein's fascination with the night. He was mostly responsible for the image. Already in 1967, the night appeared in the title of one study, *Lachen, Liebe, Nächte* (*Laughter, Love, Nights*).

The attraction of the nocturnal shadows became apparent in Klopfenstein's school film, *Nach Rio*, a série noire film of 16 minutes' duration as well as in a report on the death of a burlesque Basel night-club, *Variété Clara* (AKS with Georg Janett).

"Klopfenstein came closer to this theme as a draughtsman, painter, and photographer. In 1975 he showed works that had been made between 1972 and 1975 in Italy: pen-and-ink drawings, acrylic paintings, and photographs. The drawings and paintings revolved around three themes: bizarre stage backdrops recalling Piranesi's dungeon images, vast beaches, and studies of shadows. Some works, brought together under the title, *Der Tag ist vergangen*, recorded the course of the day via the passage of shadows on buildings. The photographs—nocturnal images, interior and exterior shots (streets and monumental architecture)—are grouped under the title *Paese sera*.

These photographs send us directly to *Geschichte der Nacht*, a series of 11 photographs entitled *Filmidee*; these still have a residue of conventional narrative. *Geschichte der Nacht* has been described as a story that takes place at night (and in the cinema), and tells of a missed encounter. This engenders another: the to active characters have disappeared ... or have been placed "on the near side" of the camera, of the screen. [2]

[2] Martin Schaub, "Im Norden der Stadt schneit es. Clemens Klopfensteins *Geschichte der Nacht*," in *Cinema*, no. 1, 1979, "Fahren oder Bleiben," Unabhängige schweizerische Filmzeitschrift, Arbeitsgemeinschaft, *Cinema*, March 1979, p. 73–74.

With *Geschichte der Nacht*, an international co-production, Clemens Klopfenstein entered unknown territory, for himself and for Swiss cinema. Filmed in over 150 nights in 15 European countries from Dublin to Istanbul and from Rome to Helsinki, he pushed the possibilities of the black-and-white film material available at the time to its extremes. In the blue hours of dawn, in the pulsating light of the street lamps, and in gloomy railway stations and bus shelters, Klopfenstein photographed on 400 ASA film with an open aperture. The manual wind-up mechanism of his 16mm Bolex camera restricted the shots to two or three minutes and lent the film it is wonderfully ponderous rhythm. The exposed material was finally developed to a double or quadrupled developing time of 800 to 1600 ASA in long nighttime hours at the film laboratory Schwarz-Filmtechnik in Ostermundigen. This technique gives the film copy a fascinating, shimmering graininess. One has the impression that the emulsion starts to boil like magma, and this has a hypnotic, magical effect on the viewer.

"Houses, lines of houses, streets, miles of pavements, piles of bricks, stones. Changing hands. This owner, that. The owner never dies, they say. Another steps into his shoes when he gets his notice to quit. Pyramids in the sand. Slaves on the Wall of China. Babylon. Monolithic remains. Round towers. Slums built on air. Shelter for the night. Hate this hour. Feel as if I had been eaten and spat out." [3]

[3] Quotation from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922, episode 8, Lestrygonians) from the preface to *Story of the Night* (Colm Tóibín, 2005).

During a good hour during the night, the viewer resides simultaneously in several different cities and locations in Europe: "In this film I want to realize the physiognomy of a European city that does not actually exist. It will consist of various parts of different cities and thus attain a great geographical spaciousness ... The few people who appear in the totality of the images serve the viewer as a bridge. Just like the figures in the film image, the viewer will stand in the film: overtired, irritated, but also calmed by the empty stillness of the cities." [4]

[4] Clemens Klopfenstein, "10. September 1978," in *Programmheft 9. Internationales Forum des Jungen Films* (February 22, 1979–March 3, 1979) Berlin-West, 1979.

*Geschichte der Nacht* was invited to be shown at numerous film festivals and brought Clemens Klopfenstein international renown. Long before the Danish

"dogma" films, Klopfenstein had made do without a tripod and steadied his 16mm Bolex camera on his shoulder. He found it to his advantage that he was not very tall. With his slightly wavering, even breathing, camera, he gave Christian Schocher's long 1981 feature film, *Reisender Krieger* (*Traveling Warrior*), a subjective touch. Hence the viewer does not succeed in maintaining a distance and must take a stance, a principle that Klopfenstein also employed in his successful feature film *E nachtlang Füllerland*, co-directed with Remo Legnazzi in 1981.

A consistent further development of the nocturnal theme is, finally, the 1981 experimental film, *Transes-Reiter auf dem toten Pferd*, an apparently endless journey. "Noi metteremo lo spettatore al centro del Quadro" (We will put the viewer at the center of the picture)—Klopfenstein placed this maxim by the Futurist painter Carlo Carrà at the beginning of his film.

Klopfenstein's camera describes the intoxicated feelings of an escapee. Long, seemingly endless shots from a car and later from trains, into a landscape far away from restricting civilization exercise a liberating fascination and simultaneously a magical attraction on the viewer. *Transes-Reiter auf dem toten Pferd* is a subjective camera journey poised between trance and hovering.

*Das Schlesische Tor*, filmed in Berlin, Tokyo, and Hong Kong, finally apparently breaks through the nocturnal formula. When it is still nighttime in Berlin, in the Far East it is already daytime. This simultaneity allows a magical juxtaposition, a mysterious poetry to come about. Chinese pop music from the 1950s and 1960s, copying American models, reinforces this strangeness. It is "found music" bought from a street peddler in Hong Kong. The combined effect results in a film poem of intense, timeless beauty.

"Images and sounds from Berlin, Tokyo, and Hong Kong; in addition studies in light and shade of my room in Berlin are to be mixed with one another and superimposed on each other, and, supported by Westernized Chinese music, are to evoke feelings of homesickness and a longing for far-off places, of yearning from somewhere and nowhere." [5]

[5] Clemens Klopfenstein, concerning his film *Das Schlesische Tor*, in *Berlin oder Das Auge des Wirbelsturms, Filme um und über Berlin aus drei Jahrzehnten. Reflexionen von Gästen und Freunden des Berliner Künstlerprogramms*, Kino Arsenal (November 8, 1999–November 19, 1999), edited by par Barbara Richter, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst DAAD, Berlin-West 1999, p. 24.

"Klopfenstein has made images which one finds, with their peaceful indeterminacy, when one arrives in unknown territory and don't yet know what to say of it, nor what one should notice in the general atmospheric impression. The gaze does not penetrate, does not fix on anything, it drifts far away, follows the movement of a suburban train, orients itself on an warning sign, a telephone booth, then slides far away, leaving it all as unimportant. The images of the night world in front of the Silesian Gate, or the day in Tokyo and in Hong Kong, have an unpretentious self-evidence. The editing gives the images a voice, which articulates the passage of light around the world. When night falls in Berlin, the light shimmers blindingly white in the east. To this realistic statement is added a poetic one: the images of both parts of the world are made strangely unreal by a background of 'Americanized' Chinese music. The poetry attempts to join together the world, which is separated by the independent course of time in east and west, day and night." [6]

[6] Peter Schneider, "Kritischer Index der Jahresproduktion 1983," in *Cinema*, 29th year, Basel and Frankfurt 1983, p. 186–187.

Transformation, the change from one state to another, from one place to another, from one medium into another, can be constantly observed in Clemens Klopfenstein's work. Just as the film medium allows him to jump temporally and geographically, so too he jumps from one medium to another. When certain feature-film projects

threatened to fail for financial reasons, Klopfenstein bought the best amateur video equipment, made his films electronically on a low-budget level, and then transferred the video to film to be shown in the cinema. In this way he preserved his artistic freedom and independence as a filmmaker and producer. It is no longer necessary to have elaborate lighting; the camera and sound material can be easily and quickly inserted anywhere, and above all, one is no longer conspicuous as a filmmaker. Because today every Tom, Dick, and Harry make their family films with semi-professional cameras, the filmmaker can do his work undisturbed. Even borders and official permission to shoot scenes are no longer a problem; you play the amateur and get lost in the crowd. So much artistic freedom, of course, provokes envy, and it is not surprising that Clemens Klopfenstein receives almost more attention abroad than in Switzerland. The renowned New York film critic, Jim Hoberman, publishes his personal list of the "10 Best Films of the Year" each year in the *Village Voice*. In 1986, *Tranes – Reiter auf dem Toten Pferd* appeared on this list together with *Blue Velvet* by David Lynch and *Caravaggio* by Derek Jarman. No other Swiss film has ever made it onto this list. And in the Netherlands there is a Stichting Furland, a cultural foundation named after Klopfenstein's /Legnazzi's film, *E nachtlang Fülland*. But that is another story ...

FABRICE MONTAL

### **CINEMA, TRUTH, AND VIDEO-LIES (ON THE WORK OF ROBERT MORIN)**

The text you are about to read is an attempt to put down on paper the complex, wild, and delectable world of someone who doesn't care much for categories, classifications, or hierarchies, a combatant for the pleasure of making art, a video artist who calls himself a filmmaker or, more straightforwardly, a *faiseux de vues*, or "maker of film shots," a term translated from Canadian French that connects him both to the founding act of the Lumières brothers (their simple, direct film takes, which were called *vues cinématographiques*) and filmmaking in the USA (moviemaker), squarely situating him as a craftsman who can be found daily polishing the results of his craft.

Born in 1949 in Montreal, Robert Morin first studied literature, film, and communication before becoming a photographer and cameraman. In 1977, with several friends, he founded a production company, Coop vidéo, short for La Coopérative de Productions Vidéoscopiques de Montréal (or the Video Production Co-operative of Montreal), where he still creates the majority of his films.

For 30 years he has worked at the exploratory limits of narration in his field. Drawn to the repressed zones of his society, which he has had great fun exposing for all to see, Morin has shown throughout his extensive output the tiny mechanisms involved in the public's credulity before audiovisual fiction and documentary treatment. In this respect, it might be amusing to label him as an "experimental narrative" video artist, which would strike some as paradoxical.

The prevailing idea behind the creation of Coop vidéo was the urge to free oneself from the commercial and governmental constraints that dictated and limited filmmaking in Quebec in those years. The collective produced some 20 short and medium-length videos before tackling feature-length film in the 1990s.

Morin and his friends wanted to shoot films at all costs and all the time. This is evident from the independence and freedom that the members of Coop Vidéo granted themselves, in their autonomist and creative attitude, precursors of the video-artist cells making up the Mouvement Kinö, which sprang to life in Montreal in the late 1990s and is now spreading around the world. Indeed, their motto is *Faire bien avec rien, faire mieux avec peu et le faire maintenant!* (Do a good job with nothing, do better with little, and do it now!)?

But unlike Mouvement Kinö or Vidéographe, to take two "historic" Montreal examples, this association involved a relatively limited circle of co-op members who shared a certain vision for film and had initially pooled their funds, talents, and technical means to be able to realize that vision.

Their social commitment appears in their earliest works, which were documentaries in the narrow sense of the term, but fiction quickly and joyfully interfered. Until the mid-1980s, most of the tapes were collectively signed. This was the heroic age of joint artworks in which the very idea of a single creator was deemed a bourgeois legacy. However, those members who had talent gradually came to the fore. And Morin, who was among them, was to become the main scriptwriter-director.

To plunge into the world of Robert Morin is to find yourself facing three types of script that are both different and concomitant, that is, the existential videotapes, the "self-filming" and the films with professional actors.

For many years Morin's films were screened in experimental video festivals. Today they are occasionally honored in festivals devoted to documentaries. Yet in reality, they belong to neither category because he questions the limits of fictional protocols in their extremely private relationship with reality, a relationship that is amplified by the place video discourse has in the development of the language of moving images.

In 1978 Morin showed himself to be an auteur quite by accident with *Gus est encore dans l'armée*, which he originally made as a way of having fun with unused scrap film. A former French-speaking soldier from the Canadian Army tells us his story, filmed in super-8: "I went into the army to see the world. I saw northern Ontario during exercises. In the first days of that fake war I fell in love with another soldier ... " The fusion of the narrator's tone and the documentary imagery reinforces a fiction whose excesses alone manage to sow doubt in our minds as to the truth, in the tradition of "banality's dizzying whirl."