

To make Oxygen burn

On the construction of picturesque soundscapes

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“He plunged in and swam about, and let the small jangling noise of his troubles be swallowed up by the innumerable laughter of the sea”.
“Eh?”

“κυματων ανηριθμονγε λασμα - quotation from the classics. Some people say it means the dimpled surface of the waves in the sunlight- but how could Prometheus, bound upon his rock, have seen it? Surely it was the chuckle of the incoming tide among the stones that came up to his ears on the lonely peak where the vultures fretted at his heart”.
D.L. Sayers: The Man with no Face, 1928

This essay comprises a series of reflections on the relation between music and moving images in the work of composer Peter Jørgensen and architect and film director Morten Meldgaard. It concerns itself with the making of the audiovisual space for the documentary “Kim”, about a Danish WWII resistance fighter. It is the fruit of a long collaborative practice between composer and director, between sound and picture. This collaboration started out as an attempt to negotiate the traditional hierarchy of sound and picture as expressed in the “Soundtrack” or the “Music video”. The essay tries in its own way to trace a line through a series of diversions into film, painting, architecture, mapping and music. It is a sort of constructivism that searches for a specific picturesque relation between image and sound in the construction of worlds. Further more it is a precise section through “the complex” that the actualization of a virtuality consists of. It is a series of local events, dealing with the aforementioned sound-picture relation, which reveal the process of going from the virtuality of raw footage to actualized form of a film. In this respect the essay is about concrete ways in which to objectify problems and actualize virtualities. How to make a model of the singularity of a human existence? How to simulate a full scale surface attack? How to make Oxygen *burn*?

We might start this essay by questioning the origins of cinema. Film only became cinema when it encountered architecture.¹ In a very literal sense this refers to the cinema as a built spatio-temporal and social structure: the movie house. We might even think of the famous German expressionist F.W. Murnau who echoes Vitruvius ten books on architecture by stating that a cinematic play should be devised so that no part could be added or subtracted without shattering the whole of the composition. But this is not the point. As Deleuze has argued the early film wasn't mute because it had no soundtrack, it was only silent² and clad in aural garments of a social and musical clamour of sound; an ambience. In fact most early

¹ Guillian Bruno: Atlas of emotions. P. 44

² Gilles Deleuze: Cinema 2, p. 226.

cinema houses contained a rather diminutive projection screen in order to allow the audience to mingle and enjoy the social venue of cinematic viewing.¹ This procedure of housing an aural and visual event as a social practice points to a more remote genealogy than that of traditional film studies.

Such a proto cinematic space would be conceived of various elements from optics, architecture, cartography, landscape and tourism. From the idea of the picturesque in landscape architecture to the display of panoramic views in huge building scale constructions of “panorama”. From small portable display cabinets of optical illusion, to the wholesale apparatus of 18th century travel for leisure. A proto cinematic landscape comprising of cartographical experiments, forms of travel and representational models, which precede the cinematic body, the camera eye and the recording of sound. But what is the status of the aural in such a topology? Landscape gardening would of course include sound effects such as running water, crispness of snow, crackle of flames, that is ambiances of summer and those of winter. The panoramic installation might include other sound effects as those of the bustle of the metropolis or the roar of the ocean as heard from a ship. But we might search father back to the foundations of meta-cinematic space; the cave image of Plato as accounted for in “Republic”³. The cave is conceived as a projection room where the immobilised spectators watch a screen of moving images composed of the shadows of people moving behind them. “Again: if the prison house returned echo from the part facing them whenever one of the passers by opened his lips, to what, let me ask you, could they refer the voice, if not to the shadow which was passing?” It is a known paradox, that Plato who himself condemns the image, has to use a visual metaphor like this in order to communicate his idea. If we delve into it, the imagery that he attacks in “Republic” is exactly the distorted image, which is the result of projection. In this respect it is even more puzzling that Plato chose “Shadow” (projected image) as privileged in relation to “Echo” (sound), but it is exactly this hierarchy that has been haunting western culture ever since. The direction and angle of the projected image supersedes the Omni-directional ambience of sound dispersal. However the aural dimension was present at all times and it is precisely in the field condition of the ambient that the picturesque lies. So let us examine the “Soundtrack” for “Kim” from these premises, that of the coexistence of the sound-picture relation and that of picturesque aesthetics.

The initial collaboration between us was a small assignment. The idea was to parry one composer and one filmmaker and have them produce a series of sketches for a small film. At the time I was frantically involved in studying the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøj in whose work a certain nakedness, melancholia and ambience dwell. As Hammershøj had painted almost exclusively in his own apartment, treating its spaces and occupants as a set, I followed treat converting my own apartment in his sombre manner. On the aural side Peter experimented with a small piece of piano music of a melancholic, cyclic and yet halting nature. The music it seemed was waiting for something, like the pictures I was shooting at home. As Orson Welles puts it, “It’s full with sorrow- the kind of sorrow that accumulate in a railway station where people wait”.⁴ Peter’s music had the ambience of one of Hammershøjs interiors. We would cut the film according to every hesitating chord played by Peter himself on piano. There is an echo of this initial track in the closing piano piece for “Kim”. Every beat, every chord is chiselled out of a dense sensory-block, full with sorrow. I

³ Guillian Bruno: Atlas of emotions. P. 47-50

⁴ Peter Bogdanowitch: This is Orson Welles p. 247

think we both felt at the time that this meeting was one of mutual temperaments. My studies of Hammershøj continued and Peter started composing tracks on his laptop.

Once in a while Peter would let me listen to a track and I would enjoy the dreamy ambience of his work. It was slow work though and it seemed that each track had to be dragged or heaved out of a bottomless pit. Jean Luc Godard talked about this when he stated “ It was as if I had to snatch the shots out of the night, as if they were at the bottom of a well and I had to bring them to light”.⁵ Watching this body of work grow literally from the first nucleus was a painstaking event. For my part I was working on a project that would eventually become the next collaboration and finally end up as a “material” in the construction of the “Kim” film.

For a number of years I had been shooting Super8 reels in an offhand manner. The idea was to create a degree zero plane of composition in order to avoid pictorial content and narrative structure. Again Hammershøj was the inspiration. In 1893 he had painted a large canvas of “Job” in a manner so dark that the motif of the picture disappeared as the drying of the paint commenced. This black picture never the less fathered a whole series of beautiful and sombre low key compositions. In a sense this is also what Lou Reed achieved with his Metal machine music, a degree zero plane from where a new series of compositions could emerge. Having concluded shooting on the “Atlantik” project I was faced with the fact that no editor would undertake the cutting. Perhaps the editing was already done in the camera? I discussed it with Peter and we sat out to finish the project together. We simply took one of his three finished electronic tracks and mounted it on a lump of footage. It seemed it would work and even provide us with a structure. The reels shot over a period of 3 years were simply tied one after another in eight lumps constructing a sequence of eight “tracks”. Now this meant that half of the footage had to be “lifted” out while not messing with the continuity of the rolls and that Peter would still have 5 or 6 tracks to do before we could finish the movie.

“Atlantik” was a real challenge. I was carefully “lifting” out small bits of footage while Peter was heaving up tracks from that bottomless pit with the pace of a fat man ascending from a swimming pool. Walter Murch once said that editing is “just” cutting out the bad parts, but what if nothing qualifies to this description, if it’s beyond good or bad?⁶ How do you compose a score for something like that? We turned the situation around, letting the tracks decide on the visual material. Or so it seemed.

The material for “Atlantik” consisted of a sort of architectural diary. I would shoot single frames, every 5 minutes, not bothering to look into the viewfinder in order not to compose. Then I would get impatient shooting small lumps of forty to fifty frames, go on a trip in the country filming cows and then return to the city. The material was picturesque rather than aesthetic. It was rough, disparate and with sudden jumps and ragged edges in its space-time relations. As Ulvedale Price put it: “A temple of Grecian architecture in its entire perfect state, is beautiful; in ruin it is picturesque”.⁷ On the other hand Peter was producing a body of music involved with a more formal aesthetics, achieving a sense of real beauty. Smooth, long and flexible tones alternating in simple and yet complex patterns. It seemed that his tracks lent to the material the continuity that it so lacked in itself. The individual tracks seemed to traverse these heaps of visual rubbish and in doing so pointing out their attractions. The disparate pictures would start to materialize and suddenly one would look at

⁵ Interview with Jean Luc Godard on “Vivre sa Vie” (1962) in Cahiers de Cinéma 138, 1962

⁶ Walther Murch: In the blink of an eye

⁷ Uvedale Price, Essay on the Picturesque, 1774

an accidental cut as a real filmic event. A cut like that, you could live your whole life and not achieve and there it was in front of you and had been the whole time. Perhaps it was the mesmerizing nature of the music that would make you forget the expectation of entertainment and then suddenly let you experience how a picture emerges and explodes in your brain. This is how they must have felt when the brothers Lumiere presented the first motion pictures at the Boulevard des Capuciennes in 1895. The event of the motion picture.

Starting work on the feature length documentary “Kim” about a famed WWII resistance figure I had already asked Peter if he would compose the score. Peter had put out his first album of electronic music and was preparing the second one. My idea for the film was to treat the past as a living memory rather than a set of old dusty files. That means that whenever you make one change, you change the whole of its relations. I had a basic scheme for the adaptation of Kim Malthe-Bruuns letters and diaries, namely to go to the various countries where they had been produced and read them there. A journey into the picturesque. For these reasons I had to rely on the talent and skill of composer and sound designer. As much as “Atlantik” had been a journey that only came together when it merged with its soundtrack, “Kim” would rely on an aural dimension in order to make shifts and gears in its negotiation of common space-time. I thought Peter was the right man for this. I would need both analogue and digital music and I would need the confidence of the composer in order to let me construct different layers of sound on top of it. A point in case is the scene from Werner Marsch’ Olympia Stadium at the 1936 Olympic games; the showroom of pre-war Nazi Germany. Kim’s family had attended the games and shot actual 16 mm “home-movies”. My idea was to treat the event of the stadium of Werner Marsch as a singularity, a black hole so to speak, that would eventually swallow up the whole of the civilized world including our main character. For this I needed more than pictures. Another example could be the beautiful colour footage shot on the family’s lawn in a careless world of yesterday sometime in the mid thirties. This world deprived of sorrow, which would soon be swallowed up by the streams and jets of time. For that I also needed more than the astounding beauty of the 16 mm reels. As Deleuze puts it, it was exactly the motion picture, with its manifold somnambulists, spiritualist media, Doppelgangers and man-machines, that were “Horrible realised” by the spiritual automat incorporated in the image of the Fuehrer: “Ich erkläre die Spiele hiermit für eröffnet!”⁸The image seemed redundant in accounting for this, while the sound/music dimension gave back to the images of peacetime their initial horror: “Real birds, real bedrooms, real children, real graves”.⁹

Our initial idea was to include Peter at the first possible moment. On commencing editing with Sara Reiter, he had already seen some of my footage, whilst we had got a small “bank” of music, consisting of the “Atlantik” tracks and Peters two albums. However the Atlantik tracks weren’t the only part from that project that got included in the new film. We chose early on to solve our shortage of archive footage by including “Atlantik” itself as raw material. This unorthodox procedure in a historical documentary meant that the editing took a certain turn against the unfinished, the flawed and the erroneous. At first I felt put out, not because of the picturesque quality of cracked, maltreated or badly shot archive material, but because my editor started to look after the same faults in my own carefully done camerawork. In this essential strategy, one might call it the visual ethics of the film, Peter’s music was a comfort. It is evident that what ties the editing together is the difference that all

⁸ Gilles Deleuze: Cinema 1, p. 252-253

⁹ Chris Marker: “La Jetée” (1963)

the cuts share, the differential of the imperfect. But in order to go there, this time for real, I needed companionship and that is what I found in the tracks from “Atlantik”. As we started to assemble bits and pieces from that project, we also started to incorporate tracks, from the sombre humming of “Track 7” in the opening to the glacier like sinus curve and heartbeat of “Track 4”. These two tracks along with the picturesque editing drew up the signature of the picture.

Getting further ahead in the editing table, meant an increased need for musical companionship. Our little bank had run dry and the actual job of composing specific tracks began. Peter worked simultaneous on digital and analogue tracks, while we tried them out. “Lübeck” was one of the first to hit the bull’s eye, while “Astoria” was last. On listening to the track that should create the virtuality of a full-scale surface attack I knew we had it. The track had altitude. It had vibrations, bones, all the right overtones and the cosy humming of 4-engine long distance bomber. It sounded like death and combined with the breeziness of the preceding Benny Goodman track you got the irrational picture inside your head that “here come the jazzmen”. Perhaps it is one of the strangest and most suggestive parts of the movie, when this scene of manmade inferno is cut with a quiet seascape just before dawn and the words of Kim’s beautiful letter to his girlfriend at home. In the words of Sanford Kwinter it is an irrational that covers up for a total rationality that cannot be accepted by the sensory motor schematics: To make Oxygen burn.¹⁰ Another place that occupy the same strategy is found in the last part of the movie. A calm footage shot of a host of airborne B-25 Mitchells is accompanied by an atmospheric almost elliptical track (“Luxembourg”) while the words of Kim resonate on the imperfection of human emotional perception. It is a place of rest, of calm airy contemplation that precedes the arrest and succeeding torture of Kim in the hands of the Gestapo.

While the digital tracks seemed to envelope clusters of radical montage in order to create intensities like “Olympia Stadion” or “the jazzmen”, the analogue tracks were thought of in another way. One might say that that the digital brought the past into the present, while the analogue tracks brought the present into the past. In some region it seemed the past were still actualized, vibrant and waiting for the present moment of cinematic viewing to join up with it. This meeting could take the form of actualized incidents as in the scenes from Berlin and Lübeck, but could also be reversed. The past would no longer be dragged into the present but conversely the present would be dragged into the past. The intensities we worked on in this respect had another quality than that of a past actualized, it was the quality of a past virtualized in order to allow us to experience that moment on that specific lawn during the thirties as a not yet given and still open. In this sense we had to reverse the relation between the picturesque and the beautiful. The imagery and montage took the place of the aesthetic while the music developed a series of irregular patterns and subtle yet abrupt formal changes. Of course this is a childish division, because as soon as we had the two basic directions of time, we began to play with them, populating our world with them. Alternating, varying, jumping and skipping like kids playing on flakes of ice on a frozen river.

The analogue tracks proved to be a tall order. One opening theme, one theme of joy and youth, one romantic theme, and so on and so forth. I had an almost childish joy of asking for these tracks in this mainstream terminology as if we were redoing some sort of melodramatic act. I think this was the biggest challenge for Peter. There was to be no

¹⁰ Sanford kwinter: Architectures of time, p. 106: “Irrationality” is always steeped in a broader, deeper, and more importunate *total* rationality”

dreamy grey melancholic states, but pure sentiment in colours none of us was wont. This is where skill supersedes talent and inspiration and gives us back the event. Like in the scene where Kim returns from the outbreak of war in the East. Tall beeches, small lamb, a couple in love and a romantic chord line on the piano It's all very simple, but Peter and I still smile at each other while watching that scene thinking- Did we do that? Once again work almost slowed down to a halt. Then one track would surface and then the next. At this time the film was far from finished and the tracks were being moved around, deleted, reinserted just like individual scenes. The opening "Palimpsest (For Strings)" was a sure thing, but it was not until we had Kim's theme that we could actually construct the opening of the film proper. But while one thing is opening, it is yet another one closing. In his cell, probably hallucinating from lack of food and the agony of torture, Kim experienced a sense of the spirit leaving the tormented body. In this state he would see a strange picture, alien to the confinement of the bare prison cell. In his secret diary he would write: "*Sometimes I see a strange picture. None of you are present therein. It is myself, alone, riding a horse*". These words held a special meaning for us, nonetheless for us having the actual pictures of Kim riding that horse. There was no doubt, that we wanted to close with this footage of Kim and that we wanted to blur the relation between words and pictures by separating them in cinematic time. As Deleuze commented on Welles in relation to Kafka's "The Trial": "*Welles success in relation to Kafka is that he was able to show how spatially distant and chronologically separate regions were in touch with each other, at the bottom of a limitless time which made them contiguous.*"¹¹ So instead of words, even those written in the prison diaries, we wanted music to that effect. In the end we dug up our initial collaboration and used this primordial track as inspiration for the final one. A young boy taming his horse in the water of a lake long ago: "*It is myself alone riding a horse*".

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze: "Cinema 2" p.111