

An Observer's Discourse: Fragments. Getaway Inn

Stefanie Kreuzer in catalogue *ars viva 07/08 – Sound*, October 2007

All twelve scenes of the work *Getaway Inn* (2006/07) by Astrid Nippoldt were produced during her residency in Italy at the Villa Massimo. The rooms and gardens of the Villa are regularly rented out for various third-party events such as receptions, fashion shows and a variety of presentations. Nippoldt recorded her observations of these events with a video camera. These recordings form the starting point for a loosely knit narrative that on the thematic level plays on the tension between observing and being observed of what is visible and what is hidden. On the visual level, Nippoldt makes use of both a filmic and painterly picture language, with the staging of light and shadow forming a crucial dramatic element of the narrative.

“You’re coming closer again...”

Harsh spotlights shine through the passenger side of a car from outside onto the face of a man turned to the viewer. The light blinds him and simultaneously subjects him to a merciless visual analysis. The viewer comes dangerously close to the person seen, becomes an intruder, an unscrupulous paparazzi, and thus reveals a mode of reception shaped by the world of glamour, in which showing and hiding, seduction and refusal, define the high art of dealing with the media.

The man holds up a protecting hand that casts a shadow over almost his entire face. The eyes and facial features, which lend him individuality, can hardly be recognized; all that remains discernible is the surface of his outer appearance.

The use of slow motion in this scene, which is the only looped scene of the series, prolongs the moment of exposure until it becomes almost unbearable. The cautious movements of the man's upper body and of the camera make the shadow move to and fro, and one therefore suspects an event simultaneously taking place outside the car. At the same time, the visual restlessness of the filmic image thus created becomes a sign of inner tension that holds the protagonist prisoner in his position, until the entire image fades to black, marking the transition to the next episode.

“When my finger unexpectedly...”

The lowcut back décolletage of a woman in a black dress enters the scene. The hand of a man rests on her skin near the hemline. The woman moves in slow motion away from his touch. This act of distancing is intensified, on the one hand, by the slowmotion sequences running at different speeds, on the other—on the level of colour saturation—by the transition from a colour to a cooled-down blackandwhite recording. The spectator's gaze, in turn, continues to remain fixed, held spellbound to where the body was touched, until in the end, shortly before contact is lost, only the stretched fingertips seek to secure the last breath of the other.

The lost one withdraws without looking back, and the hand—at first still stretched—is lowered out of the field of vision. What remains is the viewer's fantasy, his/her imaginations vacillating between scenarios of protection and insistence, seizure and separation, and getting out of it only when the image fades to black.

“Notorious”

Taking up the black of the preceding episode, and thus establishing a connection between the narrative fragments, the third scene shows different pairs of legs from the hips down: Two pairs of male legs clad in suit pants in the background and the legs of a group of three males and one female in the foreground comprise the image detail, which due to the camera perspective appears a bit grotesque. The fragmentation of the figures and the camera's concentration on one part of the body open up a space for the viewers' own pro-

jections, especially since the composition of the outdoor scene gives rise to an emotional tension reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's aesthetic picture language. On the level of the images, this is reflected in the restless movements of the men's legs that directly contrast the almost motionless female legs held close together. The high slit of the woman's black dress lends the scene an unambiguous sexual connotation, with desire again appearing in the images through the visual excitement caused by the antiquing flicker of the recording. In this sense, the woman balancing on her stilettoheeled sandals is not only a symbol of the fragility of the person within the existing constellation of the group, but also becomes a metaphor of the fragile balance of the scene itself.

Hard, moving shadows, nervously twitching creases of the suit pants that counterpoint the smooth skin of the naked, almost motionless legs of the woman, stir the scene and give it a dramatic quality that is only resolved to a certain degree when the woman takes a step toward the camera in the fade.

Although individual elements, for example, the colour shades of the images, the repeated appearance of individual figures, or the recurring rooms suggest narrative coherence, the for the most part slowmotion scenes of the individual episodes do not establish a tightly woven plot, not even when, in the following sequence, the female protagonist can be recognized once again.

“In the play of the signifiers...”

The camera captures the legs of three at first static women standing next to each other on the edge of a path. The initial motionlessness, which the spectator reads as a scenography of expectation, then develops into the grotesque choreography of a shoe heel and a blade of grass that incites the entire group to start moving, with which the scene—possibly because the person expected has arrived—then comes to an end.

The scene filmed in the reduced colours of a night recording and the renewed appearance of already familiar figures prompt the viewer to construct a narrative sequence—based on his/her competence in film—by imagining a before and after as well as a coherent cinematographic space and projecting it onto the previous and following episodes.

“We are our own devils...”

Through a door opened to the outside, a stripe of light shines into the semidarkness of an interior space. The room's furnishing and colour tones refer to a tradition of interiors in painting, which charges the image with associations of the past. Merely a monitor set up next to the door brings the scene back to the present. In this ambiguity of historical spatial reference, a room staged in an historicizing fashion, and a modern-day device, a group of persons softly moves in slow motion along a brown wall in the background. The group's constellation, the roles of the individuals, remains ambiguous to the viewer. Soft light illuminates the entire bundle of different affects arising between the three men and one woman.

The atmosphere appears to theatrically shift the scene from reality to a picture, the meanings of which remain concealed to the viewer, especially since his/her observational, almost voyeuristic point of view suggests that the exclusion from the group amounts to the exclusion from a certain intimacy. The mysterious moment of this encounter is continued by one person leaving the group and pulling a curtain in the background—which the viewer initially perceived as a wall—to the side, making one suspect an illuminated room behind it that one cannot look into. The group gradually moves towards the curtain and thus appears in a new source of light, a spotlight directed at the curtain and now additionally illuminating the bodies before they disappear behind the curtain for good and the folds of the fabric are smoothed again, returning the scene to the notion of a static painting.

“The absent one...”

The occurrence appears trivial, the location is identical—it is only the sequence of the episodes that charges the scene with suspense. Three men wearing almost identical T-shirts, their uniform look suggesting a group of security guards, push the fabric, behind which the group of persons in the previous scene disappeared, aside. They stop at the threshold of the room, to then walk right towards the camera as dark silhouettes in the following sequence. The scene is faded out just before contact is made, and the viewer’s imagination is given the choice.

“And the stars sparkled...”

Within the entire video, the following four short episodes with the same protagonists form a coherent sequence that focuses on the face of a woman and the associated, emotionally charged interaction of the two persons at the centre of the scenes. While the viewer looks directly at the female protagonist through a slightly dirty windscreen of a car and precisely registers her flickers of emotion, she is additionally observed quite closely—from a viewing position within the image—by a man in the back of the car. The act of coming too close, of intruding into the intimate sphere of the other, which is revealed in the relation between the two figures, is mirrored on the level of the medium by the camera unsparingly recording the emotions of the female protagonist—until the fade relieves the viewer, as well.

“Blow up”

In the last episode, almost like in amateur recordings, which are partially out of focus and often overexposed or underexposed, the camera pans in uneven moves across a park, stops for a while, before being set in motion again. One sees tentlike pavilions standing next to each other, covered with red lengths of fabric and framed by black silhouettes of trees in the back and on the sides by columns topped with resplendent lions. The sunlight is refracted by the sloping roof of one of the pavilions, making it shimmer in a silvery colour. The reflected rays define the images, wandering along with each shot and coming between the viewer and the filmed landscape with a blinding effect.

The garden lies still and deserted in the midday sun, while the camera seems to be struggling for an optimal shot by constantly going through various perspectives and apertures or different degrees of image definition. Countless atmospheric states and moods of the garden are captured in this way. Then a movement in the background suddenly indicates the presence of a person dressed in green who—like an hallucination only vaguely discernible—dances around a red tent pole, until the figure finally blurs, becomes an impressionistic colour dot and entirely melts into the background of the image.

In the last shot preceding the fadeout, which structures the entire film as a rhythmicizing black element, the camera pans by the pavilions to the left to a tree, in front of which an unreadable poster announces a past or upcoming event. Then the first scene of the entire video, which is looped, commences again.

Getaway Inn—Rewind

The linear sequence of the episodes alternating with the black fades, the thematic elements of observing, looking and perceiving, and the recurring figures and image spaces, allow the spectator to repeatedly set different narrative strands in relation to each other without, however, arriving at a “solution”. The intertwining mode of reception is supported by the acoustic dimension of the video.

On the soundtrack, which runs independently of the video track, a fournote chord is repeated time and again during the four minutes, gradually becoming darker and lower. Like a bracket charged with tension, this sequence of tones spans the entire film and forges the various episodes to one piece. In a similar way as with the images, a tension is alluded to in the sequence of tones, the resolution of which is denied on both the

visual and acoustic levels. Sound is used quite differently in the work *wy o ming* (2002), in which the acoustic level lends the images a certain form of narration through the soundtrack of *Dances With Wolves* that accompanies the rapidly passing images of treetops and evokes all the connotations related to the western genre in one's memory. The stereotype of western music is inscribed in the open cinematographic images and determines the perspective from which they are interpreted.

This also takes place in a more subtle way on the second sound level of *Getaway Inn*, through which original sounds from the park and the surroundings, e.g., the cries of crows, the sound of a siren and footsteps on gravel, enter into the world of the images. The range of associations that this selected sound scenario gives rise to connects the sound to a certain cinematographic imagination related to the crime and thriller genres, whereby showing and hiding, i.e., in this case hearing what is not visible, again serve as an element to increase suspense. Although there is no visual counterpart to the footsteps on gravel, the crows or the siren, they are present in the image as an atmosphere, as a present absence. Something similar occurs in Astrid Nippoldt's video trilogy *Grutas* (2006), in which the strange park landscape in which Russian folk songs can be heard is interrupted by the voices of a child and a man. At least for anyone who has grown up in a German-speaking area these voices evoke cinematographic images of seduction embodying the notion of suspense par excellence: Gerd Fröbe playing the role of the paedophile sexual offender and business man Schrott in the German-Swiss coproduction *It Happened in Broad Daylight* (1958).

The in part gloomy and eerie mood of the images is intensified and dramatized in the artist's various works through the level of sound, which at times not only underlies the visual level but adds a further associative dimension. The interaction of soundtrack and video track creates a form of suspense that confronts the unsuspecting figures with the viewer's knowledge of their being observed. The hidden view penetrating the intimacy of the figures is intensified and charged by means of deceleration and slow motion. The cries of the crow, the footsteps on gravel, become auditory signs of an imminent threat that is alluded to but never revealed by the four-note chord; it always remains in an impending state.

Since soundtrack and video track are asynchronous, image and sound enter into a whirl of new constellations and reciprocal comments. When the loop is repeated, each shift in sound is accompanied by a shift in the arc of tension.

Astrid Nippoldt produced photographic works parallel to the video *Getaway Inn*, all based on the original video recordings. The artist shot photos of the video stills projected onto a wall, printed them out and placed them on black photo cardboard to again take pictures of them—this time with an analog reflex camera—on slide film using different exposure times as well as deliberate faulty exposures. The resulting prints accompanying the video work have lost the character of video stills through the anachronistic process of re-analagizing. Through the grain reinscribed in the print they regain the softness of photographic images. This shift of media takes place analogously in the video itself, which mutates to a black-and-white or amateur film, to a painterly or photographic image.

The self-referential reflection on media inherent in these images is a constant running through Astrid Nippoldt's work. In *The Serendip Stadium* (2003/04), for example, the filmed snowstorm transforms into the white noise of the video medium itself. In a similar manner, the photographs and the images taken from the video *Getaway Inn* always thematically address both the semantic level of content as well as the semiotic level of their media-based production and reception.

In this analog "re-imaging" of *Getaway Inn*, Nippoldt's manipulation of various exposures and points of focus, with the resulting change in the atmospheric quality, bears witness to an intensive examination of the processes of perception and the reflection of perception through media that intentionally employs slow motion, zoom, acoustic manipulation and blurriness as tools for generating meaning.