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The Trapdoor

The film, and film work in general, makes it possible to determine time, space and image, to place them in order, to give them rhythm, to manufacture relationships between iconic, thematic, historic, idiosyncratic and other contents; to enrich them with noises, sounds and language and to do everything that working with filmic material makes possible: to have them at your disposal.

In this specific case the power of disposition acquires a special quality because the film shots from a number of family archives, originally intended for personal use and later used as life documentation, have been montaged by Tim Sharp into a new filmic whole. The material that was originally carried personal meanings and subsequently had memories attached to them were, however, also subject to the irreversible course of all lifetimes, the unity of body and place, and are now restructured into the film *The Trapdoor*. The apparent naturalness with which the initial material generates new meaningful connections and strata of collateral meaning gets its explosiveness from the fact that the film sequences used are unquestionably part of subjectively experienced history and the expression of personal perception. Tim Sharp re-builds the memory work paradigmatically using the means of film-making in such a way as to allow us to participate in it. In the process the images themselves prove to be so independent that in *The Trapdoor* they achieve the validity and effect of collective memories.

We'll see

First of all I have to find a language that would make it possible to name my speechlessness. It was indisputable that something had happened to me and perhaps it might be possible to talk about what had happened while I watched Tim Sharp's *The Trapdoor*. It had gone almost unnoticed but the emotional afterimage of this film had created a familiarity with a series of scenes that allowed them to become, so to speak, my own memories. It is only with the question: what will *my* life have been? that thoughts become articulated which at the time marked my place on the periphery of a still uncertain life-mass of compacted time.

I tried to read the answer to this question from the film images and the last sequence of the film seemed to me to be particularly appropriate. It leaves the viewer behind, standing on an empty station platform; a train has arrived and departed again. Nothing that could give our hopes and yearnings trajectory is left over, no-one, only landscape and technical structures. A further image from the repertoire of the film just seen, a woman in a landscape looking off into the distance, lost in herself, slips itself into the foreground. It is a scene full of visual poetry and quietness in which time is stretched into the present. We see this woman from

some distance away, she becomes a compositional element in a densely atmospheric picture that, little by little, floating in suspended time, allows one to realise that there is someone else present, the invisible person behind the camera. It is his gaze we follow, he who wants to capture the pictures, who selects the framing and who is, even now, inscribing future meaning into the scenes of a stored lifetime. It is a gaze that sees more, that knows about atmospheres and thoughts, that knows a before and an after and so, just as the technical eye of the camera registers a section of the landscape, the strip of film depicts an excerpt of lived time. The gaze is offered more than it can see.

The typical-for-the-time fashion, for example, but also the signs of the times that at the time was the symbol of the new and greater era, a time when the future was already calculated at a thousand years. The red flags with the swastika, moving in a light summer breeze, that also stroked the hair of the bride and groom, a caress for the world that appeared to there only for young lovers; back then, when the flower-decorated wedding carriage was captured by the camera lens. The ignored triviality, the flag-decked side street that only comes into the picture accidentally, for a fleeting moment, something the eye was blind to at the time, shows us now, looking back, the casual way people can be made into the objects of history. It goes beyond a subjective life story and is omnipresent, like the gaze of the camera.

Letter by letter, frame by frame

Surprisingly the suggestive power of this film by Tim Sharp approaches that of great feature films because it is under the spell of filmic illusion that we gradually re-discover ourselves changed and in a state in which making sure of yourself also demands vivid language initially. The sum total of life of this compacted time seems to usher in a balancing, considering-your-own-life perspective. It meshes what was seen with our own disposition making it possible to provide our own history with images into which we inscribe ourselves as time passes, extending our own lifetimes into others' pasts.

Tim Sharp enables us to take part in the lifetime of others by filmic means that create the illusion we are participating subjects of these (hi)stories. He stimulates our willingness to experience these structured memory works as subjects through projections and with the help of fictional additions to the narratives. The film seduces with its technical and conceptual maturity but at the same times it leads along a pathway marked by the sites of memory work, showing that that is a creative process, that it has a purpose even when—as with the moments of synchronicity between a lifetime and the exposure of the film material—it goes unrecognised. The Trapdoor skilfully stages the mechanism of non-recognition as a pre-condition enabling us to live history from the standpoint of subjective experience and to see it as a totality. In the process the memory work is carried out in the sphere of existentially

influenced self-corroboration where the linguistic referents are the experiential or reflective 'I' and its generalised form. Language itself, the material expression of what is accessed through memory offers, for example, psychoanalysis insertion points and is taken literally in the process. Because of this an illuminating analogy can be proposed in relation to Tim Sharp's film: "letter for letter; frame by fame". Here psychoanalysis serves only as a model on which it can be shown that the process of remembering and the past itself are not ordained and that it is only through repetition and re-working that they become consistent although as far as the materiality of the film material is concerned—and the worlds visibly contained therein—it might appear to be different.

In Tim Sharp's film repetition becomes an instrument of compositing a film and an analytical instrument that, on one the one hand, reproduces the natural process of frequent returns to imprinted scenes of the past and on the other also shows that meanings are variable quantities receiving their value from preceding and succeeding materials. Thus the scene where a young boy drags a wooden board on which "Ende" is written clearly belongs to a sequence that would have been the staged ending to a holiday film. But it nevertheless indicates much more. Somewhere in the middle of Tim Sharp's film there is also a change of generation, 'the end' for this young life is a beginning that is accentuated by yet another formal decision.

A hard cut places two almost identical scenes that apparently lie decades apart together. It is the same place, a stairway winds its way upwards with a young man headed for the top, once in black and white and continued with a colour film from a later production. Looking at the material again I find that memory has deceived me, the empirical reality that appears frame for frame before my eyes imparts added meaning to all of this. The visual material of Tim Sharp's film is compressed, moved and put together elsewhere. Sites of memory combined like this are sequences as, for example, the flag-decorated bridges over the Salzach show - swastika flags (black and white) and the Austrian state flag, red-white-red, in colour. All of this could still be interpreted as a filmic formulation of memory work within a framework of personal experience were not for a series of subtle formal decisions that place the film, the medium itself, in the position of the narrator.

"Polyphonic" seeing

The world that has remained visible is created before our eyes according to the technical possibilities and means available at the time. At any given point in time the film material available, the lenses and camera skills inscribe themselves into the physical constitution of the material. That is a relatively straightforward insight, but Tim Sharp makes use of the possibilities that this opens up as a means of expression that has a wider significance than the

material inherently has. He avoids with mastery all the imperatives that in many experimental films remind us that it is a film that we are viewing, that it is frames of film montaged together that produce the illusion of movement, have rhythm and thus structure our experience of time, that establish causalities by editing, sequencing etc.

The Trapdoor imparts the enjoyment of “polyphonic” seeing. It is a polyphony that initially appears to be intoned by the diversity of the material used but which, little by little, proves to be a polyphonic narrative, a family story in which the film thoughts that one can see make themselves audible.

This exhilarating experience can be compared to knowledge that through sublimation becomes pleasure, the insight that language was always prior, that we had first to arduously learn it and then, with its help, have to understand that we are being talked by it. The dedication to this narrative, in our case filmically structured life stories, give us a piece of sovereignty back again. It creates the distance required so that we can grasp, on the one hand, our own history as a subject—with all its existentially experienceable consequences of time that is irretrievable past as well as its irrevocable end—and, on the other, to be able to examine ourselves as objects of a history that “will have spoken” us, in which narratives are created about us. In the process life’s verities and historical truth, historicity and responsibility become interlaced.

Looked at in this way, Tim Sharp’s film also contains a dimension of existential ethics. Superficially this can be tied to questions of responsibility during and after the National Socialist regime. Even if everything began in great fun with the trapdoor game (as it appears at the beginning of Tim Sharp’s filmically-montaged memory piece), the actor’s amusing disguise and the pleasure of being afraid heightened to childlike ecstasy, surrendering to shrieking fright comparable to the fear of the crocodile that Punch will chase away... Even when it began with that, looking back what remained from that love of fear was often only the fear and its transformation into guilt. While much can only be known retrospectively, the guilt-removal construction or the relativisation of guilt is questionable and Tim Sharp shows that with the material used in the film. He finds correspondences for the incidental as the form in which history occurs in the present and he finds correspondences for subsequent meaning-endowing effects with which we evolve the past from our present.

IT shows

And this is how the workings of power are shown at the level of camera handling, the camera work and the choice of subject which, in the case of National Socialist rule, was manifested in numerous picture prohibitions. This can be exemplified with the scene in which the camera

follows a person and then, when a soldier accidentally comes into the field of view, it falters. The camera is torn away, just a short jerk, but it is nevertheless sufficient to show awareness in all the sequences from that era, it makes clear that responsibility was already possible and necessary during those “great times”. Through this jerk everything from this period that was not to be seen because depiction had been prohibited or because wartime events and life circumstances simply made amateur filming impossible becomes, mentally, part of Tim Sharp’s film. It is part of the intelligence of this film that it doesn’t present, doesn’t illustrate but rather that IT is shown in the material and its use. This is how filmic illusion is depicted and what is manifested in the filmic work itself.

It is not by chance that the terms that describe the psychological work of processing latent content come from psychoanalysis such as displacement, disassociation, repetition, reversal etc. and the Freudian concept of depiction which can also refer to the design of this film. Thus, although we see what was able to be represented according to the rules of those with political power at the time and what was able to be depicted of individual desires, through his work Tim Sharp conveys some of the latent content that defines his own wishes. He does not follow the linear course of time, his narrative method is “modern”, multi-voiced and determined by a high level of sensitivity for the material itself. He proceeds like someone who has given up trying to put a puzzle together completely but who nevertheless arranges pieces and fits them together, daring to propose drafts and in the process enticing us into accepting some things as important and perhaps deflecting our attention away from others, grabbing us by our predilections and prejudices only to release us into a speechlessness in which we then have to drip the inks of our own thought and feelings.

The “secondary processing” of the exposed remainders of the bygone days of unknown people makes this film into a complex parable in which we disclose ourselves to ourselves, in which we are less concerned with exploring the life circumstances of others and more with discovering our own lives. For short moments comprehension flashes across the mind, it is the filmmaker himself who has his hand on the lever that will open the trapdoor, the solution is clearly written above it forming the prelude: *The Trapdoor*.