

splace

Transparent, opaque and pastel colours
Nuances in Betty Leirner's films

The camera races rapidly along the sharp scenery so that only abstract structures appear to the sound of the American traditional song "Children go where I send thee".

Delicately the camera moves over the rocky desert landscape- fold mountains somewhere in the Near East- as words fade in and out of the screen: "zero" with its equivalents in Arab, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Japanese. Placed above each other just like in the old polyglots (multilingual dictionaries), they incite to comparison, but the translated words show few similarities. More polyglot entries follow: "time", "language", "translator" and confirm the impression that we are approaching the subjects of translation and communication. The camera slides reaching a grand panorama of the open valley when suddenly, we discover an oriental.

A tourist, in fact, as more of them appear on the screen equipped with camera and sun caps and accompanied by a tourist guide who appears to be talking to the group in a short untranslated scene. The word "question" with its translations appears. The badges on the travelers' sun caps with the Japanese and Israeli flags confirm that we are in the Negev desert in Israel. Not far from our group, a gray and a white pigeon are strutting over a thirsty-looking wall. Fade to white. These are the first scenes of Betty Leirner's film *Political Mistakes* (1998).

At a first glance, this is a subtle play consisting of observations, irritations and delayed information. The Brazilian photographer, poet and video artist Betty Leirner has been living in Germany for years, but most of all she likes travelling in order to experience the feeling of being outside her known self - expressed throughout her entire work.

Since 1994 she has produced more than thirty videopoems, some of them in Japan, others in Portugal, Brazil, France and Germany. Much like her multilingual books, multiple language is spoken simultaneously in her films. However, she does not simply deal with the topic of translation. The syncretism of languages is a *modus vivendi*, an harmonious togetherness of several languages as practised by the author in her everyday life. The esthetics of the homeless we could say, but since it happens without complaint because the author has accepted her self-chosen homelessness and is obviously enjoying it, we should rather call it a cosmopolitan attitude. A cosmopolitan is a world citizen, not necessarily a traveller, but someone that does not define his home by means of nationalities.

One of Betty Leirner's landscapes are the languages. Spoken text is a rarity, comments are seldom, written words and phrases appear frequently. Picture and text are closely related to each other. The overlaying of words transform the pictures into layers of processable material. The actual physical Israel, that is, the space independent from the film, and the space modified by writing, music and cuts (the Israel of *Political Mistakes*) are osmotically related by the personality of the author through a fine, always perceivable membrane. Leirner's film techniques are seeking for the poetic space in which emotional atmosphere and materiality are

intentionally created, where things are freed from the burden of being witnesses and actual documents. We realize that we are in fact dealing with conceivable suggestions and ideas: we could say- dealing with film or video essays.

The writings are never diegetic- e.g. narrative, but they enable associations connected with the subjects. When in an unobtrusive, effortless panorama over the rocky landscape of Mitzpeh Ramon the words "price", "root" and "rifle" are faded in, the author tries to find the historical dimension behind that picture. The linguistic/typographical means reveal archeological layers lying underneath the ones that are captured by the camera. The present can be hence understood as a stage of an historical process, and the seemingly fixed as something that can be modified. A strictly linear, chronological succession is replaced by a spatial representation of history in which we simultaneously perceive what has already happened. Even those elements that haven't manifested themselves historically, the unrealized projects, are installed into the visual space: "pain" and "blame". Hence the picture as such becomes hypothetical- a method stemming from the best essayistic traditions.

Another landscape of Betty Leirner is music. The soundtrack of her videos are painstakingly sought after. The original sounds are always removed, except in a few selected scenes. The pictures are left in a silence that consists mainly of the absence of synchronised events, therefore strictly opposed to the illusions created by journalistic or documentary techniques. The music not only provides an emotional coloration of the visual scene: lyrics, sentences or individual words are mostly selected due to their relation to the pictures.

After this initial sequence we experience" three musical compositions in "Political Mistakes that mark the following visual sequences, separated by white fade-outs. A Sufi lament is sung with an emotional deep voice while at the square in front of the wailing wall Japanese, Jews and an Arab stare over the roofs, over bizarre TV antennas, security sensors and search-lights; in the centre of everything, the waving flag of Israel and the cuppola of the Holy Mosque. Next comes an elegiac Jewish prayer ("Kaddish") accompanied by shockingly intimate close-ups of women praying and weeping directly in front of the wailing wall, the remainders of the ancient Jewish Temple. Finally, at the sound of rhythmic Arab music, nomad riders appear on the sand canyons proudly galloping towards the camera on their powerful horses.

What is unusual in this film, is that it is in some way held together by its etymological structure, by processing a paradigm of synonyms in which translation has something to do with understanding, comparison with compensation, convention with reconciliation- but all this is only potentially happening.

In fact, Betty Leirner is a linguistic artist who loves to play with words and sounds, and who can handle them virtuously beyond linguistic borders. At the end of the film, after a close-up of an open, long look into the camera, we glance at clear, bright blue water, transparent enough to discover a fish dancing between the stones. Only this kind of openness and transparency could help the hopelessly entangled situation in the Near East as transparency stands for comprehensibility and visibility (of intentions). But, can the collective transparency be trusted? The author seems to oppose to an overly optimistic evaluation in the epilogue: in the clear blue waters of a huge aquarium, the children of an Israeli Orthodox family stare at the swimming sharks.

Another of Betty Leirner's topics is the subject of transparency. In her objectual, photographic and filmed work she repeatedly uses transparent material, e.g. glass, water, light. In Japanese

for beginners (Red Sea, 1998) transparent medusas are pumping through the sunny, bright blue water while we listen to the smooth sentences of a fairy tale in Japanese (Urashima Taro). The contracting bodies of the jelly-fish are hovering as bright, bizarrely shaped light phenomena through the space, through a medium that, being transparent itself, takes the colour of the sky.

In *Unphotographable* (Hamburg 1996) two male hands turn and caress a small natural ice sculpture in an iced landscape. A romantic song is dragging nicely and lazily along as the winter light is refracted in the ice object: *unphotographable*.

At the end of *Caution, chain* (Lisboa, 1999) four hands are juggling transparent spheres that are reflecting the entire surroundings. In *Voz interior* (Pantanal, 1997), a ride into the natural landscapes of Brazil, apart from crocodiles, cattle herds and wild horses jumping into the river, fish in oscillating glass clear water reappear: a glistening dreamy vision of over-abundant nature, of a dense school of large pikes gathering near the riversides. This transparency might remind us of a cosmic community, but Betty Leirner rather seems to pursue the unlimited view, the intensification of visual perception and the re-definition of space. Abandoning colour and delimited shapes that otherwise define and therefore confine everything in our daily lives, Betty Leirner has developed the desire to show what is still unseized, what is not still yet clearly defined.

Emptiness, however, is not only found in the absence of synchronic sound events or in the frequently used fade-out as a metaphor to the absence of pictures. In fact, the dematerialisation of transparency is never complete: the translucent material slightly changes in tone and enables part of the surroundings to shine through as a mere volatile idea.

Betty Leirner loves these subdued substances, rather light blue, beige and pastel, those delicate tones between the defined basic colours. Maybe this could be a reason for her special inclination towards Japan, a traditional country of intermediate tones, a world that appreciates volatile, non-persistent apparitions, where the walls between contrasting areas are as thin as paper.

Poetry is born out of the fragile, the delicate, the undefinable.

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translation: Holger Hermansen and Damien Lynch