

The Ecological Environment of this Film

It does not at all feel natural to treat this film within a predetermined genre or context. But if we made an attempt anyhow, we could say that the film intervenes in what is sometimes called classical film theory based on the ontological paradigm where formalistic theories, such as those of Sergej Eisenstein, are contrasted with theories oriented towards questions of realism, such as those of André Bazin for example.

The form of this film is too complicated to regard it merely as a realistic, let's say ethnographical film, and I do not see any effort to do pansori tradition justice. While apparently the montage is neither constructed along a linear narrative with a starting point, nor following a predetermined editing principle, it should not be reduced to a representation of pansori's grammar or an unconventional breach of style, even though such a reading would be possible. The distance and relation to the filmed objects vary at all times. In close-ups, medium shots, as well as location and milieu shots it is uncertain which object the camera is focusing on. The camera oscillates between static examinations as seen from a tripod, a groping registration with a shaky hand-held camera and occasionally a more or less cinematic perspective. Switching between a worm's- and a bird's-eye view a warped image is rendered. But I think that if one insists, that this is an ethnographic film, the whole assemblage of the filmmaker, the camera and editing program, as well as the changing environments, climates and objects must be considered co-actors and informants. One thing is certain: The composition of the film is not controlled by the dominating colonial and postcolonial meta-narratives regarding the "problem of the Other". It simply insists on a different, more contingent and changing view.

Approaching the film from a formalistic tradition instead, it would be tempting to regard the narrative structure with its fragmentary composition as fractured. However, this would be misleading, particularly since nothing indicates that there had been only one narrative structure that was then broken up in order to constitute this film. Rather, the impression is created that if you want you can easily find an infinite number of narratives that have been fragmented and then put together. Even though it is always ambiguous what the object of the camera is, I never doubt for a second that what the camera depicts actually does exist, even if this film was not made. And I do not believe that this experience should be reduced to an illusive reality effect. In order to make this speculation meaningful, we might need to understand the camera and its context – the entire ecology – as something more than just a reproductive technology. The perspective of the classic film theory is not productive because of its focus on the question of the relation between film and reality. This perspective is of course important when we are dealing with the ethics of representation, with the question: who has the right to represent how and why etcetera? However, this perspective excludes another aspect that I believe is more important for this film: the relation between film, thoughts and affects.

Montage as an Intelligent Machine

Jean Epstein has pointed out that film has its own form of intelligence. Already in

the 1920s he emphasized the ability of film to exceed the spectator's individuality and established self-image. For him, the most peculiar characteristics of the cinematographic eye was its capacity to escape "the tyrannical egocentrism in our personal vision [...] The lens is itself!"¹ One way to understand this statement today, without being anthropocentric or a technological determinist, is simply to regard the camera as a prosthesis that one does not control properly. There might be a good reason to be reminded of Epstein here, since he thinks that different types of images activate different subjectifying processes. This is something one really feels exposed to in Marhöfer's film, maybe because the established ways in which we are subjectified through different image types become such uncertain experiences. The camera approaches a bird in the same way as it approaches a mountain or a human being, which possibly contradicts generally accepted customs of how for example we appreciate suspense and mystique in relation to the depicted objects. The effect of a close-up, a longdistance shot or a pan, a hand-held camera appears anything other than obvious. Also the montage in Marhöfer's film evokes what Epstein says about the lens. With Epstein in mind we could say that the most peculiar characteristic of the montage is its capacity to escape the tyrannical egocentrism of our traditional urge to narrate and represent. In short, a central part of Marhöfer's film is about how the montage and what is actually filmed in which way, affects individuation.

Pleasure and the Observer as Connectors

To be confronted with this aspect of the film involves enjoyment. While traditionally sublime pleasure is regarded a way how reason reconfirms its place in the world, the pleasure of watching the film arises from the ability to handle contradictory optical and audible relationships. The viewer senses connections, yet abstains from the impulse to demand coherence, and thereby a safe place from where to observe the world. This experience is related to what we might call the logic of the sublime; of getting a better understanding of myself and my site-specific knowledge through the confrontation with something frightening, un controllable or incomprehensible. Maybe one could say that another kind of self-awareness appeared, demanding coherence the most threatening one. I think the entire composition of the film brought about this emotional effect, which forces me to question all my conventional postcolonial understandings and premature conclusions about what it means to travel today as a European artist to a country such as South Korea with a film camera to deal with a tradition like pansori.

The material is filmed on 16 millimeter film, developed and digitized to be edited on an intelligent machine, the computer. A type of machine that is associated with a democratization of the access to knowledge; as well as with advanced ways of governing and regulating lives through different types of protocol. That is to say, the totalizing governing organs guide the technical and political formation of everything, from computer networks to biological systems. Today of course, there is not only the optical gaze that is employed to supervise and to regulate the possibilities of our bodies, but also computers, log files, databases and cell phones. They create a new form of visibility beyond the human eye. Sometimes this new area is called panspectron, within which broad spectra of analogous signals can be digitized, and thereby made visible in a much more extensive way than before.

Based on the encounter with Marhöfer's film, we could formulate the following

methodological point of departure that can be applied to film in general: the greatest quality of film today is the fact that we instantly treat it as a “mobile archive”. We carry it along with us, we rearrange sequences, we turn off the sound. We remember earlier versions and we not only recombine the internal material of the film, but also its external context, that is to say the environment for the viewing, the adaptation of the film as material. We exist in-between the film and its environment. To think with the film has not involved an uncovering or analytical practice. Nor has it implicated a fictionalization of the world outside the film. Perhaps the emerging practice should rather be understood as a sort of constructive speculation about our present reality.

At the same time, temporary dislocation lies at the core of our presence. This schizophrenia of the presence makes it hard to handle the fact that we cannot be in place and time. To me, it is as if the film suggests a way to “think with” this situation, rather than taking a step back to an illusionary safe space to mourn this loss. Therefore, there is no point in longing for a meta-narrative or an external reference that can make sense of everything.

Epistemological Trouble

Theoreticians of science such as Isabelle Stengers, and postcolonial thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak have repeatedly argued that researchers within the natural sciences, humanities and social sciences are affected by their object of study, how knowledge is inscribed in different types of power structures, and how the researcher him-/herself is always affected by his/her own practice. To them, the point is not to abandon science as a consequence, nor to regard it in terms of a cultural relativism that lacks objective validity. The problem is not the positive statements of science, but rather its claim of universality; when science presents itself as objectively true and stigmatizes all other discourses as irrational and superstitious, based solely on faith. Or, as Isabelle Stengers puts it, it is a question of not letting science mobilize into a war machine that is only able to make positive statements about the world by the destruction of all other discourses.

There is no reason to reject this or that scientific discipline of research. It is however problematic to believe that the truth about human nature is to be found in, for example, the genome or sociological analysis. Some sort of transcendental critique that determines the limits of reason is necessary to prevent certain ideas about rationality from denouncing practices that are based on different claims and expressions.

Even though it is risky to compare scientific meta-narratives with conventions that govern our understanding of cinematic narration, Elke Marhöfer’s film actually appears to be nothing less than an attempt to deal with this problem. It is approached not only by letting the camera and the editing operations be influenced by an infinite number of external factors, but also by letting the viewer think it through with the help of the sequences she has chosen for the film. This has possibly to do with the fact that the form of the film appears to be its own claim. Thus, it becomes something far removed from an illustration of both an established theory about film, and a theory about the Other.

Within anthropology the faith in Culture with a capital C is long gone and with

that the option to study life from a secure, scientific distance has vanished too. Yet, probably more common today is the idea that “scientific research” is naturally created and constructed in a situation where communication and mutual influence between the researching subject and the object of research is self-evident, as is the attitude that every claim regarding truth must be essentially polemical and temporary. The same loss of faith we also find, albeit to a lesser degree, in popular conceptions of the relationship between documentary filmmakers and their objects. This has not brought about the death of these disciplines, but amongst those who once really believed in anthropology’s and the documentary film’s abilities to neutrally represent the world, we will today surely find those who, in the worst case, lead a life of total hopelessness, as well as people who think this has made the field become even more “scientific”. In some cases they are more or less stuck in the “linguistic turn”, and have allowed it to dictate their view of how science and documentary film should relate to their respective topic. A similar development can be observed regarding the so-called ethnographic turn within art and the critical discussion following exhibitions such as *Primitivism* at MoMA in New York in 1984, and *Magiciens de la Terre* at Pompidou in Paris in 1989.

Remarkably, the encounter with Elke Marhöfer’s film evokes none of these affective reactions concerning representation. Certainly, you can ask questions about misrepresentation or the entitlement to cinematically gather and use material you do not own the rights to. But if you allow such questions to rule your encounter with the film, you will probably leave it to an external judge to determine the meaning of the film. The film’s passion simply seems to call for another kind of ethics that neither rejects nor affirms an external judge. Yet, it impels the viewer to question what and how he/she/it really sees, hears and feels, and above all, from where. Since just as it is unclear what the film actually represents, the same goes for what the filmmaker and the viewer represent.

The film simply cannot be understood within this thinking that establishes a dialogue between having or losing faith, and the ability to represent a truth. This kind of thinking has nurtured the distinction between the fictitious and the documentary, and thus also promoted notions of docu-fiction and the fictional status of everything. Therefore, one could even say that Marhöfer’s film sets up a contract with the viewer that actually occurs beyond, above, during or indeed before the conflicts and problems this way of thinking about cinematic representation has caused. Since this film does not allow itself to be narrowed to neither fiction, documentary nor docu-fiction (including its self-mirroring version, the film essay), maybe we should view it the context of all the panspectric and panoptic operations, that aim to inform state and private interests? These activities are of course based on specific ideas about knowledge, which also requires a personal belief and interest. And even if the making of documentary films as a discipline and a passion, just as an academic field such as anthropology, is likely to play a relatively small part among these activities, I would still suggest that the composition of Marhöfer’s film establishes another kind of faith by eluding the dominant ways of determining knowledge and ignorance.

The Life of Filmmaking

During the last 15 years, the concept of “life” had a pronounced return within art as well as within philosophy. We have seen it both in aspects of what is sometimes

called the biopolitical, new vitalism, and the concept of images and objects as living things. In brief, this interest can be regarded a turn away from an increasingly language-oriented perspective that, within the humanities, can be defined as the linguistic turn, and within art, for the sake of simplicity, can be called the breakthrough of conceptual art. The turn towards life consequently could be summarized, in part, as a turn away from language, towards the biological, the real and the material. At the same time it is no longer possible to make a discriminatory distinction between “the civilized” as representatives of knowledge, and “primitives” as representatives of faith. The power-knowledge regimes operating and controlling life today are working on what some might call a pre-representational, neuro-political or affective level.

What has Marhöfer’s film about pansori to do with this? On the one hand, it appears to approach the phenomenon almost ethnographically. On the other hand, it obviously does not seek to cinematically represent pansori culture. From this perspective you can look at it as a way to liberate life from ethnic, family and individualizing normalization, always based on myths about purity, native country etcetera. The theoretical debates about the biopolitical used to take nazism and fascism as their starting point, however today it is equally important to consider all the ways in which life is regulated by other forces: biochemistry, genetics, neuroscience, genetic engineering, etcetera – all of these fields have changed our basic understanding of the meaning of “life”, along with the way how governments and companies try to handle and restrict this. Companies like Google and Facebook develop increasingly sophisticated techniques for identification and control, while in political decisions profitability analyses tend to receive superior status.

Along with the intensified interest in life as a category, the expansion of an economic thinking regarding all forms of human and nonhuman life has accelerated. These are probably the largest ideological displacements to take place simultaneously. In light of this development, a work that takes a complex phenomenon such as contemporary pansori culture as its starting point, has to consider questions regarding exoticism and the politics of identity, as well as how the form of the film relates to the rationality we can simply call “economics”. Marhöfer’s film does neither analyze, explain, reveal, nor does it describe the pansori tradition in terms of a classical documentary. Instead, the filmmaker appears to be organizing “relationships” with the help of the camera and editing tools, both regarding the pansori tradition, the places she films, and regarding the conventions of filmmaking.

It has been pointed out repeatedly that in *Man with a Movie Camera* from 1929 Dziga Vertov bases his montage technique on the new industrial society in an attempt to create an authentic, international film language – an absolute cinematography. Film theorist Trond Lundemo suggested, for example, that Vertov’s film explores the biopolitical aspects of the compound of man and machine. I believe that, if we read Marhöfer’s montage in the context of current relations of production we have to consider both Fordist and post-Fordist conditions of production, which dominate the world today, however we also have to consider new methods to monitor and classify life by means of supervision, research, and by identifying the politics of cultural protectionism.

In any case, this is one of the effects of the uncertainty regarding whether there is

any life behind the camera or not. Marhöfer's film often seems to be disconnected from a subjective feeling or perception. It might be possible to divide the sensual and affective experience of the film into a subjective element and an element, not contingent on a subject who made or watches the film: something like a description of affects and percepts that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are referring to in *What is Philosophy?*. Could one even talk about a montage of affects and percepts?

The deconstruction and disavowal of all kinds of sociological variables have been intensely debated over the last forty years or so. Gender, sexuality, race, class – it has become common knowledge how to undo and tear down all these categories. However, despite all the poststructuralist critique of humanism as an ideology, even the most radical social constructivist still hesitates when it comes to the centrality of the human. In art, we see a similarly easy way to avoid this issue. When, for example, creative processes are outsourced or decentralized from the individual artist, the end product still bears the artist's name. It might not be enough, however, to be pleased by this dialectical logic: when (hu)man dies, he/she returns as a brand. What would it mean to make and watch a film from a postanthropocentric vantage point? To be able to answer such questions, we might have to come up with all the possible support systems that make filmmaking and watching possible. Both the camera as well as the screen, and the artist as well as the spectator are indeed dependant on an infinite number of human and non-human relations. In short, modes of relations with human and non-human others are fundamental for the existence of the film. I would propose that one aspect of various sequences in Marhöfer's film could be understood as an attempt to acknowledge this web of relations, and to reconsider the relations with these others, allowing them to influence the form of the film. But humans, animals, plants, climates, myths, are not only returned to the centre of attention. This centre does not really exist anymore, at least not if we think about it as one linear narrative, drama or canon. If this film is also a portrait of the filmmaker, this filmmaker does not appear as an oppositional independent mind, telling us a story about the world. Rather, it is an image of a filmmaker that engages in a present that is moving at many different speeds, transforming the film negative in the process of mapping different relationships that keep the filmmaking alive. The relationship between the filmmaker and the world therefore cannot be oppositional. If capitalism today is making money out of living things, Elke Marhöfer makes art that invites the spectator to think and engage with the present to find out about new relations with "life after man".

¹ L'objectif lui-meme (1926), in "Écrits sur le cinéma", 1921–1953: édition chronologique en deux volumes. Paris: Seghers, 1974–1975. Tome 1, p. 129.