

iText 6: The Last Picture Show**iTexts 1 to 6 are a compilation of related texts accompanying the exhibition iPod Killed the Videostar**

The contemplation of live versus digital performer identity has proven a rich ground for artists to explore in recent years using increasingly cheap digital technologies. In their work, the formal aspects of the moving image, its construction and manufacture have been tied up in the content and thematic issues of the works.

However, another group or filmmakers have chosen to make use of the opportunities afforded by these technologies to make films that engage directly with the discourses of (dominant) cinema. In a sense, they have not made 'visual art' works in which the nature of the moving image is considered, but instead made video or film works at face value, directly engaging with the languages that mainstream or 'art house' cinema has evolved.

A striking example of this is the work 'City of Light' ('Stadt des Lichts') by Mario Mentrup and Volker Sattel. The film highlights the potential of new digital technologies: it is literally a no-budget hour-long narrative film made on location in and around Berlin.

Ostensibly a sci-fi western it deals with the experience of a group of stragglers negotiating their way through a landscape left by a post-urban meltdown. The work draws on the lyrical traditions of European cinema, using found landscape, found footage and the pro bono performances of a number of the filmmakers' mates to weave its tale.

Arguably, the film could only ever have come out of the unusual economics of Berlin. This is a work made without the involvement of an industry. Instead, the filmmakers, having access to the necessary technologies, shot their work on location in and around Berlin with a cast of friends that includes the likes of Peaches and Angie Reed. And, certainly, the specific Berlinish nature of the work is referenced in the film itself: the title taking its name from the strap line historically applied to the city. But, it does not stop here, the action and its depiction owes a lot to the post-modern mise en scene and performance

styles strongly associated with German theatre traditions such as the work of the Berlin Volksbuhne.

The pop video works that came out of Germany in the 1980's span the broad range of options from trashy pop through to serious attempts to elevate the pop video to a 'serious' art form. In much the same way that German art rock groups and musicians sought to use the basic structure of the pop band as a means of more serious musical exploration, so too did their video works often seek to edify from a popular position rather than talk down to a mass audience.

In the last decade, the revision of musical forms such as hip-hop has readily lauded the work of musicians working in crossovers that embrace a hip-hop tradition. Again, Berlin and its expatriate Canadian community have featured large in this. But it's worth remembering that, as early as the 1980's (when the distinctions between art rock and hip-hop were more fiercely delineated in the music press) German artists such as Holger Hiller were engaged in experimental work that sought to find the points of connection between hip-hop and twentieth century western composers' practice. Furthermore, these experiments were not only confined to music, but produced experimental video works too.

'City of Lights' not only connects with the visual languages coming out of German attempts in the 1980s to find a new, more experimental language for the pop video, but it shares a longer German tradition of engagement with American popular cultures whilst being simultaneously aligned to political positions that present a headache for the formal American power structures.

Perhaps it is not the film's connection with German pop video visual languages that is most notable but instead its identification with German cinema and preceding stage traditions. 'City of Lights' uses a visual language that has a strong resonance relating to both.

The film's fascination with the form of the western is certainly reminiscent of the work of German neue welle filmmakers of the 1970s. There is also a strong, oblique sense of Wim Wender's fascination with the American west. In turn, this earlier cinematic fascination with

the frontier land of America was itself the follow-up to an almost obsessive interest in the evolving mythology of America that gripped Weimar Germany. Perhaps best known through the works of Brecht and Weil, the urban jungles of the New World were a powerful setting for the work of numerous heavyweight Weimar creatives. For them, as in this film, the setting of the American west is actually an allegorical statement about the self; 'City of lights' as the title indicates, is entirely about Berlin, despite the cowboys and showgirls.

Urban collapse and social injustice, a strident focus of Weimar works, reappear here.

And, they also appear in another work coming from the complete cultural counterpoint. One of the features of "City of Lights" is that it highlights the way in which new technologies have contributed to a scenario in which a narrative film can be made in the absence of real financial resources. By contrast, Burke Robert's short film, "Handicap City" is notable that it managed to get made at all because of its production in a context namely one in which money, and who controls the money, controls what gets made.

Burke Roberts' "Handicap City" was made within the heart of the Hollywood machine. Technically, it is a short film made by one of the numerous production companies reliant on the financial whims of the American film industry and its acolytes. The whims with which these economic forces make their investment choices is basically the back story to "Handicap City". It is a familiar one; the struggle of a director to complete a cinematic work by whatever means necessary.

"Handicap City" was not made as visual art. Its provenance is clearly from within the film industry. Certainly, it is an independent production; non-commercial by Hollywood standards. But it is most definitely not the product of a subsidized fine art context in which various types of European art film works are made.

There is no obscurism in this work. American filmmakers often have to balance their more poetic and expressionistic tendencies against a strong framework for measuring film quality against a classic Hollywood (as opposed to fine art space) language. This is very much

evident in this work. Though constructing a poetic narrative it carefully does so on two levels: the populist and the more intellectual.

To elitist European visual arts audiences, this may appear a shame, a lost opportunity to abandon the demands of the mass audience in favour of a more personal expressionistic language. Perhaps they forget that this two-level structure was a common feature of Renaissance drama. Aligning oneself with 'high art' and belittling the popular can sometimes be as ignorant as the most crass outpouring of the populist press or mass entertainment machine. And subsidized snobbery may be a luxury unavailable to those working in rigid industrial confines.

Here, as in the works of Shakespearean drama, or its film noir reworking, a narrative unfolds in which the audience can opt in at a level that makes a relevant meaning suited to its own needs. Some may not get the reference to Vesuvius and Pompeii in the set-up, but they would be fairly likely, especially if local, to understand the allegory to Los Angeles and its uneasy relationship with the San Andreas Fault.

Similarly, the audience may or may not realize the art direction's source as actually being urban graffiti rather than the post-Goth stylings of Tim Burton. Not surprisingly, the film has become something of a cult movie for young American fans of all things Goth. Thus, there is a certain irony given the date of its production- and the actual source of the visuals: the work arises from the products of the other gang; the urban graffiti-producing hip-hop kids.

For this alone, the film is a fascinating exercise. It was filmed on colour stock on sets and using actors, all meticulously painted in greyscale shades that give the film tones of film noir. This is not the work of digital trickery but old-fashioned filmmaking. As Burke Roberts has pointed out, one doesn't realize just how much colour there is in the world until you need to cover it all with paint.

Black and white film is loaded with meaning and its use here alludes to film noir while trying to come to a new understanding of the forms used by urban graffiti-producing subcultures; pondering their artefacts by removing one of the elements with which they

are strongly associated, namely bright colours.

Although it is ironic that this styling has been readily embraced by other subcultures that read it as 'gothic', it fundamentally proves the strength of meanings that something as simple as black and white imagery can invoke.

The lineage to the language of the pop video culture of emerging in the 1980's is also strong, intentionally or coincidentally. If the graffiti-influenced design is the baseline, then the film is populated with characters that are presented in visual languages that emerge as incidental backdrops to numerous pop videos. The bar in 'Handicap City' populated by people in their outlandish club wear could easily exist in a pop video as extra eye candy. But what is going on in this piece is a substitution. In the pop video such characters primarily exist as background colour to underscore the digital persona of the performer or band. In this film they exist as a subsidiary element to the main narrative drive of the film.

If Burke Robert's film takes the language of the pop video and filters it into film, by contrast, Johan Renck's pop video for The Knife's "Pass This On" takes the language of European film and filters it into a pop video.

Renck's work, like that of Burke Roberts is commercial; in this case, a commission by a Swedish electropop band. And, like Burke Roberts, his work is made in the most commercial and industrial of contexts. Ever since his own transition from cult pop fame yes, Mr Renck is none other than mid-90's Scandinavian popster Stakk Bo- he has worked as a successful pop video maker whose credits read like a who's who straight out of the international candy pop factory: Kylie, Robbie Williams, Beyonce, Madonna et al.

But, in the 'Pass It On' video, instead of the orthodox overt visual wizardry and foregrounding the digital identity of the band (a feature in some of their other videos) Renck's work shares a preoccupation with the boundaries between live performance identity and the digital artefact that other contemporary artists address.

However, in this work, there is also a sense of engagement with European visual film languages. This is the pop video as dogma film. Harshly lit in an unglamorous setting, a transvestite or a woman who looks scarily like a transvestite- appears to be trying to entertain a motley crew contained in a local community (care) centre.

As the song progresses a number of the chavtastic youths begin to dance to her song, oddly disconnected from her. Yet strangely, given the lyrics, it feels inappropriate, a transgression in some unclear way. Renck's video is jarring. It gives pleasure from things that seem wrong and denies obvious pleasures that we have come to expect from a pop video. It evokes the kind of disorientated response that recent European avant-garde cinema has tried to revive; feelings of alienation, enjoyment, confusion and even annoyance. And it does so, in part, by using what appears initially to be a form of apparent naturalism that rapidly turns into a hyperrealist sleight of hand. Everything is horribly familiar and yet simultaneously dense and unreadable. It feels miserable and good at the same time. It seduces us not with promises of glamorous trysts in fragrant gardens, but the special kind of pleasure that can only come from fucking in a cold car in a supermarket parking lot with a thumping hangover.

As with the recent slew of Scandinavian cineastes and their nouvelle vague forbearers, the language of Renck's condensed film does not seek to draw us into the fantastic escape that cinema can offer but to reward us with a heightened actuality of what is very real, very everyday and all the more potent for it. The sexiness that it achieves is partly because the Vaseline has dripped down the inside of our knickers and not over the lens.