



Wednesday 24 October 2007

The Ghosts of Vienna

by Cyril Neyrat

The premise of the Jean-Pierre Gorin-curated "Termite Art" retrospective is that the filmed essay is not a genre but a polarity of cinema - a subjective thought pattern that uses the power of montage to traverse documentary as well as fiction, surpassing and even eliminating the difference between them. Its power is felt in (Posthume), a video in which Lebanese filmmaker Ghassan Salhab tries to make felt the psychological and aesthetic consequences of the Israeli invasion of South Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The film is expressly chaotic, with superimposed layers of images of various origin - dolly shots through the ruined streets of Beirut, TV news footage, details of paintings by Mantegna and Bacon, - a cacophony of raw noises, bits of music, overlaid voices delivering litanies of suffering, wandering, and indifference in the face of war. Yet, one thing speaks clearly from all this confusion: living with war today means suffering a double assault - enemy bombs and the barrage of images that block all direct access to emotion and imagination. Salhab assimilates the ruins of Beirut into his film through the stacking of images. This is the image as ruin, not the romantic kind, but the shapeless ravages left behind by war. This leaves no room for fiction, but no more for documentary either - after all, what do you show, what do you say, which reality, which thought underneath the piled-up images/ruins? This leaves only the essay, the energy of which is undaunted by chaos and confusion as it searches for a form, an idea, an emotion that holds up and can be shared with others. A power of thought that, like Manny Farber and Gorin's termite, digs its tunnel through dense layers, looking for a way through the jumble of pictures and sounds: Salhab's beautiful forward dollies that seem to dig their path through the superimpositions, in search of the immediate presence of the world.

The immediate presence of the world. At the risk of sounding pompous, let's say the Straubs are indeed the filmmakers that have never lost sight of this goal. What is a festival? It all depends. What is the Viennale? A special kind of festival, warm, generous, precious - two weeks in which an ephemeral country in the heart of Europe opens its doors to representatives from around the world, who come to realize the ideal of a present open to both the past and the future - an expanded present, with a long memory and a distant gaze. At a festival like the Viennale, brain activity picks up, one randomly edits together a wide variety of films, timings, and representatives from across the globe. This may sound soppy, but it does describe the rare achievement of this festival: it's a sanctuary wide open to the world and the future. But let's get back to the Straubs. Danièle Huillet passed away last year and Jean-Marie Straub hasn't come over to introduce their furious *Europa 2005*, 27 octobre. Yet, they are present, everywhere, all the time, in the debates, the films, the stories told. In 2004, the Viennale held an exceptional complete retrospective in their honor. Three years later, they are still here, like phantom sentries in a land that once welcomed them, opening wide both borders and screens. Yesterday was the screening of Peter Nestler's wonderful and moving 24-minute documentary (or is it an essay?) on the Straubs, *Verteidigung der Zeit*. This intentionally didactic presentation of the filmmakers, their work and their methods was commissioned by German television and will serve as an introduction to ZDF/3sat's broadcast of *Ces rencontres avec eux*. Undoubtedly the most modest film at this Viennale, *Verteidigung der Zeit* (in English: defense or preservation of time) is definitely one of the most beautiful films here. Nestler starts out by paying tribute to Danièle Huillet, whom he knew intimately - they first met in the early sixties, when the Straubs first came to Germany and couldn't stop expressing their admiration for the man they considered to be Germany's greatest living filmmaker. Nestler's voice is one of unerring gravity and resonance, turning the slightest phrase of his narration into an oracle, a truth immediately set in stone. Nestler thankfully chose to balance this with a thoughtful and precise text. There is that wondrous moment toward the end, when he steps back to make way for three excerpts from *De la nuée à la résistance* - the cinema of the Straubs never felt more powerful, clear, elementary. Peter Nestler's films of the 1960s were shown earlier this year at the Cinémas du réel festival, and it is high time for a follow-up: since Fassbinder's death, quite a while ago already, the Straubs may well have been right.

The Straubs were still around this morning when the screening of John Gianvito's magnificent *Profit Motive* and the *Whispering Wind* followed that of *Europa 2005*, 27 octobre. In his report from the last Marseille Documentary Festival - where it was in competition - Eugenio Renzi already sang its praises. Gianvito delivers an elegiac and sensual chronicle of the history of America's labor unions' and equal rights groups' struggles, by way of the traces they and their main players left across the landscape: memorials, tombs - and wind always blowing in between frames. Neither Gianvito nor anyone else utters a word in this wordless yet eloquent film, but he makes the stones, the earth, and the trees speak and sing the way the Straubs did in, say, *Fortini/Cani* or *Quei Loro Incontri*. Last night, Gianvito delivered an impromptu DJ set of American political rock ranging from the Velvet Underground via Neil Young to Billy Bragg.

Tonight the Straubs are still within earshot when Astrid Ofner, the radiant Antigone from their 1991 film, presents her new thirty-minute short, a free association of images based on the few days Kafka spent in Vienna in 1920.

After that, it's off to the Filmmuseum to hear Gorin speak on Dziga Vertov - the filmmaker, not the group - in the hope of not missing it like we did the first one. Depending on what we see and hear, we may or may not get back to the essay and the Straubs tomorrow.