

Un-Sentimental Journeys: Exploring ‘Space’ in the Work of Ana Torfs*

‘Narration’ as *leitmotiv*

“Every story is a travel story.” This adaptation of a quote by Michel de Certeau¹ introduces, as a written and spoken sentence, the beholder to Ana Torfs’ slide installation *Displacement*. While this recent work does indeed take the viewer on a ‘trip’ through the rough landscape of an island in the Baltic Sea, the motif of narration may well be understood as a recurring theme in the artist’s work in general.

Many of Ana Torfs’ works are essentially narrative, being created on the base of a specific literary or historical subject matter, such as the written, so-called “conversation books” by Ludwig van Beethoven translated into a filmic narrative in the 35-mm-film *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* (“Cycle of Trifles,” 1998), or the records of proceedings of the infamous trials against Jeanne d’Arc or Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht from the 15th and early 20th centuries in her installations *Du mentir-faux* (2000) and *Anatomy* (2006) respectively.² For these works, the artist meticulously extracted sentences and passages from the original documents and transformed them into a highly reductive scenario. In conjunction with carefully constructed images, it constitutes a now rather ‘disrupted’, or deconstructed, narrative, which in itself eventually fictionalizes the underlying subject matter. Narrative structures are constitutive elements in Ana Torfs’ work inasmuch as she edits excerpted dialogues in a dramaturgical manner, interweaving written and spoken language with a series of (predominantly black and white) images. Thus she aesthetically distances her subject matter from everyday vernacular and the realm of mere facts. Rather, she creates image-text-narratives that seem detached from specific times and events, dealing instead with somewhat universal questions of guilt and justice, truth and fallacy.

“Anatomy”, 2006

* This text is a revised and slightly extended version of the talk given at the conference at Ghent University.

¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

² The most comprehensive overview on these installations as well as Ana Torfs’ work in general so far is given in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition “Ana Torfs – *Album/Tracks A + B*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen Düsseldorf/Generali Foundation Vienna 2010, ed. by Sabine Folie and Doris Krystof, Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2010.

The video and slide installation *Anatomy*³ establishes a multi-layered atmosphere of spoken and written language and aesthetically different images (fig. 1): On two monitors, full frontal video images⁴ of 25 young men and women are confronted with written questions from the trial which followed the killing of communist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in Berlin in 1919. Questions and answers were taken from a document in the German Military Archive in Freiburg, Germany, that the artist visited during her residency as a guest of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Programme in 2005/06.

The persons shown in the video images stand for the defendants and random witnesses of the killing of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Their (spoken) answers to the questions during the interrogation are quite contradictory and unsettlingly indifferent. Looking back in history, they are all the more telling, bearing witness to an authoritarian society in the dawn of devastating military conflicts and judiciary arbitrariness. The dialogue between court and defendants and witnesses respectively, is, in the installation, joined by large projections of black and white images showing 17 further persons in a setting that refers to a court room as much as to a theatre: the Anatomical Theatre in Berlin.

The appearance of these figures – seemingly absorbed in their very own thoughts and emotions, not communicating with us nor with each other – creates a distance that corresponds to the ambivalent visual and verbal ‘evidence’ of the double cast video images. At the same time, the space of the Anatomical Theatre appears as a somewhat a-temporal sphere *à huis-clos* that heavily contrasts the factual and vernacular look of the video. Different from the frontal video close ups, where the viewer might take on the role of the interrogator confronting the witnesses, his or her place in relation to the large black and white projections is less equal. In long shots, he finds himself in the centre of the Anatomical Theatre, at the very same centralised position of the table where since the late 18th century public dissections have been executed.

Thus, through the images and their display, the function of the spectator in “Anatomy” is constantly reflected. His position, his movement in space, and his intellectual and emotional engagement with the represented ‘story’ are constantly stimulated through the intertwined use

³ Installation with black and white slide projections (loop, 34') and video on two monitors (colour, loop 90'), projection socle, sound, German spoken, English interpretation via wireless headphones, digitally controlled, variable dimensions.

⁴ In “Anatomy” and other works, the artist works with a double cast, thus provoking a paradoxical simultaneity of presence and absence that calls into question what is seen and heard.

of image and (spoken and written) text. The spatial arrangement and the audio-visual environment are, in general, important and well-considered aspects in Ana Torfs' work.

“Displacement”, 2009

While many of her works are initially triggered by what we might call ‘mental journeys’, i.e. by reading all kinds of literature, and while some of them are finally realized on the occasion of a factual journey, or residency, as *Anatomy* and *Displacement*, the latter slide installation stands as Torfs' first work that explicitly draws upon a journey as subject matter.⁵ As the artist stated,⁶ “Displacement” was conceived as a photographic “remake” of Roberto Rossellini's famous movie from 1954, *Journey to Italy*. Again, she edited a given text, the movie's original dialogues, which she shortened, adapted and supplemented using text fragments from Gotland tourist guides and newspapers.⁷

Rossellini named the married British couple in his movie Katherine and Alex Joyce, who on their journey realize that they have grown apart. The reason for their trip to Naples is to sell a house their late Uncle Homer has left them. Obviously, this onomastic constellation alludes to two groundbreaking literary works of Western culture, Homer's *Odyssey* and James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* from 1922, and while these *opera magna* may well span the poles of a Western literary canon, they stand for the intricate relationship between storytelling and travelling (or rather, in *Ulysses*, wandering) in the first place. In literature, we find all sorts of descriptions of places and spaces, spatial metaphors and topographical rhetorics to describe a character or a state of mind.⁸

More specifically, and traditionally, speaking, travelogues, as a literary genre, narrate the world as it is experienced: They describe the visible and – conventionally – stick to the more or less objective empirical perception of the places and things seen. Though these accounts may always suggest a narrator's subjectivity, his individuality became more articulated in the aesthetic discussions of taste, manners and morals of the 18th century, exemplified in Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* from 1768. He and his followers prefigure the

⁵ More recently, the artist completed *Legend* (2009), a photo text series that will be referred to later in the text.

⁶ See the artist's interview with Gabriele Mackert in: Ana Torfs – *Album/Tracks A + B* (see note 2), pp. 180ff.

⁷ As will be explained later in the text, *Displacement* was shot on the Swedish island Gotland. Technical data: Installation with black and white slide projections on 2 opposing walls (2 loops of 50 minutes), 2 projections socles, wireless headphones, sound, English spoken, digitally controlled, variable dimensions.

⁸ See, among many others, J[oseph] Hillis Miller, *Topographies*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995, and, for German research in this field, Hartmut Boehme (ed.), *Topographien der Literatur. Deutsche Literatur im transnationalen Kontext*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005.

‘introspective’ Romantic novel of the following century, in which a psychological dimension is increasingly set in relation to the experienced landscape and places.

„A novel is a figurative mapping“, states J. Hillis Miller,⁹ stressing the intrinsic metaphorical function of space and land- and cityscape descriptions that we find in literary works. Metaphorical concepts in terms of a potential projection of images and ideas, experiences and feelings onto a specific place or location are deeply rooted in language and literature. We find topographical metaphors in film as well, as Rossellini’s movie clearly attests.¹⁰ Here, the premises and the dramatic unfolding of the story are essentially based on the cultural dichotomy of the two countries, England and Italy. The different sites that the British couple visits in Naples and Capri such as Pompeii, the lava fields of Vesuvius, or the Catacombs unmistakably represent a sensual culture of emotional expression completely contrary to the couple’s rather uptight social background.

In *Displacement*, however, the plot and its psychological subtext are not so much characterised through means of cultural dichotomy and unfamiliar social manners. Rather, the alienation that the travelling couple experiences, results not only from their very own estranged relationship, but from the fundamental strangeness and desertedness of the country they encounter. Different from Rossellini’s film, all characters, and the island, remain nameless, and the title of the work is much less precise in regards to the journey’s (not only topographical) destination, and far more telling when it comes to the psychological aspects that travelling and the experience of moving in space may entail.

While it has replaced notions of “exile” and “diaspora” in recent geo- and socio-political discourses, the metaphorical use of the term “displacement,” with the privative connotation of its prefix, focuses, in cultural theory, on concepts of cultural and individual identity and their potential rupture, or even loss, through the physical removal from a familiar location or position. Physical movement is thus read as a mental effect. In *Displacement* hence, the journey to that nameless island in the Baltic Sea explicitly begins in the beholder’s mind.

⁹ J[oseph] Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (see note 8), p. 19. Miller continues, “The story traces out diachronically the movement of the characters from house to house and from time to time, as the crisscross of their relationships gradually creates an imaginary space. This space is based on the real landscape, charged now with the subjective meaning of the story that has been enacted within it.” (Ibid.)

¹⁰ For motifs of motion and space in art, architecture and film (among others, Rossellini’s “Journey to Italy”), see Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion. Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, London: Verso 2002.

Created on the occasion of the artist's residency in the history-ridden Swedish island Gotland in summer 2007, the installation consists of two large black and white slide projections on opposing walls with sound that can be listened to via wireless headphones. Giant, frontal portraits of a man and a woman on one side are facing the visual narrative unfolding on the opposite wall. Structured into a chronology of seven days, its 153 slides offer the minimum requirements for a dramatic plot, that is, a written indication of time and *diegesis*, and photographic images of landscapes and interiors as potential settings. (figs. 2 and 3)

The slowly alternating close ups of the motionless male and female faces form a static counterpart to the changing panoramic views and text slides, and while it remains unclear if the man and the woman stand for the story's couple or the installation's beholders, the visual arrangement is, again, complemented by the sound track.

Spoken from the off, an anonymous male narrator introduces to the couple's story which unfolds in dialogues between the two and two further 'actors'. Being performed in a rather emphatic and professional attitude, these off-scene conversations stress even further the incoherence of image and text. As Catherine Robberechts remarks, the actors "seem to be reading rather than speaking and you sense that – like the photos in the travelogue – they 'allude' to a human presence rather than representing actual characters."¹¹

The plot evolving from the dialogues is only very loosely connected with the photographic settings. These show pine woods, coast lines, limestone quarries, an Italianate villa, a golf club, a beach resort, a summer house in Suisse style, several Bronze Age grave yards, a military defence museum, an airport, and a hotel room. A sort of desertedness seems to be the strongest typological connection between these rather incoherent places. While the sites are abandoned, they nevertheless often show traces of a human presence, be it an abandoned military infrastructure, archaeological remains or an idiosyncratic furnishing.

While the visual travelogue unfolds in front of the viewer (and the alternating portraits of a man and a woman on the opposite wall), its settings change with every day and the different times of a day. Seen against the historical background of traditional travel art and especially the representation of the North in art, these images sketch a rather unconventional picture.

¹¹ Catherine Robberechts in her text on "Displacement," see <http://anatorfs.com> (13.11.09).

Scandinavia emerged pretty late on the artists' mental and factual maps. Remote and pathless as they were, the Northern countries met the Romanticist search for pristine landscapes and harmony between man and nature. Not surprisingly, artists found their favourite motifs in nature: the rough Sea, impressive mountains, or a cliff in stormy waters. Likewise, today's tourist guides of Gotland praise the island's cliff coast, its birds and flowers.

Almost none of that – except the coast line – we see in Ana Torfs' photographs. The motifs she chose hover between artificial and natural settings and landscapes under a sometimes cloudy, but always bright sky. Subtle shades of grey dominate her black and white photographs that hardly ever show any strong contrasts of colour or light. An all-encompassing, virtually 'enlightening' luminescence seems to pervade the island, and while the spatial and semantic interrelation of the depicted locations may sometimes appear quite obscure, the pictures themselves are remarkably sharp and distinct.

The unfamiliar look of many buildings – be it military sites reminiscent of the island's strategic function during the Cold War, be it an Italianate villa in the middle of a forest – is further stressed by the inner structure of the visual travelogue: The camera, and thus the viewer, slowly moves around and towards those particular sites. The images suggest a deliberate and gradual, not a linear approach, and thus an intrigued and, indeed, a pristine gaze. The camera becomes an active tool, an 'actor' taking the viewer on a rather deviating than determined route.

The very few interior shots of the couple's hotel room stand out against the openness depicted in the landscapes and the island's other interiors. Here, the extensive space of nature is contrasted by a restricted area enclosed by a white curtain that eventually opens, on "Day 3," to let some Northern sun in. (fig. 4) While in art history curtains often visually introduce to a depicted scene, thus symbolically unveiling it in front of the beholder's eye, stressing the act of seeing, the curtain in the couple's hotel room stands as an antipode to their wandering eye that explores the island. The room is the spatial antipode for the experienced landscape, and the catalyst effect of this experience on the couple which finds themselves trapped in a state of *aporia* becomes all the more palpable. The spatial and physical orientation of these travellers in the strange and unfamiliar environment of the island, far away from domestic surroundings and routine, little by little gives rise to an investigation and reorientation in regards to their marriage as well.

Again, the technical structure and the spatial arrangement of the work have a strong impact on the viewer's perception. He or she is able to move around in the exhibition space, to change position and perspective, and to watch the visual travelogue or the alternating portraits of a man and a woman. They can decide to listen to the dialogues on the (wireless headphone) audio track, or to create their very own travelogue by just watching the landscapes and interiors in the rhythm of the changing slides. 'Her' story of a couple's journey to an island in the Baltic sea is therefore just *one* narrative that the artist offers: We are invited to loosen the connection of text and image even further, to skip the one or the other, and to imagine what might happen to the couple that we see in the large portraits, or what will take place in the empty settings on the opposite wall. Unlike in cinema, the viewer of this 'remade' film moves around in space, potentially becoming aware that the concept of 'space' not only allows for, as the depicted landscapes suggest, metaphorical connotations, but may as well be understood, with Michel de Certeau, as a place of "spatial practice."¹²

Despite the tactics of deconstructing and 'disrupting' the underlying narrative, "Displacement" establishes, like all works by the artist, a strong immersive quality, not only through the gentle rhythm of the changing slides in the darkened space that the viewer will respond to. Significantly enough, the very first and very last images of that voyage show a boat terminal – one of the empty and lonely places of transience for which Marc Augé coined the term "non-places."¹³ Yet, the way that we perceive them through the artist's camera is not in a state of "acceleration," as Paul Virilio described our postmodern condition, where the economy of speed annihilates the category of space.¹⁴ In "Displacement," space and time are anything but vanished.

The Intruder, 2004 and Legend, 2009

Ana Torfs' specific interest in topics of space and its representation becomes equally clear in further works such as the slide installation *The Intruder* (2004).¹⁵ (fig. 5) Here, unlike *Displacement*, she retained and translated the original title of Maurice Maeterlinck's one-act play *L'Intruse* (1890) on which the work is based. But it's not only the title that has a strong

¹² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

¹³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London, New York: Verso, 1995.

¹⁴ Paul Virilio, *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*, London: Continuum 2006.

¹⁵ Installation with black and white slide projections on black projection surface, projection socle, 4 loudspeakers on tripods, sound, English spoken, +/-35 minutes, loop, digitally controlled, variable dimensions.

metaphorical implication in regards to space. The *cadrage* of the photographic images radically frames the living room of a (now modern) villa, and it seems hard to imagine a space as illuminated and yet obscure as this modernist, casket-like interior. It functions as a stage for constellations of statue-like figures, yet the actual, dramatic ‘action’ takes places only beyond its confinements. As the *mise-en-scène* unfolds, it reveals the psychological conception of space that characterises this work (and Maeterlinck’s play), expressed by the blind grandfather’s presentiment of his daughter’s death motivated by events inside and outside the house, construed by him as evil omens. Perception of the outside world is conceived as a projection of one’s subjective inner experience.

In one of her most recent works, again, Ana Torfs interweaves reflections on possible ways of seeing with the topic of travelling: The photo text series *Legend* (2009)¹⁶ combines nine images of La Gomera, that the artist shot on the small island in the Atlantic the same year, with five “legends” each, i.e. captions citing tales and texts about the island’s history and myths, its culture and politics, about tourism, displacement and refuge. (fig. 6) While the images recall the focussing view through a telescope, the short texts create a dense discursive framework of the island’s past and present; ultimately, the work takes on a rather critical view on aspects of site and motion, portraying the island not only as a popular tourist destination, but also as a favourite gateway to Europe for thousands of desperate illegal immigrants from the African continent.

Ana Torfs’ ‘Un-Sentimentality’

The gaze through a telescope implies, just as ‘projection’ as a term and technique, a certain spatial distance. Likewise, we find motifs and metaphors of distance in many of Ana Torfs’ images – in the long shot of a landscape (in *Displacement*) as well as, paradoxically, in the close-up of a motionless face (in *Anatomy*). Analytical distance is required to radically excerpt a minimalist scenario from an extensive historical document, as the artist has done for her works on Jeanne d’Arc and Luxemburg and Liebknecht. And distance – between the original and the ‘remake’ as well as between the spectator and the work – is created to translate a given scenario into a polyphonic installation of image and sound like in

¹⁶ The work was completed only after the congress “Invitation au voyage” at Ghent University and was not part of my paper given there. Yet, the series and the topics it series raises would certainly deserve a more detailed analysis. Technical data: Installation, 9 lambda prints on aluminium, each with 5 anodized aluminium tags with laser-engraved letters embedded in the wood frames, framed each 74,8 x 104,3 cm, total dimensions variable.

“Displacement.” It’s not an illusionist spectacle that we see, but its ingredients lying bare, which invite us to imagine.

By entrusting the viewer with that fulfilling yet sometimes arduous task, it seems quite compelling to describe Torfs’ work as “unsentimental.” Not surprisingly and contrary to Rossellini, she doesn’t offer us a happy ending for the unsettled couple in “Displacement,” by leaving out the very last sentence of the original script, “I love you.” And contrary to Laurence Sterne, she leaves, in her work in general, all the sentiment to the viewer, knowing all too well that “to sense” implies, etymologically speaking, the “faculty of perception.”¹⁷

Kassandra Nakas

Bibliography

- Ana Torfs – Album/Tracks A + B. Exh. cat. Kunstammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen Düsseldorf/Generali Foundation Vienna 2010, ed. by Sabine Folie and Doris Krystof, Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2010
- Hartmut Boehme (ed.), *Topographien der Literatur. Deutsche Literatur im transnationalen Kontext*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005
- Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion. Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, London: Verso 2002
- Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984
- J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1995
- Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey and Other Writings*, ed. By Ian Jack and Tim Parnell, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press (Oxford world's classics) 2008

¹⁷ See the etymology of “sense”, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=sense> (13.11.09).