

A Conversation Piece

— STEVEN JACOBS

The film *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* (Cycle of Trifles) (1998) is based on Ludwig van Beethoven's so-called conversation books—the notebooks that relatives, friends, and other visitors used to communicate with the composer after he became deaf. As suggested by the film's title, they do not contain any great artistic or musicological insights, but are first and foremost a repository of everyday, domestic life: eating and drinking, and dealing with ailments both major and minor were seemingly the principal concerns of the composer and his intimates. The contrast between these trivialities and the almost mythic figure of Beethoven—the ultimate personification of the romantic artistic genius—largely defines the structure of the film. The “Kleinigkeiten” do not, after all, derive their significance from the presence of the composer, but from his visual and auditory absence: Beethoven was deaf but not dumb, thus he barely features in the notebooks and is entirely absent from the film. The people around him did not speak but instead, wrote down their words, and so Ana Torfs only gives us their text in voice-over. Yet the characters in the film behave like “speakers” all the same: Without seeking to “act out” the words, they nevertheless move their bodies in gentle response to the dialogue. Positions and poses match the rhythm of question and answer. They face one another or the viewer, who sometimes feels very close to the absent Beethoven. Yet this absence not only shapes the film's soundtrack, but also the composition of the shots. It is as though Beethoven were just outside our field of vision or had positioned himself beside us, on our side of the invisible fourth wall.

Ana Torfs organizes all this with exceptional subtlety. No attempt is made to compensate for the protagonist's absence or the lack of synchro-

nous dialogue by heightening the poses or facial expressions. On the contrary, the figures are restrained and frequently find themselves in a state that Michael Fried referred to in his well-known text on eighteenth century painting as *absorption*.¹ Taking his cue from Diderot's aesthetics, Fried contrasted this *absorption* with the *theatricality* that dominated baroque painting, for instance. Where theatricality features a compositional organization in which the characters positively demand the viewer's attention, the mode of absorption is characterized by figures that, as it were, ignore the viewer and are wholly turned in on themselves. They might be mentally active—thinking, praying, reading, listening to music, or daydreaming—but in physical terms they are mainly passive. Absorption thus implies a purely contemplative relationship between painting and beholder.

Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten appeals unmistakably to just such a state of absorption. Apart from the intertitles and the landscape images that serve as transitions, the film consists primarily of a series of (extremely) long takes of hushed figures in domestic interiors.² The composition of these shots is reminiscent of *conversation pieces*—a term that, according to Mario Praz, is used to describe “paintings, usually not of large dimensions, which represent two or more identifiable people in attitudes implying that they are conversing or communicating with each other informally; against a background reproduced in detail.”³ It is no coincidence that this genre of painting reached its height in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—the period, in other words, in which Beethoven lived, and which Torfs evokes here without pursuing a detailed historical reconstruction in terms of costume or interiors. Praz reminds us that conversation pieces date from an era of diaries, effusive dedications, and long affectionate letters, all of which are perfectly in keeping

with the film's atmosphere of intimacy and introspection.

The pictorial associations are heightened by the slowness and stillness of the shots. A static camera uses long takes to record a series of carefully lit tableaux vivants. The film is, as it were, made up of a series of scenes that look like a succession of stills—the photographs taken while shooting the film did, indeed, feature throughout the book *Beethoven's Nephew*, which the artist published separately in 1999.⁴ Torfs' fascination for slowness and stillness places her at the intersection of several different artistic traditions. *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*⁵ can be situated at the crossroads where the work of artists who have appropriated the strategy of the tableau vivant and the film still (Jeff Wall, James Coleman) overlaps with that of artists who have responded to the logic of the film still with a kind of *still film*: the latter, too, plays on the ambivalence between motion and stasis, and between cinematic, photographic, pictorial, sculptural, and theatrical modes (Douglas Gordon, Stan Douglas, or Tacita Dean).

At the same time, with its aesthetic of the extended long take, *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* places itself firmly in the tradition of European modernist cinema (Robert Bresson, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky, Chantal Akerman, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet)—the cinema of the *image-temps* (*Time-Image*), which, according to Gilles Deleuze, focuses less on movement and more on temporality as the medium's essence.⁶ Straub-Huillet would appear to be especially important points of reference in this regard. The relative autonomy of the soundtrack evokes a number of their works, while the subject matter of Torfs' film is especially reminiscent of their *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968). The taut structure of *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* with its limited number of shots—mostly two shots in interiors in which camera

and actors alike remain motionless for minutes at a time—in turn recalls Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Gertrud* (1964).⁷ Like Dreyer's late masterpiece, dismissed at the time by one French critic as “a two-hour study of pianos and sofas,” Torfs links the aesthetics of the *Kammerspielfilm* with the formula of a *conversation piece*.

From the Dutch by Ted Alkins

NOTES

1 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

2 A little cinematics reveals that the film (excluding credits) lasts roughly 88 minutes and comprises 122 shots, 21 of which are titles and intertitles. That gives *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* an average shot-length of 43.3 seconds.

3 Mario Praz, *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 33.

4 Ana Torfs, *Beethoven's Nephew/Le neveu de Beethoven/De neef van Beethoven/Beethovens Neffe* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert Publisher, 1999).

5 The film premiered at *KunstenFESTIVALdesarts* in Brussels in 1998, followed by numerous screenings worldwide, like the international film festivals in Rotterdam, São Paulo, Riga, Split etc. It was also aired twice on Belgian television, once in 1998 and again in 2006.

6 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

7 Dreyer—and more specifically his *Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928)—also clearly resonates in Torfs' *Du mentir-faux* (2000). See Ana Torfs, *Du mentir-faux* (Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts, 2000).