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Visual Illiteracy. The Paradox of Today's Media Culture and the Reformulation of Yesterday's Concept of an écriture filmique

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Axel Roderich Werner

Visual Illiteracy. The Paradox of Today's Media Culture and the Reformulation of Yesterday's Concept of an *écriture filmique*

Abstract

According to art historian James Elkins, the very term of ›visual literacy‹ is to be assessed as an at least »slightly dubious expression« (ELKINS 2008: 8) if not, in its linking of the *scriptural* to the *pictorial* or the *discursive* to the *non-discursive*, as an outright »self-defeating paradox« (ELKINS 2008: 5). In much of the same sense, William Mitchell views this arguably problematic though historically quite successful term as »a strong and seemingly unavoidable metaphor« (MITCHELL 2008a: 11) in which, though not mutually exclusive, the term of ›reading‹ serving as the *vehicle* and the term of ›vision‹ as the *tenor* thus are establishing a kind of hierarchy by apparently privileging the former over the latter in a kind of *catachresis* (in which the metaphor fills the gap of the lack of a literal or ›proper‹ designation)—literacy *explains* visuality just as texts *explain* pictures. At the same time, however, this relation might as well be reversed (so that Mitchell in fact wonders if one should speak of ›visual literacy‹ or ›literary visualcy‹): even *verbal* literacy does in fact rely on vision as, most evidently, for example, »the skill of reading is already a visual skill« (MITCHELL 2008a: 11), just as even face-to-face communication is governed by the recognition of facial expression, gestures, posture etc. (or ›body language‹, to use another metaphor of that kind). Neither, then, is literacy ever thoroughly independent of vision (or, more generally, *communication of perception*) nor is vision itself ever ›purely optical‹ regarding its physiological

predispositions—let alone a ›natural‹ capacity exempt from learning and training (cf. MITCHELL 2008b: 13, 15).

The same metaphorical, paradoxical, or *oxymoronic* combination of this seeming *contradictio in adjecto*, I would like to argue, can be found in the concept of an *écriture filmique*, or ›filmic writing‹, which in the following I will discuss with special regard to recent changes in the wider scope of today's media culture: just as *film*, according to intermediality scholar Joachim Paech, has ultimately become a mere metaphor for virtually »every kind of moving picture« (PAECH 2011: 8), *writing* correspondingly may as yet be nothing more than a metaphor for its own *remediation* in a *postmedial* era (cf. BOLTER/GRUSIN 2000; WEIBEL 2005), along with ›literacy‹ as a metaphor or *synecdoche* for several kinds of ›new literacies‹ (cf. BUCKINGHAM 1993; LANKSHEAR/KNOBEL 2006; LEU/KINZER/COIRO/CAMMACK 2004)—›computer‹, ›digital‹, ›information‹, ›media literacy‹ etc. as certain particularly mediatized ›cultural techniques‹ considered elementary for current quotidian communicative competence—in short, to quote Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, the general and extensive »semiotic competence« necessary to cope with today's multimodal »post-typographic texts and technologies« (LANKSHEAR/KNOBEL 2006: 3, 5).

The comparative linking of both concepts characterized in this way, then, hopefully still will not result in an explanation *metaphoram per metaphoram*, that is, rather tautologically, *idem per idem*, or even *obscurum per obscurius* and *ignotum per ignotius*, but rather aims to contrast two particular reflections on *visual literacy* by their respective depictions of the *lack* of it; one philosophical-textual as a general diagnosis of today's media culture and one artistic-filmic as a specific case in point. In a very cursory way, then, I will discuss

- *firstly* Vilém Flusser's concept of the ›techno-image‹ as the latest and, implicitly, also the last ›symbolic form‹ of cultural history, and
- *secondly* a film by Peter Greenaway centrally addressing the problem of the ›reading‹ of an image—*The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982)—in order to
- *thirdly* and conclusively address the concept of an *écriture filmique* as founded in Alexandre Astruc's seminal essay *The Birth of a New Avantgarde* and its possible uses for the situation of today's media culture.

1. Vilém Flusser. Starting with a Very Long Quotation

In his very last and only posthumously published essay, Vilém Flusser writes:

In our tradition, we philosophise in written words: we construct linear discourses out of letters on lines. This, however, cannot go on for very much longer because words (written or not) are not adequate for the more and more particulate (numerical) concepts. We

cannot philosophise in texts anymore like we used to do, we have to try and do it with pictures.

In Western culture, the term ›philosophy‹ has acquired a peculiar meaning associated with a specific academic discipline, not comprising all possible speculation, but only that speculation yielding to that discipline. Image-makers may well speculate, but they have not learned that philosophical discipline, which means that we have not yet learned to philosophise pictorially. However, we begin to learn to do that.

The photo camera allows to revolve around problems and thus to philosophise pictorially. Unfortunately, photographers have not yet grasped just what the hand of scientists and technicians has put into their hands. They do not learn philosophy before they photograph, and hence—with few exceptions—photographs are lousy speculations.

This is not entirely the case with film, that subgenre of photography, and one might say that people like Fellini or Cocteau are indeed philosophising pictorially. There is, however, an excuse for photographers and film people: They do not yet have the right instruments for philosophy.

This seemed to evert with the invention of the video camera. Here was a mirror (the monitor), that is, an instrument of speculation which, other than the old mirror, did not change the sides and allowed the philosopher to view himself from another's perspective (of the camera operator), from behind for instance. It seemed as if henceforth it would be imperative to philosophise only with video and no longer with the alphabet. Then it turned out that video people are clueless and philosophers have too little imagination for videos.

When subsequently numerised images appeared on computer screens, any observer even slightly learned in philosophy just had to downright explode. Here, in sheer nothingness (in the electromagnetic field) one could view images based on algorithms, that is to say exactly that what is called an ›idea‹. Every criticism raised against image-making ever since Plato and the prophets must collapse in view of the synthetic images. Numeric images project exactly that which is meant by philosophising. One cannot and should not continue to philosophise in words when now there is a code to pictorially represent that for which words are no longer competent. [...]

However, for the time being, this has not yet come to anything. (FLUSSER 1994: 189–191, translation A.R.W.)

What is the problem here? After approximately 4.000 years of dominance of the ›symbolic form‹ or ›communicative code‹ of the text, mankind has developed but not yet mastered the new semiotic code of the so-called ›techno-images‹. Here's the sequence of Flusser's famous ›game of abstractions‹: while the very beginning of humankind (or ›Menschwerdung‹) is marked by the hiatus between man and the four-dimensional ›world‹ (three-dimensional space plus time), mankind has subsequently made abstractions from this world:

- firstly, the dimension of *time* is abstracted in three-dimensional *buildings* or *sculptures*;
- then, the dimension of sculptural *depth* is abstracted in two-dimensional *images* (serving to *depict* the world);
- then, the dimension of pictorial *planarity* was abstracted in one-dimensional *texts* (serving to *explain* the images);
- and finally, the dimension of textual *linearity* is abstracted in zero-dimensional *points* (corresponding to the virtuality of *bits* of computerized digital data whose height of abstraction, then, could not be surpassed any more).

This succession of ›communicative codes‹, again, is driven by a kind of *erosion* or *degeneration*:

- While images were originally meant to *depict* the world (in an ›imaginative‹ or ›magical‹ state of consciousness), soon they were *occluding* it, *replacing* it by a *context of images* referring only to *other* images, so that *texts* had to *explain* them (in a ›conceptual‹ and ›historical‹ state of consciousness) in order to regain an *access* to the world;
- but soon again, the same degeneration occurred to the texts, which in turn were then themselves *occluding* the images (and consequently, the world) and referring only to *other* texts;
- so that, finally, the so-called ›techno-images‹ generated by technical devices from cameras to computers took a step *further* to the zero-dimensionality of numbers as well as a step *back* to the two-dimensionality of images (cf. FLUSSER 1992: 143) in order to *re-invest* the texts with meaning.

A main difference, however, lies in the *translation* of these codes: while images are *explained* by texts by *conceptualization*, and thus *linearization* and *temporalization*, techno-images, on the one hand, are *infused with meaning* by pre-existing texts (or ›pre-texts‹) and do not *illustrate* but *supply* texts arising *from* them with meanings otherwise inconceivable: »Pre-alphabetical images signify the world, and techno-images signify texts which signify images which signify the world« (FLUSSER 1998: 102f., translation A.R.W.). As a manifest example, though the first may be said to be *indexical* in a Peircean sense and the second *hyperrealistic* in a Baudrillardian sense, astronomic telescope pictures as well as astro-physical computer simulations shape, or *project*, the *image* as well as the *concept* of a star, a planet, a galaxy, or the cosmos at large. The great remaining problem, according to Flusser, however, is that mankind, apart from few experts in their own respective fields, treats techno-images as if they were traditional images directly and immediately depicting the world (for example, even otherwise competent astro-physicists cannot properly watch television); and that is precisely what Flusser calls »pictorial alphabetism« (FLUSSER 1997: 76, translation A.R.W.). A techno-image does not *reproduce* but it *projects*; it does not represent (or even ›redeem‹) a physical *reality* (as Siegfried Kracauer would put it, cf. 1985), but visualizes *information* conflictingly generated by what Flusser calls »the complex of *apparatus-operator*« (FLUSSER 1998: 151, translation A.R.W., original emphasis): an (apparatic) *programme* and a (human) *intention* (cf. FLUSSER 1983: 33, translation A.R.W.).

2. Peter Greenaway, with a Couple of Very Nice Images

Self-declaredly, Peter Greenaway's overall artistic project is to fathom cinema's potential as »a philosophical medium« (quoted in WILLOQUET-MARICONDI 2001: 177) as »a form of visual philosophy« (quoted in PALLY 2000: 117) in a *cinema of ideas* (cf. GREENAWAY 2002b: 28); citing Picasso—»I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them« (quoted in GOLDING 1988: 51)—, Greenaway, in utmost dissatisfaction with cinema's outmoded aesthetics and technologies, is repeatedly stating that

we have not seen any cinema yet. We have only seen 105 years of illustrated text. [...] But I have hopes. I do really believe that we are now developing the new tools to make that happen. Tools, as Picasso said of painting, that will allow you to make images of what you think, not merely of what you see, and certainly not of what you read. (GREENAWAY 2001a: 48)

This *aversion against* (but also at times obsessional *fascination with*) the medium of text is based on the identification of a fundamental cultural over-reaching:

I am often persuaded we live in deserts of visual illiteracy. Our ability to make, see, and read the image is curiously low in the scale of our values. (GREENAWAY 2001b: 286)

Our educational bias is all in favor of the word and remarkably little in favor of the meaning of the image. (GREENAWAY 2002b: 6)

Just because you have eyes does not mean you can see. We all have to learn to see. [...] This presents us with a problem because our visual education in the world is undernourished, impoverished, and not prioritised in our education systems. [...] The word is an ineffectual insubstantial temporary tool of historical and geographical limitation when compared to the image. We must transform our visual illiteracy. (GREENAWAY 2011: 186, 189)

This verdict of *visual illiteracy*—i.e. the incapability to comprehend an image as *communication* over and above its mere *perception*—does not only go for the *recipients* of images, but also their *producers*: »In practically every film you experience, you can see the director [...] [i]llustrating the words first, making the pictures after, and, alas, so often not making pictures at all, but holding up the camera to do its mimetic worst« (GREENAWAY 2001a: 48), or, in an even more pointed formulation: »most filmmakers are going into the studio with a blindfold and their arms tied behind their backs« (GREENAWAY 2002a: n.pag.). The question of how to *manufacture* and to *interpret* an image, however, is not only treated theoretically in Greenaway's numerous speeches, but already centrally addressed in Greenaway's first feature film *The Draughtsman's Contract* from 1982.

In short, in late 17th century rural England, the already fairly renowned draughtsman Mr. Neville is lured into a contract by Mrs. Herbert and her daughter Mrs. Talmann to make twelve drawings of their property of Compton Anstey, allegedly as a present for Mrs. Herbert's presently absent (and soon to be found dead) husband to foster a reconciliation of the two

estranged spouses. Quite beyond the fixation of merely pecuniary rewards, however, this contract also includes the claiming of sexual services as well as Mr. Neville's nearly absolute disposal over the household's activities necessary for the manufacture of the drawings. However in control of all things he may think himself, though, in the end Neville is caught up in what has really been the women's stratagem all along and, murdered by the collective of the neighbouring gentlemen, dies a most violent death.



Fig. 1:
The Draughtsman's Contract (DVD Extra Deleted Scenes)¹

Instead, then, of trying to explain this plot's numerous mysteries—many of which are nothing else but implausible, illogical, contradictory or otherwise unexplainable *macguffins* and *red herrings* anyway—, I would like to comment on the way the drawings in question are *manufactured* and how, then, they are quite opposingly *construed* as the alleged evidence for various accusations.

The draughtsman Mr. Neville is introduced as a very scrupulous man of his craft in his ideal of a rigorous ›realism‹: »I try very hard never to distort or to dissemble« (*The Draughtsman's Contract* 00h:44min), »I'm painstaking enough to notice quite small changes in the landscape. Once started, I make that a committal—whatsoever ensues« (*The Draughtsman's Contract* 00h:23min), or, as Mrs. Talmann puts it: »Mr. Neville has no imagination; he draws what he sees« (*The Draughtsman's Contract* 01h:15min). In his at-

¹ *Der Kontrakt des Zeichners – Arthaus Collection*. Berlin [STUDIOCANAL] 2007.

tempt, then, to produce an exact and pristine ›transcription of reality‹ (or at least his visual perception of it), Mr. Neville tries to be indifferent and receptive just like a photographic camera and for this end employs a special optical device—a kind of *dioptra* succeeding, for instance, Leonardo's *netted frame*, Alberti's *velum* or Dürer's *Pförtchen*—which, in a geometric segmentation of the visual field, enables him to see and reproduce shapes and brightness values rather than ›things‹ or even ›people‹ (cf. GOMBRICH 1978: 335).



Fig. 2:
The Draughtsman's Contract 00h:11min



Fig. 3:
The Draughtsman's Contract 00h:11min

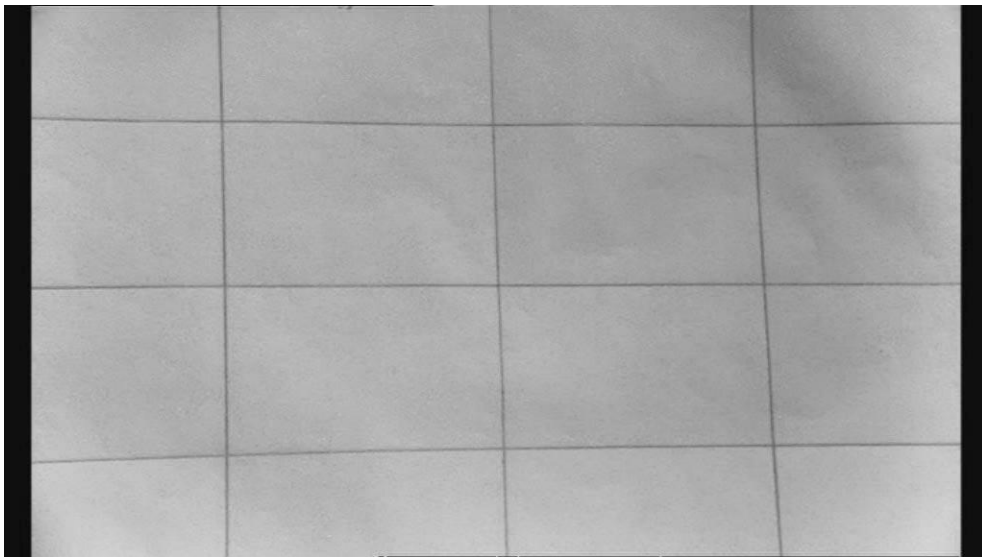


Fig. 4:
The Draughtsman's Contract 00h:12min



Fig. 5:
The Draughtsman's Contract 00h:12min



Fig. 6:
The Draughtsman's Contract 00h:12min

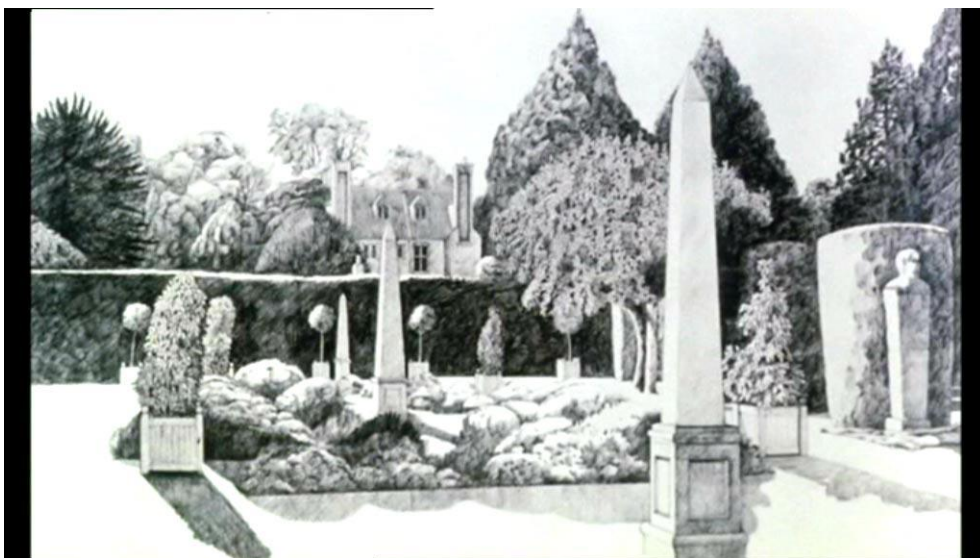


Fig. 7:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:00min

In this sense, Mr. Neville in a kind of *preadaptive advance* could well be said to try to simulate a digital camera centuries before its invention—much like Flusser's complex of *apparatus-operator*, and the results can well be said to be quite accurate—judging, of course, not the drawings against ›reality‹, but the filmic images of the drawings of the estate against the filmic images of the estate (thus making the filmic image the standard of the comparison as well as the model for the subsequently produced drawings).

Finally, these are the twelve drawings—whose status becomes really problematic only *after* their production when Mr. Herbert is mysteriously found dead and the drawings are claimed to be not only proto-, quasi-, or

pseudo-photographic *indices* (in a Peircean sense) but *indications* or *indictments* carrying a hidden meaning, namely an accusation of murder. As it turns out, a number of objects have secretly or ostensibly been placed across the estate and then regardlessly included in the drawings, strangely out of place at first like some *objets trouvés*, but later on suggestively interrelated and interpreted as visual hints to various crimes and vices:

- a ladder to Mr. Herbert's room, possibly implying *assassination*;



Fig. 8:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:01min (highlight A.R.W.)

- Mr. Herbert's cloak lying wrapped around the feet of a figure of Bacchus, god of wine, implying *drunkenness*;

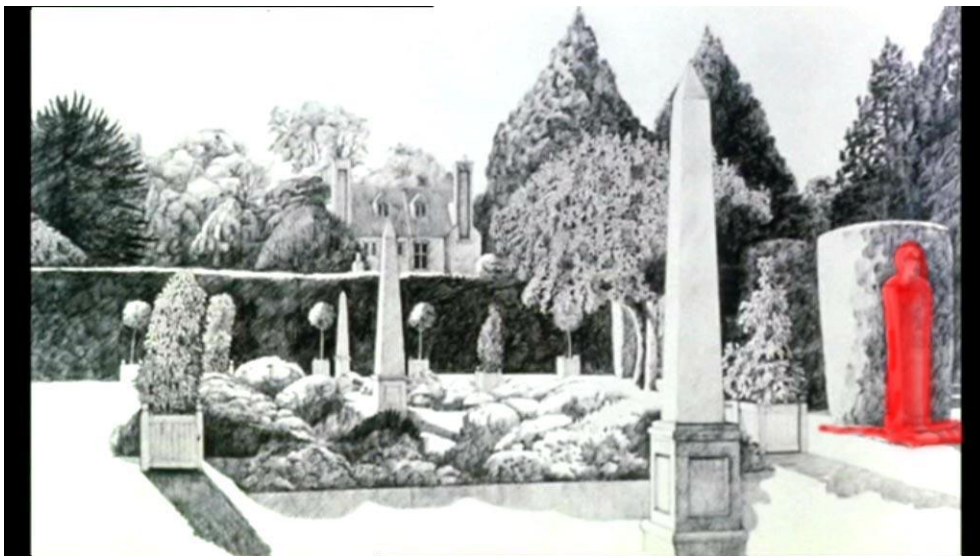


Fig. 9:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:00min (highlight A.R.W.)

- Mr. Herbert's jacket slit across the chest, implying *murder*;

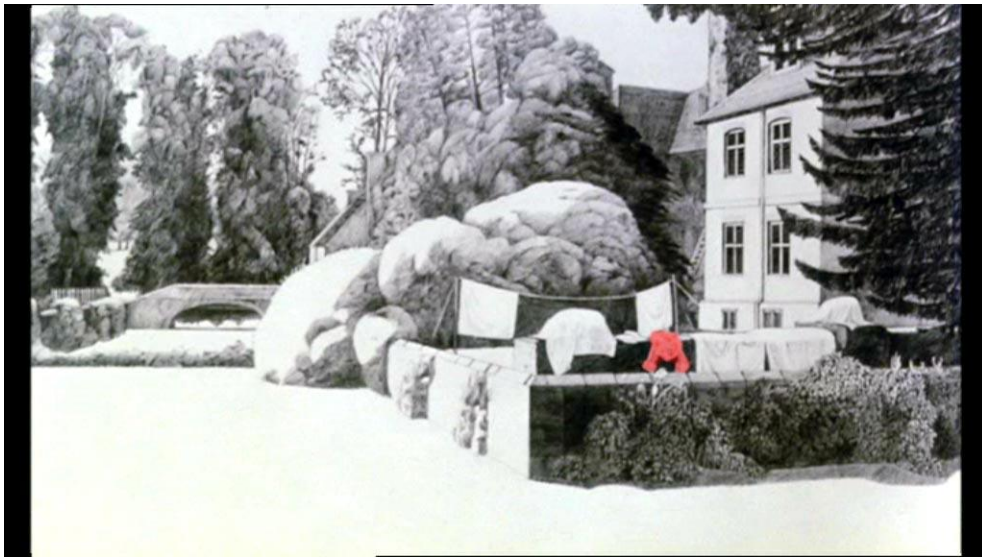


Fig. 10:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:00min (highlight A.R.W.)

- Mr. Herbert's unclaimed riding boots (though obviously *not* in the picture any more than Mr. Talmann's whistling), implying *legacy-hunting*;



Fig. 11:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:00min (highlight A.R.W.)

- Mr. Herbert's shirt near a statue of Hermes, god of thieves, implying *marriage fraud*;

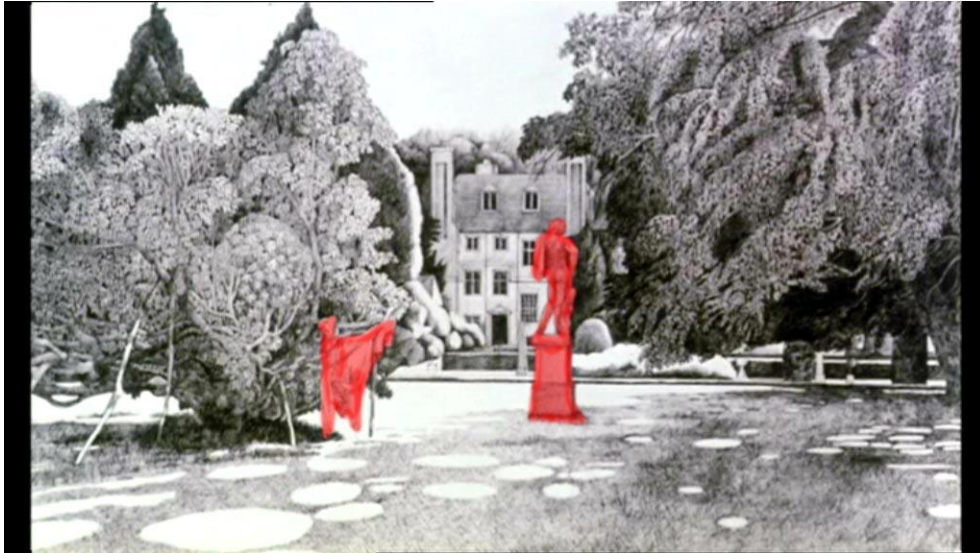


Fig. 12:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:00min (highlights A.R.W.)

- Mr. Herbert's riderless horse, implying *impotence*, and

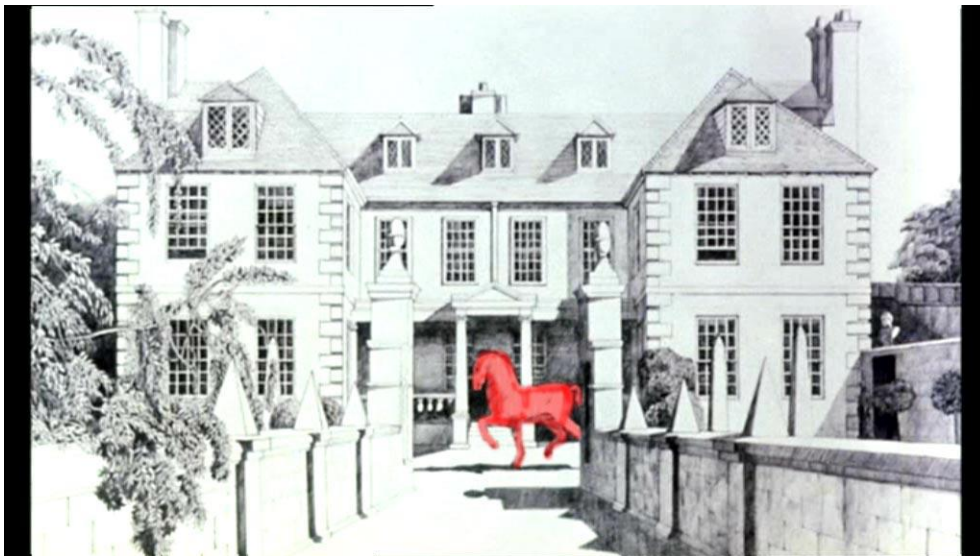


Fig. 13:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:00min (highlight A.R.W.)

- Mrs. Talmann's dog watching the bath house;

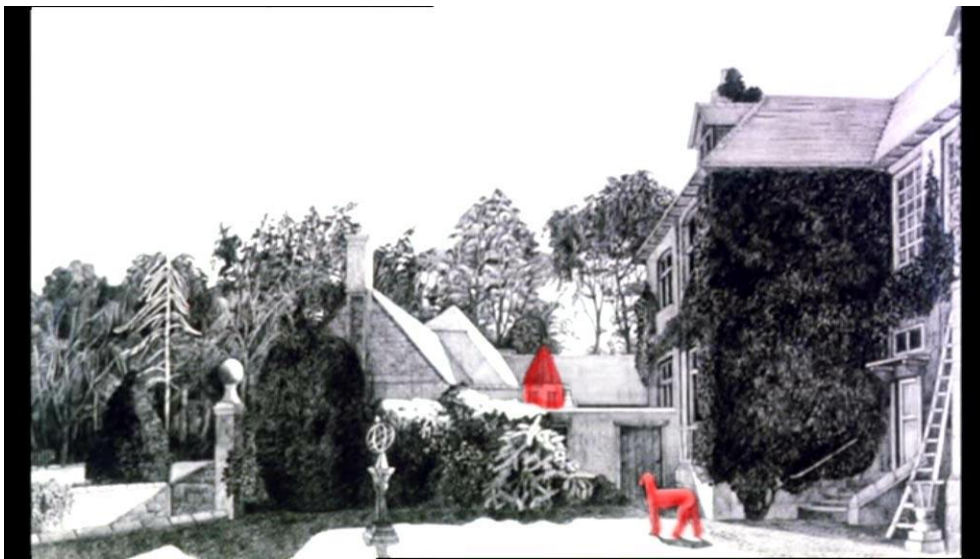


Fig. 14:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:00min (highlights A.R.W.)

- Mrs. Talmann's umbrella and clothes and, finally ...



Fig. 15:
The Draughtsman's Contract 01h:00min (highlights A.R.W.)

- a ladder to Mrs. Talmann's room, all implying *adultery*.



Fig. 16:
The Draughtsman's Contract 00h:59min (highlight A.R.W.)

These items, far from being »innocent«, as Mr. Neville reckons (*The Draughtsman's Contract* 00h:46min), are thus subject to an elaborate *emplotment*—much as Flusser suggests the explanatory linearization of images—in order to make up a set of narratives each of which are equally incriminating for the persons involved, and all of which can be attributed to the unsuspecting Mr. Neville as their *author* and the conspirators' *useful idiot* and *scapegoat* who has nilly-willy burdened his drawings with the systems-theoretical gerneal »risks of all communication« (LUHMANN 1995: 41, translation A.R.W.)—so

- that *firstly* they are imputed with a *meaning* and thus are assessed as the result of a sequence of contingent selections anticipating connectivity,
- that *secondly* in order to understand this meaning, a component of *information* (which apparently is not self-evident) must be distinguished from a component of a *message* (for which there had to be a particular decision to communicate it the way it was communicated);
- that *thirdly* these selections of information and message, that is, the choice of issue and behavior, or in the case of images: of motive and exhibition (cf. BAECKER 2004: 67) can be assessed as *actions* which in turn, then, can be attributed to a *person*;
- that *fourthly* this person can be imputed with an *intention* and
- that *fifthly* this intention must be accounted for—irrespective of whether what the communicator of the message may have »really« meant was understood »correctly«, or even whether or not he may have meant anything at all: intentions are always interpretations as in-

tentions, that is, »fictions pertaining to the operating activities« (LUHMANN 1992: 106f., translation A.R.W.), and »understanding«, as Luhmann has it, »is practically always a misunderstanding without an understanding of the mis« (LUHMANN 2000: 97). The question, then, for *The Draughtsman's Contract* is not »whether an intention is factually given or not, but to explain the fact that intentions can be imputed and that such imputations are very quickly met with approval« (LUHMANN 1992: 106f., translation A.R.W.).

The *successfully intended* misunderstanding, then, is that though no meaning whatsoever had been intended by the otherwise most scrupulous artist, it has only been interpolated by the viewers in a kind of Derridaean »performative interpretation« (DERRIDA 1995: 88)—just as, in a kind of *mise en abyme*, Mr. Neville delivers an interpretation of Januarius Zick's painting *Allegory of Newton's Achievements in Optics* whose subject really has absolutely nothing to do with the rather abstruse murder mystery implied by Mr. Neville—in fact, in 1694, it has not even been *painted* in the first place.



Fig. 17:
The Draughtsman's Contract 00h:53min

As Flusser states, in order to ›read‹ an image one needs a specific kind of *imagination* and, hence, every image can always be ›incorrectly‹ understood, that is, *with an imagination different from the one intended by its producer* (cf. FLUSSER 2014: 20–21)—who, just like Mr. Neville, may even have no imagination at all, making it even the easier to use the images' being ›true to life‹ in order to spread a *lie*—which, according to Umberto Eco, is exactly what confirms their status as being *signs* (cf. ECO 1987: 26, 89)—that is, their capability to signify a non-existent circumstance.

Finally, while their quasi-indexical manufacture has the drawings aspiring to the photographic, their sequential ordering has them aspiring to the cinematographic, and according to Greenaway's self-disclosure,

The Draughtsman's Contract perhaps ought to be called *The Filmmaker's Contract*. What is the profit to a filmmaker, if he only films what he sees and not what he, and also his audience, undoubtedly know?²

Contrary to this correlation, however, the real representative of the filmmaker here is not so much Mr. Neville but the women Mrs. Herbert and Mrs. Talmann who skillfully manipulate the draughtsman as well as all the other gentlemen into their stratagem—just like a filmmaker should use a camera not in order to produce a ›transcription of reality‹, but to make the viewers see what he wants them to see—taking into account what they *know* and what they may be fit to *understand*.

Addendum: a quarter of a century later, the very same mechanism is employed in Greenaway's film *Nightwatching* (2007), a kind of *docu fiction* about Rembrandt van Rijn's decline and fall from grace as caused by his painting *The Nightwatch*—only in reverse: the *filmic* is approached by the *painterly* not via the *photographic*, but via the *theatrical*: while Mr. Neville together with his optical device foreshadows the photographic or even the digital camera, *The Nightwatch* is presented as being »not a painting at all«, but »a work of the theatre« (*Nightwatching* 02h:06min) with its inclusion of movement and sound and its ensemble of actors foreshadowing cinema itself as *the unity of difference of painting and the theatre* (as, for example, Rudolf Arnheim had it). Furthermore, while Mr. Neville does not at all intend to make any accusation with his drawings (although they are understood that very way), Rembrandt's famous painting is presented as carrying a specific clandestine meaning explicitly intended by the artist—although hardly anyone has ever been able to understand it and practically no-one can understand it anymore; constructing a hair-raising conspiracy story reaching from local rivalries to international politics which Rembrandt allegedly had been drawn into, *The Nightwatch* is presented as an accusation of murder made by Rembrandt against his own clients who in turn soon effect Rembrandt's ruin and demise, and its whole reception history is presented either as a obfuscation and oppression of its ›real‹ meaning according to Rembrandt's ›original‹ intention or the incapability of comprehending it.

3. Alexandre Astruc and Consequences, Regrettably Without Images Again

The name and concept of an *écriture filmique*, according to Christian von Tschischke's overview, has been used to denote either

² <http://greenaway.bfi.org.uk/material.php?theme=2&type=Greenaway&title=draughtsman> [accessed March 29, 2009], original emphases.

- a *literary* »adaptation of filmic forms of perception and techniques of presentation«,
- a *generic* categorization for the specificity of the textual genus of the film script
- a *strategic* attempt in film critique and film theory to »establish film as an art form equivalent to the older arts« (eventually turning the history of film into a *literary* history of *works* and the appendant *authors*, cf. FRISCH 2007: 15) or finally even
- a *media theoretical* conception of a certain »category transcending works, genera and media«—

which, however, according to Tschiltschke has never really been explained or made plausible and should therefore »rather be avoided« since, apparently, it would not have any meaning at all apart from its mere metaphoricity (TSCHILTSCHKE 1999: 203-209, translation A.R.W.). In order, however, to make that metaphor work again in a new context, I would firstly like to trace its roots.

Some seventy years ago in 1948, Alexandre Astruc published his famous prophecy of the cinema's future, *The Birth of a New Avantgarde*:

The cinema is simply becoming a medium of expression, just as all the other arts before it, and in particular painting and the novel. After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or a medium of preserving the images of an era, it is gradually becoming a language. By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel.

That is why I would like to call this new age of cinema the age of *camera-stylo*. This metaphor has a very precise sense. By it I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of the visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a medium of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language. [...] The author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen.

A Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Méthode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily. This has nothing to do with a school, or even a movement. Perhaps it could simply be called a tendency: a new awareness, a desire to transform the cinema and accelerate the advent of an exciting future. Of course, no tendency can be so called unless it has something concrete to show for itself. The films will come, they will see the light of day—no doubt about it. The economic and material difficulties of the cinema create the strange paradox whereby one can talk about something which does not yet exist; for although we know what we want, we do not know whether, when, and how we will be able to do it. But the cinema cannot but develop. It is an art that cannot live by looking back over the past and linger in nostalgic memories of an age already gone by. Already it is looking to the future, for the future, in the cinema as elsewhere, is the only thing that matters. (ASTRUC 1964: 111ff., translation A.R.W., original emphases)

This future, one may add from today's perspective, obviously has already happened. 66 years after Astruc's prevision of film's prospective transformations, these, with the advent of the digital technologies, must now be said not only to be *imminent* or *in the process*, but *to have already taken place*—even if so under unforeseeable conditions and maybe quite other than expected or desired: following Astruc, the notion of (and the call for) an *écriture filmique* has been prominent especially in the works of French theorists and

artists such as Alexandre Astruc, Thierry Kuntzel, Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, Jean-Luc Godard, and many others, questioning film's potential as a medium of art and communication as well as the very possibility of a semiotics or a semiology of film—»to understand how films are understood«, as Metz famously put it (METZ 1972a: 197, translation A.R.W.). Paradoxically, however, while the cinema as we knew it back *then* is about to have already *disappeared* from it, one finds today's media culture very much dominated by the semiotic regime of a communicative code very much brought about by the cinema that—in spite of all efforts—still apparently no-one, including even professional experts, is capable of thoroughly mastering or even understanding. Contrary to Astruc's hopes and much to Flusser's disappointment, there has as yet not been a »new Descartes« who would have stood up to Greenaway's prospect of cinema as »a philosophical medium«³—the *Leitmedium* of scientific communication (as system-referentially distinguished from *artistic* communication) is still and undisputedly the *written published text*, and while it is highly questionable whether philosophers, following Plato's argument (in *Politeia*, 473c–d), really should become kings, it seems at least as dubitable whether philosophers should become artists—which, re-ordering Kant's argument⁴, is not to be desired, but, fortunately, not to be expected either.

We might return, however, to the concept of an *écriture filmique* following Flusser's characterization of film as »the last link in the chain of texts« to render the »quiddity of linear codes both over the top and out of joint« towards that new cognitive mode of »techno-imagination« sublating both textuality and traditional pictoriality (FLUSSER 1998: 192-195, translation A.R.W.) in what, following David Rodowick, may be called »a semiotic of *figural discourse*« undermining the pre-fixed opposition of the discursive and the visual (cf. RODOWICK 2001) which was very much the Achilles' heel of the classical semiological concept: on the one hand, by putting up »»word« and »image«, or the expressible and the visible [...], as not only differing, but opposing categories of representation«, according to Paula Quigley, »this idea of a kind of filmic writing [did] not work *with* the image, but *against* it« (QUIGLEY 2004: 153-155, 167, original emphases)—even Astruc spoke of the »tyranny of the visual«—; on the other hand, by adapting to linguistic standards, according to Metz, the cinema only adapted to the role of verbal language's »coarse double« and thereby »sentenced itself to eternal inferiority« (METZ 1972b: 77, translation A.R.W.). In the meantime, however, while the notions of an »*ur-mediality*« of writing (cf. PAECH 2003: 300) or an »*archimediality*« of language (JÄGER 2001: 17f.; 2002: 34) may still have never really lost their validity, we have already seen the advent of the new electronic and digital technologies, as Friedrich Kittler puts it, *absorbing* writing and *carrying it away* (cf. KITTLER

³ Nor, according to HÖRISCH 1999: 158f., will there ever be one.

⁴ »That kings would philosophise or philosophers would become kings is not to be expected, but not to be desired either; for the possession of power inevitably corrupts the free judgement of reason« (KANT 1977: 227, translation A.R.W.).

1986: 3), thus undermining the ›monopoly of writing‹, the ›*Schriftmonopol*‹ of this former *Leitmedium*. While, as Mitchell points out, »[m]edia are always mixtures of sensory and semiotic elements, and all the so-called visual media are mixed or hybrid formations, combining sound and sight, text and image« (MITCHELL 2008b: 15), correspondingly the *new literacies*, according to David Buckingham, are always inter-, trans-, or multimedial competencies, »not tied to particular technologies or practices« but »developed across the whole range of culture and communication« answering and at the same time reinforcing »a blurring of boundaries between texts and between media« towards a so-called »trans-media intertextuality« (BUCKINGHAM 1993: 20, 25). This indication, then, has often (and quite differently so) been subsumed with the term of ›post-mediality‹ in which, according to Rainer Leschke, there are no more *media* (in terms of a reifying *hardware*, an exclusive *technology*, or even a specific *apparatus*) but only *medial forms* (in terms of structures of aesthetic *organization* and cultural forms of *representation*) so that the very concept of *intermediality* may be replaced by that of ›interformativity‹ (cf. LESCHKE 2013: 49).

Indeed, now, terms like ›visual literacy‹ and ›*écriture filmique*‹ should first and foremost be seen as the metaphors they are, but, as Astruc had postulated, they should be given a precise meaning—that is, as I would like to argue, as *metaphors of interformativity*: following McLuhan's famous dictum, »the ›content‹ of any medium is always another medium« (MCLUHAN 1964: 8), but when there are no more media, all that is left is an interplay of forms; if, for example, according to Lev Manovich, under the conditions of the digital cinema, film becomes *a subgenre of painting* (cf. MANOVICH 2001: 406), under the conditions of digital culture at large, painting in turn becomes *a subgenre of writing*, that is, of a »metalanguage of computer media, a code in which all other media are represented« (MANOVICH 2001: 74). The paradox, then, of the concepts of ›text‹ and ›literaricity‹ as one medium or one kind of mediality *amongst* others and, at the same time, *comprising* all the others, could be unfolded into a *synekdoche* in which, as Cary Bazalgette has put it, »media literacy is simply part of general textual competence« (BAZALGETTE 2011: 186)—changing with it, of course, the conception of textuality itself. Indeed, if one applies as the probably most basic definition of writing George Spencer Brown's famous recursive dualism of *distinction* and *indication* (cf. SPENCER BROWN 1997) as the operation of *creating information* and *leaving a trace* (cf. POTT 1995: 18), the subsequent emergence of quite different media can thus be stylised as an evolution of writing—according to Michael Wetzel—from literary ›*classical*‹ writing to the ›*trans-classical*‹ writing of technical media and their physico-chemical registration to the ›*electronic*‹ writing of digital technologies (cf. WETZEL 1991: 47, 79); or—according to Robert Stam—from »*print textuality*« to »*celluloid textuality*« to »*electronic or virtual textuality*« as a form of »*cybernetic écriture*« (STAM 2000: 324, original emphases).

In this respect, while it is certainly true that, following Felix Keller, the interpretation of an image is not limited to the mere assessment of its »visual

evidences« (KELLER 2014: 107) but must also involve the »tacit knowledge« of the whole »pictorial system« not least as the »technological configuration« which has produced it (KELLER 2014: 107), in order to understand how not only *films*, but all sorts of texts and images are understood, it may be advisable to follow Leschke's call for a *metaphorology of media* which would even transcend the focus on the »technological configuration« towards the discourses which serve to ensure a given technology's »cultural processability« (LESCHKE 2003: 73, translation A.R.W.) and thus constitute and validate media *as media*:

The rather dry media technology is provided with a specific metaphor in order to bring about its semantic and cultural connectivity as well as the openness necessary for the game of interpretation. Thus the object of interpretation is not the technology but its metaphorical depiction and its connectivity, that is, its semantic potential of reaction. (LESCHKE 2003: 72f., translation A.R.W.)

What we need to do, then, is to clarify and, if necessary, re-conceptualize the metaphors we work with and of which, as Nietzsche had already reminded us over a century ago, we may have forgotten that they *are* metaphors in the first place (cf. NIETZSCHE 1988: 879ff.)—maybe skeuomorphisms all.



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