

Andrea Cinel

«Avec le cinéma
on parle de tout,
on arrive à tout».

Quelques réflexions
autour du travail de Gabriela Löffel

en page 41

“Through
cinema we can
discuss every-
thing, achieve
everything.”

Reflections
on the work of Gabriela Löffel

For more than ten years, Gabriela Löffel has been putting together a body of work through which she confronts her viewers with issues including the representation of violence, the trivialisation of war and the manipulation of debates for economic and political ends. Löffel is interested in situations where reality rubs shoulders with fiction and she manipulates cinema's codes and techniques to expose our society's contradictions. Always critical, yet not limited to one single political reading, her work teases out the layers of narrative and cites multiple references so as to create space for reflection. In this sense, the installations *Offscreen* (2013) ^{→ S. 2–23} and *Setting* (2011) ^{→ S. 24–39} are perfect examples of the complexity and commitment of her approach.

Setting enfolds us in a spatiotemporal environment: its split screen alternates the absence of images – darkness – with sequences featuring sounds created using a wide range of techniques and objects by professional sound engineer Daniel Hug. An array of loudspeakers emits these sounds or soundscapes that he has put together; there is a loudspeaker at the centre of the installation, but more important is the voice recounting an extra's experience.

We are not on a film set here; instead, we are in Bavaria, immersed in the largest American military camp outside the United States, where soldiers train prior to leaving for Iraq or Afghanistan. Opened in 1910, the Grafenwöhr site was used by the German army until the end of the Second World War. After 1945, it became an American territory, whose location was of strategic importance during the Cold War. Today, this camp is particularly known as a place where conflict situations are staged by *civilians on the battlefield*—that is, extras hired to play Arab civilians—to train soldiers for combat.

After interviewing this extra, the artist called on a narrator to interpret her testimony. The narrator relates her experience in the camp: depending on the scenario, the extra might play the role of an Afghan or Iraqi woman, perhaps in an everyday situation, or perhaps during a simulated insurrection. However, the moment the helicopters and tanks join the action, the fear becomes tangible, almost real, even though this is a fictional war. These helicopters

trigger something in our minds which goes beyond factual reality and is more concerned with filmic memories. Remember for a moment the opening sequences of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, where the noise of the helicopter engines and—metaphorically speaking—the fan plunges us into the frenzied Vietnam War. Similarly, by drawing on the audio vocabulary of war films, the sound engineer weaves a second story which is integrated into what we see and what we hear between the audiovisual experience and our memories of film.

In contrast, *Offscreen* makes use of three projections and two audio tracks: the loudspeakers play an abstract soundtrack in dialogue with the images while a wireless headset enables the viewer to concentrate on the narrator's voice and stroll through the installation. Two screens show a series of projected cinema sets—interior ones using a green screen or a replica aeroplane, for example, and outdoor sets such as the reconstruction of Berlinerstrasse used by Polanski in *The Pianist*. Between the two screens, a wall projection follows a team of stuntmen rehearsing sequences taken from the narrator's story.

Löffel listened to a young Swiss man who, in 2011, took part in an all-inclusive package tour to Afghanistan and Iran: his trip demonstrates a new sector in the tourism industry, namely holidays in conflict zones. Again, the narrator's interpretation fictionalises the account and shows the power of storytelling. Accompanied by a guide and a bodyguard, this traveller discovers a curious reality: a notable feature of his trip through countries at war was a visit to a landmine museum. He stays in the highest-security hotels, yet also explores the most incredible landscapes that these countries have to offer. All the same, there is a moment in the narration where reality regains the upper hand over pretence and the story becomes history: our tourist finds himself at Bagram just as the operation to assassinate Bin Laden is launched.

From the design to the production to the creation of these installations, Löffel uses duplication and fragmentation. She fragments and multiplies viewpoints by interweaving narrative and personal accounts, created and evoked sounds, and direct recordings

juxtaposed with images of film sets, so as to muddy the waters and encourage viewers to ask questions.

In this way, Löffel enquires into a documentary and fictional approach while starting from direct testimony to create an edited and scripted work that sets the narrator's interpretation alongside images and sounds. The artist uses the constant two-way flow between the subjective experience and a universal understanding of war to show us how difficult it has become to distinguish between the categories of reality, truth and fiction as we muse on current wars and the ways in which they are represented. In contrast to the—televised—Vietnam War and the—*imageless*—Gulf War, the artist chose not to show the 21st century wars, but to recount them indirectly, using the experiences of the tourist and the extra, via the narrators' disembodied voices—*voices off*. This refusal is an in-depth investigation into the value of mass-media images, and also a device that Löffel uses to criticise the ideological and economic aspects inherent in their production.

Her oblique and political representation of war is reminiscent of the installations *Raw Footage* (2006) by Aernout Mik and *Serious Games* (2009–2010) by Harun Farocki. The first of these revisits images of the war in the former Yugoslavia not broadcast by the media: Mik shows how extremely serious situations are intertwined with the *unstressed beats* of everyday life and criticises the spectacularisation of war. In *Serious Games*, Farocki took an interest in the new technologies used to train soldiers for combat: like video games, they use digital models to shape reality. Löffel's approach shuns the spectacular and analyses the devices used to prepare for war. She reveals the way in which our perception of war is born of fiction: somewhere between those who believe in objective photographs and those who see all images as a *fabrication*, she chose to film abstract sequences which forge links with the world of cinema.

In this respect, the *civilians on the battlefield* on the Grafenwöhr site are literally entertainment workers who evolve in response to a scenario, which is itself akin to an American blockbuster. These fictional people are the perfect symbol of the idea of *People Exposed*, *People as Extras*, because they are a metonymic representation of Arab populations, victims of

interventions by foreign armies. In effect, as Didi-Huberman puts it, people today are simultaneously *over-exposed*—as a result of mesmerising spectacularisation and media attention—and *under-exposed* thanks to the censorship practiced by the same media. In our opinion, *Setting* is a precise reminder that “under-exposure deprives us, quite simply, of ways of seeing that which should be at issue”.¹ In *Offscreen*, on the other hand, the trip reveals the Disneyfication of the contemporary world, the commodification and theatricalisation of every sector of the economy. Like Alice, bored by her sister reading a book *with no pictures or conversations*, the young Swiss man craves adventure and no longer distinguishes between the real world and the absurd: ultimately, his trip is a kind of cinematic experience in which the Iranians and Afghans he meets are the extras.

All the same, Löffel’s relationship with the cinema is further-reaching than this. The two installations reprise such Hollywood elements as the studio and sets. They also draw on the work of film technicians and create something genuinely collective with them. In this respect, the sets at Babelsberg Studio take us on a journey into times and places that major American productions have made familiar to us. *Berlinerstrasse* reveals quite literally that cinema is all about façades. At the same time, the interior sets compel us to reflect on the resources and techniques used in film production: the *green screen* is the quintessential non-place in which all worlds are possible and can exist. By contrast, the replica aeroplane examines the clichés and the homogeneity of scenarios in film. Moreover, the sound engineer in *Setting* plays on the fictional pact that we live out at the cinema when we perceive the sounds accompanying the images on screen as real. In the same way, the stuntmen in *Offscreen* rehearse scenes taken from the young man’s story against a minimalist set made up of cardboard boxes which could represent all sorts of objects.

Offscreen also uses cinematographic techniques: long tracking shots alternate with short sequences, overviews with details and fixed shots with reverse-angle shots: the editing defines the rhythm of the whole, which—as Coppola put it—is the true essence of cinema. We must go beyond

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés, peuples figurants. L’Oeil de l’histoire* 4, 2012, p. 15.

visual editing in Löffel's work, however, because the role played by audio arrangements is probably even more important here. In fact, despite appearances, the sound and original music in these installations are never incidental or used as padding; instead, they are compositions in constant dialogue with the narrators' voices and the on-screen images, or even sources that multiply the layers of narrative and critique.