Review: Robin Curtis (2006) *Conscientious Viscerality: The Autobiographical Stance in German Film and Video*

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As Robin Curtis points out the 19th century neologism autobiography is made up of three stem words derived from the Greek terms *autos*, *bios*, and *graphe*, respectively, the self, the life, and, with regard to the medium of film, the specific form of their incorporation in audiovisual form. This breakdown allows Curtis to introduce his central thesis, which focuses on the *bios* rather than the *autos* in autobiographical German film and video and a particular kind of *bios* at that. He states: 'the autobiographical film in Germany places particular emphasis on the situation and movement of the subject through space, that is, on the experience of the ecological self in its mobility, implied by the *bios* of autobiography, with the emphasis placed on the experience of the present moment' (116). There is a lot packed into this statement. For one thing, it suggests that there is a recognisable genre of autobiographical film in Germany. However, Curtis's research led him to the surprising fact that there was a dearth of autobiographical film in Germany. In part, *Conscientious Viscerality* is a search for a genre, a search, which results in Curtis encompassing a wide range of German largely independent, experimental film into his framework with varying degrees of success.

Curtis begins by looking beyond a notion of autobiographical film modelled on the literary form whereby the self, whose actions comprise a coherent chronological life story is foregrounded. From Curtis's very interesting but much too brief forays into the psychological

and sociological impact of post-war German history, all kinds of reasons emerge as to why that version of self representation might not appear or have currency in German film. The most compelling of these reasons appears later in the book when Curtis cites psychoanalyst Dori Laub's thesis that 'a unique feature of the Holocaust was its effect of having produced no witnesses' (144). Whether as victims or perpetrators, the German nation were so fully immersed in the occlusions that were part and parcel of everyday life in Nazi Germany so as to render the external perspective intrinsic to self-reflection null and void. While post-war filmmakers in the 1970s and 80s did begin to account for themselves autobiographically, even then, seizing the address of the "I" was fraught with silences that extended to the public realm of reception. In lieu of being able to circulate the "I" as an authorial voice of knowledge and memory, Curtis implies that in German experimental filmmaking there is more emphasis on the visceral as a communicating force between film and viewer. Though Curtis celebrates this somewhat, he is also attentive to its inherent cultural problematic, which stems from the inheritance of a cult of the body that existed during the Nazi regime as a cipher of 'the natural and authentic', of 'a corporeal aesthetics' extending from the Nazi regime to the post-war period and on into the 1970s (7). Curtis's emphasis on *bios* is in part haunted by this legacy.

Bios, for Curtis, has a phenomenological impetus, having to do with one's situation in space, which, while being crossed by temporality, is largely bound up with the affectivity of movement rather than the contents of a life per se. In proffering this as an alternative autobiographical stance, Curtis turns to definitions of the self offered by cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser who 'postulates five kinds of self-knowledge, each of which is composed of different kinds of information, is gathered by different means, and is acquired at a different time ontogenetically' (37). This is where Curtis gets the notion of the ecological self that most explicitly defines his notion of *bios*. For Neisser, '[t]he ecological self is perceived in relation to the physical environment and the state and activity of the self in that environment' (38). This notion, which Curtis sees as both visceral and historical, leads him to incorporate a range of films from Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Grobstadtzigeuner* (Urban Gypsies) 1933 and Oskar Fischinger's *Munchen-Berlin Wanderung* (Walking from Munich to Berlin) 1927, (the latter is one of the two films presented in flick book manner at the bottom corners of each page), to films by second generation Turkish and Kurdish immigrant and second generation German filmmakers, who feel the need to remember what their parents' generation left out of count. All of these very different films are tentatively linked in terms of how they present a body or

bodies moving through space, whether this be a camera body in the case of Moholy-Nagy's and Fischinger's films or the autobiographical subject himself as in Fatih Akin's filmic journey from Hamburg to Turkey, the world of his family's past. In foregrounding the affectivity and viscerality of filmic movement as autobiographical tropes, Curtis's book relates to general trends in film theory which have revised phenomenology as a mode of cinematic engagement and indeed references to Laura U. Marks, Giuliana Bruno, and Vivian Sobchack occur. However Curtis makes the case for the specificity of these tropes in German film and video where filmic spatial and visceral images substitute for events that cannot be incorporated into a fully historical dimension where the past can be brought into a relation with the present and the future.

For example, Claudia von Alemann's *War einst ein wilder Wassermann* (Was Once a Wild Watersprite, 2001) follows a series of discussions between von Alemann, her mother, and her daughter on the occasion of the mother's first trip back to Thuringia after more than 50 years. For Curtis, while the daughter's tearful response to her grandmother's description of her support for the Nazis serves as emotional witness, a silence hovers over the film. The daughter asks no questions, which leads Curtis to conclude that 'no real attempt is made to achieve […] comprehension' of what it was like in those days (154). Something similar occurs in Helma Sanders-Brahms *Mein Vater Hermann S.* (1986) where Sanders-Brahms returns with her father to the various locations where he was stationed in France during the war. The romanticism of war, the self-sacrifice and inescapable fate of German soldiers, dominate the voice-over narration. Sanders-Brahms' father reminisces politely with French people of a similar age. The occlusion of any conflict either in the location or in the relationship between father and daughter is encapsulated by shots of the green hills in Normandy where the concrete bunkers built by the Nazis are slowly disappearing into the landscape again covered by grass and sand.

However, in a sense, perhaps these occlusions communicate by default. Key to Curtis's establishment of a different basis for autobiographical film in general and German film in particular is the necessity of *reception* to the autobiographical. After spending an inordinate amount of time surveying theoretical texts from literary studies of autobiography Curtis eventually reaches the useful point that autobiography is determined by reception, i.e. an act of reading, or viewing, rather than a particular set of textual characteristics. At first, given Curtis's exegesis of Alois Reigl's notion of the haptic, I had the impression that he was going to develop a phenomenological account of reception from his identification that the traversal of

on-screen space by protagonists either in front of or behind the camera generates affective interrelations between viewer and film. I was disappointed. In fact, the first part of the book began to read more and more like a dissertation literature survey. (From what I can gather from the frontispiece, this book was initially presented as a dissertation at the Free University in Berlin in 2003.) Arguments precede on the basis of minor disagreements with, or overlooked minutia in, texts such as Elizabeth W. Bruss's *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (1976). From the latter text, Curtis extracts the concepts of intersubjectivity, performativity, and referentiality, which are crucial to his theory of reception, concepts which are well-established in feminist theories of autobiography, as well as in theories of visual culture and documentary. In Curtis's attention to detail, development of the overall argument to do with reception gets lost. As the book proceeds, contrary to Curtis's claims, reception becomes filmic content rather than being the scenario of an embodied, haptically engaged, viewer, who is also historically situated. This might in part relate to the lack of illustrations in the book, which necessitates lengthy, albeit evocative, descriptions of films that will only be known to a specialist audience.

Curtis begins his filmic journey with Moholy-Nagy's films, particularly concentrating on *Grobstadtzigeuner*. I have not seen this film, but, from Curtis's description, I am unconvinced by his insistence that it is not an ethnographic film, but instead presents the *bios* of autobiography in portraying the urban Gypsies in a particular location in time and space. While it is clear that the film is not intended to give us cultural knowledge of the urban Gypsies as such, this seems a very reductive definition of the ethnographic in film which, in Catherine Russell's term of auto-ethnography, can be expanded to incorporate formal experimentation and social representation, as well as question the distance between selves and others both near and far. In fact, Russell's *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* is a key absence from Curtis's otherwise extensive bibliography. Trinh Minh-Ha's films would be a case in point. Their poetics stage a dialogue between the filmmaker, the subjects being filmed, and the viewer that incorporates the visceral and the historical in ways that address the problematics of reception. Certainly Curtis is right to say that the version of Moholy-Nagy's film that was reconstructed by the film production company, Chronos, following the transfer of the original film stock from nitrate to safety stock in 1968, presents a more typically ethnographic representation of the Gypsies (91). However, Curtis's claim that in the original film's different address '[w]e, the viewer, are the intended' does not rule the film

out from being considered ethnographic in Russell's sense. The images, he says, present the 'representation of the situation of a particular historical subject in time and space', i.e. the Gypsies, and in inviting the viewer to engage haptically, 'the film extends that historically and geographically-situated experience in its particular filmic manifestation into an intersubjective one' (88). The first body of films that Curtis looks at from the 1930s are all read as manifesting a phenomenological, embodied reception by means of how the camera, the images and the editing show spaces being traversed, generating emotional geographies in the process. This is a very general claim and true of almost any film.

One would have thought that when Curtis gets on to more obviously autobiographical films, i.e. where filmmakers set out to explore an aspect of their lives, their family history or relationships, the intersubjective dimension of reception would really take off theoretically, but instead reception transmutes into filmic content. In films such as Jutta Bruckner's *Tue Recht und Scheue Niemand* (Do Right and Fear No One, 1975) and Karin Jurschick's *Danach Hatte es Schon Sein Mussen* (It Should Have Been Nice After That, 2000), where the filmmakers set out to uncover the complexity of their family histories, a historically and geographically-situated subject is explored, but where is the viewer who seemed key to the conferral of the autobiography as an intersubjective engagement? How do we relate to these German mother and father figures? How do we interpret the absences and revelations that the films present? How do we embody them or situate them in relation to histories we have varying knowledge of? Discussing Angela Melitopoulos's *Passing DRAMA_* (1999), a video which weaves the stories of numerous former refugees from Asia Minor now living in the Greek city of Drama with that of her father, a former inhabitant of that city who survived a concentration camp in Austria and is now a retired *Gastarbeiter* (guest worker) in Germany, Curtis returns to reception and finally poses some of these questions (137). In relation to Birgit Hein's controversial *Baby I will make you sweat* (1994), an exploration of her trips to Jamaica as a female sex-tourist, Curtis raises the more obvious issue of reception vis-a-vis audience outrage, but where is the situated viewer, who is led by particular types of image-making to haptically negotiate intersubjective relations? How do viewers with no experience of immigration negotiate the stories presented in the films Curtis poignantly describes by second generation Turkish immigrant filmmakers who often deploy a nomadic camera and a variety of means of transportation to signify a lack of ground? Is our relation to these journeys purely based on

narrative or on an imbrication of the formal and the emotional, as Curtis suggests, but doesn't fully develop in relation to the films themselves?

For me this book is more interesting for its descriptions of the films in relation to background historical and social detail. Germany's relationship with Turkey in terms of immigration, the concept of the *Gastarbeiter* and *jui sanguinis*, a concept insisting on the purity of German identity tellingly raise the problematic of self-identity in the German psyche that extends from the Nazi regime. But again, even on a very general level of reception, if there is such a barrier between what it is to be or not to be German, how, structurally, might the visceral affectivity of films that challenge, or at least question this purity, transgress those boundaries? While I am totally convinced by Curtis's account of the encumbering of German autobiography due to historical circumstance (143) and the use of spatial traversal as a means of executing a trace that substitutes for remembering (147), the haptically engaged viewer seems to left in a state of wandering through obscure spaces.

Ultimately, *Conscientious Viscerality* is a book in two halves. On the one hand, Curtis gives us useful exegesis of theories of the haptic and visceral mimesis, as in Kracauer's concept of mentality. On the other hand, eloquent descriptions of a range of films to which concepts of the kinaesthetic, the haptic, and the visceral are applied without being challenged by the formal structures of particular films and how these might engage particular viewers. By this, I do not mean socially situated audiences, but a specifically dynamic intersubjective response. Kracauer's concept of mentality had to do with how 'a film facilitates the implicit transmission of visceral and intellectual knowledge both through the surface data of a work and through the optical unconscious made sensible through the particular manner in which a film makes the world accessible' (17). Description as the mere designation of a site, as Roland Barthes put it in 'The Third Meaning', can only go so far here. It needs to be put in dialogue with the theoretical concepts Curtis applies, the point being how a film image or sequence of images generates affect in ways that go beyond content, exceed narrative, and impinge on our embodied psyches.

Curtis ends with the struggle filmmakers have in signify the autobiographical using a medium whose mechanical nature is always producing something that is beyond the control of the filmmaker, something that is other than intended. But isn't this the beauty of film as an autobiographical modus? The film acts as an interface, not between the filmmaker and viewer as in a very traditional and outmoded concept of the autobiographical, but between the other

that constitutes the self and the self's capacity to hold its own viewing at a distance, both optically and haptically. The film body is the external other, which engages our internal dialogue and allows us to attend to the space of intersubjectivity. Thus we become witnesses of our autobiographies through the stories of others.

Bibliography

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