

Nanna Heidenreich

Films by Philip Scheffner: THE HALFMOON FILES & THE DAY OF THE SPARROW

Philip Scheffner's films create a totally unique form of political thought which reallocates the visible and the invisible. He creates complex visual and aural spaces, weaves together different stories and sets out on intense searches for clues whose points of intersection remain pointedly open.

Scheffner was born in Homburg an der Saar in 1966 and has lived in Berlin since 1986. He was a member of the interdisciplinary project Botschaft e.V. and part of the Berlin authors' group and production company dogfilm from 1991-1999. In 2001, he founded the production company pong together with Merle Kröger, a platform "for film, text, sound and everything in-between".

www.pong-berlin.de

This double DVD release contains Schneffer's first two feature-length films (with English subtitles included). Both multi-award winning films received their premiere at the Berlinale Forum and are in the Arsenal - Institute for Film and Video Art distribution range.

THE HALFMOON FILES (2007, 87 min) follows the trail of the "Half Moon Camp" in Wünsdorf near Berlin, uncovering images and sounds like a game of memory. The film's starting point is the sound recording of an Indian colonial soldier who was incarcerated in the prisoner of war camp during the First World War. The crackling sound of this shellac record, which is stored in the sound archive of the Humboldt University's Helmholtz Centre, comes to soundtrack a series of ghosts from the past, whose presence in our present is made both audible and visible by the film.

Philip Scheffner also realized a 4-channel sound and video installation on the film's various themes together with author and academic Britta Lange.

Since 2007, numerous academic articles, essays and other texts in both English and German have appeared on the film, the installation or on individual thematic aspects of both, a selection of which are available at the film's website.

www.halfmoonfiles.de

DER TAG DES SPATZEN (2010, 100 min) is a political nature film about a country where the line between war and peace has become blurred. Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, November 14th 2005: a sparrow is shot and killed after knocking down 23,000 dominos. A German soldier dies in Kabul as a consequence of a suicide bombing. These two adjacent headlines lead director Philip Scheffner to set out in search of war using the methods of ornithology.

www.dertagdesspatzen.de

The Cinematic Surplus

Nicole Wolf on THE DAY OF THE SPARROW

(...) THE DAY OF THE SPARROW is thus an animal film and, true to its genre, follows birds to their habitats, providing insight into their territorial behaviors. It takes us to the meanders of the Mosel River, little villages and forests behind hilly fields in the Eifel region, flowery meadows, tranquil lakes in the woods, long sandy beaches and the expanse of the Baltic Sea, as well as to cities such as Bonn, Berlin, and Leeuwarden. We often gaze at complex open spaces and sometimes into the sky – but before the screen is able to turn into an abstract, idyllic landscape painting, a particular detail grabs out attention or there is a cut to a precise close-up of a flock of birds or a Tornado fighter plane landing. The observer must often wait patiently in ambush and, much like an ornithologist, pay as much attention to sounds close by as to those far away; perhaps a bit like a soldier lying in wait for the enemy, even if those were different times.

Gradually, an alongside, a behind, an in front, or an in between develops. Places that cannot be entered, films never made, peripheral talk, questions and answers, about war, security, militarization, peace, involvement, remaining silent and taking action, and Afghanistan. Image and sound both work together and against each other; concentration, friction; our senses become confused in steady, accumulative fashion. Without spectacular images or dramatic climaxes, the sustained use of an inconspicuous, yet precisely placed and always observant camera and a sensitively constructed nexus of thoughts and perspectives both fragmentary and incisive generates a sense of tension and intensity akin to the breathless feeling of building a tower of cards. A cinematic surplus is produced, the sort of wonderful excess we experience when cinema is at its best; perhaps it can best be reformulated as a form of thinking and seeing from the margins, a cinematic experiment in showing what cannot be described.

The simultaneity of the death of a sparrow and of a German soldier in the Afghanistan war and the seemingly coincidental overlaps between these two events come together to form a sophisticated balancing act that avoids over-interpreting unexpected parallels in

favor of questioning our perception in unobtrusive, yet fundamental fashion. Neither the possibilities revealed by the oft-silent long shots nor the sheer proximity to the matter at hand result in anything being determined in definitive terms. The insistence on silence, observation, sustained listening, and the tacit invitation to allow our habitual perception to leave the beaten track creates a feeling of cinematic openness that makes a shift in perspective possible. The relationship between the observer and what is being observed becomes blurred, partly because we are denied the opportunity of remaining on the periphery and uninvolved even as we watch from afar. Thus, when the camera takes in two German soldiers slowly pacing out a fenced-in area and watching and wondering whether the intruders should be taken seriously, it is a situation which contains far more than can be described based on mere structures of gaze and reciprocal gaze.

If the crisis in documentary means that no new images can be made and that there are no really new stories to tell anymore, not to mention the fact that we live in an age where the media grapples with conflict zones in such constant fashion that our lack of relationship to the matter of hand has caused us to lose our capacity for empathy, *THE DAY OF THE*

SPARROW is a quietly insistent example of how documentaries, or specialized documentaries at any rate, are capable of moving beyond describing the world the way we see it today. If we view familiar landscapes with a sense of corporeal alienation after watching the film and the standard, unwavering position we inhabit within the particular visual and acoustic contexts we have experienced has been shaken up, this serves to demonstrate the fascinating potential of a politics of aesthetics that makes political thought and action possible in the first place. (...)

In the end, we are confronted with highly topical questions as far as taking action is concerned, the question of how taking action is linked to seeing, or seeing is linked to understanding, or understanding to proximity, or proximity to involvement – or how we relate to things that seemingly only disturb our peace from afar.

To be Haunted

Nicole Wolf on THE HALFMOON FILES

THE HALFMOON FILES is a gift – a generous gift and an invitation. An invitation to journey to distant lands that turn out to be not so far away after all, to seek the unexpected, to listen to the sounds of an old barrack or a landscape gradually emerging from the fog, and to closely observe the many possible images of a voice. A film in the form of an invitation to follow ghosts which is also a quiet, yet nonetheless intense call to think. At the beginning, everything seems very simple and clear, but soon we are being haunted: by ghosts, by voices, by many different stories, and finally by strategies and the power of history. In the end, everything turns out very differently than expected, which ends up being a very good thing.

On the one hand, we are in the middle of World War One and in Wünsdorf, a small town near Berlin. This is the location of the “Halfmoon Camp”, a special POW camp for enemy colonial soldiers. We learn how the call to jihad was used as a German war strategy in 1914 and hear about the stories both big and small that begin with a postcard of a mosque hanging in a pub called “Zum Zapfenstreich” in Wünsdorf in 2006. In 2006, we are also in the Sound Archive of the Humboldt University, Berlin. But at the same time we are in the year 1914, when the idea for a sound archive of “all the peoples of the world” was born; soon afterwards, linguist Wilhelm Doegen was head of the “Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission”. From time to time, we are also in India. In 1892, the Sikh Mall Singh is born in the northern Indian village of Ranusukhi in Ferozpur District, Punjab.

“At four o’clock on December 11, 1916, Mall Singh speaks a brief text in his native tongue into the funnel of a phonograph. It all takes exactly one minute and twenty seconds.” – This is in Wünsdorf. The filmmaker’s voice guides us from visual material to sound material and usually lets us linger there awhile. At first the voice seems to speak without emphasis, factually, clearly, without judgment. But after a while, it is as if what it

says is sending out vibrations and setting out a path for the listener. The dimensions relating to the sound archive's interior design provide an inkling of how deep and full an archive can be. Sound, voices, cracklings and rustlings, whether alongside, in connection with, behind, or in absence of an image, open up spaces of resonance. A recurring soundtrack already seems to be connected to the ghosts in formal terms, because latency and depth are just as evident here.

(...)

The individualization of every single component of the film creates conceptual spaces of a multi-layered nature. All the materials are protagonists of equal importance when it comes to considering questions and posing new ones; they are all part of the dramatic structure. The filmmaker is also implied in this process, thus becoming material himself, just as giving over the dramatic structure of the film to the material itself becomes a formal argumentation against the instrumentalization of Indian soldiers as extras in the project of war. The colonial plan to produce knowledge by measuring, numbering, categorizing, codifying, and displaying the exotic is undermined – and not by means of a counterstatement, but by displaying historicity in a different way. The cinematic reflection on possible relationships to the archive material thus leads to unobtrusive forms of narration which enliven our relationship to the archive and its history in more lasting fashion as a result. At the same time, the view of India thus becomes an encounter in which we meet each other halfway.

This political moment – the possibility of changing current thought with the aid of the ghosts of the past – links here to cinema's political potential. *THE HALFMOON FILES* accepts the cinematographic potential to produce different temporalities and expands upon it; history, present, and future collapse into one. Cinematic excess develops from the challenge it poses to the medium of film itself. The search that leads to film does not reduce the substantive, material, and sensual qualities inherent to each medium, but allows them to come into their own to an even greater extent. The crackling of a more than 90-year-old sound recording of a striking voice breathes life into an image that is as black as a shellac disc. A film scene is described and plays with our memories. A sequence

of unknown slides that is well put together yet simultaneously enigmatic – portraits of Indian soldiers in World War One – is placed alongside calm footage of today's Wünsdorf. A fragmentary approach to narration, experiencing history, and contemplating life, which at the same time implies responsibility: no cut in this film is arbitrary.

THE HALFMOON FILES also poses a challenge to the genre of the documentary film. The documentary material encourages us to spin tales, and our notion of the real is pushed to expand the limits of what can be thought possible. The film's political component is equally present in the diverse ways of seeing, hearing, sensually experiencing, and thinking. And even without specific notes about current political strategies over the course of different historiographies, we cannot fail to see that many places are haunted.