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**ARTISTIC
RESEARCH**

BOXES, LINES, RHYTHMS

On “The Forgotten Space” by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch



In face of the flows of money and commodities that Alan Sekula photographically documented for his “Fish Story”, it comes as no surprise that he changed the medium for his most recent work: from photography to film. His collaboration with filmmaker and film theorist Noël Burch, “The Forgotten Space”, not only deals with the consequences of capitalism, but must also be grasped as an examination of Marx’s “Capital”.

But, how much Marxism is possible today, and, when talk is of forgotten spaces, where are the spaces they can be addressed? Where do the parallels to other projects lie that deal with “Capital”, such as Alexander Kluge’s large-scale project on the abandoned film adaptation of “Capital” by Sergei Eisenstein?

Recently, Alexander Kluge revisited Eisenstein’s aborted 1927–28 plan for a film version of Marx’s capital: “Nachrichten aus der Ideologischen Antike” is a 10-hour DVD set containing a seemingly endless series of short segments, most of them conversations between Kluge and various representatives of German *Suhrkamp-Kultur* like Peter Sloterdijk and Dietmar Dath.¹ Its shamelessly sprawling and rambling nature may appear anachronistic, suggesting that for Kluge time is not an issue and in unlimited supply; on the other hand, the project is clearly of its time in its abandonment of Eisensteinian dialectical film montage in favor of a televisual enfilade of talking heads. “Nachrichten” reflects radical changes in medium and in production and distribution in its very structure. Insofar as Kluge’s sprawling assemblage of performers is dialectic, is an open-ended dialectic of intermingling discourses that regularly collapse into virtuoso sophistry.

Recent art and filmmaking are not short of works that could be seen as covert attempts to make a filmic capital for the 21st century – such a hubristic intention never being stated explicitly. The most wide-ranging and indeed monumental of these works is Allan Sekula and Noël Burch’s 2010 feature-length film, “The Forgotten Space”, which is subtitled “A film essay”.² Co-director Noël Burch stands at the origin of the origin of the notion of the essay film, pitted against both the conventional documentary: “I set the essay film against ‘documentary’ in the classical sense, that supposedly objective rendering of reality, my bad objects were Flaherty, Grierson and the GPO. An essay film was about getting across ideas.”³ In the case of “The Forgotten Space”, the ideas come largely from Sekula’s work: “The Forgotten Space” is a continuation of his photo/text essay

“Fish Story” (1989–95) using other means. This also means that discussions of the film are often somewhat skewed when it comes to authorship: Sekula’s contribution seems easier to pin down than Burch’s.

Like the photo essay that is “Fish Story”, the two-hour film focuses on ocean transport and the labor conditions it entails. As a covert filmic take on “Capital”, it is necessarily an essay on abstraction – on the reality of abstraction as embodied, in this instance, by the shipping container. “The Forgotten Space” is, as Sekula’s voice-over puts it, “the unlikely story of a steel box”. The minimalist boxes are shown in various situations: on deck, on endless trains traversing the countryside, being carted around in a fully automated port. Accompanied by Riccardo Tesi’s accordion on the soundtrack, the latter scene becomes a veritable ballet *mécanique*. Containerization, which had triumphed by the 1970s, means that the physical labor needed for the loading and unloading of commodities was drastically reduced; harbors became mechanized and the ocean and its ports became a “forgotten space” while capitalism prided itself on its “dematerialized” reinvention in the age of information technology. “The Forgotten Space” takes a long hard look on the container as a physical agent of abstraction, transforming labor, life, and entire communities.

The film originated a decade ago when Sekula was asked by SKOR, the Dutch foundation for public art, to document the upheavals of the Betuwelijn, a new train line connecting the all-important port of Rotterdam to the hinterland. The film’s first part, “Phoenix and Mammoth”, reflects the project’s origins in homing on the dubious nature of this prestige project, for which alternatives (especially riverboats) were readily available



Allan Sekula/Noël Burch, „The Forgotten Space“, 2010, film still

and that never lived up to its alleged potential. As an autonomous reality, a line of flight being isolated as much as possible from the surrounding countryside, the Betuwelijjn stands for an increasing separation between lines of transport and their context; they cut through spaces and communities without connecting to them or offering employment.

From Holland, the film embarks on a global itinerary, with long segments focusing on California and Hong Kong and Shenzhen in the Pearl River Delta, before returning to Europe for an acerbic exposé on Bilbao and its Guggenheim branch – the sublimated container for blue-chip art (as it was called before the financial crisis). In between these segments, Sekula and Burch portray the Korean/Indonesian crew of a container ship, driving home the importance of another American innovation, the “flag of convenience”, which allows for the bypassing of Western labor law. The film’s epilogue is an ode to the Belgian village of Doel, which also shows up briefly in the prologue – a village slated for demolition because of the expansion of the port of Antwerp. While “The Forgotten Space” mourns the destruction of old forms of life and old communities, at times quite rhetorically, it should not be seen as an exercise in nostalgia. Instead, the film exposes the effects of a containerization on societies open to questioning by suggesting that the transforma-

tions we see are not natural occurrences but the result of political and economical processes that can be influenced.

It is not particularly surprising that an unashamedly Marxist film starring metal boxes spent a long time in development hell, during which the directors and SKOR tried to find co-producers and secure funding. The film on the screen is consequently not quite the one envisaged in early treatments and scripts. One element that disappeared was the Leitmotif of a Disney Winnie-the-Pooh doll that would appear in various contexts, from its fabrication in China to its consumption in Holland. The Disneyfied bear would have given the containers’ content an anthropomorphic face; it would have shown us the type of commodity that is familiar from a lot of art. By contrast, in the finished film the box remains a hermetic, modernist volume, concretizing the abstraction at the heart of the system, making visible its production of invisibility. However, this nonhuman protagonist is joined by (and at times eclipsed by) a human supporting cast that ranges from Dutch farmers and technocrats to Indonesian sailors and young female workers in Shenzhen – migrants from the Chinese countryside who flocked to the expanding city.

When “The Forgotten Space” was screened in Rotterdam in February, followed by a Q&A with the filmmaker, Hito Steyerl’s recent film

“In Free Fall” (2010) was on view at the Wilfried Lentz gallery in the same city. Steyerl’s much shorter film centers on a different kind of metal box, the airplane, specifically on the “lives” of Boeing airplanes, leading from the Israeli army to an airplane junkyard in the Mojave desert. Steyerl references Sergei Tretyakov’s 1929 essay “The Biography of the Object”, as well as the stock market crash of that same year, which also figures heavily in Kluge’s “Nachrichten”. Steyerl’s 30-minute short combine’s shots from the airplane junkyard with shots of herself and a few others as well as a TV documentary on DVD production: while the planes are at times used for filmic spectacles such as “Speed”, their aluminum is also recycled for DVDs. It would indeed appear that with “In Free Fall”, Steyerl “has turned from the essayistic subject to the essayistic object”, but it may be more precise to say that the film focuses on objects as having a certain derivative and secondary agency that affects lives.⁴ Depending on market fluctuations, planes may be used for movie productions or be sold to China for their scrap metal. “In Free Fall” does not fetishize the social relations between things; both object and subject act and are acted on in a bewilderingly complex political economy, with Steyerl’s cameraman partly losing his job in Hollywood because of the crash in the DVD market due to online streaming and filesharing.

“The Forgotten Space”, that “story of a box”, is also much more than that. In addition to shots of people at work or at leisure, there is no shortage of talking heads. A particularly poignant episode focuses on a tent camp for homeless in California patrolled by underpaid guards right next to the railway track on which the containers move. An African-American woman with a

blond wig – her hair is falling out – clutching some dolls makes for a rather different talking head than those in Kluge’s DVD film. In his review of Kluge’s opus, Fredric Jameson recalled that while Eisenstein had theorized a “discursive film” that would be non-anecdotal, filming “Capital” necessitates a dialectic of the discursive and the anecdotal; when trying to track abstraction in real and concrete situations, one can hardly avoid the telling – and thereby anecdotal – example.⁵ However, with Kluge the discourse itself often tends to become an anecdotal kind of virtuoso performance, whereas with Sekula and Burch the filmic “anecdotes” are eventually reintegrated in a whole that is both musical and discursive, an ebbing and rising, rhythmic montage. The overarching structure of “The Forgotten Space” allows its makers to include many vignettes – one such vignette, for instance, shows children on a “container port” playground, playfully preparing themselves for life in the containerized world. Helped by its geographic trajectory, which allows the directors to explore different facets and effects of containerization, the film is much more linear than Kluge’s “Nachrichten” – and yet, the digressions that feed the analysis also make for a “rather rambling structure”, as Burch puts it. If, towards the end, there are a few too many false stops and restarts, a few too many rambles, Sekula’s voiceover provides for a fitting finale by intoning that “the lowly crew must seize the helm” and that the last thing left in Pandora’s box, after all the horrors had escaped from it, was hope – the film’s last word.

Burch’s grim diagnosis that the kind of essay film he has advocated “is out of fashion, ratings are paramount, audiences are meant to be too dumb to follow anything the least bit complex”

seems to be borne out by the fact that during its release in Dutch art-house cinemas, “The Forgotten Space” was seen by some 130 people. Television screenings obviously have higher ratings than that; the film was co-produced by VPRO television in Holland and the ORF in Austria, but these broadcasters demanded shorter edits. “The Forgotten Space” traces the lines drawn by boxes shipped across the globe – but the distribution of the film itself doesn’t run as smoothly as container transport. If Steyerl’s quick-paced and almost MTV-style edit runs the risk of making “In Free Fall” look deceptively easy to consume, “The Forgotten Space” seems ill-equipped for survival in what passes for today’s visual culture.

Since “The Forgotten Space” will usually be screened in a digital format anyway, screenings for students and other groups in contexts that not anticipated by regular film distribution may be a more interesting option.⁶ On the release of his “Film Socialisme” in 2010, Jean-Luc Godard developed a curious fantasy that involved parachuting a young boy and girl into France and having them screen the film at cafés in order to investigate if and how it should be released “officially”. If nothing else, this utopian scheme reflects on the crisis in distribution for “difficult” films. The theater of LantarenVenster in Rotterdam, once an important site for film culture, is now a dismal venue for midbrow jazz and art-house kitsch that did not even bother to advertise the screening of “The Forgotten Space” with Sekula and Burch in attendance (which was organized by the Nederlands Fotomuseum) on its own web site. “The Forgotten Space” is a difficult object in a malfunctioning cultural economy, easily brushed aside as “an old-fashioned sort of critique” – a remark overheard after the Dutch

premiere in Utrecht, last fall, which tacitly seems to imply that all fundamental critique is obsolete. This, of course, is an assumption that the film questions throughout.

As Jameson put it in his Kluge review, “Marx is neither current nor outmoded: he is the classical”. Against the background of this ideological antiquity of our late modernity, “The Forgotten space” is both current and outmoded. “The Forgotten Space” is still a film in search of audiences. It is, perhaps thankfully so, unfinished business.

SVEN LÜTTICKEN

Allan Sekula/Noël Burch, “The Forgotten Space”: A Film Essay, Netherlands/Austria 2010, 112 minutes.

Notes

- 1 Alexander Kluge, *Nachrichten aus der Ideologischen Antike, Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital*, 3 DVDs, absolut Medien, Berlin 2008.
- 2 Allan Sekula/Noël Burch, *The Forgotten Space: A Film Essay* by Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, Netherlands/Austria 2010, 112 minutes.
- 3 Noël Burch, “Essay Film”, <http://www.theforgottenspace.net/static/notes.html>.
- 4 Kerstin Stakemeier, “Plane Destructive: The Recent Films of Hito Steyerl”, http://www.metamute.org/en/articles/plane_destructive_the_recent_films_of_hito_steyerl.
- 5 Fredric Jameson, “Marx and Montage”, in: *New Left Review*, No. 58, July/August 2009, pp. 109–117.
- 6 “The Forgotten Space” was shot in part on Super 16 and in part on digital video. A film print is currently being produced, but digital projection is the norm.