

MONEY, LANDSCAPE, POETRY.

Gerhard Friedl's Film

"HAT WOLFF VON AMERONGEN KONKURSDELIKTE BEGANGEN?"

I.

The title of the film that I want to comment briefly upon does not indicate that it might be concerned with landscapes. On the contrary: The erratic question „Did Wolff von Amerongen Commit Bankruptcy Offences?“ takes us in a completely different direction. It supposes a protagonist with the baroque name „Wolff von Amerongen“, and it raises the question if the aforementioned suspect might be involved in illegal economic transactions. I am no expert for bankruptcy offences, but my guess (or my prejudice) is that crimes like these are usually committed in office buildings or stretch limousines, at mobile phones or in business meetings and not in open fields, on mountain tops or along desert shores, to name some of the recurring topographies of „landscape movies“. I will therefore have to address this gap between the supposed subject of the film and the actual subject of this conference. How do landscapes enter into the equation of economics and crime?

Let's begin by watching a short clip to see what it has to contribute to this question.

[first 3 minutes of AMERONGEN]

What we notice from the start are two different layers that are hard to reconcile. Two different regimes (if you will) that the film establishes in its very first minute: First, after the title credits and the industrial sounds on the soundtrack, there is the layer of the image, starting with a slow and continuous pan, scanning a landscape with green meadows from left to right. The pan, it

should be added, is one of the most prominent operations of landscape representation. Yet in this case, it is contradicted, commented upon, called into question by the voice-over narration that sets in as soon as a few nondescript buildings enter the image.

It is a strange text that oscillates between complete soberness and a very poetical tone. We get to know that a certain „Alfons Müller Wipperführt“ is a textile manufacturer and that he started his enterprise in 1932 with seven workers and three sewing machines. At the threshold between the first and second shot, the second of two patterns begins to crystallize. But let's begin with the first pattern. (1) It is a pattern of names and sounds, of rhythms and melodies: After „Wolff von Amerongen“, „Alfons Müller-Wipperführt“ already is the second bizarre name that resonates in our ears. Both names are „real“ names taken from the west-german history of economic crime, but Gerhard Friedl has surely chosen them just as much as for their documentary value for their melodious qualities. When you make an inventory of all the names mentioned in the 65-minute-film, you come across specimen like Hermann Krages, Heinrich Knoop or Herbert Quandt, but also across extravagant ones like Anita Gräfin Zichy-Thyssen, Fritz Aurel Goergen (mentioned eleven times) or Knut von Kühlmann Freiherr von Stumm-Ramholz. The stories attached to these names imply large scale fraud and several suicides, commerce with arms and whitewashing money. On this level, the film - and its narrator Matthias Hirth - basically recounts the history of west-german and European commercial felonies, a history of rise and fall, of hubris and woefulness. Shakespeare meets industrial capitalism, administrative lingo meets the poetry of the *fait divers*.

II.

But what about the visual level or what I have referred to a moment ago as „pattern two“? About one minute into the movie - at the same time that we begin to notice the autonomy of the

soundtrack, we begin to suspect that the pan is the primary visual operation of WOLF VON AMERONGEN. In the context of this conference and for this particular film, I would like to insist on the highly ambiguous effect of this camera operation. On the one hand, you could say that it has a democratic effect of equalizing the gaze and levelling out the differences.

While the size of a shot usually indicates hierarchies or visual preferences by singling out and framing (the close-up would be the most obvious example of this), the steady pan shot barely makes any such suggestion. It sweeps the landscape and doesn't tell us precisely where to look, it doesn't direct our attention anywhere. Yet at the same time, this indifference has something fundamentally uncanny. It reminds us of the indifference of a machine, of a cold gaze reminiscent of the ubiquitous surveillance cameras. Rather than „looking“ (which implies a subject or an „author“) it has the character of „scanning“ the environment for potential suspects and crimes. If, indeed, there is a democratic aspect to this visual regime, it is in the sense that everybody that comes into view is a potential suspect and every place is a site for a potential crime. A third potential function of the pan shot is that it reminds us of the gesture of surveyors, that measure the land and from A to B. On an anecdotal level, this is confirmed by the fact that for the previous film, „Knittelfeld“, Gerhard Friedl and his director of photography, Rudolf Barmettler, disguised as land surveyors in order not to be bothered for lacking shooting permits.

I would describe Friedl's formal and aesthetic choice as follows: He appropriates the pan as the paradigmatic operation of the „landscape film“ only to radically expand its range, applying it not only to landscapes in a strict sense, but to whatever comes into his focus. He doesn't necessarily shoot landscapes, but he shoots everything as if it were a landscape. And he leaves these „as-if-landscapes“ in all their vagueness: Something has happened here, something will happen here, we don't know. In doing so, Friedl's film poses the question what a pan shot

actually is, what it does and does not, what form of the gaze it installs. How does a panning from left to right differ from a panning from right to left? What effect does it have if a movement begun in one shot seems to continue seamlessly in the next, as is the case when we slide from the green meadows to the construction site or from the military airbase to the sober room to the landscape with the tractor? One possible answer would be that the strong formal decision signals that these two images, as different as they may be, have something in common. The camera operation thus shows us a permanent negotiation of how two images relate to one another. How to find (or construct) a connection between parts of a visual narration that seems discontinuous and heterogeneous. Perhaps my use of the word „negotiation“ was not totally contingent. For if I pushed the interpretation a little further in this direction, I might come to the point where I would postulate an analogy between the ubiquitous pan shots and the function of money or currencies in general. Money aggregates things that don't have anything in common. It establishes an abstract layer that organises the exchange of labour and goods. The pans in „Wolf von Amerongen“ do something similar. They link places that do not necessarily have anything in common.

III.

Up to now, I have spoken about the visual and the sonic layer as if they were two discrete entities. Things get more complicated when you try to reflect upon the relation between both patterns, between text and image. I have suggested elsewhere that Gerhard Friedl's two films „Knittelfeld“ and „Has Wolff von Amerongen committed Bankruptcy Crimes?“ confront us with nothing less than a re-invention of sound film 70 years after its „invention“ or rather implementation in the second half of the 20ies. I know that this is a huge claim to make, but I would insist on it and explain briefly what I mean. As soon as a sound and an image appear

at the same time, we cannot help but ask ourselves: What do they have to do with one another? No one tells us what exactly we are seeing, so we automatically think the spoken text is going to reveal something about the image. In James Benning's *DESERET*, static images from Utah are combined with spoken newspaper articles recounting episodes from the states' history. We are aware of the fact that the past that is recounted on the soundtrack somehow „is part“ of the landscapes we see. The landscapes are filmed in the present, but history has become a part of them, has at one point in the past shaped them. In another case, the relation between image and sound, between past and present can become literally unbearable. If you think of the beginning of Claude Lanzmann's *SHOAH*, the enormous proportions of the genocide present in the conversations collides brutally with the peaceful and quiet landscapes of Poland. How can the trees and the soil remain tacit, when thousands of people have been brutally tortured and murdered? Gerhard Friedl has developed a very sophisticated way of combining text and image, and - much to the dismay of his collaborators - it has taken him months and months to calibrate the balance between the two. There are moments in „Wolf von Amerongen“ when image and text are so close to one another that they could practically shake hands. When the narrator says „seven workers“, we see the construction workers at the unfinished houses. When, at a different point of the film, a „shipping company“ is mentioned, we see a large boat. Yet this does not clarify anything. It rather establishes a web of references, of proximities and distances not too different from the intransparent transactions described in the voice-over.

IV.

Towards the end of *AMERONGEN*, the pan is complemented by a second camera operation.

It is an operation familiar since Early Cinema, when it was highly successful with the audiences.

The term „Phantom ride“ hints at the uncanny and fascinating effect that the spectator doesn't know whose point of view he takes. The camera usually was attached to the front of a vehicle, a street car, a train or an automobile. Instead of scanning a landscape horizontally, this procedure draws us vertically into the film space, establishing the depths of field and moving towards the vanishing point of the image. In the second clip I want to show you - the last 3 minutes of the movie - we see that this operation has quite literally taken over in Friedl's film:

[last 3 minutes of *AMERONGEN*]

What if we only had these two clips and didn't know what lies in between? What could we extrapolate from them? We would see a movement from the horizontal scan of landscapes that remains totally external to a penetration into the film space. Yet this movement of entering does not solve the enigma in any way. The film takes you in as you might be taken in by an investigation of an unsolved case.