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Looking for a fictional eye

An interview with Maya Schweizer and Clemens von Wedemeyer

Joanna Mytkowska: What was the beginning of your China-based project called *Metropolis*?

Maya Schweizer & Clemens von Wedemeyer: Our idea was to go to China for a certain time and work on a remake of the film *Metropolis* (1929) by Fritz Lang. This was a film that had a great impact on both film history and architecture. It was interesting for us to confront Lang's film with contemporary Chinese scenery. China, as a phenomenon. It's obviously a real place, but it is also a fiction, a fictional space for us. We went to Shanghai to find locations and people who would help us adapt the script of *Metropolis* to present day Chinese conditions. First of all we thought that it would be good to realise the remake in China because the architecture there is influenced so much by western utopias, of which „Metropolis“ is one. Many architects we also met, were trying to build new "utopian" architecture in China, things they could never build in Europe, for example. *Metropolis* was also a large-scale-film and had an enormous budget in the 1920s; the scenery of this film was extremely expensive. In this, it could be a metaphor for China today. Everything in the big cities there seems to be new and huge-scale. But a lot is strictly controlled. This system of control, which used to be communist and is now something else, functions very precisely. The name of the communist party remains, but there also exists a very clear division between the working class and the "new rich" people. We have found a lot of similarities between the situation in China and the fiction of *Metropolis*, where at the end a certain "third way" is mentioned, between the working class and the capitalist... So you see, we were trying to verify a certain cliché we had in mind about China, and it was this reality, which we wanted to falsify. Maybe „Metropolis“ is not the right film to remake in China, but as we travelled and investigated, we thought it's maybe not necessary to make this film because the same ideas and structures can already be found in reality, though arranged in a different way.

JM: So, you have found many parallels between the film *Metropolis* and China – both the actual country and the simultaneous fantasy of it. For example, the structure of aggressive capitalism and the aesthetic value it creates.

MS&CW: From the aesthetic point of view, *Metropolis* was a very kitschy film. It shows the demands of a rapidly developing capitalism, but on the other hand there is the proletariat, which is controlled and lives in the darkness. But we also have to remember that *Metropolis* is an anti-utopian film. The other common motives are the masses. If we are typical western viewers, then China is first of all a society of masses. *Metropolis* is also about this.

JM: Do you think that an emblematic film from early modernity can be a tool for understanding China today? A popular cliché about China says that it's a place of enormous changes and possibilities, also economical, but, on the other hand, its social structures and directions of development are in the rather unclear way still strongly connected with the totalitarian system.

MS&CW: *Metropolis* helped us make the cultural shift and focused somehow our view of another culture. *Metropolis* itself is also a dream (or nightmare), a fantasy. A few years ago UNESCO decided to announce this film a world testimony, a heritage of humanity. We found it very strange that this happened to a film that critics had dismissed completely in the '20s and '30s. This film can also be interpreted as an anticipation of National Socialism in Germany, where the moment of tension between capitalism and populism is defined.

JM: And all these associations open a new perspective for interpreting China today?

MS&CW: That might be going a bit far. But if we try to deconstruct our own fantasies we may be also more reflective about our vision of China. Maybe this perspective is only the starting point... Before, China was a communist system. Now, the transformation is going into capitalism. This is a completely new situation, which we cannot fully understand. Also, in China the workers are not prisoners like in the movie (*laughing*). We have to mention also that we are talking only about the big cities in China, which are different from the rest of the country. People need special permissions to stay in the city. The government is regulating this very precisely. Workers come mostly from the country. Statistics report that for the next 10 years masses of cheap workers from the Chinese countryside will still be pouring in to feed the cities' economy. This population may soon ask for more rights and better living conditions – we don't know. Maybe this will develop a new social

space. Coming back to *Metropolis*, the idea of new technology as a challenge is also common to both fantasies.

JM: How exactly did you work on the remake of *Metropolis*? Did you look for similar imagery, similar scenery and identical sequences in Chinese reality?

MS&CW: On the one hand we were looking for similarities and in this case we were mostly focused on the architecture and on investigating what was happening in the locations we found. On the other hand we were conducting interviews with the workers and architects in order to learn what they think about their country's shift toward Western culture and how the Western utopia has been translated into China's reality.

JM: Clemens, in the work entitled *Silberhöhe* (2003), you have already used the element of remaking sequences of historical films in order to enlarge the field of interpretation for contemporary images. You have linked the phenomena of shrinking housing areas in former East Germany with the film „L'eclisse“ (1962) by Antonioni, in which modern architecture evokes an atmosphere of emptiness and emotional void. Transferring this atmosphere through associations with the history of modern architecture you gain an additional dimension for interpreting the demolishing of buildings that have remained after the collapse of a certain model of the modern utopia. In which terms this method for connecting contemporary phenomena with images from the past is still effective for you?

CW: This filter or, as you call it, this tool, serves to help us to look at reality through a certain fictional eye - which is something that everybody does anyway. Of course, certain films are fitting to our fiction better than others. , while certain books and films (like those of Antonioni) were becoming "an image", a classic of modern cinema. I used the ending of Michelangelo Antonioni's film „L'eclisse“ (1962), because I liked the way he edited this sequence, a narration without protagonists. Sound and image constitute a kind of autonomous film. Like a ghost, the camera moves alone solemnly through a modernist cityscape, while the editing pretends there is still a story to tell. Antonioni wanted to capture and portray the mood of a certain intervening period, like an eclipse, where something's changing... and this corresponded to the atmosphere I felt in East-Germany's abandoned social housing projects close to Leipzig. But whereas Antonioni filmed in the 60's in Italy, when these utopian housing projects were first being planned, I used a similar way of looking and a modernist technique of film editing to view the destruction and dissolution in the ruins of East Germany's failed housing projects. .. Antonioni himself was an architect before becoming a filmmaker, so he had a special sense of space. This helps me to confront his view and his times with the situation in East-Germany today. Here the buildings I filmed were edited as Antonioni did, in a modern way while looking at abandoned modernist housing projects.

JM: The appropriation of certain historical images, which can work for contemporary fantasies, can function only if this shift is very precise, isn't it?

CW: The idea is to shift something from point A to point B and see the outcome, or test it. Antonioni's film gave only an impression, a suggestion of this emotional void, which can be incarnated within the concept of modern architecture. Today we have very visible effects of those subtle feelings. Films are historical images, but as moving images they carry much more, as an archive of gestures and atmospheres for example - also the sound is very important...

JM: The associations between historical positions (films and the history of its reception) and contemporary context create the structure of your films. Can you explain how this process of creating associations works?

MS&CW:

It's like a filter or a mask which clears and adds information: A confrontation between the past and the present. For example: Maybe we would not have been interested in „Metropolis“ while living in the 1920's, because it was a film about the future. But, now as it is a film of the past, it's interesting to use it as a filter to have a look at the present. It opens a gap. The idea of confrontation between different logics and ideas is what makes it interesting for us, and to work together in this project. The process starts by thinking about references or just about things we get in mind. For example: *Metropolis* / China. The second step is then to try to deconstruct this cliché. To understand why we thought of it.