

Catch me if you can...

Constitution of the subject and logics of gaze in video works by Miriam Bajtala

“Not only is the image in my look, but I am also in the image.”¹

Without doubt contemporary means of visualization have trained the perception of cinematographic and videographic images to take the respective imaging apparatus into account and thus raised the awareness for the constructed nature of the depicted. In this awareness: What is the position of the spectator with respect to a film or a video? Which parameters define his/her location that become apparent in and through the gaze? In approaching the latest video works by Miriam Bajtala the very questions concerning the constitution and construction of the subject and the gaze inside and outside the screen are raised as both categories “subject” and “gaze” are fundamentally distressed.

The establishing shot of the video “Paranoia (Death Valley)”² depicts a deserted landscape with an unpaved road in the foreground that passes into desert vegetation, in the background a mountain range marks the horizon. A woman running shown from behind erupts in the centre of the image and abruptly disappears again before approaching the left frame. As soon as she is out of sight the so far static, seemingly objective camera sets in motion and follows the woman – the establishing shot is transformed into a point of view shot. The movement is translated into the image and provokes the subjectivation of the camera gaze, which falls into a void as the object of desire is absent. The degree of irritation is even increased by the accelerated replay of the sequence which brings about a nightmarish visual and auditory alienation. About reaching the point where the woman disappeared the image, the camera pauses. A hedged cabin comes into sight, a flag of the United States is blowing in the wind – no trace of the haunted. The camera sets in motion again, accelerated as before it approaches the house, the gaze turns left along the fence and pauses. As soon as the gaze is arrested the woman appears in the centre of the image. Running along the fence to another cabin, she abruptly disappears after a few seconds and thus restarts the chase which subsequently passes by buildings, parked trucks and a telephone booth in zig-zag fashion. The chase heads on along a road to a ruin and seemingly ends up at its point of origin, just to start the loop again.

In the ludicrous interplay of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, objective and subjective camera gaze, arrested and accelerated shot fundamental parameters of the diegetic reality remain unsolved: Who is the chaser whose gaze is imposed on us? Who is the haunted, who literally eludes the gaze? So how about the initially mentioned categories of “subject” and “gaze” inside and outside the screen?

With reference to Lacanian Psychosemiology Film Studies describe the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers with the concept of “suture”:³ In the state of pure visual and auditory perception the spectator at first is confronted with a shot which completely appropriates him/her and gives instantaneous pleasure in an imaginary manner. At the same time the complete immersion is undermined through the realization of the image as such and the absence of the self. To gain a location on screen the spectator needs to identify with a character in the cinematic narration, which is ultimately an identification with a subjective gaze.⁴ As Žižek put it: “In order to stitch the decentering gap with a suture, the shot that has been perceived as an objective one is re-appropriated in the following image as the subjective gaze of a character inside the diegetic space. In

Lacanian terms: The second shot represents the absent subject of the first one (inside the diegetic space of representation).⁵

In "Paranoia (Death Valley)" the missing of this complementary shot, that relates the subjective gaze to a character, conjures "the ghost of a free-floating gaze without a corresponding subject"⁶. Thus an impossible subjectivity which cannot be located exactly in the diegetic space is constructed. The constant code conversion of an objective shot to an subjective one, which is a common method in horror movies, enhances the threat of that gaze. This correlates with the presence and absence of the haunted object – the woman is exclusively visible for the objective, arrested camera gaze and eludes the subjective gaze completely. Not only is the gap between the subject of the spectator and the cinematic text not stitched, inside the diegetic space it rather gapes open: The subject is split and literally chases itself – the object of desire, the object that eludes, is the image of the subject.

According to Lacan and his concept of the visual and imaginary constitution of the subject, the child is deceived through the identification with its mirror image as it is always about identifying with the image of the other. It identifies with an image "that is not him/herself but still allows him/her to recognize him-/herself"⁷.

Like in most of her works the author herself is the character in "Paranoia (Death Valley)". Time and again Miriam Bajtala traces the constitutive elements as well as the potential for manipulation of the medium and points out the relation between visuality and representation, mediality and identity. Again in her latest work "Videogymnastik (warm ups 1-4)"⁸ she thematizes the inherent qualities of the categories photography and film in confrontation with the self by using her own body. She translates the ambivalence of static and moving images to simple body exercises like adducting and stretching arms and legs while lying down. Here she suggests by means of digital video technique the slipping-out of the body and the slipping-back-into the body in two stages that remain visible. The visualized parameters of the medium act as metaphoric vehicles that articulate the changes of the inner and outer ego, of illusion and reality. Again the Lacanian approach comes to the fore, that there is no reliable and authentic consciousness of the body which could be caught up with through exercise in view of a problematic mental consciousness.

Both "Paranoia (Death Valley)" and "Videogymnastik" debate the subject that is at disposal through the procedures of perception. If in "Paranoia" Bajtala watches herself from the "outside", from this impossible point of view, then her ego is not only reduced to an external object for the gaze, but moreover the gaze itself, that watches her from the outside is objectivized – it is no longer HER gaze, it is eluded. Just as she as an object eludes the subjective gaze time and again. One can hardly imagine a place more suitable for this moebius-strip-like self-circling chase after the object of desire: With its civilizing remnants the nameless ghosttown in Death Valley is a phantasmagoria of itself. It is a simulacrum of a long gone structure that is maintained in ordinary of touristic attractions – for the pleasure of watching and free-floating gazes.

Catch me if you can... You will never get me.

¹ Cf. Jacques Lacan, *Das Seminar, Buch XI, Die Vier Grundbegriffe der Psychoanalyse*. Weinheim/Berlin 1997 (translation by the author).

² Miriam Bajtala, *Paranoia 1 (death valley)*, 2004, video, color, sound, 3 min., looped.

³ Cf. Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*. New York 1983, pp.194-236.

⁴ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, Die Furcht vor echten Tränen. Krzysztof Kieslowski und die „Nahtstelle“. Berlin 2001, pp.12-13 (translation by the author).

⁵ Ebd., p.13.

⁶ Ebd., p.14.

⁷ Cf. Jacques Lacan, Das Spiegelstadium als Bildner der Ichfunktion, wie sie uns in der psychoanalytischen Erfahrung erscheint. In: Schriften I, Freiburg 1973.

⁸ Miriam Bajtala, Videogymnastik (warm ups 1-4), 2004/2005, video installation, four videos, color, sound, 10-30 sek., looped.