

WERNER NEKES' *ULIISSES*: LITERARY CITATIONS BETWEEN EYE AND BRAIN IN THE CINEMA OF "LIGHT-ERATURE"

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ABSTRACT

The metaphoric use of light, traditionally a domain reserved to painting and architecture, has always, by its very nature, played a major role in film, because photography and cinema are simply specific ways of dealing with light. In *Uliisses* (1982) German film director Werner Nekes makes use of the fact that the processing centers of the cerebrum work much faster than, for example, the organ of perception, the eye. Indeed it is just this sluggishness of the eye, creating the impression of actual movement out of a specific rapid sucession of individual images in sequence, which is fundamental for film as a medium. In fact, it is clear that it is not the eye that sees, but the brain. In that sense, in this film, both, text and viewer inhabit the same dominant fiction. This paper explores how Nekes' film language attempts to activate the capacities of the cerebral cortex, and in so doing, to bring about a greater collaboration between eye and brain.

German film director Werner Nekes¹ is undoubtedly one of the outstanding film artists of our time. With *Uliisses* he has developed a unique film language. The film, based on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Homer's *Odyssey* and Neil Oram's *The Warp*, was finished in 1982. It is in English, colour and has a duration of 94 minutes. Needless to say that this film is not similar to the one of Joseph Strick (*Ulysses*, 1967)².

Nekes has always been careful to place his own creations within the framework of the history of cinema. In *Uliisses*, all the important historical developments, from the black-box projections of the sixteenth Century, through Baroque mirror-images and the earliest photographic techniques, to the Polaroid, are dealt with in such a way that an immediate thematic relationship between the development of cinematography and the development of *Uliisses* is established.

Nekes' film is based upon the study of the history of cinematography. Here are two examples:

¹ German film director and painter born in Berlin, 1945.

² American film director, 1927. He shot *Ulysses*, based on James Joyce's masterpiece, in 1967.

-In the Nestor episode, Hans, as Pallas Athene, and Phil, as Telemachus, sit face to face. Pallas Athene shows Telemachus an old optical device with a mirror, in which the alternations between the convex and concave curves can be interpreted as a zoom. At the same time, the transformation of two states of being into one another is established as analogous to the transformation we notice in a Polaroid photo after it has been exposed. At the same time, however, and this is crucial, these reflections on technical history and on the history of our visual perception are clearly shown to reflect the relationship between Pallas Athene and Telemachus, between gods and men, between past and present, between visible and invisible.

-A second example of the many which characterize the entire film occurs in the Ithaca sequence: a mother and child, dressed as clowns, are placed before a rigidly stationary camera in such a way that the whole scene clearly illustrates the history of the development of the photographic image, and well as that of the development of the human race. This small technical masterpiece, which Nekes offers as an example of coexistence between positive and negative within one and the same film image, also represents the notion of the failed evolution of humanity and human relationships in a way that has never been done before.

Not only are the instruments of the history of cinematography and their influence upon our perception of the world reflected in the narrative, but also in their own metaphorical transformations. The metaphoric use of light, traditionally a domain reserved for painting and architecture, has always, by its very nature, played a major role in film, because photography and cinema are simply specific ways of dealing with light. Nekes calls this *Lighterature*.

Uliisses offers a greater abundance of light metaphor than has hitherto seen in any film. For example, in the Nausicaa episode, Uliisses shatters neon light bulbs, and, on the narrative level, the light gushing out of the neon cylinders is like the issuing forth of sexual desire at the moment of fulfilment.

Aside from his interest in situating his own numerous technical innovations in the context of the history of cinematography, it is a matter of the most essential importance to Nekes to submit his own discoveries in editing and montage to a historical critique through reference to the film language of earlier artists. Personal film language is developed primarily in that which we customarily call editing and montage. At the same time, however, Nekes also advocates a very independent conception. His film theory posits the least possible variation between two consecutive visual fields as the prime element of film language. Nekes makes use of the fact that the processing centers of the cerebrum work much faster than, for example, the organ of perception, the eye. Indeed it is just this sluggishness of the eye, creating the impression of actual movement out of a specific rapid succession of individual images in sequence, which is fundamental for film as a medium. In fact, it is clear that it is not the eye that sees, but the brain. In that sense, in this film, both, text and viewer inhabit the same dominant fiction:

The dominant narrative film encourages the viewer to substitute its "impression of reality" for the lost object, and so to deny the phenomenal lack which he or she "knows" full well. Cinema's reality-effect consequently derives in part from its perceptual intensity, i.e. from the primacy it gives to the imaginary register. (Silverman, 1990:110)

Nekes believes that the history of film as technology and medium gives us very little recognition of the cooperation between eye and brain. Until now, the efficiency of the neocortical centers in relation to film has been dealt with only in the most superficial manner. Nekes' film language attempts, through an unfamiliar ordering of cinematic sequences, to activate the capacities of the cerebral cortex, and in so doing, to bring about a greater

collaboration between eye and brain. That is why he calls his approach to film "light-erature".

In *Uliisses* the individual sequences of the episodes -the narrative and the historical references alike- are worked out in an astonishing wealth of variants of film language. For example, in the Aeolus episode, Penelope/Molly/Tabea, in a glamorous dress, is suspended upon the cart of a wind machine. This is clearly an allusion to Marilyn Monroe on the subway grating. Out of this, Nekes creates an optical wind, which activates an image in our brains of other similar variations on the theme of cloth exposed to a strong current of air.

In the Ithaca sequence the suitors present themselves at the palace of Odysseus. Through the use of montage, Nekes creates a breathtaking photo session, a vortex of images, the undertow of which urgently forces upon us the psychological dimension of Penelope's conflict.

In the Penelope episode, the famous last words of Molly Bloom, "Yes, I will," are transformed into a film sequence, and indeed, into image and sound; Molly, naked and lying on her bed, is transformed into a breathing sculpture, while the sound suggests that the sculpture, through a built-in mechanism, becomes something akin to the mechanism of the camera, which for Nekes is always, along with the projector, that which gives life to the images. It can be said with certainty that Nekes shapes the breath of creation with his film sequences -that inconceivable difference between now-obsolete material and still-living form. In this sequence, Molly becomes the image of Woman because no other -ordinary- woman is like her. The image is characterized by a lack of resemblance. Nevertheless, she somehow represents all women through her incarnation as a generalized femininity, an abstraction or ideal of femininity. Scholars like Mary Ann Doane refer to such characterization as "The monolithic category of Woman" (Doane, 1990: 47).

Anyone who has been confronted with Nekes' work will be very eager to discover how he will deal with literary material like the *Odyssey*, because until now, Nekes has always firmly resisted resorting to literary means in his film sequences and montage.

Indeed, Nekes' film follows essentially the same episodic structure as Homer's *Odyssey*; Nekes also incorporates elements of Oram's play, as well as specific approaches to the subject matter as developed by Joyce. Nekes even worked with the drama troupe which, independent of Nekes, two years before had done Oram's 24-hours play *The Warp* in Great Britain. However, Nekes does not utilize the literary treatment of the material by Joyce, Homer or Oram/Fenelon in order to illustrate it in his turn, or to make his own vision out of it. Literary citations serve the function of discovering or splitting up the customary cooperation between eye and brain; the thematic literary citations compel the brain to construct new expectations with regard to the filmic material. These literary citations provide the brain with the inducement and assistance necessary for unaccustomed interpretations of the optical and visual offerings which Nekes gives us in his film.

If, for want of literary references, we do not achieve the divorce of our habits of seeing from a neocortical processing, we are simply left with the impression that Nekes wants to shock us with terrorist arbitrariness. Up until now, viewers of Nekes' films have frequently reacted in this way, which is understandable, because until now, there has hardly ever existed in a film by Nekes the possibility, through the treatment of an independent literary subject, to totally intervene in the collaboration, customary in film in general, between eye and brain and to activate the capacities of the brain which will free the film material from the laziness of the eye. At this stage, it is significant to point out Umberto Eco's considerations on the "transactional relationship":

La relación transaccional en la que se resuelve el proceso de formación de la percepción y de la comprensión intelectual excluye que se pueda captar una

configuración de elementos dotada de una organización objetiva propia, y reconocible gracias a un isomorfismo fundamental ... entre la estructura del objeto y las estructuras psicofisiológicas del sujeto. (Eco, 1994: 199)

A typical film industry box office success, first and foremost through the deliberate calculation of the filmmaker, attempts openly to synchronize the natural laziness of the eye with the natural laziness of our brains. In *Uliisses* we feel the invigorating experience, through the capacities of the centers of the cerebral cortex, of soaring far above the filmic image, of breaking out of our constraints. Nekes achieves this through his inimitable construction of film sequences.

It is advisable to offer the following schedule of episodes (made by Nekes), which should be used throughout the projection of the film in order to be able as far as possible to contradict the conspiracy between eye and brain and to make use of the literary aids with which we will be able to turn our eyes into legs.

EPISODE	SCENE	FILM TECHNIQUE
Lotus-	Injection by police	Cops movies (no close-ups)
Eaters	Watch with mother	BBC style transmission for children
	Cocaine	
	Uli's walk	3 interwoven shutter segments
Proteus	Galery	Close up
	Galery-paintings-visitors	Single frame
	Piano recital, Uli-Tabea	Citation from <i>Casablanca</i>
	Turkish mayor	Standard frontal stage set up
	Arabs	Standard frontal stage set up
	Chinese	Chinese red light
	Florence-priest-massage-psychiatrist	Double exposure with two O-sounds
Hades	Factory-photo scene	Triple filter exposure (cyan, magenta, yellow)
	Factory	Red-green double exposure
	Factory ruins, pornographic magazine	Triple filter shutter
	Letter to mother	Colour misprint
	Stereo-drawing of a camera	Stereo drawing, stereo parallaxe
Aeolus	Picture taking of a girl	Wind machine, windy frames
	Photostudio	
	Chimneys	Standard metaphor
	Tabea above fan-machine	Single frames moved during shooting
Wondering	Election debate	Point close-ups
Rocks	Uli	Double exposure with video dots
	Election debate	Dot close-ups
	Ships on television	Multiple t.v.

Lestrygonians	Meal, beans on toes	Hollyfood
	Melon	Kung Fu
	Buying carrots	Artificial German language
Sirens	Bhagwan's whore	Distraction from painting
	Uli-Tabea	
	Uli behind film camera that projects light	Emerging from water, backwards, twice
	3 sirens on rock	Light projector, closing shutters
	Uli behind camera	
	3 sirenes emerging from water	
	Banjo-player	
	Water-island scene	Rotating mirrors
	Tabea getting out of Uli's head	
Scylla and Charybdis	and Rajneesh	Close-up
	Hologram	
	Rajneesh	Close-up
	Rajneesh	Full picture
	Scene with baby/room/ bathing	Single frame sequence/home movie
	Hooligans, Scots against Hippies	
	Cambridge, parents' home	Rotating mirrors (two scenes)
	Industrial landscape	Camera rotation following the horizon
	Repair-shop, car	
	Airport-interior, street	Coloured mirror reflection
Cyclops	Lunatic asylum	
	Cyclops	Blending of Hollywood motion pictures
	Tarzan's cave	
	Cave-opening with laser	
	Shadow of cyclops' glasses	

Nausicaa	Preparation of cables	Triple exposure
	Tabea cable	
	Tabea with burning neon lamps	
	Girl behind trees	
	Bathing-scene, washing	
	Breaking of neon lamps	Cut
	Sex, "VA WÖLFL" – painting	Double exposure
	Tabea/Uli	
	Water-snakes in fountain	
Eumaeus	Coat stand, painted	Multiple exposure
	Coat stand and Uli taking pictures	
	Uli/Tabea in industrial landscape	
	Sculptures in studio, horse of Troy	
	Forge, forging of cubes	
	Forge/ballet	Double exposure
	Forge	Circular form
	Tabea among houses, industrial landscape	
	Phil hitchhiking, Uli stops car	
	Tabea in front of cold-storage-plant towers	Threefold blend
	Uli leaving Tabea's head	Rotating mirror
Oxen of the	Cows	
Sun	Cattle, industrial slopes, high-way	Camera moves
	Ruhr-chemistry	
	Phil and Tom	
Ithaca	Uli at post-office	Single frame sequence
(insertion)	Tabea getting dressed	
Circe	Grasshopper circus, tight rope	
	Sex in a park, police intervention	
	Grasshopper circus, grasshopper waving	

	Phil with two women	Intermitted double exposures
	Grasshopper circus, on the pole	
	Sex disturbed by bees	
	Grasshopper circus, on face	
	Uli in brothel of the film	Camera projection, shot
	Grasshopper on face	<i>Belle de Jour</i>
	Train arrival	L'arrive' du train
	Tabea getting prepared for suitors	Single frame
	Suitors party	Cinemascope fusion with film, Uli shooting
	Clown and child	Reflecting on "mis"-development
	Presentation of suitors	Photo-session
	Dark room	Red-green double expo
	Studio, film shooting	Single frame motor, light-drawing
	Dark room	Developing, crying, red green
	Presentations	Photo-decay, phosphorous powder
	Uli/Tabea merging	Rotating mirror
Penelope	Tabea asleep	Scanning subject camera
	Tabea with suitor, Uli intervenes	Reference to Groucho
	Uli-Tabea talking in the garden	Single frames
	Uli showing Tabea photo-graphs	
	Uli/Tabea/garden	Repetition of movement
	Tabea dancing with Uli	Mirror cabinet
	Tabea/Uli nightmare	<i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i> , double exposure, sixfold shut
	Tabea: Yes, I will (convulsive breathing in sleep)	Half-frame projection of photos
	End, title	Lithophany with grease pencil, filament into darkness

Years ago Wener Nekes bought, in a Hamburg antique store, a framed stone slab about the size of the palm of a hand, which was engraved on one side like a cameo. The style of the design and the motif were hardly noticeable as long as the thin slab lay on the table, and for this reason the antique dealer had no idea what to do with it. Nekes knew immediately what to do with it, and acquired it for a modest price. It was a stone engraving from the second half of the Eighteenth Century, and its decorative potential first became apparent when it was held up against the light. Nekes added it to his collection of cinematic objects. In the final sequence of *Uliisses*, Nekes used the stone engraving as a final image (many of the objects in his collection appear thus in this film).

After I had seen the film for the thirteenth consecutive time, I was thunderstruck. There was no doubt that the stone light-engraving depicted exactly the moment when the leader of the suitors forcefully demands that Penelope finally make her choice, and abandon her hope for the return of Odysseus. Stylistically the engraving could quickly be classified as a more or less well known scene from the first illustrated edition of Fenelon's *Telemach*. Throughout the film we can see how the narrative level rules the fiction, how the language of cinema describes a story line within the limits of literacy. Undoubtedly, this film represents a clear example of Jorge Urrutia's idea of cinematic perception:

Por ello el cine es un lenguaje materialista que sitúa las cosas [...] Porque no es inocente la percepción. Antes que con la vista vemos con el cerebro. La percepción depende no sólo del elemento estimulante, sino también del individuo estimulado. Sólo vemos lo que hemos aprendido a ver. (Urrutia, 1984: 83)

As I am inclined to understand this last discovery, the inner logic of the history of cinematography converges with the inner logic of Nekes' film even where Nekes simply acts instinctively as an artist: he himself has by no means ever identified the scene of the stone light-engraving.

In earlier times, a demonstration of this kind would be understood as predestination, the choice of grace. The grapes of Joyce, after all, help us to see that out of the grasshoppers of Nekes' film sequences, the fragmented formulations of our lazy eyes, gracehoppers become, as it were, ideas (inasmuch the same as with Joyce's *Ulysses*).

Werner Nekes declared in an interview for the *Jerusalem Post*:

All film can be reduced to creating in the mind of the spectator the illusion of movement. The ingredients necessary to complete this deception are light and perspective. It is basically the manipulation and interaction of colour and depth that gives believability to the image. (Hoffman, 1988: 39)

As we can see, Werner Nekes has, in some ways, created a revolution of the image, inasmuch the same way as Joyce created the revolution of the word. Let us think that both of them have met in the metaphor of cinema.

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