

LOS FELIZ

by Edgar Honetschläger

Los Feliz is an affluent hillside neighborhood in the central region of Los Angeles, California, abutting Hollywood and encompassing part of the Santa Monica Mountains. It is noted for its expensive historic homes and celebrity inhabitants.

Out Of The Right Place Where The Right Place Is An Illusion: Los Feliz

AN ART/FILM BY EDGAR HONETSCHLÄGER, 2000-2015
BY ROSANNA ALBERTINI, LOS ANGELES, DEC. 2015

Humanity's archetypal dreams are being realized ... and an incredible wealth of fantasies such as in centuries past were the blissful magic of dreams. Our age creates these wonders, but it no longer feels them.

It is a time of fulfillment, and fulfillments are always disappointments; our time lacks a sense of longing, a sense of some challenge it hasn't yet mastered, but which gnaws it at its heart.

Robert Musil, 1922

LOS FELIZ. The scroll has become a film, a Babel of spoken and visual stories sometimes shed like tears in the form of raindrops; images struck by sounds or submerged in silence, dragging fears and fights for control along with a deep sense of how meaningless they are. And yet LOS FELIZ is an art piece, gnawed at its heart by desire. An art piece longing for a space in which BEAUTY escapes the torture of being used to seduce the public, and becomes lively and lovable in a pot of grass.

The visual stream built by the artist stretches and transforms reminiscences of Edgar's journey between three faraway pots of civilization: his personal experiences in Rome, Los Angeles and Tokyo. His own displacement in the back of his mind, he fills the screen with an undefined space of waiting, searching for and letting go, as if the few persons involved in the fictional trip were figures wrapped around an inner empty hole, measuring the distance that keeps them far from their own lives. Symbols, only looking like humans.

I travel, instead, through the remains, I would say the ruins of his spiritual and intellectual digging for thirteen years into the solid ground of places and people, until he resets and expands in the now their visual presence through a different story, in a rarefied as well as imaginary world. The question: "Does what we see or understand have anything to do with things as they really are?" wears certainties away. I better avoid truth as a word. I can't avoid seeing the display of episodes in and out, the blue car like parts of a long painting, mostly gray: the remains of a feast on a long table, they make me think of André Derain's late still lives.

The image of the three ridiculous cardinals each standing on each other's shoulders while turning the wheel of the entire story, shifting gears while not much happens in the characters' inner journey, throws humor over the process. Guns and violence look as absurd as the false teeth of the prelate blocking the gears of a possible new story. Nonetheless, although feelings are vanished from the thread of the story, images and sounds hold on to them, strongly.

Writing itself, unfortunately, has driven the aforesaid paragraphs into the film logic. I don't regret it because in LOS FELIZ, the artist has embraced the film format in the first place, 102 minutes of a hybrid creature. As God is generated by its own name, a bunch of letters makes an absence. My head has been cut off, Edmond Jabès lent me his words for a short while.

The world is sound, sound like a head.

"Drive," he says.

Emptiness is your face

Emptiness is your trip

You must carry the *film* as a sin.

He is talking to Edgar, and to me if I don't stop writing about the film.

As if it were only a film. It's also a piece of theater, using the backdrop of 'miles' of Edgar Honetschläger's black and white drawings: the spare profile of the land of freedom as lonely as the universe. It's a river of music and singing birds and silence and water merging into each other.

Almost floating in time, a sequence of accidents in and out the blue car pretending to move from one station to another – the strongest illusion in LOS FELIZ – gives rise to a development that doesn't go anywhere, very much like in Pat O'Neill's experimental films. Since the beginning, the idea of a story (*Deus ex machina*) hovers over the blue little car like a flying stork holding a baby who won't become an adult. Why the grass? "Oh, it's NECESSARY," says Edgar's shinto goddess. "The necessary angel," Wallace Stevens would say, and he corrects my Italian vision of angels with wings sitting on clouds. Life is a disturbing storm around, but the artist "*merely enjoys existence.*"

"The way we live and the way we work alike casts us out of reality."

"I am the truth, since I am part of what is real, but neither more nor less than those around me. And I am imagination, in a leaden time and in a world that does not move for the weight of its own heaviness."

Wallace Steven spoke these words in 1943. Honetschläger's feeling of flatness is the equivalent, today, of Stevens' feeling of heaviness. In his art piece in motion LOVE, FAME, FATE become mirages. The more humans rush toward them, the farther away they move. After all, they are nothing but words.

La vie est plus belle que les idées. Life is more beautiful than ideas. Music and sounds are stronger than words: they convey the infinite vibrations, sudden changes, weaknesses and pitches of living things; they adhere to the artist's body like a second skin made by past and present others: beauty is sharing. As for images, beauty pervades them when they become flat bodies of a moment, sparkles of time asking our senses to embrace them and let them go, in a river of emptiness.

Love and Eternity

BY EDGAR HONETSCHLÄGER
LOS FELIZ, MAY 2001

I wake up at 4AM because the water sprinkler in the garden starts gyrating, just like the one in the neighbor's garden. I stare at this fragile existence and realize that in this moment, millions of water sprinklers are spreading water in this man-made paradise, where banana trees bloom year round, hummingbirds drink sweet nectar, the colors of the leaves never change, and the Hispanic gardeners make sure that no difference is to be felt over the year and throughout the decades; all in a place that used to be a desert. Los Angeles—an artificial paradise man has marked with the attributes of permanence.

Yet, one morning you look into the mirror and realize that you have changed – there are wrinkles on your face. Off you go to the plastic surgeon in order to merge with the permanence of your surroundings. Forever young. Hollywood has been carrying this message to the world for decades. This is how the concept of youth culture must have come into being. By now, plastic surgery encompasses all body parts, even up to 'vaginal rejuvenation.'

How strange this must seem to an "Alien" if he were to undertake his studies at the most Western city of Western civilization, a city dedicated to fiction. Los Angeles works like a magnet. This is a consequence of the propagated eternal sunshine that the film industry needs in order to sustain itself. A hundred years ago, immigrants were lured westward to cultivate citrus orchards, but soon a transition into the world of celluloid took place. What is sold to the rest of the world as imagination and illusion is reality here. From the perspective of the first European immigrants, the vastness of the American landscapes and skies must have been a shock, a fascination that remains to this day. We all know the images that try to translate the American hugeness to the screen – especially something as iconic as a road trip across the vast distance. How fun it would be to cram the vastness of America into this one room.

Los Angeles is the pinnacle of Western civilization. The center of image production was built on a dream created in the romantic period, and it lingers on. In the romantic period, our idea of love was redefined. European immigrants carried this concept into the world of film. Romantics are idealists who believe in eternity and immortality. Love is supposed to offer salvation from the hardships of life. It is supposed to neutralize and overcome conflict. Yet emotions too are only ideas. The way we deal with each other today has its foundation in the creation of sentiments which the Romantic poets and later filmmakers, laid out.

Film is the search for a perfect, ideal world. Who determines what this world looks like? We all do. The immigrants who made Hollywood longed for a perfect world and sought to create it here. Those who came later from war-ridden Europe tried all the more to find and produce it. Even today, a majority of those working in Hollywood are Europeans. It's as if Europe is still creating its dream. No matter what genre – Hollywood makes the audience's wishes come true and meets their predetermined desires. The outcome of the story in "functioning cinema" is predictable, the protagonist's actions are foreseeable, the story meets expectations and the audience is satisfied. "I knew what would happen next, I could foresee it." Of course, one cannot foresee one's life. But film can. It can fulfill the promise of eternity. That connects film with the promise of eternity found in all monotheistic religions.

From its very beginning, America was a projection: The Promised Land flowing with honey and manna falling from heaven. It turned out though that this HEAVEN could not fulfill the promise of eternal life. Film could. It succeeded in building a bridge toward the sought-after projection with a promise of redemption and eternity. Light alone transports this yearning and suffocates the darkness of the 'barbarians,' those who do not believe, those who are unenlightened, those who do not want to see.

Film is man's claim to divinity (The Wizard of Oz). Film is the tip of capitalist yearning, its leavening agent, its lubricant, its raw material. It makes man God. Film is the oracle of modernity.

The water sprinkler doesn't stop. It won't let me go back to sleep. I slide into a bubble bath. Next to the tub I find a book of poems by Fernando Pessoa. One ends with the words:

*The Gods, by their example
Help only those
Who seek to go nowhere
But into the river of things*

This will be the conclusion to a movie called "Los Feliz."

Nothing Ever Moves

AN INTERVIEW WITH ZHIXUAN LI,
LOS FELIZ JAN 2016

ZL: Let's start with why the movie is so complex?

EH: The movie has a seven-day structure like the genesis. It starts in Rome – takes the character into a five day road trip across America and ends in Los Angeles. Its proposition is: "Those who create the images rule the world." Christianity is the only religion that has made images the core of its persuasive power. For centuries, the Catholic Church commissioned artists to translate its beliefs into paintings. Hollywood is doing the same today. The West does not dominate the globe merely by military power, politics or industry. It determines the fate of the world by means of images (film). Imagine being born into a different culture – one without Jesus, one without Freud. You go to the movies and see your first Hollywood film. It's far from your conditioning, it throws you off concepts you've previously embraced. It's designed to seduce, it creates desires you cannot escape. IMAGES are the ultimate power of Western civilization. That's not complicated at all, right?

ZL: So you're saying how images get rooted in people's minds is a way of having power over people and controlling them. So, in a way, the movie is showing history in the making. In the movie those who assume power is shown through the "rolling images."

EH: Yes. Three cardinals, who represent the Catholic Church and the West, roll the images in the movie.

ZL: Later on in the movie, there is a scene where Chinese people are copying the images, and this line of dialogue: "those who make the images are different from those who create the images." In China now, the colonial image of Western pop culture has invaded Chinese society. Will there always be a distance between outside images and people's beliefs, or is it only a matter of time before these foreign images begin to take root in people's minds?

EH: I think the leaders in China have understood very well that controlling imagery allows them to have an impact on the world. There must be a reason why Southern China is setting up bigger film studios than Hollywood. There is a brewing conflict between the current empire of America, and China, a place that used to be the empire for a very long time. These two huge blocks are definitely moving towards a conflict. This is another aspect of Los Feliz, but presented in a sweet way. There's the saying: "with honey you catch bees, not with vinegar." Even if you want to make a film about something complicated, you can reach the audience through visual aesthetics and humor. Then, they can dive beyond the surface of the pond...

ZL: Let's say there's a line. Once crossed the movie becomes more religious, or political. Was it your intention to walk this line?

EH: Border walking is always good. The surface should make you believe things are rather light. I bring up a topic, I abandon it, and maybe 30 minutes later I get back to it. My movies are like carpets: You weave in blue – you carry the thread below all the other colors and arrive at a spot where you take up blue again.

ZL: So, this carpet, this tapestry you are making, has multiple angles of entry, different threads to trace, and it's up to the viewer to decide which part of the tapestry should be examined?

EH: Exactly. And yet taken all together it makes sense, you don't have to get stuck on the particulars. How you perceive the film has to do with your experiences in life. In my movies, different cultural takes on life are being presented, which means certain things might address an Eastern audience, others a particular Western culture. You can decipher it all if you have experiences of many different cultures. But it is not a must. Certain things might escape your attention, yet others are presented in a way that might make you laugh or be curious, even if you do not get the cultural references that form their basis. Hopefully the whole or the parts will be seductive enough for you to be interested in solving the puzzle.

ZL: It is like entering a labyrinth with multiple paths to follow, and a particular cultural background would lead the way. Culture is such a significant component in the movie. It integrates everything, wouldn't you agree?

EH: Yes. Look at the characters, they are very stereotypical: There are three cardinals who represent the monotheistic West, there is the Faustian devil who is of their sort and a lost little girl who wants to be famous, who dreams the dream of the 20th century, "I'm gonna make it, I will be a star". At some point of the movie she asks herself: "Am I the only human being in this story?" – because everybody else is related to the divine, even her friend, a Japanese Shinto goddess. Shintoism is animism, that is millions of gods, no center. Kaya is the only character who represents a different kind of thinking: she cannot comprehend the concept of romantic love, which has a lot to do with her language she cannot understand Monotheism, nor good and evil – but she is really curious to figure it out. Yet, they all together are a bunch of fools. There is only salvation, rather enlightenment for the only human character, Lydia.

ZL: How do you assign different roles to these characters?

EH: You can also look at it with different eyes. The characters need not necessarily represent particular cultures. The Japanese lady in the movie is simply cool – she is sovereign. She doesn't feel threatened by an intimidating Western man.

And the “devil” eventually turns into a very weak man-like most men. The three cardinals are like clowns – good clownery is always intelligent. And the main character Lydia could be your next-door neighbor. So, it’s universal in a way. Each character stands for a stereotype, and they act this way.

ZL: Somehow the girl wanting to be a celebrity is the only one who is developing, unlike the other characters who already have certain beliefs from the beginning. Would you agree that her character is the only thing open to change?

EH: Well, the Shinto goddess is open to change too and yet she is caught within the boundaries of her “system.” She is more open than the Westerners, but she has her own limits – after all, she evaporates at some point – (laughs). The young French seeks what most Western people desire: to stick out, be loved, be famous – a totally empty reward. Fame makes those who are famous unhappy. It’s a lose-lose concept like monotheism, like anything mono, like 3D movies, like the entire concept of the central perspective. Lydia learns throughout the story that what she desires doesn’t make sense. That’s why she finds out in Los Angeles what she would have become if she’d carried on seeking fame: a pitiful existence in the city of dreams.

ZL: Okay. Let’s go back to the importance of exporting the image as a form of control. Earlier, you juxtaposed East and West as the condition concerning the image. In a way, you are saying the audience of the image is always on the outside. What about the inside of a specific culture? How do film or other forms of imagery represent their own identity and ideology?

EH: I am trying to lay open iconology, iconography and ideology behind the moving picture. Usually their control is subtle – it is not violent at all. It is like offering a baby chocolate for the first time. In 99 out of a 100 cases the baby will like it and will become addicted. It is actually a way smarter way than outright dictatorship. It gives everyone the feeling that they have a choice and yet they don’t. Even though everyone seems to be creating their own images in our age, one wonders what “own” means?

Things are so standardized. Desire has been standardized. On a daily basis, we are not only losing species in wildlife but we are also losing people, people who stick out, but who in reality can become role models for some. These days it’s “Look at me, I’m different, I’m unique.” And yet Disney, Apple and other companies conditioning makes us all believe in the same thing. The arts are always children of their times – they might have a longer memory than the times they have inhabited though – in both directions – historically and into the future – but art does have its own rules, identity and ideology. That’s what makes it sometimes so hard to be part of it. Too many rules, too little experimentation, no risk-taking, aversion to failing artistically, aesthetically, very little bravery to take outrageous new steps, to invent a brand new planet or a new dimension – away from those three dimensions that have become so absolute and boring.

ZL: In other words, the movie is built on the set-up of the Self and the Other.

EH: Yes, because “the other” still exists. (laughs)

ZL: The image behind us right now contains three palm trees. We all know that palm trees were imported to LA, but somehow through time the land ensured their adaptation, even though media made them into the image of LA in people’s minds. What is the significance of the grass goddess in your movie?

EH: When it comes to food, I don’t really like fusion. It’s great to have many different options of food in one place. The world was always “global” – long before we talked about globalization. There has always been give and take. We all learn from each other—all cultures. But why is man so obsessed with himself, why does he only love himself? Why can’t he show respect and care for all the other beings in this world? We will never succeed in destroying this world – it will recover – but the homo sapiens – the so-called crown of creation – will be gone. The image of each and every culture is formed by inside and outside views – sometimes the outside view becomes more important for the insiders. You take it on – you like to see yourself in a new way, you become this way.

ZL: We choose “the land” we are living in.

EH: Do we really have choices?

ZL: It depends on how you frame it.

EH: “The problem is the perspective” – the character Kaya says in the movie.

ZL: We understand these characters in the movie represent different cultures, but don’t you see these characters are also within ourselves? It depends on choice for each individual to be the devil, or the god. But if you follow fate, then you are letting your experience to frame you into certain character. In the movie everyone is god and everyone could be the devil. And fame and other concepts constantly fall upon you to force you to make a decision. What leads to the ending of going with the flow of things?

EH: The movie ends with the poem by Fernando Pessoa. The last line is: “the gods by their example help only those who seek to go nowhere, but into the river of things”. All this driving and pushing and trying to get ahead doesn’t make sense. Things are given to you, that’s why you never have reason to be proud of yourself. If you are smarter than others you should be using it to help others. Go with the flow, if you can. That’s exactly what the gods do too.

ZL: I think we’ve been talking about the macros in society, how cultural difference manifests. And the movie itself is almost like creating an imaginary land. You put all these little figures on this land, and you compose it as a musical piece. My question is: do you see this musical piece, this constant struggle with all these different characters, as the fundamental basis of each human being?

EH: Well – it’s my planet, right? I created it all. I played god. It took me 15 years instead of seven days, though. Don’t I have the right to play with the puppets? (laughs). Isn’t the aim of every piece of art to make the observer find himself in it?

ZL: We also talked about the difference between fate and choice.

EH: Again, it all starts with conditioning. In Woody Allen’s film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, he posits the question of god. Of good and evil. Let’s say you grow up with a mom who teaches you to never steal things or you will be punished, you will have to pay up for it. Later on in life you do something you’re not supposed to do. You feel guilty about it, and the next day – as a consequence – you lose your wallet. The conditioning fulfills itself. Or you grow up in a Mafia family where killing is common. You will definitely not lose your wallet because you have slit someone’s throat. You’re conditioning your world, as far as you can see and feel. It’s the same with culture, with religion. It leaves a stamp on you that is very hard to escape. You can never thoroughly understand an alien culture. You can have sympathy, you can address it with utmost tolerance, with the willingness to take in, but you can never fully become this culture.

ZL: Yes. In a way each individual’s identity is in the making, too. When I was watching the movie, the whole time I was feeling like an animal chasing its own tail. At a certain point, I have to tell myself, I am not only this animal, but also the observer beyond it. I am both. But how could I be both? You almost need a third eye. So I have to look at the film in separate layers. Though the symbolic figures and the imagery are flat, but this labyrinth we talked about earlier is not. The movie becomes a mirror that you are looking at yourself. At the end, each character in the movie is part of me.

EH: Bravo! This is exactly the concept. All these characters are us. When I wrote them I would always feel like, sure, I can be the devil, the young girl, or the goddess, and the three cardinals on top of it. If I were to be reincarnated in my next life I wouldn’t mind being a cardinal, not a pope though – that’s a hard one. (laughs). Each personality is multi-layered. I think it’s comforting to know that we are not one-dimensional. If you feed people hamburgers all the time, like Hollywood does, then they will not be able to appreciate good food. I guess that’s your ‘animal biting its own tail feeling’. I play the over-and-over-again game in *LOS FELIZ*, I pull out the clichés, I make them unpleasantly obvious. That is the mirror you are talking about.

ZL: Being a Chinese, it's really interesting to see this because you are born like a white canvas. All the culture from the past was erased. And it is really up to you to assemble the image of the self. This realization comes with the acceptance of reality being a free form. In the moment reality opens up, fears come in. The concept of reality is just like the concept of freedom. Freedom is what scares us in the end.

EH: Absolutely. It scares everyone. Also people who are aware of their history fear freedom. Freedom means autonomy and independence, which can never be materialistic. It means going your very own way regardless of your environment. You have to be a person who has tremendous belief in yourself in order to withstand all those who want to stir you away from this path. They do so because they fear it in themselves. Independent thinking is very hard to achieve and it is dangerous as it is neither popular in dictatorships nor in democracy. It is always connected to the sanctions society inflicts on you, from being bullied all the way to having your head cut off.

ZL: You know, this movie reminds me once I was thinking about how one registers one's persona. Imagine, you are constantly moving on a horizontal plain that is built upon experience and encounters with various cultures. And there is a vertical line built upon your perspectives of life, which is also moving. The crossing is the register of self, which is constantly moving as well. Once you realize that, you are no longer fixated on the belief of who you are. It's constantly in the making.

EH: You found this in the movie? Great! Yes – none of my films should be a closed entity. That would be a lie. Life is never a closed entity. It carries on. And film should be a clearly defined two-hour world? How odd!

ZL: Yes, this is how I relate to it. But there are other things to see. Too many things to see, in fact!

EH: I know, it's very dense. But that's the fun of it. You can watch it over and over again. Why would you be seeing it only once?

ZL: The movie is very iconic.

EH: Los Feliz is full of quotes – e.g., the liquor store quotes Sidney Lumet's "The Pawn Broker" and later "Gone with the Wind" among many others. I mainly quoted American movies, since it is a road movie and the protagonists are traveling across America, across an entire continent, an entire world, and yet they do not move a bit – neither physically nor mentally. Absolute stasis. They/we are chasing illusions and yet, how could we survive without creating them?

ZL: Yeah. That's true even of the separation between sound and image. It's almost telling the viewer directly that the cinema is in your mind. You are creating it while watching it. It made clear in the movie by separating these elements.

EH: The film starts out with Richard Strauss' "Vier Letzte Lieder." There is nothing more enjoyable than riding a cool car in the most Western city of the West and having this kind of music on full volume. It fulfills itself there. Next is Stravinsky - which was already mentioned in the first version of the script in 2001. "Le Sacre du Printemps" was the first piece of music history that denied the existence of god. It accompanies/juxtaposes Rome. When we get to the painted America, Peter Ablinger's music comprises the score.

ZL: Why did you choose Peter Ablinger?

EH: Hollywood has repeatedly copied the great romantic composers for a hundred years now but there are composers out there, non-film composers who build on the classic heritage in a true way, including the merits of twelve-tone music all the way to Feldman and Stockhausen, etc. Ablinger is extreme in his approach as he makes no compromises, yet the classical surfaces beautifully in his compositions. He does not quote – he builds on. For me, he is the most radical of all contemporary composers. And he thinks flat – as if he is drawing – like me (laughs). There are moments in "my America" when I needed sentimental music that brings tears to your eyes (the Hollywood kind). In those moments I used compositions by the very talented Florencia di Concilio. Thomas Köner's music pops up too, which together with my images evokes the feeling of America being a war zone. At the end of the movie it's classical again – some of the finest music ever composed and recorded.

Trilogy of Beautiful Foreignness

EDGAR HONETSCHLÄGER'S ART AS FILM
BY GEORG SEESLEN 2001

We have – in the difficult if not altogether "impossible" dialogue-field between art and film – agreed to discourses we can fathom: art in film, film as art, artists as filmmakers.

The most difficult aspect of the discourse is perhaps 'art as film'. We are not talking about translating art into film or translating one medium into the other, or looking for a bipartisan installation that allows us to question the film's meaning until it will, in a moment of self-referential truth, take a quantum leap from an industrial cultural commodity to 'superior' art. Instead it is a matter of treating film like the canvas of a painting, like an exhibiting room, like the elements of an installation. That can – but does not necessarily have to – mean that a film looks like art.

Thus, there is more to be done than simply to avoid the conventions of mainstream cinema and equally the intentions of its opposite pole – 'experimental film' – which, as the name implies, does not use the film as a medium, but examines it as an aesthetic problem. Edgar Honetschläger rigorously ignores this dialectic in order to arrive at his art in the form of a film. He uses the camera as a 'painting tool' that is free in principle – including the freedom of a form of 'necessity to art' that can only be understood out of a gesture of negation. His 'art as film' is free enough to find its own 'language' again and again.

Against The Symbolism Of A Centralized World

BY DIETER BUCHHART 2009

Imagine a vast sheet of paper on which straight Lines, Triangles, Squares, Pentagons, Hexagons, and other figures, instead of remaining fixed in their places, move freely about, on or in the surface, but without the power of rising above or sinking below it, very much like shadows – only hard with luminous edges – and you will then have a pretty correct notion of my country and countrymen. Thus Edwin A. Abbott in Section 1 of his science fiction novella *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, By A Square*. In his mathematical satire on the hierarchical ordering of Victorian society, Abbott describes a two-dimensional country where life – reduced by one dimension – takes place on a flat plane. The bodies of the figures in the novella, who can see, hear, and feel, consist of outlines, like house walls. Like walls in our three-dimensional world, closed outlines are impenetrable, although to the inhabitants of Flatland houses are neither open nor shut. The missing dimension only becomes an issue when a female visitor from three-dimensional Spaceland, a sphere, observes that the houses are open, because she can simultaneously see both their interior and their exterior. Entrapment in conventional knowledge and familiar social structures both puts the "old Square" in prison (having had a glimpse of three-dimensional society he tries to spread these new insights in Flatland) and leads the Sphere to reject the "old Square's" speculations on other dimensions.

The way Edgar Honetschläger probes and explores such unreflected, culturally determined givens and ways of seeing on the "threshold between what one knows and what is unfamiliar" constitutes the hallmark of his artistic work. Living between cultures he addresses the variety and contradictions of a globalized world.

Since the late 1980's he has lived primarily in Tokyo, but also in New York, Vienna, Rome, Palermo, and Brasilia. At present he commutes between Brasilia, Tokyo, and Vienna for his latest project AUN. Like the Sphere from Spaceland, he is a traveler who perceives cultural phenomena and what is apparently God-given with detachment, thus relativizing them. In the film trilogy COLORS/MASACCIO (2000) Honetschläger had his protagonists Ryo Kogai and Yukika Kudo meet, without prior consultation, in the Brancacci Chapel in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence, and recorded their interaction and dialogue with a camera that ran without his being present. When Prof. Kogai observes that "From the start of the Renaissance people tried to see and to depict the world as it is," Yukika replies, entirely in the spirit of Abbott: "It depends on how one sees it. I think most people only understand the illusion of perspective as a result of their education, while those who aren't accustomed to it can't see the way we do." For in the terms of reference of Flatland there is no more a third dimension than there is a fourth or a fifth in Spaceland, or the achievement of central perspective in Japan.

But which dimensions exist? How is the world? Is it never more than a projection screen for our culturally determined notions? And is central perspective capable of depicting the world as it is? In *Art and Visual Perception* Rudolf Arnheim writes: "*The differentiation between two-dimensional and three-dimensional form has been achieved, but only through the suspect trick of making the picture plane appear as an image of three-dimensional space.*" Arnheim adverts here to two decisive issues in painting in Western culture. Firstly, a three-dimensional form can only be created on a picture plane by an illusion, for, in the words of Clement Greenberg, "three-dimensionality is the province of sculpture." And secondly, because the picture plane in painting and drawing is two-dimensional, every image is perpetually confined to the two-dimensional space of Flatland. Arnheim compares this with children's drawings where our world is translated into two-dimensions. For children adapt their drawings with "admirable logic ... to the conditions of the two-dimensional medium." Which raises the question whether the two-dimensional depiction of three-dimensional space can be an image of our world at all and whether it does not in fact require a translation,

"a kind of geometry impelled by the need, conscious or unconscious, to remind ourselves of, and repeat, and acknowledge the physical limitations of the medium. "This holds no less for Jean Dubuffet's drawings "reduced ... to the rudimentary linear schematizations" than for Jackson Pollock's "tension inherent in the constructed, repeated flatness of the surface. " But it also holds for Honetschläger's artistic attempt to undermine the central perspective of filmic space. For precisely the projected film remains intransigently two-dimensional on the surface of the projection screen, whereby film, in contrast to modernist painting, seems to pay no tribute to its literal two dimensionality. But to what extent can the moving picture of film take into account the physical limitations of the medium? Is flatness, as Greenberg puts it, really "exclusive to pictorial art" understood as painting? Apart from drawings, is it not also a property of film?

The starting point in Honetschläger's artistic line of argument is invariably the medium of drawing, whose physical limitation to two dimensions, however, is only tenable if the pictorial representation is grasped as immaterial surface of an illusionistic window. For Honetschläger, drawing (like Abbott's Flatland and in line with the logic of children's drawings) is for the most part adapted to the two-dimensional medium. In his drawing *Los Feliz* (2001), for instance, the artist depicts a highway interchange from above. The cars are reduced to outlines divided into front, middle, and rear sections. This blending stick drawing can be read on the one hand as a translation of events into two dimensions in conformity with the principles of Flatland; or on the other as a bird's eye view of two intersecting highways. While Honetschläger dispenses with clear edges to the highways, the partial disappearance of vehicles at the lower edge of the intersection suggests the second reading. For all recognizable objects (including pictures themselves) exist in three-dimensional space, "and the barest suggestion of a recognizable entity suffices to call up associations of that kind of space. The fragmentary silhouette of a human figure, or of a teacup, will do so, and by doing so alienate pictorial space from the literal two dimensionality which is the guarantee of painting's independence as an art."

Honetschläger himself in this drawing can scarcely not call up spatial associations. But it would be a misunderstanding to think that he wants to resurrect Abbott's Flatland in his works. Rather he visually explores the illusion of central perspective, one of the major achievements of Western culture, which even today dominates how we see the world. Arnheim presents the case tellingly when he writes: "Central perspective, however, is so violent and intricate a deformation of the normal shape of things that it came about only as the final result of prolonged exploration and in response to very particular cultural needs." Honetschläger opposes the "global artistic world domination" of the "illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional ground" as "one of the most questionable phenomena of Christian Western society," for ultimately central perspective is rooted in particular cultural needs and one may in no way assume a valid, universally readable reproduction of our world. Nor does central perspective produce the mechanical projections yielded by the lenses of eyes and cameras, even if it closely resembles them. Honetschläger's sharp rebuttal of Christian Western society's claim that central perspective is the only possible way of representing the world as it coincides with Arnheim's ideas when he writes: "The discovery of central perspective bespoke a dangerous development in Western thought."

It marked a scientifically oriented preference for mechanical reproduction and geometrical constructs in place of creative imagery. Thus, for Arnheim too the acceptance of "the geometrical construct of central perspective" for the production of an "illusion" as artistic ideal involves a significant loss in creative pluralism. Honetschläger consistently opposes the absoluteness of all dogma. He will not and cannot accept the momentous dogma of central perspective, not because it is a deficient construct, but because it becomes a "poisonous absolute." The adjectival qualifier in the term "central perspective" elicits similar associations in both Arnheim and Honetschläger. While Honetschläger notes that "The very word – CENTRAL – describes the problem," Arnheim argues: "Symbolically, such a centered world suits a hierarchical conception of human existence." Both advert to the cultural difference between the centralized Western Christian world-view and other approaches to existence. "It [the hierarchical world view] would hardly fit,"

in Arnheim's words, "the Taoist or Zen philosophies of the East, which express themselves in the centerless continuum of the Chinese and Japanese landscapes shaped by isometric perspective." Honetschläger almost continues where Arnheim left off: "Influenced by living in Japan, I've learnt how differently one can think of the world. There is no absolute. Every scheme of life is equally valid. Central perspective is an illusion, just like the bittersweet Western invention of Romanticism. We are proud of these achievements, but the world also functions very well in two dimensions and without Romanticism (until the West intruded itself there was no word for "love" in the Japanese language!)." Here, Honetschläger clearly identifies the relativity of cultural givens he has experienced commuting between cultures. In his film MILK, produced in Tokyo in 1997, a Japanese man quotes Wittgenstein: "That the world is my world shows itself in the fact that the limits of language mean the limits of my world." But precisely by crossing these limits, by breaking out of an apparently objectivizable world-view, it becomes possible to experience and understand new dimensions. Just as the "old Square" could or would only see the third dimension once he had had a glimpse of the three-dimensional society of Spaceland, so too are we only able to see a possible fourth or fifth dimension if we let other life and world schemes obtain. The opening up that characterizes Honetschläger's works is dependent for its success on the detached outside view, the regard of one who is a stranger in his own cultural world and its "objectivity." The drawing is invariably the crucial aesthetic and thematic bracket in Honetschläger's artistic production holding together the individual work groups with their cross-genre approaches.

In such projects as IMMERGRÜN UND DIE MODERNE and THE LAST LUNCH/THE AUDIENCE the artist single-mindedly addresses the question of fragmentary subjective realities and the illusion of central perspective in film. At the same time like no other he consistently links this subject with the narrative structure of his films and the two-dimensional medium of drawing. In THE LAST LUNCH/THE AUDIENCE, he reenacted the Last Supper as a schnitzel lunch in a dual projection with noted representatives of the Austrian art scene at the Leopold Museum.

Which disciple is the “chosen one” depends on whose balloon can be blown up biggest (each of the disciples finds a balloon in his lederhosen pocket).

After this the scene is divided. The left projection shows the disciples, whose actions are dictated by a paper stoplight (onto which lights are shone). In the right-hand projection one sees the “chosen one,” naked, wearing a wig of glued paper covered in pencil drawings before a tree to which paper leaves are attached. The sequences are punctuated by a train crossing a bridge and captions, such as “AND HE SAW A FIG TREE” referring to the parable of the barren fig tree. Finally, the disciples dismantle the stoplight, the only scenery, and at a stroke the fig tree loses its leaves – Jesus destroys the tree that failed to give him what he wanted. The scenery is deconstructed for what it is, namely, a flat collage. Honetschläger thus contradicts the viewpoint of central perspective in two respects. Firstly, he breaks both pictorially and narratively with the underlying religious hierarchy communicated in medieval art by means of the “perspective of importance.” Honetschläger’s work seems to refer to Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* in which the figure of Christ is both the focal point and the vanishing point of the composition, whereas in *THE LAST LUNCH/ THE AUDIENCE* with its dual projection, the central strip in the scene, hence the figure at the center of the performance, has been erased. The *Last Supper* becomes *THE LAST LUNCH* and is reduced to a schnitzel dinner devoid of all religious symbolism, with the “chosen one” being randomly selected. Secondly, by using the paper collage as a for the most part two-dimensional piece of scenery for events (whose theatricality Honetschläger brings out expertly) the artist works quite literally against central perspective. Neither the drawing of the stoplight nor of the fig tree are perfect illusions, but rather abstract forms that gesture at what they represent. It is only by means of the lighting – an important stylistic element in Honetschläger’s films – that the stoplight begins to look like a real stoplight, yet it is clear to viewers all along how the illusion is produced. The dismantling of the stoplight and the falling of the leaves finally bring out that these are simply paper props, thus precluding the emergence of a filmic illusion.

In *IMMERGRÜN UND DIE MODERNE*, the work following the introductory *THE LAST LUNCH*, Honetschläger succeeds again in adroitly combining painted and drawn scenery with film photography, whereby the paintings, reduced to a few brush strokes, not only expose the filmic space for what it is – i.e. an illusion – but also seem to directly counteract the illusion. Although the perfectly lit paintings seem to depict real scenes, these spatial images are constantly being deconstructed. While constructing the filmic space, Honetschläger is also at work deconstructing it. This comes out clearly in the scene where “the seduction” (Yukika Kudo) slowly applies a yellow centerline to the flat canvas on which a road is painted. It is as if she were outside the rigid borders of the picture area, as if off-film in the film within a film. “Off ” thus seems to take on a double meaning—off within and off outside the projection. In connection with the moving image in film Gilles Deleuze defines the concept “off” – the “out of field” (hors-champ) – as “what is neither seen nor understood, but is nevertheless perfectly present.” By combining scenery, people, lighting, and on-set projections, the artist creates a film-in-film situation, almost a kind of doubling. For instance, he takes frames from existing film material, paints a stylized version in acrylic on unprimed canvas, then lights and films it with ‘the seduction’, or he projects the existing material onto it and films it again. Off-screen is also important in scenes such as the one in which ‘the seduction’ leaves the one picture field and appears in the second, while her shadow remains in the first. Thus, although it is essentially a space that delimits and separates, the gap between the projection fields is also a connector, not unlike a demarcation line that has to be deliberately crossed.

The painted scenery in *IMMERGRÜN UND DIE MODERNE* has much in common with Honetschläger’s set drawings. In *ENDURING FREEDOM* (2002), for instance, we see the protagonist lying in bed, behind him drawings of a window, a light switch, a light bulb, and a ventilator. Once again, Honetschläger immerses the scenery in perfect stage lighting. In this ironic portrait of the USA after 9/11, the protagonist flicks the drawn light switch and, with a real vacuum cleaner, attempts to eliminate a mosquito – metaphor for terrorists – disturbing his sleep. He finally succeeds using the

New York Times; a flattened mosquito and drop of blood remain drawn on the wall. When the man (America) has finally fallen asleep, another terrorist attack hits him. Honetschläger breaks again with central perspective, on the one hand by calling into question the centrality of the West, on the other by undermining it in drawings translated into the two-dimensional. He literally turns against the “symbolism of a focused world” to open our eyes to new dimensions in film, for “film as the principle of painting taken a step further has actually strengthened this illusion. Film has taken on board the desire for central perspective and has accustomed our eyes even more strongly to seeing in that way and no other.” Honetschläger takes a stand against realistic, naturalistic art that disassembles the medium and which seems to have succeeded almost perfectly in its goal of “using art to conceal art.” He criticizes our centralized worldview and our ignoring what a projection is, namely, an immaterial, two-dimensional film of light on a projection screen. If the electricity goes off, things stay dark. In deconstructing central perspective and disclosing the filmic means of production Honetschläger almost seems to be seeking a new self-definition of the medium. It is as a “self-criticism” of film, in much the same way that Modernism owed its success in painting to artists like Manet and Cézanne stressing the flatness of the support, that Honetschläger would like to introduce a new way of seeing that contests our previous ways of seeing. Honetschläger’s approach is intensely political. In his self-criticism of the medium his drawings are not merely scenery, props, studies, and drafts. Rather they bear in themselves the thought of Flatland and the struggle against central perspective, product of a hierarchically organized society that accepts violence as an attribute of interpersonal relationships. They are narrative and filmset, scenery and independent artwork all at once. But, as Greenberg already observed, flatness, to which both modernist painting and Honetschläger’s drawings and films aspire, can never be absolute. It is a viewpoint Honetschläger can only endorse, for “dogma is evil.” Honetschläger’s films, like Flatland, are multidimensional, which explains why they are so often felt as an affront to the establishment. And rightly so. For the artist is adept at communicating his view from the outside with fitting irony.

His artistic statement is at heart deeply political and often disturbing because he is ever ready to go on a collision course with both the political and the cultural establishments. Whether in his critical letter to the curators of this world, or his radical critique of central perspective, his choice of artistic means always ensures precision political agitation. The aesthetic surface appeal of his works is always important to him as a means of beguiling viewers into the critical discourse. Honetschläger, in the spirit of Abbott’s dedication at the beginning of Flatland, would like to open our eyes to new dimensions: “To the Secrets of FOUR FIVE OR EVEN SIX Dimensions/Thereby contributing/To the Enlargement of THE IMAGINATION/And the possible Development/Of that most rare and excellent Gift of MODESTY/Among the Superior Races/Of SOLID HUMANITY.

Central Perspective As Tamed Perception

EXCERPTS FROM PAVEL FLORENSKY’S
‘ESSAYS ON THE PERCEPTION OF ART’

The origin of perspective depiction is to be found in the craft of theater decoration. Creating a fake reality on stage turned the audience into an irresponsible, escapist, poisoned subject. Painting has indeed the task not to duplicate reality, but should instead evoke a deep understanding of its architecture, its material and its meaning; to fathom this meaning by sensing and empathizing reality is the artist’s task.

The ideology of the Greeks was driven by the probability of appearance and not by the truth of Existence. A major feature of icon painting is the reverse perspective, which states that parallel lines diverge on the screen as opposed to the central perspective where they converge to a point.

The Byzantines had a different relationship with reality, a different perception of the world. They would have never imposed that a single, subjective perspective was the only way to recognize reality. The supporters of the central perspective would call it a discovery as it derives from geometric laws, yet it is nothing but an invention, a concept of many.

The artists of the historical periods, in which the perspective was not being used, or – as claimed – “where not capable to use it” willingly went for a different representational principle than the central perspective, because the *Zeitgeist* understands and feels the world in a way that encompasses the method of depiction as immanent.

Giotto, the “curious, light connoisseur”, is “the archetype of the era of Leonardo”, as well as a harbinger of naturalism and thus of a time in which science and the perspective determined the view of the world.

The development of the central perspective means a decline in the perception of reality for an entire society. The Euclidean understanding of space and the Kantian worldview lead to a materialistic worldview that misinterprets the world. From the age of enlightenment on, man turns into a prisoner in Plato’s cave who does not want to recognize the origin of the shadow on the wall. We pave the way to a holistic worldview in the future ...”

The perspective representation of reality is in no way the closest to man’s perception of the world. Perspective is not a discovery, instead it is an abstraction, an invention. Science and the teaching of perspective go hand in hand and gradually bring an upheaval in people’s minds, a development that moves mankind further away from the nature of humanity – a causal chain from merging with reality to separation to materialism. Science tames us, it seems to suffocate our life in a system of schemes. It is remarkable and extremely ridiculous how “the enlightened existence” succeeds in portraying this distortion from “the feelings for nature”, this re-education in the spirit of nihilism, as a returning to naturalness and a successful renouncing of restrictions. A dreadful re-education from the pathos of the medieval man – the confirmation of reality within and outside of itself and therefore “objectivity” – to the pathos of the “enlightened man”, who escapes reality and gives into illusions and mirages and tends toward subjectivism: from “the grateful to be blessed” to “I will, I want; I need”.

“It took more than five hundred years of social education to get the eye and the hand used to the central perspective, as neither eye nor hand of a child nor those of grown-ups are trained to this submission to a “standardized perspective”; today as back then each individual who wants to draw the perspective needs to learn its schemes. Children’s “unbound relationship to the world” often brings about an inverted perspective. A special experiencing of the world, by no means naive, but perhaps a more natural perception of reality leads them far from scientific abstraction. With a concentrated knowledge of physics it is theoretically possible to represent space on a surface, “but only by destroying the nature of the depicted”. “Naturalism has for once and for all become an impossibility”.

There is no motivation to refer to an absolute point of view as the only one to capture reality. No man who is in full possession of his mental faculties would consider his point of view as the only one, he’d accept any point of view that allows seeing different aspects of the world. Certainly we cannot see three walls of a building at a time, from one point of view we might only see a small piece of a wall, from another one we might not see anything at all. An artist can and must depict his idea of the house but he can certainly not transfer the house itself onto the canvas. The question of the purpose of perspective in painting cannot be answered with the proximity to natural perception. Thus, the perspective can actually be seen as a taming of perception, an instilling of a certain worldview. It condemns the artist and the beholder into passivity and leads to a distorted relationship with reality, to an illusionary image of the world. We’ll again and again face the dichotomy between symbolism and materialism and a view of the world that separates subject and object, which eventually turns us into passive spectators and leads us into naive materialism.

There is an anecdote about Giotto in which he paints a small fly onto a painting composed by his master Cimabue. The fly looks so real that Cimabue tries to chase it away several times before he recognizes the illusion. At this moment Cimabue recognizes that Giotto has surpassed him. The fly becomes a symbol of artistic progress.

The task of art, however, is to take the viewer beyond the limits of perception and not to tie him up in an illusion.

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