

Contextualizing the Unseen; Maria Finn

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The Author

A screenplay is not literature but text to be used as instructions. Nevertheless, screenplays are published and studied thoroughly by people who have no intention of making a film. This fact doesn't necessarily change the text into literature but shows that this text can be read in various ways. "Auteur" as a term was invented in the fifties, by film critics from Cahiers du Cinema to express, as they saw it, the necessity for filmmakers to take control over the whole process of filmmaking. Instead of serving solely as craftsman who visualize ideas written by others, film directors should work out the concepts for their own filmmaking from the very beginning. If not writing the screenplay themselves, they should at least initiate the ideas themselves and then let professionals do the writing. From there they should follow the process and in a sense write the film according to their personal styles and visions.

In his essay *The Death of the Author* from 1967 Roland Barthes writes: "Writing is that neutral space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing". Here Barthes deconstructs the writer, turning him into a scriptor producing texts for the sake of writing, not expressing. What is relevant here concerning the writing of a screenplay is what kind of subjectivity this allows the author to express. Here the writer of the film will have to bear in mind his very specific readers—not the undefined readers of literature but the readers who will be using the screenplay: the actors, the photographer, the editor, the musicians and the film crew. So here it is interesting to investigate how to make room for the unexpected, while at the same time being precise enough to convince the producer of the film. This is because the screenplay is not an end product; it is a tool to be used. And therefore it should offer possibilities to encounter the unexpected, which might lead to a new interpretation of the original idea.

An interesting introduction to Antonioni's way of writing for a film is to study his collection of texts, *That Bowling Alley on the Tiber*, published in 1986. William Arrowsmith has translated these sketches for film and has also written a preface in which he tries to describe these "story-ideas" in relation to Antonioni's filmic oeuvre. He writes in this preface: "We encounter not merely a transcription of narrative to cinematic terms, as when 'the eye pans', or dawn 'begins its fade-in,' or an action 'seems out of sync' with the spoken words, or we hear a voice 'off-screen,' but rather the verbalization of pre-cinematic material in terms of its kinetic potential". These texts differ in lengths and depth: some of them are merely a couple of sentences, while others stretches over a couple of pages. We are invited to follow how an incident, an over-heard conversation, something read in a newspaper, or the colour of the sky, has the potentiality to contain an embryo for a film. These single images can engender associations that can be developed into elaborated stories that become a script, finally to become a screenplay. But in these texts we are still at the very beginning, which here means a sensibility towards what surround us. A text called *Where There Aren't Any Houses* shortly gives some remarks about the landscape:

"A flat expanse of landscape on the Po delta. A village of low, coloured houses. The sidewalk continues beyond the end of the street. No more houses flanking it, only the sidewalk proceeding all by itself toward the embankment.

At night there's always a small empty truck, as though its owner lived there, where there aren't any houses".

This little text is precise and yet contains the kind of ambiguity that triggers our curiosity. A dull landscape, a village of no importance, and some ordinary houses that all of sudden are missing. With a house besides the truck the image would have remained ordinary, but when left out, this becomes a disturbing detail, which when enlarged creates a pervasive sense of instability. Arrowsmith describes the impact of these texts like this: "Regarded as visual 'stills' they are in some real sense satisfactory; but they all look forward to dynamic enlargement, a more ample fulfilment". And some texts have indeed been enlarge and actually included in a film. In another text Antonioni describes how he stops his car while driving to the pine forest of Ravenna. While looking out of the window of his car, he envisions a dialogue between a man and a woman. The dialogue takes place on a trattoria, and

they discusses what to eat. When the proprietor proposes chicken and the woman protests, it makes him laugh at his own forgetfulness, and he excuses his proposal. The other man becomes jealous, feeling left out. When they are alone again he asks what all that was about. The woman explains that she doesn't eat birds and the man comments:

“You mean you don't love them? Because if you loved them, if they made you feel fond of them, then you'd eat them, no?”

“Yes, in that case . . . At least I think so.”

“For instance?”

“Cats.”

“Kittens.”

“Yes, kittens.”

“Soft, playful, independent . . .”

“Like that, yes, I'd eat them.”

“For instance . . . me.”

Ivana turns to look at him with a quiet open smile: “If I loved you, Aldo.”

This conversation appears in *Red Desert (Il Deserto Rosso)* (1964), Antonioni's film situated in the industrialized Ravenna depicted in a both frightening and impressive way. The title of this text is *A Film to Made (or Not Made)*. Arrowsmith continues: “The order of the pieces is not chronologically structured, but rather designed to reveal the process by which a film grows from its matrix”. This is interesting when taking into account that the title of the last text is: “Don't Try to Find Me”. This is an indication for how these sketches could be used, not as an explanation to Antonioni's choices but as an invitation to follow the process of writing a film. Here the before mentioned essay by Barthes comes to mind, and his remarks on the author as the voice of a single person confiding in us. In this sort of confiding, the author gives clues that when deciphered with the help of autobiographical details will reveal the meaning of the work. But Antonioni refuses to take the role of the author in this sense. His characters are presented to us without a previous history, and therefore also without Antonioni's own history. We merely follow them and their reactions to their environment. This is what makes a never filmed screenplay by Antonioni a temptation. His open-ended writing paired with the not yet seen images offers a specific, yet very open, suggestion.

The Reader

To continue the reading of Barthes essay I would like to quote a remark about the reader: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." Barthes continues by stating that this destination cannot any longer be personal; the reader is simply a place where all the traces that constitutes the text is held together. With this in mind its interesting to quote Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990): "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity". What is interesting here is that Butler refuses to accept a common reading of the concept of gender. She offers a possibility to new readings of fixed concepts by suggesting a re-enactment. Because this re-enactment will produce a slippage, a failure will reveal the unstable nature of the reproduced concept. In her book on Butler in the "Live Theory" (2006) series, Vicky Kirby writes: "Indeed, it is in the slippage, dissonance, or even contradiction of their repetition that the subversion of identity becomes possible, if not inevitable". So if Barthes wants to liberate the reader from the author, then Butler offers yet another way out. A failed reading of a given concept reveals its produced nature. Not only is the reader liberated, but a failed reading also can prove to be a success.

In 2004 I made a re-enactment of Antonioni's film *Red Desert*. Chosen scenes from the film were re-photographed, and then some photographs were turned into drawings. The drawings and photographs were shown together in a slide-series as a loop, offering a kind of distillate of the film. This work, *Sometimes the Desert is Red*, becomes a subjective interpretation of the film. The original landscape is replaced with a similar in Copenhagen-Amager, a southern suburb with some remaining industries—a slippage that brings new perspectives to the original film. In the same year Yvette Brackman made a re-enactment of another Antonioni film. *La Notte* (1961), also in a Copenhagen suburb, Herlev. Here scenes in which the films leading character is alone is remade in locations similar to the original. This coincidence tempted us to show the works together to further investigate how these works corresponded to each other. This resulted in the show *Deserted Lot 2005* at Southfirst

in Brooklyn. The show created in a sense to a third space, an interweaving of quotation that opened up for new meanings in both works. We therefore felt that it would be interesting to pursue this project, and we wanted to find a form for a new collaboration. After having read parts of *Unfinished Business*, a collection of Antonioni's never realized projects we decided that a screenplay that had never been filmed would offer an interesting angle. Here were given instructions, but half of the text—the images—were missing.

Michelangelo Antonioni wrote two screenplays in 1966, one was *Blow Up*, filmed the same year, and the other was *Technically Sweet*. Antonioni had made a deal with the producer Carlo Ponti who would produce three films with him backed by MGM. The first was *Blow Up* (1966), which was a huge success, both critically and financially. The second, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), had great problems during production, went over budget, and turned out to be a huge flop at the box-office. *Blow Up* was a fresh take on swinging London, convincingly catching the spirit of the time, and *Zabriskie Point* attempted to do something similar for American society. But whereas *Blow Up* explored the way we experience and construct reality, *Zabriskie Point* focused on signs of materialism and tried to describe possible scenarios for an escape from this society. *Technically Sweet* was in preproduction in 1971 when Carlo Ponti decided not to fund the film. Instead Ponti invited Antonioni to film a screenplay by Mark Peploe, *The Passenger (Professione: reporter)* (1975). Antonioni rewrote the screenplay together with Peploe, with whom he had worked on the screenplay for *Blow Up*, and Peter Wollen. *The Passenger* (1975) explores themes that should have appeared in *Technically Sweet*. The screenplay was published in Italian a year later, but *Tecnicamente Dolce* was never filmed.

The title to *Technically Sweet* comes from a remark by J. Robert Oppenheimer, who used the term in relation to his work as a physicist. When a problem was too tempting technically, you had to go ahead and solve it, only afterward considering the consequences. The ambiguity of this expression caught our attention and we decided that we wanted to use this screenplay as a starting point for a new project. But such a complex project would certainly be more interesting if there were several artists that contributed, giving different views on the screenplay. So *Technically Sweet* grew into a group show with thirteen participating artists, or even more appropriate, thirteen different readers.

The Text

“The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture”. Here is Barthes’ *Death of the Author* once again quoted, and this time the purpose is to focus on what kind of text the group show would generate. For although there would be thirteen different interpretations of the screenplay *Tecnicamente dolce*, they will be read together. Each interpretation would refer to the others, because they would emphasize a part of the script ignored by someone else. What would be left out one artist work would be given significance when interpreted elsewhere. And since we do not have an original, each interpretation would have an authority in it’s own right. Having no original, we would have to draw on quotations from earlier films, and here *The Passenger* probably would be the most relevant since *Technically Sweet* in a sense already exists inside this film. The same actors, Jack Nicholson and Maria Schneider, appeared, and the protagonist is in both stories a journalist. One film quotes the other, in an intricate and subtle way. The contributions will also perpetually refer to each other since they all will be excerpts from a larger text. But since both the author and the film, is absent, something else is also at stake here. For the real challenge is to pursue the ideas of someone else. When Barthes writes that to give a text an author is to impose a limit to that text. Here this limit is avoided since the author of the film, not the screenplay, is removed. This is what makes the project challenging, to create a new work from something given and impersonal, a restriction and yet an opportunity.

When Oppenheimer used the phrase “technically sweet” during the 1954 Atomic Energy Commission hearings, his remarks provoked doubts. Philip M. Stern refers to the remark in his book *The Oppenheimer Case: security on trial* (1969). Oppenheimer used the term twice to explain that one could not argue when presented with these kinds of problems. What was suggested was that it was likely that someone who used a term like that really would have qualms about constructing a new weapon of uncalculated destructiveness. On a third occasion Oppenheimer said: “I have always thought it was a dreadful weapon . . . Even though from a technical point of view it was a sweet and lovely and beautiful job, I have still thought it was a dreadful weapon”. This leaves us with another perspective, the technical point of view. For the text written by the exhibition is also an investigation of the terms for artistic production. One of the first questions that come to mind when you have read the

screenplay *Tecnicamente dolce* is why the film was rejected. The answer to that is not clear; it was probably just a result of various circumstances. But while working on the project you are still confronted with all kinds of technical problems, on a much smaller scale than when making a feature film. Still, these problems remind you of the dependence of the artist and the art of making yourself independent. So, when choosing the title, Antonioni in a way made his vulnerability all too clear, exposing the fact that to be able to technically fulfil the film, he was depending on others.

“Image, Music, Text”; Roland Barthes, Fontana Press, London, 1977.

“That Bowling Alley on the Tiber”; Michelangelo Antonio, Oxford University Press, 1986.

“The Oppenheimer Case: security on trial”; Philip M. Stern, Harper&Row Publishers, New York, 1969.