NATHALIE MELIKIAN: WAR

HER WAR OF WORDS

Surveying this War of film, its constant noise, its pale shapes emerging from the darkness, its visually rhythmic, repeating form, can result in a sense of strange disorientation. It is a film, certainly, but as the frames succeed each other onscreen we begin to realise that it is hardly one in the conventional sense, for it's a film without moving pictures, without cinematic characters, locations, or dialogue.

We begin with a title screen, and then there is a brief introduction to the subject, but it is the third frame, and the continuing lack of moving images, which might surprise us. It is followed by a hundred and forty, maybe a hundred and fifty frames of black-lettered text on a white background, appearing on screen and fading out to black with hypnotic regularity. Some of the text pieces are brief, some a single word. They include narrative elements as well as technical, descriptive, and stylistic indicators, Dissolve, Double Agent, Down Shot, Enemy at gunpoint, and they play to a continuous soundtrack which hits us with a varying selection of sounds mixed with snippets of film scores which range from the anonymous to the unmistakable. It's an unusual film, but there are some conventions which it does follow, for War is the third in a series of films by Nathalie Melikan, the first two, rather aptly, being Horror and Action, as if the third were an accumulation of all that had gone before.

As we view these slowly appearing texts, and become aware that these words are the very substance of this film, we begin to wonder what we should make of their steady progression. Generally, we are not content to see these brief texts in isolation, to leave them lying static in their frames. The familiarity of the elements named, the Casualties, Cease Fire, Chaos, and the purposefulness of their advance onscreen, means we quite naturally expect them to say more, to tell us their story. Roland Barthes remarks that 'narrative institutes a confusion between consecution and consequence,' meaning 'that which follows next is at the same time the result,' and so, bridging the gaps between words, we begin to try to understand how one text frame may relate to the next, how Maps leads inevitably to Marine Gunnfire. If we are to assume that War is a War film, as opposed to a film about war, a form of documentary or essay (and this assumption is borne out by a familiarity with the conventions of Horror and Action), then the most sensible approach to take might be to project these words onto the film of moving images, the cinematic story, that surely lies behind them.

Indeed, in his review of Action, Jörg Heiser says that Melikan "describes briefly what would be happening on the screen if you were watching an action film," the frames of War following one after the other on a single reel of film. Like a silent movie where only the dialogue boxes remain, War becomes a form of annotated film, or a strangely animated screenplay, which requires only that we read it properly for the film as we would recognise it to take shape before our eyes. We might imagine that if these frames were projected at what must be their true speed, a rate of twenty-four frames per second perhaps, then they would blur together in a line of moving pictures.

Yet, no matter how hard we might probe for the logic governing the order of these framed texts, the links seem increasingly random. Even accounting for flashbacks and anticipation in the ordering of the plot, the anachronies of story-telling, and even taking into consideration the possibility of rapid editing and numerous scene changes, these fragments of text refuse to cohere into an organised storyline, at best presenting us with some random notes on the structuring of a commercial trailer: Battlefield, Blood, Blood Bath, Blurring. Fast-forwarding through the tape doesn't result in a stream of familiar images, but only a rapid strobing, like enemy gunfire in the night. Looking for order, almost inevitably we will come to the realisation that War is structured not according to any grand design, but is formed by the most basic of orders, that of the alphabet. It isn't necessary for the individual frames to follow each other as they do, it is simply a convenient method of display, the solution to a perceptual limitation which prevents us from seeing all these elements simultaneously but instead presents them to us over a period of time. Watching them now, we move from reading in these lines the potential for narrative, oriented along a line which reads from a beginning to the end, and instead we stack the frames one on top of the other and make our way down a list, a mere index to the contents of the War film.

For Michel Butor, this vertical line of the list, cutting down into the narrative, undermines what he considers the privileged line of the story, forever reflected in the Western tradition of writing from left to right. Where this horizontal line encounters a list of objects, he says: "I perceive a kind of interruption in the line's movement; this enumeration is arranged, then, perpendicularly to the rest of the text." The nature of the list means that any of its members can be placed at the point of intersection between its vertical line and the horizontal line of the text without changing the meaning of the sentence, but this does not mean that the members are confined to the vertical dimension. If we can say, for example, that War is about Street Scene, Suicide Attack, Superimpose, then we can also say that War is about Street Scene, War is about Suicide Attack, War is about Superimpose.
These words, linked by their function in the line of the text, share a positional similarity, what Roman Jakobson would term "equivalence", and so this list, though spread out along a horizontal line, nevertheless remains linked by a vertical line. Each of Melikian's framed texts can be seen now as a list in itself, and the work seen as an index to the verticalities of War, a list of lists. The framed sections which follow one after the other seem no longer to be linked by some causal relation, but become self-contained elements which remark on recurring moments in the War film, forming sets of related points on the line of the story, the Medium Close-up, the Planes crashing, the web of connections formed through the interaction of the vertical and horizontal lines. Except, it seems impossible that any story could connect with all of these named points, angling itself to intersect with every element in the list. Folding in upon itself, wrapping itself up, this film could not fail to become ever more disjointed and more dispersed, breaking its body open to spread it wide on this field of listed parts. There is no single film to support War and structure it, no plot to hold all its parts. We come to realise that to tell the whole of War we will need not one but many stories, and so War becomes not an index to a War film, but an index to War as genre, listing the stylistic and thematic conventions of a mode of film-making. Moreover, although no one film could touch upon all the elements named here, still we realise that each War film must connect with at least a few of these elements, for the formula demands the Dead, the Heavy Casualties, the Killing Fields. What we might wonder is whether the narrative line which links with these elements is defined by an order of cause and effect any more than Melikian's alphabetised list is, or whether generic demands hold sway. Barthes' observation that "the narrative invariably chooses that from which it profits, i.e., that which assures its survival as narrative" is as true when we say that "the genre invariably chooses that from which it profits, i.e., that which assures its survival as genre."

Rather uncannily, War appears now as an unconventional film comprised wholly of conventions. As an index to a genre, its individual frames do not simply name repeating moments in the storyline of a particular War film, but related elements across the field of War films. Each frame marks a point of intertextuality, a link between films, and can be seen as playing simultaneously in any number of the film reals converging on that point. Rather than demanding from us a single story to contain its every frame, War instead seeks to divert our minds from the alphabetised order of its presentation, and to send us running to put some familiar images to the uniform frames of text, to put a face to the Hero, Tall and Handsome, and so to spin out any or all of the storylines which make their way through this common ground. War becomes a lattice-work of interconnecting lines, each frame an intertextual space wherein the narrative vectors entwine and overlap. If we said before that no single film could contain all of War, could hold it together, we should see now that War is not that which is held together, but that which holds together. Gérard Genette would term the specific form of its intertextuality as architextuality, meaning "the entire set of general of transcendent categories — types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres — from which emerges each text." A text takes shape, positions itself, or, as Genette says, "spins its web only by hooking it here and there onto that network of architecture." War is concerned not with the text produced, but with the architext which produces, for it is nothing less than an attempt to map this space of architecture from which the War film emerges. Even as it cites its own title within the body of its work, undermining the frame formed by its own title page and closing credits, War reveals its orientation towards the genre it describes, the line of the work not confined to the linear order of presentation, but forever open to those other texts which border on its edge, lying close along its length. Remarkably always on the form of the genre, then, War plays at the edge of texts without ever taking a part in them, for, as Jacques Derrida writes, the law of genre requires "a sort of participation without belonging." Touching on so many texts, but never embracing them, War may seem to exist as some disembodied form, hardly a work at all. It might also be said, however, that the openness of these isolated elements to reconnection and integration is not aimed only towards those bodies of text lying tangential to them. Rather, their simple collocation, their placement together on this tape wound tight around spools, with the frames thus laid randomly one on top of the other, may create new and unexpected relations independently of architectual mappings, relations which might manifest themselves too when they appear onscreen, connections created simply owing to the close proximity of these text pieces, their common ground. Heiser says of Action that "Ellipses such as 'Endless Failed Escape Attempts' followed by a devastating 'Everybody's Wounded', can make you nervous when accompanied by the right music. ... And it makes you wonder: how can i be moved by an alphabet. " Text fragments which mark points of narrative intersection, and are linked forever to those external stories, now find themselves forming part of a new narrative in this internal space of relations, the verticals combining to form brief horizontals of story. When, in War, Head Shot is followed by Help can it fail to be transformed from pure technical description to a vivid expansion of a brief narrative? As Heiser points out, this internal contact also includes touching upon the accompanying, continuous soundtrack which plays alongside the text, providing an aural map of the architecture to complement the textual. This soundtrack does not simply run parallel with the text, mirroring it, for it follows its own course through the network of architecture, but still the textual and musical lists clearly coincide at times, or touch upon each other in less explicit but equally evocative ways, producing their own miniature narratives. This index to a genre, which could not be contained within a single film but wrapped itself around and through so many films, comes now in contact with itself, and through that contact creates some kind of unique content. The innocent words of War trigger unexpected insights in the way that unremarkable sounds spring flashbacks on unsuspecting Vietnam veterans, as the films show us, and who can say where these new connections will lead to, or what these insights will reveal? There are many for whom War has only ever been a visual experience, propagated through the sounds and images
Horror
Set In An American Suburban Picturesque Small Town, With White Middle Class Suburban High School Teenagers. The Virginal Brunette Heroine, Her Love Interest, A Group Of Good Friends, The Big Breasted Innocent Blondes, the Sheriff And His deputy, Battle The Serial/Psycho Killer, His Accomplice And Anyone Else Has A Revenge Motive, With Interspersed Multiple Stabbing And Body Middle Are The Good People And The Heroine Always Survives Other For The Sake
of television and film, but there are also nations and generations for whom War has been, and still is, a more immediate reality, and for them War may mean something else entirely. The fecundity of War, therefore, threatens the unity of that part of the space of architecture which it has claimed for itself. These unauthorised words, linked to so many texts and yet to no one, form a kind of neutral territory wherein it is impossible to predict what text any frame might ally or alienate itself. This very text, not a War film but a work of criticism, seems to have woven its way through the network of War by quoting from it and referring to it. Indeed, Genette would call this relationship a piece of commentary and its subject as metatextual, distinguishing it from architextual relations, but it is still a relationship which "unites a given text to another." This relationship, in fact, deserves further study, for a piece of commentary such as this may be seen to be laying claim to those parts of War which best serve its purpose, coercing the text to yield to the meaning imposed upon it in an act of near aggression. Even to point out its alphabetical order may be to affect its potential to follow alternative routes, privileging the line this argument has taken at the expense of more imaginative diversions. This struggle over a text pulled between so many bodies of work, draws attention to the nature of the interaction of the various narratives within which each frame might exist. A feature of Horror, the first in Melikian's series, was that it could in no way be described as horrific, for it was never the intention of the piece to reproduce those features of the genre, the suspense, the tension, which result from the temporal experience of an arrangement and disarrangement of the narrative's linearity. Might War, in contrast, be described as war-like, and, if so, what is it that creates this effect, the subject matter, or the text which bears it, as if there were a violence in language?

"Death strolls between letters," Derrida says in an essay on Edmond Jabès, but perhaps there the focus is on the written word as a sign of the absence of the object, the absence of the speaking subject, the absence of the absolute presence. War seems more concerned with the violence of collision, of coming together, for the vocabulary of intertextuality is always one of contact, bordering on, touching on, intersecting, overlapping, penetrating, piercing, cutting through, such violent words. The conflict taking place on this front is evident in Melikian's Charlotte and her Boyfriend also. In Godard's A Bout de Souffle, in an airport, an unnamed journalist asks the novelist Parvulesco, played by Jean-Pierre Melville, if he thinks that it is still possible to believe in love in our times. "Pensez-vous qu'on puisse encore croire à l'amour à notre époque?" Now, in Melikian's Godardian remake, as Charlotte and her boyfriend discuss the nature of love they are drowned out by the sound of a plane passing by, as if the impossibility of their love forbade them from sharing these few frames with Godard's film. The intertextual link means here the suppression of one text by the other, so that only Godard's is allowed to speak. Charlotte and her boyfriend are deaf to each other: "What did you say?"

"Nothing." In the same way, if Head Shot and Help communicate their story, it is perhaps because they succeed in drowning out the other voices which would speak through them. Help can be only a plea for assistance, and not the arrival of some saviour. At other times in Charlotte and her Boyfriend, the words of the characters are matched by those of the disembodied dialogue, the voices, in their two tongues, overlapping, the two films connecting within the space of one, but still open to the paths of both narratives. Each frame of War stands in this open site, but perhaps this is most obvious when the visual and audible coincide, their two converging paths implying the expansive space they trace and the multitude of connections it contains. This form of contact seems more fertile than the act of erasure just described, revealing how intertextuality may result in a proliferation of interpretative contexts. No longer conflictual, now language obeys the law of desire, producing new meanings as it touches upon its other self in a way which seems so sexual. If before we said that War was war-like, might we also say that Pornography would be pornographic? Yet Barthes, describing the same act of procreation, of generation, speaks instead of how the text "explodes and disperses," the multiplication of its pathways meaning its own violent disassembly. Possibilities are brought to light, then, by shattering the whole, and one voice is preserved by silencing many. War becomes both brutal and loving, its every frame being a new end and a new beginning, embracing death on one side and life on the other. "Love manifests itself in the book," says Jabès, "by hugging, stroking, biting sentences, words, letters and, outside the book, by an unveiled passion for the wounds become writing, fertile lesions whose lips we spread open like a vulva to allow the sperm of death in." Life and death intertwine in the form of language, but their purpose is hidden. Freud can tell us of the origin of the life and death instincts, and of their "need to restore an earlier state of things," but who can tell if text's first words were of everything or of nothing, or if they kept only to their constant murmuring?

David Coughlan
IMPRESSUM / BILDNACHWEISE

IMPRESSUM
FRANKFURTER KUNSTVEREIN-HEFTE
"EINE MUNITION UNTER ANDEREN" ERSCHIEßT ANLÄSSLICH DER GLEICHNAMIGEN AUSSTELLUNG VOM
25. AUGUST – 1. OKTOBER 2000 IM FRANKFURTER KUNSTVEREIN
HEFT 1/00
MITGLIEDERZEITSCHRIFT DES FRANKFURTER KUNSTVEREINS
ISSN 1438-2555
HERAUSGEBER:
NICOLAUS SCHAFHAUSEN FÜR DEN FRANKFURTER KUNSTVEREIN

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GESTALTUNG:
SURFACE; FRANKFURT AM MAIN

DRUCK:
Cantz, Stuttgart

ERSCHIEßT HALBIJährlich

AUFLAGE 4000

BISHER ERSCHIENEN:
HEFTE 999
SONDERNUMMER -HEFTE 999 "DON'T STOP FILM FÜR DIE NEUZÄGER"

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BORIS VALENTINSCH, PUBLISHED BY HATJE CANTZ
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