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Notes on the ordinary

"All is imaginary, family, friends, the street, all imaginary, further away, closer, closest the woman, the truth that lies closest, however, is only this, that you are beating your head against the wall of a windowless and doorless cell."

Frantz Kafka: Diary entry, 21.th of October 1921, (0)



Office, 2006

Some time ago I was puzzled at experiencing the phenomenon known as déjà vu twice in the same day. Browsing through a Guinness book of film facts, it was brought to my attention that the history of motion pictures does not at all commence with the advent of the Brothers Lumiere at Boulevard des Capuciennes in 1895.

I had always felt that the fact that their names literally translates to light in the French language, seemed to much like a fake ending, while in fact it was a fake beginning. Outside this realm of accepted and worshipped film pioneers loomed the figure Augustin Le Prince, with his 1888 shots of traffic on the Leeds bridge in England and wholesale mysterious disappearance two years later on a train en route from Dijon and boarded for Paris. (1)

Later I realised on browsing through another book, this time in search for a title for a new film project, that in always referring to the same volume in case of dire needs for titles, I had over the years unconsciously begun an adaptation of that specific volume. It seemed disturbing to me none the less for being Franz Kafka's earliest published collection of shorts "Betrachtung" (1913), his uncouth testimonial words to Max Brod, that these stories was of a character so dismal that it would not prove worth to shred them, but most of all because it struck me that the exit line of the title short "Das Urteil" runs more or less: "At that time there was an seemingly endless traffic on the bridge". (2)

These opening remarks, which are of themselves of no relevance, only goes to show that context, very much like statistics, is mostly what you make of it and the rules you apply. On my wall hung the seemingly harmless picture of ordinary people going about their ordinary business on a bridge in England, now adjacent to a photography depicting the bridge in Prague crossing the river and leading up to the apartment building in which Kafka had resided with his parents while writing "the judgement".

Later on I sat talking to one of our accomplished scholars in art history. I had grown tired of the sterile, melancholic world of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøj (1864-1916), the "apparatchik" of Scandinavian alienation and melancholy. Since my companion was a scholar devoted to another painter, born the same year as Hammershøj and with a wholly different outlook on motive, framing and colour, of course we ended up discussing Hammershøj. It seems his home was a stage, I was told, he had no studio or to be exact his studio was his home. The furniture would be moved accordingly including a special and precious bowl of porcelain. My affiliate looked me in the eye, telling me that he had recently interviewed an elderly lady, in a cottage district located outside Helsingør in North Zealand, and right there in a small wooden cottage, placed on the mantelpiece was the precious piece. Needless to say I kept my mouth shut. My office wall is hung with enlargements of that very object, the bowl, the orb, the porcelain.

To conclude we might assume that context, first of all has boundaries, namely those of its own given event horizon, as in the example with film history, secondly that this demarcated context has a tendency to merge with other contexts thus creating a context of the second order as in the example with Kakas collection of short stories and thirdly as in the example with the bowl, that context has a tendency to endure and thereby pop up in the least expected places, that is in a new context.

When we speak about context in architecture, we will seldom reflect on the nature of context and perhaps least of all of the nature of the ordinary in a given unquestionable context. It's the way nature has with us, to rule out the irrelevant, to forget the sound of the clock ticking in our living room or the thumping noise of our own heartbeat in our ears. In most cases context is simply that which have enough stamina to rise up through the pea soup of ordinariness. This paper investigates some aspects of context and ordinariness in the singular and unprecedented work of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøj.

My interest in Hammershøj goes back a long time, but it was never a scholarly one in the academic sense. Rather than studying what Hammershøj did, I endeavoured on finding out how he did it. In Hammershøj's own life, his contemporaries meant little, and on visiting Paris in 1891 in the heyday of impressionism, he would sit in the Louvre meticulously copying an ancient Greek stone relief from the classical era. (3) This would also prove my starting point, by fitting a room in my apartment like one of the empty and barren rooms depicted in his paintings. No electricity and only the most basic furniture. I studied light, I studied framing and my marriage almost broke down. The cadmium light from the streetlights filtered through the windows at night, helping me through its uniform spectre to ignore colour, like Hammershøj had once done. Since my wife really hadn't understood the part about no electricity, I took my fascination to another arena after these initial studies. Working on a documentary on a Danish pianist, I started showing my photographer the paintings of Hammershøj. We would go to the National Gallery to study darkness, gradually easing the reluctance of my associate towards low exposure, telling him over and over how Hammershøj's masterpiece "Job" was so murky, that when the paint dried up a year after its completion, the motif itself had vanished in a primordial dark. (4) To our great luck, our main character had recently moved in to a big, empty Copenhagen flat, not yet deciding where to place her sparse furniture. As it where we could follow Hammershøj in this respect, moving different parts to dress different sets. At this time my afore mentioned reluctance towards the painter began, and it wasn't until my recent conversation that I would seriously consider continuing my studies in this direction.

When the dentist and Hammershøj aficionado Alfred Bramsen, in 1930 proposed to donate his entire collection to "Statens museum for Kunst", the Danish national gallery, their answer was laconic; there would be no space in the museum or otherwise to storage such a donation and the collection would be returned as earlier agreed upon. (5) Hammershøj had died in 1916 and the interest in his work had long since dwindled. The time was that of the early modern heroic era and Hammershøj's reluctance towards colour, his strictly ordered classicism and his preference for indoor motives seemed trivial and outdated, a freak outburst of symbolism that now seemed only ordinary.

In the dictionary on Danish language the word "ordinær", is described as having several meanings, it could mean ordered, regular, ordinary, but could also be use to describe a vulgar personage or behaviour as in the English word "Common". In another sense this word could be seen in relation to the verb "ordinere", meaning to grant or to be given. In the work of Vilhelm Hammershøj, it is the intensity that he gives his studies of the ordinary in both senses of the word, that which is already there as ordered through society, culture and history and that which is being given to us in the very moment we perceive it, in a spiritual and transcendent dimension.

The motifs of Hammershøj can be roughly divided into four groups: Landscape, portraits, interiors and architecture. This seems straight forward enough almost trivial as painting goes, but Hammershøj *does* something to this straightforwardness. The way he frames these motifs, both in format and in composition, makes them stand out. In format he'll often be closer to the square than the golden section, yet not too close. In perspective he'll rather be frontal than over "X" and he'll use an angle on the perspective cone, that is narrow rather than wide, rendering octagonal lines straight and spatial depth shallow. These meticulously worked out compositions, will often be subjugated to minute alterations in framing resulting in entirely new versions of exactly the same motif. It is perhaps this minuteness on behalf of the painter, which sets his work so totally apart from other renderings of the same motifs. (6)

In Hammershøj's oeuvre the interiors stand out with special poignancy. The bulk of them executed in his various apartments located around central Copenhagen. As mentioned these apartments didn't have a regular artists studio, but themselves served as a large scene and studio combined, in which carefully chosen elements, like furniture, paintings and cutlery would serve to dress the spacious rooms. There would also be people, mostly women and more often than not with their backs turned on the viewer. The household maids and Hammershøj's wife Ida Hammershøj would figure in these compositions, but sometimes rooms or sequences of rooms would be left wholly deserted and only valued for their immanent beauty, their utter emptiness.

One thing is striking though. In this world of empty rooms, barren landscapes and naked faces, Hammershøj's deliberate paintings of architecture stands out. Especially in the paintings concentrating on the architectural heritage of the Danish architect Nicolai Eigtved (1701-1754), as in the paintings from Amalienborg castle, the residence of the royals, Ridebanen, the royal staples. The architecture depicted here, is architecture totally devoid of context. The event of architecture as an art, which must be said to be one of only four motifs in the lifework of Hammershøj, is rendered as isolated from the surrounding chaos of mere building, as much a given moment in the world as the dance of the grains of dust in the rays of the sunlight.

This apparent lack of context, these slices of architecture, leads one to speculate on an reception of architecture in its own context, namely the entirety of the work of Vilhelm Hammershøj, in which they are inserted with regular intervals. In Hammershøj's work then, the architectural context isn't what we usually define as an outside, rather the context of architecture is the sheer immensity of Hammershøj's interior painting, which surrounds isolated volumes of architecture on all sides. A point in case are the frescoes that Hammershøj execute for the town council in 1902, they to are depicting architecture, with a solemn poetry, whilst themselves infolded in a room, the interior of the magistrates office, in Københavns Rådhus. (7)

Thus in the work of Hammershøj, we are presented with the idea of architecture as given, ordained to us. The mighty interior in Hammershøj, is the context in which architecture resides, and as readers of this work we are proposed with possibility of thinking the concept of context anew. What Hammershøj is doing is giving architecture its absolute honours, while he himself is going about constructing an absolute architectonic space out of the ordinary. It might seem that he is proposing to us the following equation, if context is that important, then what is it's counterpart?

The interior it seems might be that room from where architecture is perceived and from where it gains its fundamental birthright. In this sense context, isn't just the visible outside, the surrounding, the associations, but the fact that once context has moved inside architecture, it hasn't just become architectural "space", but life itself as it is lead, for instance by a man like Hammershøj. Oddly it must seem to us, that the word we use, for that part of context which has a tendency to pervade our houses, our homes and institutions and reside there, is the word function.

Notes:

- 0: M. Brod (ed.), *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1914-1923* (New York 1965) p. 197, from 21 October 1921
- 1: P. Robertson: *The Guinness book of film facts*, Guinness Superlatives Ltd. 1980, p. 9-10
- 2: F. Kafka: *Dommen og andre fortællinger*, V. Sørensen (ed.), Gyldendal 1987, p. 50, p. 242 (note)
- 3: P. Vad: *Hammershøj*, Gyldendal 1990, p. 99-112
- 4: *Ibid.* p. 39-40
- 5: *Ibid.* p.92-93
- 6: *Ibid.* p. 287-289
- 7: *Ibid.* p. 239-241