

## A philosophy of landscape in media age

Mark Lewis belongs to the generation of media theory and practice.

A generation in which the artist fills the gap between philosophy, poetry and technology, becoming a visual thinker, a watchful eye experiencing life and duration using complex technological devices.

Mark Lewis' work is about time and space.

It is about the inexorable flow of time; about alienated atmospheres, impersonal architectures and wasted landscapes conveying psychologically latent feelings: of life and death, of micro and macro, of order and chaos, of entropy and anti-entropy, of the interplay between the simple and the inordinately complex.

It is about atomized singularities in Brownian trajectories... about contemporary solitude...

"Time is a river/The irresistible flow of all created things./One thing no sooner comes into view/Than it is hurried past and another takes its place/Only to be swept away in turn."

(Marcus Aurelius – *Meditations*)

### **Airport** (2003)

Everyday life is reduced to the background, to minimalism and waiting, grasped in an almost imperceptible silent movement. Everything is slow, minimal, precise...

The work's lack of sound is a defining attribute.

The landing strip is in the background. Unnoticed, the moment of taking off/landing is thus softened and relegated into the realm of commonplace.

Attached to the terminal in the foreground a large aircraft dissolves into frame – the film accomplishes within an ordinary winter day, suggesting the ongoing reiteration of action and life.

Monotonous, repetitive action is likely to extend indefinitely, as finally nothing really happens. Thus paradoxically turning action into non-action.

A Zen-like approach granting the quality of an Eleatic aporia, the paradox of the "frozen action" illustrates the philosophy of passage, of the imperceptible, of caducity.

### **Children's Games, Heygate Estate** (2002)

Life seems again to be a background detail, lacking in main characters... and all there is is secondary plots, parts played exclusively by anonymous extras.

The detail becomes subject (the children's games aside), and extras gain prominence as protagonists. Space is emptied out and delivered to the movement of the camera.

Films are deprived of narrative. The plot is the camera movement and the subtle ambiguity of interchange of it with the viewer's movement.

The main event is always missing. So the detail becomes the Event. The detail plays the Role.

The peripheral and the passer-by are granted special status... Sometimes pointing out to the social and economical specific of the filmed place (usually austere peripheries in London or Toronto, spaces of anonymity).\*

Traces of human presence are discrete in the recorded, seemingly empty setting.

Humans are like insects or monads following apparently chaotic trajectories - the invisible micro mechanisms behind macro forms. The movement subsists, hidden, almost imperceptible, within the apparent stillness (see the small spinning-top in the end of **North Circular**, 2002) - a kind of eternal universal breathing...

Shot in 1998 **The Pitch** is a metaphorical announce of future concept in Mark Lewis:

"I love extras... I want to put them in the spot-light, eliminate all the main parts... take out everything to do with plot and narrative(...). The uniqueness of the extras in film lies in the fact that it is both there and not there(...). Extras are the silent proletariat of the film set. Their job is to be exactly the quiet and in the background of the history".

Extras are the characters of Mark Lewis' films: they feel and they fulfil the space, even if insignificantly. Thus suggesting that, behind our own private stories, from a more general point of view, we are all acting as extras in this world...

The most recent Rush-Hour, **Morning & Evening, Poultry Lane** (2005) swarming with the shadows of people in a crowded street is a kind of "reverse negative" version of **The Pitch**.

Recalling Turner's watercolour sketches, **Algonquin Park. September** (2001) shows the vanity of life in deserted, romantic landscapes. Humans are, again, the detail, touchingly insignificant in the sublime of nature. And the aesthetic of pictorialism and of unfathomable sublime (an old theme in art history and a perennial issue of human emotions) is replicated with film devices.

**Algonquin Park, Early March** (2002) acts as a visual Haiku. The reality of the image seems to depend almost exclusively on the viewing point, zooming out.

The eye of the camera is the deus ex machina and a solipsistic referent... it generates the entire reference system.

It is being imposed on us and generates our own perception. The viewer seems to be essential to the show but with a certain anxiety one realizes there is a strange identity between the eye of the camera and the eye of the viewer..

*Agrandir ou déplacer c'est rendre visible... Rendre visible c'est rendre existant...*

The movement of the camera, through which we see what *the man with the moving camera* wants us to see (Mark Lewis' *sui generis* remake of *Peeping Tom* is no accident), leads us through, imposing upon us its rhythms and perspectives.

The inversion of hierarchies between opposing categories (between what presumably holds the primary and what is of secondary importance, between observer and observed, between protagonists and extras, between the solitary isolation and the seemingly insignificant crowds, between the whole and the details), exchanges the ontological levels and the levels of perception.

A certain ambiguity of meanings is always maintained in spite of apparently extreme clarity of image... Both precise and contradictory as effect.

**Jay's Garden. Malibu** (2001) – is made up of a continuum alternating with fragmentation of the *parcours*. *Parcours* is leading to Nowhere. Action seems suspended between overlapping of time. And the Invisible is presupposed.

Ambiguity plays a key role: the routine of a porn film set dissimulates (or vice versa) a paradise-like place populated by beautiful, idealised figures. Reality and fiction melt ambiguously escaping the ordinary logic or apparent morality of things.

Lack of narrative and of completion, a current device of Lewis in his films produces this time a subliminal feeling of frustration.

**Wind Farm** (2001) illustrates again the paradoxical moving within apparently still images... The Real is transformed into abstract and back again...

Shifting from identified locations to total abstraction of *parcours* and places... the merging of real and seemingly fictional space is simulating some sort of a 3D pathway rendered exclusively by filmic means (**Children's Games, Harper Road**), exploring the virtual potentialities of the real space. The shifting perspective generates movement and the fixed viewing point seems to capture time (**Airport, Wind Farm**).

Steady fixed camera with sequences slowly fading into each other (**Airport**), zooming out (**Algonquin Park. Early March**), rotating camera (**Harper Road**), steady and zooming (**Pan & Zoom**) slow/sophisticated moving coordination between camera, lens and staged mirrors (**Brass Rail**)... or non-staged mirrors (**Gladwells picture window**, the frame in frame/the film in film/reflections/mirroring) build up a sophisticated technical system which finally results in poignantly simple, clearly shaped images.

Investigating the phrasing of cinematic film making\*\*, Lewis's work explores the crossroads of video, film, photography and painting.

## **Ruxandra Balaci**

\*A lot has been said about Mark Lewis' films theoretical relationship with Marc Augé's concept of "non-places".

\*\*see Catherine Wood's essay: "Mark Lewis. Location, location, location" in *Mark Lewis*, cat. Kunstverein Hamburg, Hatje Cantz, 2005