

Essay on the 'Technique of Beauty' of audio-visual relationships

This essay is a personal summary of my presentation of the films by Mike Ballou in the 'Technique of Beauty' class held by Cornelis de Bondt.

Mike Ballou is a Brooklyn based artist whose films changed my artistic life when I saw them in 1998. Still I cannot clearly define what exactly made them so impressive to me and therefore I used the chance to present them in the class for some group analysis.

The subjects he chooses are either found or set up. As he says himself, he is going out and looks for things he would like to see again or he sets up things he'd like to see again. When he started filmmaking Super8 was the only film format he could afford and he still sticks to that format, black and white. He then set up two rules: 1) Do all the edits in camera and 2) try and use the whole roll of film (which is between 2min30 and 3min30 depending on the film speed). When he gets the films back from development he either has a home movie or something he would like to show others.

Of the latter ones he combined fourteen pieces to a one hour long collection. I showed five of them to the class. They have no titles.



A man opens a lifesized Teddy, puts out the padding and dresses himself with the left skin.

We hear the noise of a Super8 projector and some background music which sounds as if it comes through the wall of the neighbour. As if it was totally normal to behave like this.



Two hand puppets are taken out of a box and put on like gloves. The hands build a cupboard, it looks as if the puppets would build it. After the finished cupboard is mounted on the wall the puppets are layed back into their box. The box again is then put onto the cupboard.

We hear a comedy audience laughing, which rises the question: 'What is funny there?' and finally makes us laugh as well.



A rollercoaster on a funfair. A handicapped person is looking very fascinated at it.

The funfare music is slowed down which turns the funfare to something very melancholic.



This film is running backwards. We see a man on Berlin Alexanderplatz playing with a ball. While he is kicking against a rise he comes closer to the camera. At the end he soaks the air out of the ball. It is an inflatable globe.

The music and sounddesign is also comprised of reversed elements and makes clear from the beginning on that the film is running backwards.



An enormous inflatable puppet is folded together.

Enrique Caruso sings a heart-rending aria. It makes the puppet dying.

Why are these films beautiful?

The group discussion dealt with these two main topics:

- structure vs. improvised, plot
- emotional contradiction between audio and visual, absurdness

Striking for most was the seeming contradiction between the perceived improvisational attitude of the films and the underlying precision of structure and plot. Things happen as if they come out of chance but they are very consciously integrated. This is even more impressive when realizing that there is no editing involved after shooting. The whole film is either shot with a clear and precise vision what will gonna happen at every moment of these three minutes or his filmmaking style is open for integration of unexpected incidents. I feel both is there.

The relation between the visual and the auditive was perceived as very strong, mostly due to the fact that they 're often in contradictory emotion. Or, better, in a commenting interrelationship. When the inflatable puppet is folded together it is at first an act of pure technical necessity. Only the music makes us aware of the possibility that it could be interpreted in a psychological way. So in complete awareness of the manipulation we identify with this puppet and die with it.

My personal conclusions and developments of Techniques of Beauty:

Over the course of the recent years I made several attempts to analyze why Mike Ballou's films had this enormous impression on me. Still I can't tell in words what actually is happening in these films. Usually these wordings end up in something very trivial and do not describe what's happening to the perception of the viewer.

But I came up with some pretty clear conclusions, what effects an artwork should have on me for perceiving it as beautiful.

- 1) Strong subjects suitable for identification
- 2) Joy- and playful appearance
- 3) Full awareness of the process of perception
- 4) Openness of conclusions

- 1) The subject matter must be of significance. If there is nothing to identify it is just a formal exercise (which can be totally OK, too, but won't lead to a piece with a strong impact). Usually the subject of identification is the meaning of life. The basic drama in our life is the awareness of our shortcomings. We know we will die. Therefore our life is essentially an absurd situation. I sympathize with the idea that God made a joke when he created conscious man. And I bet he still has a good laugh.
- 2) As children we stop playing when we realize our self-awareness (assumed we had a playful childhood). I want art and music bringing back the playfulness. If the piece can trigger these naive emotions we once had as playing children and which are still present in ourselves then point 3 can develop its full potential. This doesn't mean we can feel the same as we did as children, nor do I want to. But our self-defending instinct tries to keep the memory of this innocent time down. If a piece of art can open the window to these emotions then it can open a window to the heart.
- 3) When consuming a piece of art I expect to be emotionally manipulated but at the same time I want to be fully aware how I am manipulated. Only this combination gives me the joy of perceiving my own absurdness of life. This is not necessarily an effect of a formal conception. In the example of the inflatable puppet the means by which the audience is manipulated is extremely obvious: it's the added music. But the emotional effect is unexpectedly strong. So the question, 'how' I am manipulated can be answered easily, but not the question 'why' I am reacting that strong. This gap is the interesting part and the one which creates beauty.
- 4) The piece of art should not have a definitive statement. This would destroy the playfulness. There is no message in true playing. So, as an example, making clear that the piece of art is dealing with death would destroy the *possibility* of the artwork dealing with death. This *possibility*, this ambiguous *potential* (as is) is necessary for an individual approach to the piece.