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Suspense, Camp and Coolness

Notes on the photographic works of Stefan Banz

The privileged moments of life are not the occasions prompting Stefan Banz to pick up his small automatic camera and take a picture. Quite the contrary, though he does not snap wildly and aimlessly. True, his glance is ephemeral, but his concentration is focused. What's more, the definitive selection of pictures, those which out of photographic profusion are transformed into work, is made afterwards, in an act of reflective sorting out. Stefan Banz's motifs thus obtained, which later dominate walls in large formats, display his surroundings. Landscape, architecture and his private vicinity. Like for instance the view of a grey block of flats through naked shrubs. The out-of-focus, distant group of houses in the snow. Or the back of the brown house in abstracted chalet style, with its lawn perfectly trimmed to three centimetres. And then, in close-up, the blades of grass emerging from under the blanket of snow in spring. A plate with leftovers. Then the photos of his pretty wife, Sabine, lying on the lawn reading a thick Sunday paper, resting on a couch in worn-out post-party manner, or questioningly glancing out of a car window. And Stefan Banz's small children, Jonathan and Lena. They often look directly at the camera, skilfully posing with an innocent yet knowing glance. Like Lena in her synthetic pyjama top majestically sitting cross-legged, her naked doll between her thighs; or Jonathan, in his diving mask, snorkel and fins, standing in a doorway of a family apartment with wall-to-wall carpet and furniture in the back hinting at a living room.

Beautiful Fragments

Formally, the photographs hardly match up to the popular genre of the perfected family snapshot. Frames are titled, seemingly central motifs only partially in view or depicted too far away. The symptoms of this specific technical strategy are blurred focus, lighting imperfections, and excessive colours. And that, precisely, is the reason why they celebrate a unique aesthetics, for these photographs are no doubt beautiful. Whether it is the greasy shine, reflecting the flash, on the cheeks of Lena gnawing on a bone, or the sharp red of the flowers corresponding with the red of Sabine's painted lips.

When Stefan Banz portrays his private surroundings, transcending them from a real to a hyper-real sphere, he is only marginally concerned with this transcendence of the private, but rather emphasizes economy: "I photograph my children and my wife and my surroundings because they are the best models for the things I am interested in and confront me in the most uncomplicated way," (1) In a theoretical text on his work and its discursive field, an actual guide for reception, to be seen on the background of his double function as a curator turned artist, he calls his models young woman, girl, and child photographed. (2)

Content and Suspense

Not only in motifs but also in content is the viewer of Stefan Banz's photographs confronted with fragments. Narrative is barely hinted at, there is no diegetic whole, no story that could be pieced together. The convention of the family snapshot indicating time, place, protagonists and, consequently, the occasion (outing, barbecue, wedding)

is ignored. The viewer feels displaced and confused, searching for evidence with the will to understand.

Many contents are possible, and consequently this is where the moment of suspense comes in. In the Hitchcockian sense of the word, suspense is the protagonist's as well as the sympathetic viewer's together held in anticipation of a coming event. Suspense is not always linked with fear, but coupled with uncertainty. Hitchcock illustrates this as follows: "Let's get back to the operator in *Easy Virtue*. She is listening to the young man and woman, whom we do not show at all and who are talking about marriage. The operator was full of suspense, she was electrified by it: Will the woman at the end of the telephone line agree to marriage to the man who has called her? The operator was relieved when the woman said yes. That ended her suspense." (3)

Transposed to photographic suspense, the Banzian photo can be seen as documenting an action which a) has just taken place, b) is in the process of taking place or c) is about to take place the next moment. The viewer's interest here is gleefully focused on the rather more malicious, perfidious, conspiratorial, perverse, even criminal actions.

Hitchcock further explains: "The usual form of suspense makes it necessary for the audience to be fully informed on the relevant details. Otherwise, there is no suspense. (...) Emotions are (...) a necessary part of suspense." (4)

This implies a heightened moment of suspense in case the viewer of a Banz photograph is familiar with the circumstances of its production: if, for instance, he or she knows about the protagonist's relationship with the documentarist, who is in a position of power when pressing the release button. (5)

Glamorisation

Turning from the single picture to serial contemplation, as with the book *Give me a Leonard Cohen Afterworld*, (6) in which the artist has reproduced sixty-six photographs in the usual household format of 9 x 13 centimetres, the viewer is offered a picture of the small Banz family living in various communities in Lucerne, a middle-sized Swiss town complete with lake and Alps connection. The distribution of roles within the family also seems uncannily conventional and conforming to society. The man is the active artist, his wife and children are the "passive" models. Since radical content traditionally emerges precisely where there is fundamental disinterest, Stefan Banz radicalizes his family life taking place in mediated hyper-reality through the change of context alone, from fictitious family album to real art sphere (and yet, nothing is what it used to be). At the same time, this family life is subtextually glamorized by Stefan Banz exaggerating an excessive aesthetics in line with the representational codes of certain up-to-date lifestyle magazines of the mid-nineties which in their attempt to launch zeitgeist promote clean suburban chic, giving it an unexpected and exotic gloss. (7) This specific way of seeing may best be described as a camp sensibility. According to Susan Sontag, camp is "one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon," it is not concerned with real beauty but with "the degree of artifice, of stylization." Thus, the camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken (... T)he difference (...) between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice." (8)

It would be a mistake, however, to see Stefan Banz's work itself as camp, since camp is always naïve, whereas Stefan Banz proceeds strategically, conceptually and consciously. With his aesthetics he annexes the conventional family world of small-town normality and, in a subtext to the strategy of suspense, transforms it into a desirable product of art. The same effect is evoked by the title of his photo book. Give me a Leonard Cohen Afterworld is a line from the song Pennyroyal Tea by grunge rocker Kurt Cobain, who died in 1994. He, too, was the father of a small daughter and together with singing slut Courtney Love formed a rock family that was idealized by the press and therefore glamorous. By implying a connection with the cool, subversive and authentic scene around Kurt Cobain in his title, Stefan Banz puts himself in the same line. In the sense of camp, therefore, there is an ambiguity when, in the foreword to that book, he slyly speaks of "deceptive appearances." (9)

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Translated from the German by Simon Lenz

1 Stefan Banz, in a conversation with the author, 24/2/1996

2 Stefan Banz, "Two Panes of Glass, Pedestal, Bath, Grass", in: Stefan Banz, Dive, Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz 1996, p. 39-41.

3 François Truffaut, Hitchcock/Truffaut, Ed. Definitive, Paris 1983, p. 57. (Originally published as Le cinema selon Hitchcock, 1966.

4 Ibid.

5 Particularly striking in the bathtub photograph. Lena is lying on her back in the empty bathtub, with the foot of the photographer, supporting himself on the rim, entering the picture in the lower right corner.

6 Stefan Banz, Give me a Leonard Cohen Afterworld, Ostfildern/Stuttgart 1995

7 See for instance Vogue Italia (uno stile, no. 542/95, p. 408, or free style, no. 544/95 p. 158), as well as recurring photo sequences in recent issues of The Face, I-D or Dazed and Confused.

8 Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," (1964) in: Against Interpretation, London 1967, p.275 ff.

9 Stefan Banz, Give me a Leonard Cohen Afterworld, Foreword

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