

THE PILL®

The Real Image

Lars-Erik Hjertström Lappalainen

Wieland has always, and without interruption, depicted an absurd world that he himself has compared to Kafka's. Underlying this description, one could link the possible intentions of an author that could be understood as (for example) a critique of the inhumanity in the workings of our institutions. In relation to that mad world the artist stands as an external pole of lucidity – but also as some kind of principle of reality that in itself assures us of the fictitious character of the described world. That world's lack of reality is the lack of our world, and the artist points out its truth by appearing real and sane outside of his own picture.

But who cares about truth today, anyway?

This dissociated relationship of the artist to his work was fully exploited when Wieland distanced himself entertainingly, and with great esprit, in his lecture performances like *Depression in Animals*. The tension between the style of storytelling and his emotions was extreme. It was as if the images in my head, or in the room, tore away from both the story and the narrator and moved freely but frantically.

But then the distanced and entertaining aspects became mixed, like in *Ink in Milk*, with Wieland's own emotional reactions to the story he was telling. Now that Wieland has instead become a character in his recent films and has thus disappeared as a relevant pole external to them, they must carry their own reality. He's in the movies, and something in them makes his existence as the author completely irrelevant. But the major changes in the works, I think, are that they now seem to want to access a reality that is not captured in the absurd world, or if indeed caught, still has its reality in relation to something other than this world. And the means of accessing that reality is no longer narration but rather the image, because what we're caught up in is structures, not of narration (as we are told in *Ink in Milk*), but of existence. If I did not point that out, one might be led to think that Wieland had turned to auto-fictional storytelling. But where auto-fiction strives to use the biographical as a form (Chris Krauss), and thereby creates something possible or fictional that for the reader is accessible as a subject of actual experiences, Wieland does not strive for auto-fiction but rather for what we could call hetero-reality, i.e., the reality of the world of a stranger. "My name is Gernot. I'm here because I'm quite desperate." He doesn't talk about himself to become fiction, but to achieve some kind of reality. And not even his own, but the reality of "the other" maybe – another reality. That's where the emphasis lies in his latest movies.

Oddly enough, it doesn't seem to make much difference if people are real or fictional, perhaps precisely because a reality that actually matters is lacking in our absurd world. However, it makes all the difference whether this person is the I of the story or someone else. This comes to the surface in, for example, *Ink in Milk*, when the narrator speaks about an accident that he thought was going to kill him. The images shown while he speaks about that "moment when your whole life rolls by like a film in front of your eyes" are made by a movie camera that travels up and down a flight of stairs. The important thing is that the content of these pictures represents not something from his own life, but from the life of his friend in a psychiatric ward. For this friend walking up and down the stairs "was not a matter of truth, but of reality." So it is the reality of the other that comes to the narrator when he thinks he is going to die. That is the kind of reality his films are trying to grasp.

THE PILL®

Auto-fiction can ignore descriptions of places and character since the story takes place in the world that the reader shares with the author – a world in which character doesn't matter anymore, according to Rachel Cusk, since character no longer affects the proceedings of the urban world. In Wieland's world, however, descriptions continuously reveal details that are incongruent with the world of the viewer. How small our shared world is is often illustrated by a memory, for example of someone being ostracised from the community for wearing the wrong kind of clothes. But on another level, Wieland introduces tiny dislocations that render his world alien.

Where Kafka constantly relates the events in his world to an (equally absurd) authority figure both frightening and powerful, Wieland relates events to the one who is subjected to them. It is the reality of the vulnerable that is to be put forth; the absurd world is not portrayed in order to be criticised, but because it is a means of access to the reality of the vulnerable and the delicate. And the victim is not I – is not the narrator – but another person. The reality of this person cannot be represented by bureaucratic documents (read: conceptual art), because the reality of a living being is in experience in the form of images arranged by psychic structures, by the speed of impressions and associations. This reality is a stream of images. And the images that feel most true, which seem to have the most reality, are of course not those that make you think you see the real thing, such as in trompe l'oeil paintings. The documentary account may seem to be most true, but not the most real. The real image provided by the artist often takes the form sketches, notes, or children's drawings, often presented as documents or memories or as images of memories. For Wieland, the memory image seems to be not only the original image, but also the ultimate reality. And, as everyone knows, the subject that experiences a memory image is not exactly the same as the subject that was involved in the event remembered – and therefore Wieland's work no longer needs a relationship with an external artist. (As a friend of Gernot who hasn't seen him in years, I admit that I missed that relationship with him, watching the new films. I do not regret it, though, since they are great to me as a human being.)

The great difficulty in understanding Wieland's art would then be to be given a reality as a memory and simultaneously as someone else's reality. How can someone else's reality become my memory, or someone else's memory image become my reality? Where are they going to come together? Where, if not in a feeling? Perhaps even in a feeling that is opposite to the one his world gives of absurdity – namely in the feeling of "it's quite normal." That's how it feels, he says, being a snail in a human body: "quite normal." What does a snail do? It eats, gets feelings, and moves. The reality (which consists of pictures) is a matter of pace and taste and emotional reaction to a memory image and an intimately other reality.

In Thievery and Songs the same sentence occurs at both the beginning and end: "I eat and pretend I share your taste. I talk and share affection and imitate normal life." Throughout the film eating is used as the paradigm of having sensations, perceptions, or experiences. As long as the streams of images don't go so fast that the images penetrate each other, everything feels normal – until you try to incorporate the mixed currents. Then you throw up, we are told. This happened to the kids in the film when they put ink in the milk and were forced to drink it. And even after that the ink continued to draw dancing animals in the milk. These images are not subjective (like memories), they are still animated, more so than caused, by the body that threw them up. The gastric juice here functions as the developer. These are real – living – images. Eventually the body creates its images, and at the peak Wieland tells us they are like "a dream without sleep." A dream without sleep, but which is still not a hallucination – is that what art is according to Wieland? These are images that you realise are pictures, it is said in Thievery and Songs, because

THE PILL®

what they show is “the opposite of fear.” We have got a reference outside of the absurd world, one that is the opposite of Kafka’s frightening authority. But “I am not there,” says the narrator (who is thus neither external nor internal to the film anymore). Then who is there? Not a you either, nor a thou, nor “the other.”

The real image does not occur in a dream, if I understand Wieland correctly. He has long been interested in therapy and psychoanalysis, but now he seems to have concluded that the real image, the image he wants, the one that lets you perceive the reality of a stranger, is not produced in therapy. The therapist certainly deals with reality of a higher degree than we do in ordinary life, since he goes for memory images. But in *Thievery and Songs* the Gernot Wieland of the film needs to abandon the therapist who is unable to listen to his patient because he is stuck in his own memories and associations. Wieland’s new films are themselves the real images: narrated images combined with simple, everyday types of pictures and moving pictures. He has found a way to create images that do not become literary images through stories. The difference between literary images and visual-arts images becomes very obvious when writers attempt to do visual arts, like when Beckett made films or Teju Cole a performance. Literary images do not work visually, at least not within the context of visual arts. Somehow Wieland has been able to exploit literary forms without creating literary images and instead made these small films where there is always a story that breaks through to reality and out of the logic of the absurd world. They reach a pure emotional reality where it is not only the subjective and objective, the psyche and the body that are mixed (as in the mouth of the donkey in *Thievery and Songs*, the donkey that the narrator dreams of and discovers to be himself), but also different subjects’ stories – with all their different times and spaces that, in a kind of collaboration, are mixed and spread out into different media and generate a mental image.

At the end of *Thievery and Songs* there is a very direct and simple story about a woman’s fate. It is the cruel world of Kafka again – of oppression and authority – but now seen from the perspective of the affected. This is touching in itself, but it leads up to the real picture: an account of how this woman does her ritual when she tells us about her fate. She speaks to us while she cooks; she looks out of a window without seeing. “I just see a flickering light,” she says, and the narrator takes over and says what comes to his mind. At the same time, a picture of a woman in a red dress is presented. Not in a kitchen, but sitting in a corridor where a flickering light falls in through the window. The analysis should continue here, but perhaps these insinuations should be made to see how densely this picture is made and how many subjects are part of it and how the story wanders between them, between memories of others, while being confronted with a visual image that does not directly belong to any of the subjects in the film. And it is there, in the movement between the images, within this movement, that the reality of the other exists. That’s why the narrator makes dance movements at the end – this is making art of motion. This is movement without fear. And that is the end of Kafka’s world, is a new world where Germany doesn’t win at football anymore. Motion without oppression, reality without fear. A moment of tenderness at the bottom of the world of experience. That’s the real image. “Start to eat now or I’ll never cook again,” says the woman who tells us her story without seeing anything but flickering light, says the narrator Gernot Wieland. “Start seeing now or I will never give you pictures again,” I hear.

THE PILL®

Published in:

Thievery and Songs, Catalog.

Published on the occasion of the exhibitions:

Gernot Wieland – Salzburger Kunstverein, 2020

Thievery and Songs – Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, 2020

280 x 210 mm, 116 pages, Edition: 1000

With texts by Séamus Kealy, Lars-Erik Hjertström Lappalainen

and a conversation between Ana Teixeira Pinto and Maxwell Stephens

ISBN: 978-0-9926891-7-9