

**TEXT FROM CATALOG:**

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***Hecho en Mexico***

How Bjørn Melhus subtly reveals manipulative traits in cinematic stereotypes using the example of war veterans.

In 2002, the artist Bjørn Melhus announced in an interview on the occasion of his solo show "Bjørn Melhus - Video" in Bremen, that in the future he was to address American war movies with increasing intensity. (i) Since that interview, he has created four works of very different content and form. While in the five-channel-installation *Sometimes* (2002) the artist turns to the trauma of September 11, 2001, and its ensuing, medially produced scenarios of various threats, in the piece *Still Men out There* (2003) he is concerned with the pathetic exaggeration and seductive spin on the military in the American war movie. In *Murphy* (2008) Melhus evokes, by means of light and sound, an abstract war scenario which summons the psychological pressures soldiers submit to in such situations.

In these abstract works, the artist eschews the concrete depiction of what actually takes place in war or what happens to its protagonists. Rather, the works are based on a rhythmic collage of sound and speech cuttings appropriated from movies of the American mainstream. In a procedure that is typical of his works so far, he starts from the level of sound rather than that of the image.

With *Hecho en Mexico* of 2009 Melhus charts a new course in tackling the issue of the war movie. Here, the audio track is no longer the point of departure for his artistic conception. As in the classical film narrative, it is rather serving the content of the images. The artist puts on a classical

moving image and takes on the role of the protagonist himself – as indeed he did in his earlier works. In contrast to his multi-channel, spatial video installations, events in *Hecho en Mexico* unfold in classical cinematographic mode on a single screen.

Through costume and props, Melhus creates the figure of a horse rider that represents a condensation of the traits characteristic of the warrior motif throughout the history of the genre. The protagonist appears like a bizarre mixture of members of the US Marine Corps, German GSG 9 as well as paramilitary death squads. At the same time, it recalls screen heroes such as Rambo, Terminator and Lara Croft. Faceless, Melhus' warrior-knight embodies nothing besides his function as a highly effective precision weapon: he is the Ultimate Universal Soldier.<sup>(ii)</sup> With his traditional Gaucho-saddle he references the Western genre which features specialists in violence and single combat, too.

The warrior on horseback, moving alone, as if displaced, through the landscape reveals the type of conflict Melhus is referring to: his subject are the asymmetrical conflicts that are perfectly familiar to the media-consumer at least since the war in Vietnam. It takes highly trained and suitably equipped specialists – for the lines of battle are everywhere! This message is conveyed both by Hollywood movies on the subject and recruiting videos currently mobilising the young across the Internet. The difference is that with Melhus the protagonist is not driving a tank but riding across the plain on horseback like Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo III* (1988) in the pose of a latter day knight with an anti-tank missile on his back, to face his heroic obligations.

Similarly, in his interpretation of the city as a landscape of civilisatory ruin devoid of humanity, Melhus introduces another trope known from the media: whether it is the genre of disaster, war or action movie, the depopulated urban space serves as the preferred background for the lone

wolf or the special forces.

In *Hecho en Mexico* Melhus purposefully delves into the fund of narrative devices provided by Hollywood. Even by choosing the latest High Definition technology, he aligns himself with the cutting edge format of the current state of the art illusionary device of blockbuster cinematography. High frequency in cuts, fast change in shots and the use of music as a means of providing rhythm and timing to the montage, not only enhance sentimentality but also correspond to the viewing-habits of media-consumers and allegedly forestall boredom. This condensation of familiar motifs and stylistic devices of narrative cinematography appears grotesque. At the same time, though, it creates an expectation in the viewer who is, after all, conditioned by the incessant stream of media images. The expectation, however, cannot be fulfilled. Reacting instinctively, the viewer searches for a narrative context: What is the destination of Melhus' (anti-)heroic knight? Where do the enemies (the action) lurk? Can the warrior emerge victorious from the battle, save the day and destroy the forces of evil respectively? Will he do his duty without regard for life or limb?

Melhus consciously disappoints the expectations of the viewer in order to stir critical reflection. The quest of his protagonist remains as devoid of purpose as his laboured scouting. The professed professionalism, the courage and the strength exhibited in combat are endlessly iterated, empty and thus turned into an absurd pose. Melhus adopts the strategies of seduction provided by his cinematic sources on all levels of film production. At the same time, however, he deprives them of their function in the sense of a closed narrative. Thus he exposes the dramatic clichés as subtle tools for overwhelming the audience. They inscribe themselves deeply in the viewers' consciousness by endless iteration. But what is more, he leaves the viewer in no doubt at all about the fact that he is being conditioned through the mass fare provided by medium of film.

This assumes particular topicality in view of the content of the work. The close connection and mutual assistance of the military and the movie industry in providing propaganda material for every side in a particular conflict is well documented since World War II. In times when the US military are financially as well as logistically involved, and exerting massive influence on the content of nearly every movie made on the subject, propaganda today has reached an entirely new level. When recruitment videos employ the same imagery as Hollywood blockbusters, the viewer of *Hecho en Mexico* is forced to address the question in how far his attitude towards the subject of war is tainted by the media products. How is it still possible to differentiate between entertainment and information, between truth and fiction?(iii)

In his highly topical video work, Melhus raises the question whether we can maintain, on the basis of Paul Virilio's thesis that weapons are not merely "tools of destruction but also tools of perception" (iv), that conversely our media-manipulated perception becomes a tool of destruction, a weapon which is in turn manipulated by the media. What is striking about *Hecho en Mexico* is that its inherent critique of the mass media can do without didactic moralising. Melhus is not one of Umberto Eco's "Apocalyptic" who detect unavoidable moral decline in the workings of the media, nor does he fall into the category of the "Integrated ones" who uncritically regurgitate the messages of the media giants.(v) He does not sneer at the products of the cultural industries from the vantage point of an alleged high culture and does not see their consumers as the victims of some grand and all-encompassing illusion. Melhus is familiar with the media world. He evokes cinematographic stereotypes and in a subtle manner exposes their manipulative character without denigrating the media.(vi) It is his loving view of the media which enables him to mount his critique from within and thus makes it all the more effective.

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Notes

- (i) In: *Bjørn Melhus – Video*, ed. by Wulf Herzogenrath and Anne Buschhoff, Bremen, 2002, p. 18.
- (ii) This is the name of a military unit with particular capacities in Roland Emmerich's 1992 film *Universal Soldier*.
- (iii) Katja Blomberg: *Wir sind doppelt in uns selbst*, in: *Bjørn Melhus – Du bist nicht allein*, ed. by Bernd Schulz, Heidelberg, 2001, p. 83.
- (iv) Paul Virilio: *War und Kino. Logistik der Wahrnehmung*, Munich, 1986, p. 10
- (v) Cf. Umberto Eco: *Apokalyptiker und Integrierte. Zur kritischen Kritik der Massenkultur*, Frankfurt a. M., 1984.
- (vi) Cf. Christine N. Brinckmann: *Found Footage: Akustisch. Zu Bjørn Melhus' Videoinstallation Still Men out There*, in: *Experiment Mainstream? Differenz und Uniformierung im populären Kino*, ed. by Irmbert Schenk, Christine Ruffert, et al., Berlin, 2006, p. 115.