

The Poetics of Disassembly

By Tobias Ertl

The first Ferris wheel, named after its inventor, the bridge builder and railroad engineer George Ferris, was built in 1893 for the World's Fair in Chicago. Two years later, the Lumière brothers premiered the first production of their cinematograph in Paris with the short film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*. "The intention of world exhibitions to omit what was understood as incidental and burdensome was even better realized in films: life is the suggestion of a life made up of interesting moments."¹ This can be seen, among other things, in the fact that "people are almost never shown working in films; work is only seen as it is beginning or ending."² Cinema and amusement parks are entertainment media, similar in their mechanization and dynamization of vision, as well as in their promise to transform the daily burdens of their mass audiences into kinaesthetic stimuli, fascinating views, and controlled dizziness.³

The film *fair grounds* by Minhye Chu shows the disassembly of a Ferris wheel on Leipzig's Augustusplatz. We see a worker acrobatically maneuvering through the spokes of the white-painted steel structure, which stands out in sharp contrast against the black night sky, illuminated by spotlights. Piece by piece, link by link, he dismantles the framework, which is never captured by the camera in its entirety. Only in the initial shot, before the title appears, does the film reproduce the view from the gondola, showing the perspective of the riders. In the remaining eight minutes, only partial views of the mobile steel architecture are presented, each of which corresponds to the immediate operating radius of the assembly worker. While the visual technology of the Ferris wheel was designed to provide a panoramic view of the city, the cinematic gaze is caught up in the bars, struts and spokes of the apparatus.

Chu's camera focuses on the incidental—the dismantling after the fair—and declares it the shining main attraction. In doing so, it illuminates the usually hidden backside of representation. The focus on the constructive 'scaffolding' of the mobile attraction and on the physical work of assembly and transportation draws attention to the invisible infrastructures of pleasure. This is a move not unfamiliar in critical documentary film and video art—think of the now-canonical films of Harun Farocki, in which the production processes of cultural-industrial images and the technologies that support them are showcased. *fair grounds* also

1 Helmut Färber, *Baukunst und Film: aus der Geschichte des Sehens*, München 1977, p. 30 (our translation).

2 Ibid.

3 As a leisure offer for the masses, the visual technologies of the world's fairs, as Tony Bennett has argued, simultaneously pursued a democratization of the panoptic principle, and thus an aestheticization of state power and control (See Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex", in: *New Formations* 4, 1988, pp. 73-102). The rationalization of the anarchic forces of carnivals and fairs also belongs in this context: "Beginning in the late 1880s, also, fairgrounds and related spaces included new kinesthetic experiences such as ferris wheels, roller coasters, slides, and loop-the-loops. Within these "controlled" circumstances the inciting of dynamogenic bodily sensations [...] was a fragmentary and mechanical recuperation of carnival energies" (Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, Mass. 2001, p. 238).

takes the form of a demonstration: an operation is shown. More precisely, an operation whose existence does not depend on the existence of the artwork that depicts it. The didactic clarity of the film lies in this conceptual reductionism. Nevertheless, the reversal of representation and production—hardly surprising in the context of critical video art—where we see the material basis instead of the aesthetic spectacle itself, allows for a variety of approaches. Chu could have used image editing as a means of critical commentary, as Farocki frequently did. She could have crafted a complex picture of the economic and urban context, as well as the conditions of precarious work in the amusement industry and ride business, through interviews with workers, trade unionists, and activists—similar to what Melanie Gilligan did in *Crowds*, filmed in the same year in Orlando, Florida, the capital of theme parks. Chu could have pursued a realism of real-time duration, showing the full eight-hour process of disassembling, and thus, through the sheer overload of the viewer’s receptive capacity, made the toil of physical labor consciously stand in contrast to the fleeting thrill of the attraction. Chu does none of this. She chooses to aestheticize the process. She imbues it with a poetic quality, viewing it as a fascinating spectacle. Editing, changes in perspective, and especially the addition of suspenseful film music contribute to the fact that the worker’s task at dizzying heights can be enjoyed as a dramatic event. Physical labor is transformed into acrobatics, into a circus performance, into a choreographed tightrope act. Various iconic references can be cited for this staging of labor as a feat, such as the iconic image of Charlie Chaplin winding his way through the mechanized gears with a wrench in *Modern Times*, or the construction workers performing athletic feats on colorful scaffolds in the later works of Fernand Léger. In this context, the connection to the concept of “montage of attractions,” derived from circus, variety shows, and biomechanical studies in Sergei Eisenstein’s theater plays and early films, is also evident.

In addition to the performance of the worker, the film’s staging of the Ferris wheel’s architecture also contributes to its poetic quality. Its transitory beauty, based on the “visibility of the construction,”⁴ is mimetically captured by Chu’s camera and articulated in an almost abstract manner, as a formal structure [*Formgefüge*]. Due to the extreme contrast between light and dark, the construction of the spokes and struts appears less spatial than linear—a dense network of geometric lines, sometimes evoking the image of an architectural computer simulation—reminiscent of the connections that the experimental film of the 1920s established between the modern metropolis and the cinematic medium. One can sense an afterglow of the magic that the nighttime electric lighting must have exerted on the artists of the modern city, who recognized light art as a fundamental cinematic principle.⁵ *fair grounds*

4 Albrecht Wellmer, “Art and Industrial Production: The Dialectics of Modernism and Postmodernism”, in: *The Persistence of Modernity. Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, Cambridge, Mass. 1993, p. 108.

5 I am thinking here less of Walther Ruttmann’s *Symphony of a Great City* than of Man Ray’s short film *Retour à la raison* (1923), which associates the nocturnal rotation of a carousel equipped with light bulbs with photograms and negative inversions, and of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s unrealized *Dynamics of the Great City* from 1923, in which the two components of electrification: kinetization and illumination combine:

brings the art of industrial illumination back to its material foundation: the “independence of the workday from the natural daylight”⁶ made possible by electric lighting. In doing so, it stages an aesthetically effective reversal of the relationship between leisure spectacle and material labor.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the amusement parks that emerged from world exhibitions and cinema represented the spectacular exterior of a social order that was shifting entirely towards surplus value production. But what do fairgrounds signal today? As places of proletarian amusement that have fallen slightly out of time, fairs now possess a rather eerie quality. Through its sober yet visually abstract language and its dark sound, Chu’s dreamlike film marks the historical distance from the euphoric moment of modernity’s dawn, which it simultaneously evokes through its anachronistic subject matter (festivals and physical labor) and its implicit references to art history. The uncanny aesthetic of the film could hint at a “hauntological”⁷ temporal structure, and thus also at a political sensibility of the present. Despite the physically tangible reality of the process depicted in Chu’s film, there is something unreal about it. And within these surreal overtones, there seems to linger the sense of a present haunted by the ghosts of modernity and the lost future of its utopian promises.

It is certainly no coincidence that Chu chose the disassembly, rather than the construction, as the subject of her film. In doing so, she transforms modernism’s rhetoric of construction and progress into a deconstructive gesture. Although the wordplay in the title refers to “fair conditions,” the film’s formal aesthetics negate any notion of a (morally or otherwise metaphorically interpretable) “ground,” for what we are shown is a tightrope act over an abyss—one where the viewers’ spatial orientation is deliberately disoriented by the cinematic perspective.

In Chu’s film, the dismantling becomes a metaphorical operation: it signifies a disassembly of reality into elements—akin to the montage character of film itself. But does this reveal the true reality of social labor? Hardly, because labor resists representation, both in its social function—as a source of surplus value—and in its everyday individual experience. As surplus value production, labor cannot be represented because the depiction of specific activities obscures what Marx called “abstract labor”: the function of labor measured in quantifiable units of time within the capitalist system of exploitation, in which the specific nature of the activity is irrelevant as long as it produces some social use value. But concrete work is also difficult to represent, as its representation requires abstracting from its experiential content. In order to be depicted in artworks, labor is always too abstract and too concrete at the same

“Electric signs with luminous writing [...]. Fireworks from the Lunapark / Speeding along WITH the scenic railway.”

6 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Lichtblicke: zur Geschichte der künstlichen Helligkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt 2004, p. 16 (our translation).

7 See Mark Fisher, *The weird and the eerie*, London 2016.

time. While abstract labor cannot be aestheticized, concrete labor must be aestheticized in order to be representable. Therefore, the aestheticization of labor in *fair grounds* should be understood as an aesthetical reflection on the impossibility of its depiction. Its representation is based on a paradox: to make the labor behind the attraction visible, one must turn labor into an attraction.

transl. by Steffen Andrae and Anna T. Gregor