

Walo Deuber

Visualizing the Obvious in Robert Walser's Prose
Responding to the provocation of the hand-held Camera of Robert Walser

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When a filmmaker gets back to his academic roots as I had the opportunity teaching German literature on several occasions in the last couple of years as a visiting professor in a German program in the US, it might seem natural that one remains sensitive towards reading literature as material for adaptations or translations from book into film. Seminars treating the relations of literature and film at one point or the other arrive at the question of how faithful the two are to each other or, how close the adaptation is to the original. In general, the claim for freedom of the adaptation in order to fulfill the rules of Aristotle's dramaturgy is basically accepted, not excluding regularly disappointments of the outcome.

Although being a filmmaker, the initial challenge for the experiment called Visual Book originated in this case from the literary preferences inside me: for once it weren't the freedom of the film that I was looking for, but the restrictions through the given text. In other words: the aim was to experiment with this particular inter-space between literature and film and to restrict the freedom of adaptation to its minimum. And this, finally, in order to find out how it affects both: literature and film. The term *Visual Book* that I invented for the form of my »film« somehow signalizes how small I intended to make the gap; a gap that also Robert Walser tried to close – from *his* side, as it turns out, and not from mine.

The subtitle of my presentation – the provocation that I'm responding to with my Visual Book tonight – may almost suggest that I will be talking the next few minutes about a filmmaker, just hiding behind words and letters. Well, I will probably somehow do so – although, my argument will be about an author who had been born before the movies even got invented, in 1878 to be exact, and who's only change in means to work with was from pencil to ink to pencil again.

Robert Walser, this extraordinary Swiss German poet at the turn of two centuries and ways into the 20th. He never touched a brush and he certainly never grabbed a camera. Nevertheless, in his short story *Der Greifensee*, which was his very first to be published in 1899, we find this remarkable passage: [I read from the translation by Susan Bernofsky in her Walser-book *Masquerade and other Stories* where the story is called *Lake Greifen*. It starts just as one would expect it from an author strolling along on a Sunday morning, quote]

I keep on walking, and the next time I look up, it's to see the shimmer of the lake above green foliage and silent fir tips; this is my lake, I think I must go to it, I feel drawn there.¹

[Unquote.] But then follows this – with an astonishing double-change of perspectives [Quote]:

You, too, dear reader, will see how and why I feel drawn should it interest you to keep pursuing my description, which takes the liberty of skipping over roads, meadows, forest, stream, and field, thus arriving on the banks of the little lake itself where the two of us, I and it, stop short [...]

[Unquote.] Amazing. And, while description and author are standing there together, the latter lets the word to the description [quote]: »But let's give the description itself, in its traditional effusiveness, a chance to speak« [unquote] – and he proceeds writing down word by word what it had just seen, Walser notes, what had just been recorded image by image by his *camera-pencil* so to speak: the description of a description.

The characteristic of describing descriptions has been emphasized a stylistic particularity of Walser. »Viewing a view«, as he puts it himself at one point (*Der Knabe II* SW Vol. 20 p. 116), is something that certainly can be found in abundance throughout his entire work.

Born in Biel/Bienne – a small town next to the Swiss part of the rural Jura-region with a beautiful lake at its side and the majestic alps in the near distance, and most important at the border of the French and German speaking parts of Switzerland, thus bilingual – Robert Walser gets often called a »Grenzgänger« a border-liner by his natural origin.

But when Peter Utz, professor at the University of Lausanne and probably the contemporarily most distinguished Walser specialist calls this poet a »dancer on the edges« he doesn't speak about his origins but about his style. About the ways of Walser, creating »Jetztzeit« in his writing and keeping distance to it in the text, creating »presence« or »present time« and dancing along with it and the figures of his prose at the same time.²

What did strike me in reading Walser with Graduates at Cal State University Long Beach a couple of years ago, was the simple fact, that the first printed piece of prose – we just heard of it a minute ago – was published only a mere three years after the invention of the moving picture. It was in 1896 that the Frères Lumière had projected their first shorts on a screen in Paris while in Berlin at the same time the brothers Skladanowsky presented their »Bioskop« and Thomas Edison had the first run of his »Kinetograph« projector on April 23, 1896 on 34th Street in New York City.

All of a sudden, this difficult-to-describe perception of movement or »action« in the prose pieces by Walser that we were reading, got a significant setting by pure coincidence:

Here was a writer seeking the means of his own literary expression simultaneously with film on the edge of developing its first »words«, its language of its own. And, the 21 year old bank clerk Walser who lived in Zurich at the time, most probably was aware (at least subconscious if you want) of the new invention, since the Lumière company had established distribution in Switzerland as early as the late Nineties. However, with the invention of telephone, radio and industrialized transportation, with photography becoming popular, the perception of time and space was dramatically changing in general, and so the reproduction of reality became a whole new challenge.

»Viewing the view« is certainly one of the special features of Robert Walser's style. The other one, the »dance«, is the answer to the urge not only to create images by writing, but also to let them become alive on a piece of paper: words in motion. In one of his later texts about his own writing he would speak of a permanent search for a yet »unbekannte Lebendigkeit der Sprache«, a yet »unknown liveliness of the language«.³

In 1905, Robert Walser followed his brother Carl to Berlin. By that time Carl was already a pretty successful painter. It is he, his older brother, who must be considered highly responsible for Robert Walsers affection for paintings, for *still* images, a fact that as well remains among the distinguished topics of the literary analysis of this author.

But even more so, Carl introduced his brother to the flamboyant world of Berlin society at the opening of a new century, including an extensive nightlife in the Wilhelminian capital of Germany. By 1910, the glittering city provided in mushrooming small theatres already 250 short and longer films with *moving* pictures of the shabbier kind: 97 murders, 51 adulteries, 35 drunks and 25 prostitutes among other things taken from real life. Since as early as 1902 it had depicted rushing fire trucks and breathtaking chases of all kinds: motion in raw form, so to say.

It was probably there, in the improvised »Ladenkinos« (shops transformed into movie-theatres) of the proletarian sections of Berlin, that the young author became definitely fascinated with the »graceful flitting-by of meanings«, as he notes years later in one of the scarce texts that talk about movies instead of »being movie« in its special Walserish way.⁴

Images – motion – dancing: It seems as Robert Walser would do his writing according to the recipe written down by his most admired fellow writer Heinrich von Kleist a century before in the famous article *The Puppet Theatre*. There, Kleist states that in order to create the perfect movement, the operator of string puppets has to put himself »into the center of gravity of the puppet, in other words that he, himself, dances«.

It is not just by coincidence that I present you – in the hand-out – a tiny part of Walser's short story on Heinrich von Kleist's sojourn to Thun in 1802 in order to illustrate what I mean by arguing that this author writes not only images but is adding movement to it, almost translating it into film by a filmic style. The text might nourish your own judgment and fun about and with Robert Walser's writing style. Essayist Susan Sontag once called Robert Walser »the missing link between *Kleist* and *Kafka*«.⁵

Changing perspective

In introducing a piece of film theory, I may now change sides towards my second soul, that of a filmmaker that I am.

It is a paragraph from *Filmosophy* by Daniel Frampton that you find in the handout as well. It shows an astonishing congruence to Peter Utz' *Dancing on the Edges* and Kleist's phrasing of the »operator

which himself dances«: Frampton states, that »a film about a character becomes a dance of two subjectively intending bodies«⁶ – the camera moving along with the character in motion.

Tamara S. Evans, professor at CUNY gave her essay on Walser a couple of years ago the title *Writing Paintings*.⁷ If I wouldn't have mentioned in the subtitle, that his hand-held camera had provoked me, I could as well have said, that first of all I've been puzzled by an author *Writing Movies*.

I come towards the end of my remarks on Robert Walser, who died in 1956 after remaining silent for 26 years, switching off his hand-held camera by putting down his pencil once and forever in mental clinics in Berne and Herisau by the early 1930ies.

By that time film had taken over the lead as story-telling media. In his later years in Berne Walser was an admirer of the movies and stars like Jackie Coogan. With adding sound to the images, film definitely got on the fast track. Although, Walser had invented the combination before in his already mentioned »Kleist«-piece: »... the sound down there, he can hear it but he can also see it«.

But, once in Herisau he declared: »I'm not here to write but to be crazy«, and from then on for the rest of his life he manufactured paper bags. It is this and not the poet as a dancer on the edges between prose and film alone, that qualifies him definitely for a literary outsider, although an extraordinary one, leaving behind a huge oeuvre that – thanks to interpreters like Susan Bernofsky and others – gets little by little but more and more known in this country – Susan Bernofsky having her next big achievement ready for the bookstores this spring, the translation of Walser's first novel from 1906 *Die Geschwister Tanner* under the English title *The Tanner's*.

As a filmmaker, two years ago, I felt provoked to move beyond the literary research about Walser writing film, but to challenge his texts from the other perspective – by simply »Filming Writing«.

The experiment I did with seven Walser love-stories, a director of photography, a narrator, two actors, a composer, an editor and all the rest that makes for a small film crew (mainly consisting of my students in the film department at the University of Applied Sciences in Lucerne), is called neither a movie nor a film but a *Visual Book*, a product of something coming from that gap in between film and book – just like Walser's prose is something in between writing and filming.

What you are going to *see* are seven *texts* – yes! – of Robert Walser fully read by the narrator Bruno Ganz, together with their simultaneous translation into film.⁸ The intention behind it is no more nor less than »Visualizing the Obvious in Robert Walser's Prose«.

I wish you entertaining moments with literature on the screen – and it's your turn to decide if it works this way too –. I thank you for your attention.⁹

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¹ In German: Walser, R.: *Sämtliche Werke in Einzelausgaben (SW)*. Herausgegeben von Jochen Greven Zürich und Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1986. Vol. 2, p. 32 ("*Der Greifensee*").

In English: Bernofsky, S.: *Masquerade and other Stories* by Robert Walser, with Translator's Preface, Foreword by William H. Gass. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP 1990, London: Quartet 1993. p. 3 ("*Lake Greifen*")

² Utz, P.: *Tanz auf den Rändern*. Robert Walsers "Jetztzeit"-Stil. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1998.

³ SW Vol. 20, p. 429 ("*Meine Bemühungen*")

⁴ SW Vol. 19, p. 114 ("*Die leichte Hochachtung*")

⁵ Sontag, S.: Foreword to: Robert Walser: *Selected Stories*. Translated and edited by Christopher Middleton, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1982. p. vii

⁶ Frampton, D.: *Filmosophy*, a manifesto for a radically new way of understanding film. London&New York: Wallflower Press 2006. p. 42

⁷ Evans, T. S., *Robert Walser: Writing Painting*. In: *Robert Walser and the Visual Arts*. Evans, T. S., Editor. Pro Helvetia Swiss Lectureship 9 New York: The Graduate School and University Center, The City University of New York 1996. p. 23ff

⁸ *Er, der Hut, sitzt auf ihm, dem Kopf. Robert Walser-Geschichten*. Regie Walo Deuber. Zurich: Doc Productions GmbH 2006 (DVD, 52 minutes). www.walser-sehbuch.ch

⁹ This text is based on Deuber, W.: "*Hoffnung auf eine unbekannte Lebendigkeit der Sprache*". *Die Handkamera des Robert Walser*. In: *Robert Walsers 'Ferne Nähe'*. Neue Beiträge zur Forschung. Groddeck W., Sorg R., Utz P., Wagner K. Herausgeber. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2007. p. 253ff