

JOÃO PENALVA

01.02.-27.02.2012

João Penalva's films in no way comply with our conventional understanding of film. All his films are conceived to provoke four separate, simultaneous perceptions: of what you see, of what you hear, of what you read and of what you visualise. For curious, engaged and active viewers these films create a personal, unique experience – allowing them to view two films simultaneously: One on the screen, the other one in their heads alone. At the Berlinische Galerie, Penalva presents a group of five films. For each of these works, he has explored a different approach to the visual and audio components. Like performances in a cinema, the films are shown in two separate programmes with strictly observed times.

336 Pek (336 Rivers), 1999

Aware of the compromises and constraints that subtitling entails, he began working on *336 PEK* with an English text that João Penalva wanted to show during the film in the form of subtitles. This work is about experiencing a film through reading, and Penalva seeks to forge a precise rhythm for the subtitles and narrative voice. As the title suggests, the text refers to Lake Baikal in Siberia and its 336 tributaries, all of which are named in the final sequence. But the text does not consist entirely of this list of rivers. The naming is embellished by popular legends and the speaker's personal memories. Not wishing to confront the interplay of textual rhythm and voice with a dominant visual element, the artist restricted the footage that accompanies the words of a corner of London's Hyde Park, a single continuous shot of trees, people walking and a stretch of grass. However, he did not leave the footage as it was: to render it as abstract as possible and to emphasise its subordination to the text, he opted during post-production for a maximum colour contrast, subsequently toning it bright yellow – primarily because yellow does not trigger any particular associations.

Kitsune (The Fox Spirit), 2001

In the second film in this group of works, the artist's point of departure is not the text, but the image. While João Penalva was invited to film on the island of Madeira, he came across a landscape of misty hills that reminded him of classical Chinese and

Japanese landscape art. Inspired by film footage of this environment, he began composing a dialogue between two elderly Japanese men who he made to meet by chance in exactly such a landscape. They tell each other stories they heard as children – in particular about the magical powers attributed to the fox in Japanese myths. Although the camera was fixed in the same way as for *336 PEK*, this time the footage was only slightly processed during the edit. In this case, however, the rising mists create a particular link between the text and image: in many sequences the two men seem to be standing at the edge of the screen discussing the landscape before their eyes.

A Harangozó (The Bell-Ringer), 2005

Unlike in *Kitsune* and *336 PEK*, for this film Penalva does not work with a long single take, but with a single 20-second shot of a Taiwanese landscape composed of a river running right in the centre of the image and mountains. It runs forward in a continuous loop for the full 57-minute duration of the film, while another loop of the same length, but one that is running backwards, is superimposed over it. So, the image plays both simultaneously forwards and backwards. Paying attention to the river, we are aware of the cyclical motion constructed by the artist in this image. In *A harangozó*, the only real plot elements are the subtitles and the voice of the narrator, driving to an extreme the discrepancy between the frozen picture on the one hand and the flowing story and running subtitles on the other. Thus, only the habit of seeing and hearing a film at the same time and thinking of it as a whole enables the viewer to build a bridge between these two elements.

The White Nightingale, 2005

After *A harangozó* and *Kitsune*, *The White Nightingale* is another commissioned work in the group. The place where this film was shot was defined by the City of Bristol, who commissioned it. The location is the Avon gorge, which once defined the edge of the city, and the Clifton Suspension Bridge that crosses it. Breaking with his usual technique, João Penalva works here with a moving camera. As if the parts of the film each translated into an image, the artist explores the river, the river bed and the surroundings, adopting a highly

abstract approach to them all. The structure of the film is cryptic, as the first part seems to be unrelated to the second. There is no narrator on this occasion; the fairy story can only be read in intertitles on the screen. This makes *The White Nightingale* the most radical implementation of Penalva's quest to conceive film as a reading experience.

The Roar of Lions, 2006

In the last work of the group, the artist returns to his original camera technique. *The Roar of Lions* was made while he was in Berlin on a bursary from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The fixed camera focuses for the most part on people, some ice skating and others walking across a frozen lake in Grunewald. More conciliatory than in *A harangozó*, and rather like in *Kitsune*, Penalva – at least sometimes – allows the viewer to construct close links between image and sound. One scene in this narration, for example, takes place in a forest, and at another point we can actually hear the roar of lions that gives the work its title.