

Double Lottie", or reading aloud, travelling by train, watching television and other coincidences

It is quiet in the garden. Only the treetops are moving. Perhaps fate, gliding over the garden, has brushed them with its wings.

Erich Kästner's famous children's book *Das doppelte Lottchen* (1949) is a beautiful story about the sort of coincidences and fateful encounters which sometimes give life an unexpected turn. In a children's home, two children meet by chance - two little girls who look exactly alike, except that one of them has a plait and the other wears her hair loose.

The two children soon discover that one of them has no father and lives with her mother, and the other lives with her father; they were born on the same day in Linz on the river Danube. It cannot be a coincidence! And they are not just "astrological twins", as seems to have been the case with the English King Edward VII and his double, a tailor. The two girls find out that they really are twins, and that their parents separated them when they divorced. They decide to take things into their own hands and swap lives: Lottie goes to Vienna as Louise, and Louise goes to Munich as Lottie. And the sparkling "comedy of errors" with the happy end begins.

"Chapter 2."

"What is the chapter called?"

"Chapter 2."

"But what's it called?"

"It has no name. It is just called chapter 2."

On 8.11.1996, during a train journey from Berlin to Cologne, Rémy Markowitsch, who always reserves a seat by the corridor, happened to sit next to a little girl who was listening to a woman reading *Das doppelte Lottchen* to her. Fascinated by the poetic mood of the situation, the artist switched on his video camera at 1.44 p.m. and placed it on the table, like a handbag, to record the scene. He then picked up a book and became engrossed in reading. (*Die Ausgewanderten* by W.G. Seebald).

Thus the course of events recorded by the video camera is absolutely coincidental and utterly simple. The camera is placed on the table between the seats. Pointed towards the window, it shows the woman's hands turning the pages of the book, the lines of text, the illustrations, and the hands of the child moving in play. We hear the quiet voice of the woman, interposed by the child's questions and remarks. The reading is accompanied by the varyingly loud noises of the Berlin-Brussels Intercity train, which is named after the explorer Alexander von Humboldt.

Behind the secret which had just been unveiled, new riddles, other secrets, waited.

The woman reads the whole of the second and third chapters to the child. They are the chapters which tell of the discovery of "double Lottie", the twins. Neither the child nor the woman know that the camera is operating. The child listens, asks the occasional question, the trains rumbles on through the German countryside... Only the artist knows the secret, and so - now - do we.

Rémy Markowitsch has captured an extract from everyday life which, as is often the case with fragments of reality, takes on the status of a subject of artistic interest. He is not concerned with creating an artificial world, but of the poetic portrayal of reality and ordinariness.

„Shall I go on reading?“ „Yes.“ Time passes. It doesn't know any better«. 1997

The primary function of the highly technical media used by Markowitsch is to explore and reveal, to investigate the relationship between technical media and the medium itself, and to observe the way they change through use. Although this may seem like a contradiction in terms, the fact is that so-called progress never really changes anything about the basic structure of mankind. It is only when man's artificiality is put under extreme pressure (which is already happening now and will happen still more in the coming century) that scientific and technical progress have a fundamental effect on the *conditio humana*. When all is said and done, Markowitsch is not interested in technology for its own sake, however brilliantly he uses it. Technology is a means to an end; the camera is, with its objectivity and thus its meaning (= use), accessible to everyone, but Markowitsch employs it to operate unseen as a conscious, technically flawless aid to a goal-oriented creative production.

There are stories which raise questions about the meaning of life per se from a philosophical viewpoint, about duration and transience, about time and memories. Frequently, they reveal many levels and metaphors, parallels and coincidences, and the directed and unexpected confrontation with these things startles and amazes us.

Like our own lives, Markowitsch's everyday pictures occur so coincidentally that they never take the form of shock situations which say "Look how banal and terrible life is". The artist discovers human traces by chance in books or photo albums, or he records apparently arbitrary events with the camera, rather like writing in a diary. There is an archaeological moment in this; life situations or stories are reconstructed and stored with the help of pictures and documents. Thus technology assumes the role of a preserver of phenomena which would otherwise perish, and the means of transport for archetypal, existential patterns of experience and behaviour. Thus what Markowitsch does with the camera is to express a fragmentary situation or mood, rather like the way the romantics described their wanderings through nature, history and the landscape, and transposed them into poetry by recreating their experience of the mood.

Rémy Markowitsch left the authenticity of this reading in the train intact. Thus the video has the impact of an over life-sized statue, a photograph, a video still; it is extremely concentrated and reduced to essentials. He works, as it were, against the medium of the film because he treats the video camera like a still camera while yet respecting the time lapse of the film. The camera itself does not move, it moves with the train on its journey, and a paradox arises: the landscape in the background, which is really still, passes by the window, fast or slowly according to the speed of the train. It is only during a stop at Bielefeld that the movement of the background ceases. And here we see the movement of people arriving and departing, getting into or off the train.

The photographically enlarged hands of the woman, adorned by golden rings, slowly and calmly turning the pages of the old copy of *Das doppelte Lottchen*, are a basic and focal point of concentration of the film, which is projected over life-sized onto the wall by means of a video beam. Equally important are the acoustic elements, the sound. In addition to the voice telling the story, which the listener is meant to hear, there are some distracting background noises: the sounds in the train compartment, children's voices, a baby crying, the conductor asking for tickets or announcing the next station. During the reading, the little girl's concentration varies, she asks questions about the story, and plays with a length of wool used as a bookmark; there are pauses when she tires and lays her head down on the book, and there are moments when the viewers' patience is put to the test.

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Thus the video has a documentary character which operates through the principle of coincidence and is nevertheless a conscious production within the framework of chance, created by the artist's fundamental decision to shoot from a single camera perspective.

It cannot be a coincidence.

If coincidence is merely the discovery of that for which we have been searching, then Markowitsch was searching for just such a situation. The train, the place, the people, the journey - all coincidences!

Rémy Markowitsch turned his attention to the act of reading aloud some time ago. At the end of 1995, he began working on his LESUNGEN in which he filmed people reading from their favourite books in their own surroundings. Here, the readings are staged and not a coincidence. Months later, the artist filmed reading aloud in its most archaic form in the train: a woman, perhaps a mother, reading to her child. Mysterious and unexpected encounters of this kind are always fascinating, and all the more so when they provide material for Markowitsch's work.

It is possible to establish undreamed-of parallels, repetitions and ambiguities in DAS DOPPELTE LOTTCHEN. While we listen to the reading of Erich Kästner's story, a photographer takes a picture of the twins (the illustration can be seen in the video), and the two girls read a letter from their father out loud. The video reaches a climax when the woman reads the part of the book in which the children discover that they are sisters, and at this very moment, the train stops; it grows quieter, the loud noise of the train ceases, and the tension increases. The woman asks the little girl to come closer because she does not want her reading to disturb the other passengers. We are the only ones who know that there are other listeners.

"Shall I go on reading?"

"Yes."

Time passes. She doesn't know any better.

In both the LESUNGEN, which was filmed in private rooms, and in DAS DOPPELTE LOTTCHEN which was filmed - by chance - in a public place (a train), the theme is reading aloud.

When do people read aloud nowadays, what part is played by the medium of the book? In public life, official announcements at meetings, contributions to discussions in conferences, and verdicts in courts of law are all read out loud. But reading aloud is usually restricted to the private sphere. Adults and children meet halfway and learn from one another. The child hears its first words from its mother; and children learn their language and acquire knowledge through listening to people reading aloud. Thus reading aloud is a necessary part of teaching, and above all, it is a fundamental expression of intimacy, affection and love (newly engaged couples enjoy reading aloud to one another). The medium of the book has long since been accessible to everyone, it has become a mass-produced article which does much to determine our society. It is no longer an element of power for the few people who can read as it was a few hundred years ago (see the article by Maria Vogel in: R.M. *"Finger im Buch"*, p. 83 et seq.). But fine, high-quality books appear to be of interest to but a small section of the public today, whereas the mass of television is unquestionably an essential part of life for most people. It is quicker to watch the film version of a book than to read the book and use one's own

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imagination. The evening ritual of zapping through the television channels has become a favourite pastime. Mankind has long since become a "media being" who believes he can expand his horizon through the flickering window on the world.

Rémy Markowitsch has united the two media by showing readings from books, filmed with a video camera on the TV screen. All the readers belong to the artist's circle of friends and acquaintances, and they are filmed in different situations: at table, on the sofa, at a desk with a lectern, in bed or in an armchair. They were allowed to choose where they were filmed as well as what they read. Thus we have a wide palette of texts from novels, stories, thrillers, children's books and textbooks. The languages of the reader is different, too, and include English, German, Swiss German, Russian and Italian.

Thorough preparations were made for the coming adventure.

Originally, the video was conceived for several monitors, arranged strictly and classically in a circle or a row, on which the different readings were shown simultaneously.

But the conditions of the places of exhibition demanded that the performance and presentation of the films be flexible. Different circumstances gave rise to new ideas, and further private persons were brought in for the exhibition in Zwickau.

The television sets for LESUNGEN were lent to us for the duration of the exhibition by people who hoped to be cured of their "TV addiction" by loaning out their beloved "box", complete with the objects which stood on it and some form of seating, to the museum.

We managed to find eight voluntary donors. The artist visited them all in their homes, and each of them chose a text to be read on their TV from a list of titles. They did not see the reader until later on.

Markowitsch photographed the room with the television set and the selected reading, to the accompaniment of conversations about art, life and books, and an exchange of stories. It was exciting visiting people we didn't know and learning something about their lives. What other chance does one get of going into strange homes, taking photographs there and borrowing the furniture?

At the same time, the artist asked all the donors for a list of books, which is included in the catalogue as part of LESUNGEN.

The exhibition in the Dome Hall of the Zwickau Museum shows parts of the private interiors of the homes of eight different people, thus presenting private stories in the public, prestigious Kuppelsaal in the museum's entrance hall. The expectedly heterogeneous furniture and television sets are endowed with a narrative aspect, a comprehensible and documented story.

Visitors to the exhibitions move through parts of the homes of Annette, Daniela, Eva and Matthias, Jürgen, Kerstin, Thea and Lothar, Petra, Regina, and Sven, and watch Anatolji, Esther, Hanspeter, Hjørdis, Loredana, Maria and Paul reading out loud. The private aspect is twofold. But it is shown in a public building, in the entrance hall of a museum.

On entering the museum, the first thing we hear is a jumble of voices, and it is only when we come get closer to the individual monitors that we can understand what the reader is saying. We can enter the "home" of the donor, sit down, make ourselves comfortable and, still with a feeling of strangeness, listen to the stories.

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You had yourself photographed just now, and you are going to send the picture home.

If this is a means of sorting out the muddle, well and good!

With the help of the photographs and films, the guessing game about the participating persons begins, about the readers and about the people in whose homes we are sitting. We notice how the rooms are furnished, what the TV looks like, what the people living here look at, what they read, how they read, what interests them etc. There is no doubt that there is something voyeuristic about the whole thing, it appeals to our liking for finding out about other people. We look through a window into a different, private world, a world of unknown persons, of men and women from different professions and age groups. People who live alone or in pairs or in families. Intimacy is surrendered. Interestingly enough, we observe some parallels between the donors and the readers in terms of their furnishings or their literary preferences.

But although we can look at these other worlds, make up our own fantasies and allow our imagination free rein about what these people are like, how they live and what they do, we can never totally penetrate their privacy.

Markowitsch's work is enormously complex because it operates on two different levels: the superficial level, which provides information about the participating persons (through the lists of books and the living situations), and the creative, playful level of the artistic work.

As in a party game, the "actors" behave both as individuals and according to specific, pre-stipulated rules. This element, the psychological behaviour of the "participants" and all who are taking part in the "game" is important to LESUNGEN. Naturally, Markowitsch himself also assumes an "actor's" role. Changes of position, associated changes of angle and place are part of the game. We, the viewers, are given the opportunity for self-reflection and new interpretations of the world. And although we can see through the TV screen into a different world, in the final analysis that which we experience can only ever be our own world - with an added element of provocation.

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The headings in italics are quoted from the dialogues between the woman and the girl in Erich Kästner's book *Das doppelte Lottchen*.

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Rémy Markowitsch

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