

In the cosmos of the Big Heads by Nina Staehli

critical presentation Stefan Kaiser

You feel immediately drawn towards them: how they sit, how they stand, how they make their somewhat awkward way through the world with their oversized heads. Yoshi and Moshi and all the other Big Heads are what make Nina Staehli's films so distinctive and so highly idiosyncratic. They catch the audience by surprise with unusual acts that develop a logic all of their own within the universe of these films. The acts exert a pull that the spectator can no more escape than a child can brush aside its curiosity. What comes next? How are the different elements connected? Where does the film end? The freakish appearance of the figures casts a spell over the audience.

Then the Big Heads stop for a moment. They become outsiders, observing the strange environment in which they find themselves, lost in the middle of nowhere. Their observer's gaze is formed of two deep black holes. We understand as little about the object of their gaze as we do about what is going on inside the head sculptures. What might they be thinking of? What connects them with the place they have landed up in? Their voices say nothing, the figures have stopped speaking. The mouth – the third black hole – has frozen into an astonished "Oh ...". In this way the heads become surfaces onto which to project interpretations. The gaze of the figures and that of the spectator exchange roles and the astonishment of the Big Heads turns into a way of interrogating a world that is not as we expect it to be. The ball is now in our court.

Pictures not stories

What the Big Heads do and what they observe are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, these short films offer the audience an enjoyable surprise in the form of seemingly absurd activities, carried out with a seriousness that demands a search for meaning. On the other hand, there is something unsettling about them due to the strange locations where the figures have chosen to pause. The allusions and cultural clues contained within them are as bewildering as they are real. In this ambivalence lies an invitation to explore further the images and moods on display; they also reflect the artist's thematic interests.

With Nina Staehli everything works without any didactic intent or lecturing; she puts her trust in the power of her images. The titles are the only place where there are explicit references to the issues that concern her as an artist. "Every film is based on a clear idea that I want to convey," says Nina Staehli, "and the research I do is correspondingly extensive. But I don't want to tell stories; I want rather to trigger moods and create spaces for association. If I succeed in that, I will have accomplished a lot." Her films dispense with words; the message is conveyed through moods and the mysterious appeal of the narrative flow. The images are steeped in the ideas of the filmic medium. Anyone who reads them can gain access to a whole universe of metaphors and metonymies in which artistic concerns find expression. And yet the emotions, associations and memories triggered by the images also stimulate thought. A good example is the film *Glory Land – Trail of Tears* (2015, 13'27), which takes as its theme the violent displacement of Native American tribes in the USA. References to history unfold against a backdrop made up of a desolate no-man's-land and windblown star-spangled banners. Wearing camouflage, Sparrow gazes at a burial ground, searching through autumn leaves for traces of the past. By day he carries a white flag across the land and at

night he burns it. We see him through a latticework of trees standing far away in a field, listless and lost; the warrior and his sign of peace have fallen out of time. With his wildly overflowing head of hair, TearHead explores on foot the route taken by the displaced – a kind of memorial on the ground. He arranges sheets of notepaper containing no notes, and covers his face with his hands, even though he cannot see anything through the impenetrable curtain of his hair. The emotional gestures are strong enough to lead us into the real story.

The melancholy of decline

The artist's concerns can readily be interpreted from a socially critical perspective. In *Occupy ORF – A Festival for Yoshi & Moshi* (2013, 30'), political clues are also laid down, without however becoming indictments. The guiding force behind the statements made by the films is more the melancholy that accompanies the two main figures Yoshi and Moshi, against the backdrop of locations that recur like leitmotifs and set the specific tone of the film. We are shown authentic images of a world that bears the marks of decay, loneliness, and emptiness; real life has moved away.

Often, we find images of a decayed industrial age: a disused concrete factory, made obsolete by technology, industrial wastelands, an empty car park. These images hark back to an age of promise when mass consumption was made possible by mass production. Nina Staehli's films show the other side of this. The bottles are empty, the televisions no longer spew out entertainment, and the Big Heads lose their way in large expanses that make their insignificance visible to everyone. It doesn't help that the figures have such bloated heads. Consumption has been used up as a source of meaning, the exuberant ego has been exposed for what it is, there is smeared paint on the surface – all these are traces of a rearguard action. Inside, the real face of the Big Heads is revealed: the head sculptures are in fact empty.

"I could also take the head away and put a box on top of the body," says Nina Staehli. She likes the interpretation that her figures symbolize a puffed-up society whose inner values are hollow. Ultimately, it is a question of the human quality of existence. A key work in this sense is *Homeless* (2012, 3'27). Driven by curiosity, Yoshi and Moshi emerge from the vastness of the sea and explore the world. However, the traces of our culture only make clear to them its current degree of destruction. These are enough discoveries for the two of them; they don't want to go any further. Only mutual encouragement can trigger movement – but departure is no longer shared. The melancholy of decline ends up in isolation and loneliness. This is the sad conclusion our world has conveyed to both of them.

Our inadequacies

Quartet of Bambi (2017, 8'05) presents the decline of society as a system of order. References to Federico Fellini's 1979 film *Orchestra Rehearsal* unfold in an anarchic basement rehearsal room. The Big Heads are now classical musicians. Their enormous heads are perched on top of bodies wearing evening dress, their arms are crossed, they are waiting for something to happen. The orchestra's insubordination towards the conductor escalates according to a dramaturgy fashioned out of montage and the movements of a hand-held camera, both of which oscillate between calm and hectic. The music reinforces this process, in which the world of grand gestures shrinks to the point of ridicule and the conductor fails at his task. Sheet music lies around on the ground of reality, but there are no notes visible.

In this way, narrative patterns emerge again and again to reinforce the emotion of the message conveyed by the image. With Nina Staehli, however, they don't come to form stories. They show developments on the level of action that lead not to beauty and goodness but to chaos and decay – even if the longing for another world is likewise present in the films. Human inadequacies prevail. This Big-Head society can't help it. In the opening sequence of *Quartet of Bambi* a light at the end of the tunnel seems to entice us into the great outdoors – until a sequence of abrupt cuts and scratchy violin tones disabuses us of this prospect – while at the end of the film the subjective camera moves along the ceiling of a dark cellar corridor. It is the perspective of a patient being pushed through a hospital from A&E to the operating theatre; spontaneously the failed conductor comes to mind. However, no glaring operating theatre lighting awaits him. Instead, the perspective goes back to the floor and, despite the wide-angle lens, remains trapped in a black tangle of cables in which the camera is reflected. Then it too turns black. Non-cooperation wins the day.

New expressive possibilities

In her latest film, *Yoshi + Moshi - Movie World Tour* (2020, 21'20), Nina Staehli pays special attention to the relationship between the characters Yoshi and Moshi as a couple. The film contains more narrative elements than earlier works, the characters express themselves explicitly through hand signals and gestures while deliberately not using sophisticated body language. "That's not what I'm interested in," explains the artist. She doesn't want to lead her Big Heads into a new universe, but with this film she has opened up further possibilities of expression on the level of character. *Yoshi + Moshi - Movie World Tour* marks the preliminary end point of a development that began in 2007 with an animated film about sculptures set in movement using stop-motion technology. Over the next few years, Nina Staehli's artistic need for moving images grew stronger but attempts with digital animation did not produce the desired result. That was the moment the Big Heads came into being. Nina Staehli simply cut off the head of a large sculpture and put it on herself. "I became my sculpture," she says, thus also laying down a path for biographical interpretation to follow. The shift to the new medium of film produced a first work entitled *Ruby Dean and The White Silence* (2010, 3'18). Since then, Nina Staehli's filmic oeuvre has developed continuously and now boasts a total of seventeen works. The montage of images has been added, together with music, more complex narrative patterns and a language all her own. In this way, Nina Staehli has pushed the boundaries she had previously explored in the disciplines of painting and sculpture. There remain further boundaries to push in her filmic work. We await with curiosity to see which forms of expression Nina Staehli will bring forth from her cosmos of Big Heads.

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