

Prof. Dr. Alfred Toth

„Bruxelles-Transit“ (1980)

80 min., <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0212832/> (Rating 9.7/10, 27.03.2010)

Director: Samy Szlingerbaum (1950-1986)

Main roles: Hélène Lapiower (1957-2002), Boris Lehman (1944-)

Samy Szlingerbaum's "Bruxelles-transit" (1980) must catch our attention not only because this is really a truly unique and outstanding masterpiece, but first because of its title. By definition, people who are in transit are not allowed to leave a certain secure area during their trip. Transits are characterized by corridors: In airports, nobody can make any mistakes. The ways through these transit-corridors are well defined. There are guardians standing at each corner, the doors for possible mistaken paths are closed. Also if you travel by train – another example for a corridor -, you cannot get out between the point of departure and the point of the next stop. Transits are thus circles, in the topological sense of closed lines, although their actual shape may not be round. In three dimensions, a transit can be seen as a torus, which is the topological model for a corridor. So, transits are both: security area and prison. Nobody can escape from a torus. When you go on a trip, you do not only depart at a certain time and arrive at a certain later time, but it is only in departing that you get a chance to arrive and only in arriving that you got a chance to have departed. Thus, on trips, the time-arrow is not only directed toward the future, but also toward the past – at the same time. Therefore, in transits, there are two anti-parallel time-lines. This “parallax” conception of time cannot be described by classical science, which has of course severe consequences for the metaphysical background of transits: For each decision there is a rejection. And if you make a mistake in your choice at any point of the transit, then this trip mostly turns out into a Trip into the Light – as shown by R.W. Fassbinder in his movie "Despair. Eine Reise ins

Licht" (1978) or more recently in the German movie by Maren Ade "Der Wald vor lauter Bäumen" ("The Forest for the Trees") (2003).

"Bruxelles-transit" describes the flight of a Jewish family from Poland to Belgium. The title "transit" points towards the fact that this trip does never end. The family stays in transit. As it is shown in the movie, they can never integrate in their new "homeland". They remain strangers amongst strangers. The Yiddish language is also a transit corridor, a mental space of no escape, since these who speak Yiddish are normally Eastern European Jews, so that we have a correlation between language and identity, which is not necessarily true, e.g., for someone who speaks English, German or French. Watch the scene where the young woman (Hélène Lapiower) goes to the bakery and asks the sales person to bake her Rugelach. First, she is not understood, then, after she is helped by a French native speaker, her wish is refused. One understands that the sales woman did understand her very well from the beginning, but simply reacted in a xenophobic manner (cf. a very similar scene in R.W. Fassbinder's "Angst essen Seele auf" ("Ali: Fear Eats the Soul") (1974), where the Bavarian shop-owner refuses to sell the Arabic foreigner a certain type of margarine). But unlike Ali in Fassbinder's movie who goes back to the apartment and calls his German wife to come with him to the store in order to drag the xenophobe over the coals, the Yiddish mother and her baby just leave the store and, since she cannot be helped by her husband who does not possess the French language either, she throws her pastry into a river – another transit corridor. It is this feeling of being a displaced person that is the focus of "Bruxelles Transit".

The Szlingerbaum family's story serves as paradigm. The extremely long takes build up the movie in the sense of the "cinema of feeling", and insofar involve the watcher by almost magical force. Practically the whole black-and-white movie is filmed in darkness, the few scenes where the mother leaves to house to make purchases are the exceptions. In the old house, where they live, it is dark, too, and there is also metaphorical darkness uttered by the hostility of the other tenants against the Jewish "intruder" family. There is very little spoken in the movie, not only because there is nothing to say, but because

there is simply no communication possible. So, besides the laconic dialogs, there is the voice-over from the director, even addressing his mother directly, who sings big parts of the movie her sad and hopeless Yiddish songs. People who are in transit live in a never land between the borders. Therefore, transit always implies transition, and not only the transition of borders between Eastern and Western Europe like the ones shown in the movie, but also transition between life and death. Director Szlingerbaum himself could not stand his being in this never land of transit very long, he passed away in the age of 36.

Note: There exists a copy of this movie on VHS (World Artists Home Video). Unfortunately, there are very little copies available and thus expensive. However, the Belgian film director Boris Lehman who played the male main role, offers a DVD version. For people who are interested: borislehman@yahoo.fr

Prof. Dr. Alfred Toth, of Hungarian origin, is professor for mathematics and semiotics and director of the Semiotic Technical Laboratory in Tucson, AZ. Besides his ca. 2'500 scientific publications there are ca. 200 contributions to the theory of film strictly from a semiotic standpoint (not intended to interfere with the opinions of professional film critics and/or professional film makers).