

Walerian Borowczyk / John Hejduk

Jeux des Anges / Bovisa

an inventory of confluence and representation

Giles Lane

Jeux des Anges / Borowczyk

Walerian Borowczyk – born 1923 Kwilcz, Poland. Made the animations *Once Upon A Time*, *Dom & Love Requited* with Jan Lenica and *Les Astronautes* with Chris Marker. Directed *Jeux des Anges* in 1964 in Paris for Cinéastes Associés whilst pursuing a successful career as a pioneering animation auteur. His features, *Goto*, *Island of Love*; *Blanche*; *Immoral Tales*; *The Beast* and *Behind Convent Walls* are all noted for their lush and surreal imagery.

Jeux des Anges begins with a journey, perhaps aboard a train (a cattle-truck?), moving through darkness towards an austere landscape made up of starkly geometric chambers. A struggle; a severed wing; decapitated heads rolling down pipes; limbless torsos wrestle; gaping pipes become gun-barrels; scenes all overlooked by an impassive, naked woman. Finally the scene recedes as the original journey is retraced to blackness.

Bovisa / Hejduk

John Hejduk – American citizen of Czech descent, architect and Dean of the architecture school of The Cooper Union, New York.

Bovisa - a work :

"...maps and information regarding the city of Milan haunt me. I am constantly drawn in.

A great city that buries its dead within its heart... and from the observation of these major death configurations one is silently moved to those other areas stamped in black ink... which contain the complex of hospitals.

The city impregnated by great structures of pain... cemeteries... hospitals... institutes... and their collaborators.

The railroads cutting paths through the landscape/city... as if they were moving comets with star/dust tails.

Presently the cathedral is a shell of memory which permits the evening fogs to float through its grey immense void... fogs that we attempt to push away with our arms and hearts... so that we may find the exit.

... and another revelation... this city of Milan is also a city of water... canals... rivers... lakes...

... and through it all... the inexplicable art of Leonardo's Last Supper... and here lies the crux... a gentleness pervades..."₂

The Mode of Drawing

Jeux des Anges originated as a series of water-colours. Like his contemporaries Lenica and Wajda, Borowczyk trained and worked as a *grafik*, a Polish term describing cross-media artistic practice. For *Jeux des Anges* he painted in a stripped-down, bare style, achieving a result much like a de Chirico, yet cluttered, soiled. Although shot in colour, the film is drained like a corpse, even the blood from the angel's wing is an unearthly blue. The animation itself is a careful manipulation of the drawn frame: movement is implied by the camera's pans, tracking and shuddering. This eloquent process of animating the original drawings via the meanderings of the lens is a technique since refined and developed for 3D animation by the Brothers Quay. It also has parallels with Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, in which a montage of still frames makes up the moving-image, and the film's narrative

is supplied by a commentary. *Jeux des Anges* itself relies heavily on its soundtrack to suggest action. This combination of camera movement and soundtrack creates a complex game of repetition and disjunction, fabricating an aural locus of remembrance.

Hejduk's **Bovisa** is also a set of drawings and paintings. Its relation to the traditional architecture of blueprints and building materials is obscured by its literary pretensions. Hejduk is an architect-maudit, a respected pedagogue at a leading American institute, who has helped spawn a theoretical approach to architectural space and form which eschews the twee revisionism of a Beaux-Arts tradition or the stifling pomposity of strict Corbusian modernism. It is an architectural discourse which seems to explore the narratives and non-sequiturs of personal experience. It floats, falters; is lyrical and disruptive, human and mechanistic, obsessive and baroque. It represents a new twist in the history of the creative exploration of the self, the twentieth century's preoccupation with the cult of the individual. It remains as indulgent and as rigorous as any other formal architectural project, but it is perhaps because of its form that it does offer the possibility of a less-impositional, more fluid discourse within this male dominated discipline, littered with the grandiloquent utopias of privileged individuals. Hejduk's sophisticated use of what could be termed a 'confessional' presentation, a very personal exegesis of fantasy and experience, avoids that superior air of the Professional, and becomes something other, a space of fluid discourse. However one must not forget that his position as a 'grand old man' of architecture allows him the indulgence of such a project, neither he nor his project could be called naive.

Voyeurism / Surveillance

What passes for voyeurism in *Jeux des Anges* is exposed as surveillance in **Bovisa**; the tunnel, the cells and the naked, restrained woman, witness and accessory to the murderous vision of the film. The curtain exposing and restricting our view of her alludes obviously to the peep show, whilst the wig which finally covers her shaven head remains a more mysterious symbol: a partial exposure curtailed by the intangibility of the narrative. Borowczyk knows his narrative must remain elusive, enigmatic if he is to entice his audience, and so *Jeux* is opaque, vague. The promise of more, a ceaseless loop of desire. Teased, denied the meaning of the images we project our own fantasies and desires: Borowczyk's economy of narrative leads to a subjective (albeit creative) expenditure by the viewer/voyeur.

Conversely in **Bovisa**: repeated references to carceral bodies, to deTocqueville's study of American prisons and Bentham's *Panopticon* (**Asylum**). The more sinister processes of discipline and punish.

Asylum – a panopticon, a structure designed to limit the inmates ability to communicate, to drive them insane with paranoia. No part is invisible to the central observation tower – no privacy – no asylum. Hejduk cheats us with this paradoxical building, but in so doing exposes the true nature of the power structure of **Bovisa**: control. Towers, official 'Houses', Institutes and Boards abound. There is hardly any space for the personal, a situation redolent of political regimes which depersonalise their architecture in favour of the monumental.

Hejduk's numbing drawings:

Security : House of Questions / Pulpit of Answers

Hospital Tower : Detention Center

Asylum

Board of Eradication

Museum of the History of Penology

Always a repressed violence.

expenditure : jouissance

A juxtaposition:

Stock Exchange

Agency For the Control of Pornographic Tendencies

Two structures: one a centre for the promotion of the expenditure of capital transfer, the other an agency policing the desire to spend oneself.

Thus a notion of capitalist consumerism as diametrically opposed to erotic expenditure; the displacement of desire for material consumption. In contemporary society, pornography, at the extreme of legitimate consumerism, is still an equation in the transfer of capital, not to be tampered with or to be interrupted by personal expenditure outside of this network of consumption, a highly regulated zone commanded by social mores and channelled into a state-sanctioned 'industry'. Temples of wealth and Temple Prostitution – the architecture of banks and churches. A fascinating relationship between certain aspects of Roman Catholicism, Puritanism and Capitalism becomes apparent: control of the body's (erotic) expenditure via prohibition, substitution and transference of desire to external objects to preserve the status quo.

Thus Catholicism, Puritanism and Capitalism are orders of preservation/conservation, opposed to 'fruitless' expenditures like masturbation, ecstasy, excess. They transfer wealth, resources and power between individuals and organisations, accrue more but do not actually create. Essentially, and ultimately, they are entropic systems. The terminology and iconography of withholding are rife (to "tighten one's belt" in a recession); they ignore the remarkable resilience and reliance on chance, intuition and instinct so often employed in extremes. A reckless expenditure when in danger goes against caution and the selfish concern for the self, and those who have passed beyond such experiences to re-emerge into the moral cocoon of capitalist society may find themselves barely able to re-adjust.

Sound and Vision

The sound design of *Jeux des Anges* is central to the animation, since so much is conveyed via the montage of sound and camera movement rather than by the drawn frame: a kind of pixillation technique hingeing on sound to suggest and enhance an unseen animation, such as motion of a train or guillotines falling and rising. A version of the film apparently attributes the monotonous chanting of the execution scene to songs based on those sung by concentration camp prisoners. A facet to the film which arouses curiosity about Borowczyk's own wartime experiences. He himself has said nothing of these missing years; all his biographies begin with his entry into design school in 1946. This absence, an evasion, is paralleled by the three titles announcing a disclaimer to the film, namely that any resemblances to the living or the dead are purely co-incidental. It appears in three languages, French, English and Russian.

The Record Keeper of Hallucinations

"... is given structures in which to live and work, the House of the Suicide and the House of the Mother of the Suicide. He works in the son's house and he lives in the mother's house. He reads the poems of Rilke to the point of obsession." ²

"Angels, it seems,
don't always know
if they're moving among
the living or the dead."

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*

Shoah

Horrorific allusions constantly refer me to the concentration camps. The imagery is blinding: *Jeux des Anges* – the tunnels and cell-like rooms, the ubiquitous symmetry of the pipes mouthing random execution to unknown victims. A cinematic exegesis of the dehumanised and mechanistic processes of death and killing in the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin's eponymous Age of Mechanical Reproduction as applied to the great leveller, Death.

Bovisa: the hospital towers connecting with the old Gasworks, now converted into a cemetery.

The spaces of confinement in **Bovisa – Hospital Tower: Detention Center; Hospital Tower: Prison/Normal.**

Joseph Mengele, Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka.

Hajduk uses the iconography of the camp: its guard posts and observation towers become public institutions like the **Board of Education**, overseeing the indoctrination of the young. The barbed wire becomes a shroud for **The Rose Woman Captured**.
The panoptic **Asylum** – no asylum from surveillance.

There is an overwhelming violence in the torture and execution of the angels, a 'veterinary' implication (vivisection) in a drawing such as **Autopsy**, and the invocation of the Nazis via a subtle use of motifs from Imperial Rome. The lined victory procession of a Triumph reflected in the drawing **Via of the Crucified Angels**.

I have a haunting recollection from childhood of a photograph showing victims of the Nazis hung by piano-wire. In her essay, *In Plato's Cave*, Susan Sontag memorably describes the effect on her of photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau as a "negative epiphany" :

"When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror. I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten, something went dead; something is still crying."

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Both *Jeux des Anges* and **Bovisa** avoid the sentimentality of a work such as Spielberg's *Schindler's List*: our sensibilities are not spared the naked brutality or trivialised by crass sentiment.

In the Penal Colony

Kafka's tale of a man's fanatical adherence to a punishment system of mediaeval barbarity has a deep resonance with the structures and mechanisms of **Bovisa**, and also with the bizarre conjunction of cells and guillotine in *Jeux des Anges*.

The Explorer observes an execution to be performed by an apparatus called the "Harrow", a relic from the previous (brutal) regime of the Colony. The condemned man knows nothing of his crime or sentence: the purpose of the machine is to write it upon his body with needles, a delicious torture lasting many hours. Its operator, an officer and sole adherent of the previous regime's tenets, tries to engage the Explorer's support for this mode of dispensing a summary justice. The latter refuses and as a final gesture the officer substitutes himself for the condemned man. The machine, poorly maintained, delivers not the 'exquisite torture' it was designed for, but a violent and wholly undignified death as it falls to pieces. The Explorer, sickened by this unprecedented spectacle, leaves the island and the condemned man behind him, eager to escape the horror of the Colony's incipient insanity.

Remarkably, Kafka's portrayal of the officer resembles aspects of the character of Adolf Eichmann, the SS officer responsible for the transportation of Jews to the extermination camps. In Hannah Arendt's commentary on his trial in Israel in 1960 (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*), she discusses Eichmann's defence where he claimed that he had always lived according to Kant's moral precepts and concept of duty. This outraged the court, but he was able to demonstrate that not only had he never personally harmed a Jew but also that he had advocated and worked with Zionists to set up a Jewish homeland as a protectorate of Nazi Germany. However repugnant he found it, to carry out the Final Solution he had had to overcome his personal convictions in favour of his binding oath and sense of 'duty' to the Führer. This denial of personal responsibility enabled him to send Jews to the death camps without remorse (although at that point he "lost all interest" in his work). Eichmann wished to confess his wrongdoing, but did not feel personally culpable for the "crimes legitimised by the state" which he had perpetrated. The distinction he made between laws and orders was crucial to his bastardised form of Kantian morality; Hitler was, as Führer, the source of all Law, which Eichmann could not disobey, whereas mere orders could be ignored or challenged. Significantly the procedure of the SS was to regard all orders as originating directly from Hitler which gave them the force of Law and thus bypassed the sense of individual responsibility. Eichmann's confusing of duty and law without personal judgement was fundamentally flawed as an

interpretation of Kant; this critical misconception and his essentially non-criminal nature was partly recognised in the Court's judgement. The Judges declared that had it not been for the exceptional circumstances of the Nazi era, Eichmann would never have stood before that criminal court, or probably any other, but that since confusion and criminal irresponsibility could not exonerate him, he must pay the price of his blind allegiance with his life.

The Machines of Bovisa / The Lovers of Bovisa

The symbiotic encounter of man and woman. Encased in their spiked, prophylactic machines they interlock like cog wheels unable to touch each other. This drawing makes me think of the myth of Sisyphus, an eternal loop hovering on the brink of failure.

The Lovers – a rare colour drawing, full of hope and life. The woman wears a peacock as a headdress, a symbol of rejuvenation associated with the Greek Goddess Hera. The man bears aloft an eagle, symbol of Zeus. In the foreground a black cat watches their embrace.

Bachelor Machines

The suggestion of auto-erotic fantasy, an unveiling of some inherent themes in *Jeux des Anges* and **Bovisa**: Duchamp's *Large Glass*, or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* – the lower half containing the bachelors (the *Chocolate Grinder*) – a mechanical fantasy.

An interesting quote :

“[The machine} does not tend to write the woman... the machine's chief distinction is its being male” Michel de Certeau,

Puncturing the body: Hejduk's **Organ and Blood Bank**, **The Angel Catcher** and his many crucified Angels are all images evocative of penetration, a random violence and violation of bodily integrity, perpetrated against innocents, an outrage against morality. Both Hejduk and Borowczyk invoke, via the metaphor of the severed angel's wing, a symbolic castration, the anxiety of (male) annihilation.

The harshness of this vision seems to reinforce an absence of the feminine and underscore the alienation of the bureaucratic despotism in **Bovisa** and the mechanised killing machines of *Jeux des Anges*. The cemeteries and hospitals of **Bovisa** take on an industrial character, factories processing death and life, laboratories for experimenting with the patients; the **Hospital Tower**,

“... a single patient will be selected for each tower. The entire floor within the tower is movable up/down... down/up.

... the volume of the room changes with the condition of the health of the patient. The lower terminal point (death) is at the bottom of the tower.”²

With a disturbing clarity Hejduk's towers discharge their patients and prisoners when the mechanism is fully erect, or deliver them to the oblivion afforded by the Gasworks cemetery at the point when the oppressive, empty volume of the tower's shaft presses life, pneuma, out of them.

Borowczyk too dabbles with the imagery of overtly phallic mechanisms: the frame of *Jeux des Anges* is filled with the recurring geometry of gaping tubes, at once organ pipes and gun-barrels firing randomly to puncture/ penetrate the angel's body, a passive, sacrificial victim.

All this specifically male imagery is exacerbated by the incidence, in both film and project, of the female figures depicted naked. Is this an unconscious denuding of power, and control? or a veiled deference to the innate strength of the feminine? The male gaze is almost emasculated by their uninhibited display of naked authority. These figures are imperturbable, blissfully unconcerned for the visitor to **Bovisa**'s labyrinth: their power is veiled yet manifest, immanent. They operate below the infrastructure of the patriarchal agencies of Law, below the symbolic authority of the Father. Their natural authority invests the symbolic with its legitimacy and prerogative. A fluid movement between dualities, terrestrial and chthonic.

The Mother of the Suicide

The Passport Woman

The Rose Woman Captured

Themes of sacrifice, masochism (domination) and sufferance

Narrative and Ellipsis

A fragmentation: the city seen not as a unified plan, but as partial, subject to organic growth and decay – a mutable dystopia.

Repetition becomes the cycle of life and death, excising the reign of the self, allowing Time to slip away unnoticed. The sense of repetition as a time loop in *Jeux des Anges* is a device used in Marker's *La Jetée*. Marker and Borowczyk had been collaborators – both their films were made in 1964, and Borowczyk's wife played a central character in Marker's film. *La Jetée* is set in a post nuclear-holocaust concentration camp, time travel experiments carried out by the 'victors' resulting in the time loop trapping the hero.

These loops, refusing the linear narrative of our concept of time, afford a deeper analysis of the human condition, exposing an economy of ceaseless desire. They recall an understanding of time that prevailed before the dominant theory of 'cause and effect', the linear fallacy of human 'progress'.

Genesis 32:22-32

And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two women-servants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok. And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him. And he said 'Let me go, for the day breaketh'. And he said, 'I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.' And he said unto him, 'What is thy name?' And he said, 'Jacob'. And he said, 'Thy name shall be called no more, Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.' And Jacob asked him, and said, 'Tell me, I pray thee, thy name?' And he said, 'Wherefore is it thou dost ask after my name?' And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh. Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew which shrank.

Games of the Angels

Jacob's struggle with the angel: a symbolic metaphor? A Sadean hallucination? Or an early, Nietzschean tussle with a God doomed to oblivion?

The interplay of abstraction and alienation become the fragments of narrative which elude any definite outcome. The illusion is translated into a vague disillusionment. This film and this project reduce me to shying away from definites, to employing a process of constant questioning which veers off into the void of infinity. I elucidate no answers only hints, partial theories, memories, fantasies, delusions. This taxonomy of allusions is my own personal expenditure.

The Garden of Earthly Delights

This most famous of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch hangs in the Prado, Madrid. Its three panels make up *The Third Day of Creation, The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *Hell*; of the three panels it is the latter which has the greatest resonance regarding *Jeux des Anges* and **Bovisa**, although one could regard Hedjuk and Borowczyk's sexualised depictions of human (and non-human) relations as a tawdry version of the title panel.

Other painters and paintings: the paranoia and alienation of de Chirico's empty landscapes; the distortion and horror of Francis Bacon's portrait studies; the impassive stare of Manet's *Olympia* and of the firing squad in *The Execution of Maximilian*. So much of the Romantic, the cultural debris of the nineteenth century littering the imaginations of both Borowczyk and Hejduk.

Hejduk's Angels : a Catalogue of Pain

A narrative of sorts:

The Angel Catcher – a static instrument with no moving parts other than its operator. Why would an angel allow itself to be snared, pierced in such a grotesque way? Is Hejduk suggesting that the angels are falling voluntarily onto the spikes, delivering themselves up in self-sacrifice like the Jews to the gas chambers?

The Crucified Angel – winched inside a giant crossbow, four men pull the mechanism back to fire the unfortunate projectile – to oblivion? In the foreground another figure nails together a new cross.

The Angel Watcher – invisibly occupies a house built on stilts, two windows like unseeing eyes looking out onto another crucified angel: a blind gaze. The house has wings attached to the roof, as though about to take off.

Autopsy – a dead angel lies on a morgue-trolley. Behind stand three figures, one dressed in military uniform, one in civilian clothes and one presumably a physician. The sparseness of the drawing, its lack of background, give it an unreal quality, not what one would expect of a hospital or mortuary. This lack of facilities gives it a 'veterinary' feel, as though the angel's examination does not require the care that a human's would.

The Angel Collector – holds up his prize: a set of wings severed from the corpse of an angel, lying grimly beside. Another hangs behind him, nailed up by the wing tips, beneath it the morgue-trolley it probably arrived on. Trophies of pain, an indictment of the folly of the abattoir, the vivisector's laboratory: a drawing acknowledging an astonishing responsibility for all its depiction of savage cruelty.

The Angel Undertaker – drives a horse-cart piled with corpses. He wears a pointed hat à la Klu Klux Klan, or as in the priests of Spanish religious festivals. Two angel's wings are suspended on a pole from the back of the cart. His horse wears a plumage of six branching stalks.

The Canal/Kanal

"A network of canals connects the cemeteries of Milan. It is anticipated that there will be difficulties in reference to the ordinances of the city. Flat-bottomed boats that suggest a small structure will ply the waters of the canal from place to place. The canal boat will take one passenger in addition to the navigator."²

The soul's cycle: crossing the waters of death, rebirth and Lethe, and the waters of forgetting. An evocation of the boat of Charon plying the Styx, or of Egyptian Pharaohs crossing to the 'Western Lands'. The winged heads on poles representing talismans to ward off evil? A sentry box guards the corpse of the angel.

I am reminded of the hallucinations that the character (played by Donald Sutherland) in Nic Roeg's *Don't Look Now* is plagued by: the monstrous dwarf and the funeral barge sailing the canals of Venice.

Architect and Archetype

The predilection for archetypes creates an architecture of order; a collective memory. The rows of angels, their hierarchies according to traditions (Talmudic, Kabbalistic, Koranic etc), are both heavenly and satanic. The Talmudic tradition ascribes to angels a momentary existence purely to sing a hymn to God before dissolving. The Kabbalistic tradition has an angel assigned to every human, to represent their 'secret self'. These angels (Koranic

genii) constantly intermingle on the plane of human consciousness, not always aware if they are among the living or the dead. For them time does not exist. It is said that only children, the old and the simple are possessed of the ability to see them.

Angelus Novus

My wing is ready for flight,
I am all for turning back.
For, if I stayed in timeless time,
I would have little luck.
(Gershom Scholem)

“A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

Walter Benjamin, *Theses On the Philosophy of History*

The sacred and the profane: Hejduk and Borowczyk’s fantasies carry us through a constant flux between these two states toward a space beyond historical materialism, beyond the rigid duality of binarism. The motif of repetition shatters the false idol called Progress, a delusion conjured by those authors of our rational, materialist heritage in order to consolidate the industrial feudalism to which we are all still held in thrall.

Crucifixions

“the problem of crucifixions ... the large number painted ... the artist’s responsibility”²

Night draws in: the vision recedes into darkness. The witnessing of events fades. Only a bitter memory remains, the trace, a residue of the contemporary horror of the human condition; a catalogue of atrocity, too many to mention. A single tear escapes my eye – it contains all the souls of all the world’s angels.

Sources

1. W. Borowczyk, *Jeux des Anges* 16mm Colour Cinéastes Associés 1964
2. J. Hejduk, *Bovisa, a work* Collection: Canadian Centre of Architecture, published by Harvard University Graduate School of Design 1987

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