

Semblance, Reproduction, and Simulation: On Garrett Tiedemann's *Klikt*

Douglas E. Julien & John Barner

Klikt is an ambitious project presenting a dream-like tale, described in its production notes as a man (portrayed by Camden Toy) reliving days in an effort to recall something important¹. *Klikt*'s ending, when the man finally leaves the apartment where he has been for the entirety of the film, produces in the audience a marked emptiness inherent in both the film and emblematic of everyday life. It is an uncomfortable and discomfiting project to watch. At first, it seems a slight to characterize it as simply a man trying to relive days, although the film is presented as six successive days, each beginning in much the same way. The film concerns itself more with reproducing these "days" and, as such, reproducing the "life," as it were, of its protagonist. As such, *Klikt* becomes a dramatic statement less about reliving and more about *simulating* (with all the allusions to Baudrillard intended), in a "real" rather than cinematic way, the details of the protagonist's quotidian existence—albeit one fraught with a nightmarish or phantasmal counterpoint. As Patricia Mellencamp² noted when contrasting Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum with more traditional scopic developments in live theatre, "matching action—or cutting on movement which enables a seamless match between cuts [...] is a dangerous and careless weapon" (141). Although presented as an attempt at avant-garde cinema, *Klikt* seems to have significant commonalities with a theatrical production including a limited set, repetition of action and movement, and the possibility, at least, for simultaneous action. One is left to wonder whether *Klikt* as a stage production would better serve its efforts at simulation. Instead, we are stalled in our viewing efforts by the camera, which halts where we, as an audience, would wish to go further. Alas, we are imprisoned by the singular gaze offered by the camera, and become slaves to its stops and starts, but those are not yet the limits of the simulacrum that *Klikt* offers its audience.

One of the first glaring instances of this simulated life is the anachronistic juxtaposition of the manual typewriter and contemporary photocopier the man seems to begin each day with in his attempts to return to something authentic in his life. Each attempt is stymied from the outset as he repeats the action of an automaton typing (unfazed as the keys collide and stick) producing a blurred torrent of words (i.e., seen, in one fleeting glimpse, as a series of times and subsequent places to go, "to pharmacy" or "to class"—always already forestalled as the protagonist never leaves his apartment). As viewers, we are consistently asked to watch his hands as his thoughts are transformed through the machine of the typewriter. We are asked to strain our eyes and see his writing (and are often left to wonder if the writing is, itself, a repetition of his list of things to do or is another or a different writing altogether with each attempt). With the above exception, the writing never comes into full focus, and yet we attempt to fill in the blanks. We attempt to fill in experience in the same action of the man at the typewriter. The transfer leaves us with dual simulacra: viewing a man producing a likeness of previous days and previous writings and our own product of what is on the page. Is it a list? Instructions? Dialogue? We are presented with the repeated "form" and attempt, as best we can, to fill

¹ See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1432057/plotsummary>

² In Mellencamp, P. Seeing Is Believing: Baudrillard and Blau. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (May, 1985), pp. 141-154

its content³. The man then takes his “newly” written text to the center of the room and photocopier on a chair. Each time he tries to precisely place the paper in the copier, each time in a slightly different manner. What does not change is his lack of satisfaction with the resulting copy. He moves further and further from the original and the dissatisfaction wears on his face and the “original” paper is removed from the copier each day and ultimately, repeatedly, discarded. However, it is more than paper, of course. It is the attempt at reliving—an attempt at living life itself. The protagonist’s simulation does not produce the real experience he hopes to find in the process, and as viewers, we feel the same discomfort in acknowledging the filmic world of *Klikt*, which is, while highly stylized, just as anachronistic and devoid of tangible (i.e., narrative) depth as the events it displays. While shot digitally, it is presented in contrast black-and-white; while the film is shot with a looming handheld camera, long sequences are insistently reliant on jump-cuts, reverse-shots, and heavy editing. The juxtaposition of forms is often as disorienting (and discomforting) for the viewer as the set itself—a jumble of things out of time and out of place.

The set of *Klikt* is mostly stripped bare. In one room, a typewriter, a copier, and two chairs are set. In the next, there are some books, one of which he returns to scan as much as he reads, a couch, end tables, lamps, and a chessboard, providing the film with its most fully realized locus of action, save for the front door and foyer to the apartment. There is a window fan buzzing that sits atop what we presume to be a phone book. It produces a strain in the viewer to “see” the book he is reading, as if that detail would, or could, provide any real insight⁴. There is an attempt in the viewer to locate the time and space of the film by looking for details from the phone book. They are unavailable. The viewer hopes for details in the objects of life. The film points to the idea that even if these rooms we encounter were filled with visual artifacts of living, we would still be no where closer to understanding the man’s experience or his process. Each item would be a commodity, a purchase, and one of many others just like it in the world. Taking a hundred objects or just the six into account, neither tells us more or less outside the audience’s own mental attempt to find likeness or similarity. As Baudrillard remarked⁵, this “transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point,” (170) underscoring (if not, in the case of *Klikt*, undermining outright) the hope of finding some element of semiotic resemblance, some overarching thematic relationship between objects, their human (or phantasmal) interlocutors, and the world itself.

³ It is possible that *Klikt* is attempting to reclaim the empty, automatic efforts of reproduction deliberately, as Sylvère Lotringer states in his instruction to Baudrillard’s *Forget Foucault* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007) as “a form, a specific ritual and protocol, not a content. Only this form, perhaps, alone, could belong to a higher order than the code” (16). That the audience is implicated in this futile effort compounds the discursive frustrations at the heart of *Klikt*, frustrations which are never resolved, or even acknowledged.

⁴ The book is a 1994 paperback reprint of André Breton’s *Nadja* (Richard Howard, Trans. New York: Grove Press), which, while provoking interesting parallels in terms of its focus on surrealism, re-telling, and everyday life, bears seemingly no weight or relation to the events of the film. It is the novel’s first line: “Who am I? If this once I were to rely on a proverb, then perhaps everything would amount to knowing whom I ‘haunt’” (11) that provides *Klikt* with potentially its most interesting literary counterpoint.

⁵ In “Simulacra and Simulations” from *Selected Writings*, Mark Poster, Ed. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, Trans. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

The interlocutors of the film—real or imagined, object or subject—are of import only insofar as they seem imbued with the same sense of emptiness as their surroundings. First, an image of a woman holding a balloon (played by Karen Smith, also a producer of the film) is shown in the hallway as a cause of the protagonist's paranoia and endless retreat. He glimpses her several times before shutting the door, seemingly out of fear, and returns to his routine. In other shots, edited into the chronological arc, the woman is shown in the apartment, and, in one instance, talking and laughing with the protagonist. All the while, the audience is left wondering if her presence in the film is a delusion, a memory, or real. Her appearance and actions are heightened to an almost comedic effect (i.e., she grimaces, cackles, and hobbles through her brief scenes)⁶ and actually knowing her intent and relationship is ultimately disconnected and inconsequential to the larger arc of the film and any attempt to understand or interpret the protagonist's reactions to her falls short. Another secondary character is a clown (also portrayed by Toy) who appears in the apartment, playing the opposite side in the protagonist's heretofore seemingly mysterious one-sided game of chess. This character, unlike that of the balloon woman, is both more expansive and more supported in the film, as the chess match (going on with each character independent of the other) gives way to a face-to-face confrontation with the protagonist, with each brandishing a weapon (the protagonist, a knife, and the clown, a straight razor)⁷. Perhaps in keeping with the film's larger existential themes, the protagonist first takes on a defensive posture, giving way to a series of stunted, pratfall-like offensive moves. No combat or violence of any kind is shown on the screen. Finally, the main character relents, and lets his knife drop to the floor, impaling itself, which we are shown, again in a still shot, prior to the action that causes it, compounding the protagonist's sense of resignation. Serious credit must be given to Camden Toy's performance of these scenes, which, using facial expressions alone, convey a depth of angst and futility unparalleled elsewhere in the film.

Perhaps most interesting is the appearance, about halfway through the film, of a cinematic device most commonly associated with the suspense films of Alfred Hitchcock, the "MacGuffin"⁸—in this case, a simple cardboard box that arrives at the door of the apartment, concomitant with one of the knocks on the door. In each of the successive days that follow the first appearance of the box, the audience is treated to markedly similar, yet subtle variations on the protagonist's response. First, he gently, yet fearfully brings the box into the apartment, only to kick it violently away. Second, he gently removes his knife and slices open the box, only to gaze in horror. Finally, he opens the

⁶ Indeed, the introduction of the character of the woman is almost like that of a still photo until she begins to walk toward the camera. As Baudrillard noted in a conversation with François L'Yvonnet (collected in *Fragments*, Chris Turner, Trans. London: Routledge, 2004.) and which can be applied to the "human" (or fantastical) interlocutors in *Klikt*, their initial presence as still forms comes at the expense of their "accumulative, informative order" (89) thus denoting their meaning (or, rather, their radical *lack* of meaning) as simply reflective, or mirrored, in the reactions of the protagonist.

⁷ cf. Baudrillard's discussion of "the double" and his discussion of holograms in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Sheila Faria Glaser, Trans. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 72-74.

⁸ See Hitchcock's 1966 interview with François Truffaut, collected in Sidney Gottlieb, Ed. *Framing Hitchcock: Selected essays from the Hitchcock Annual*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 2002. p. 48. For more recent scholarship related to connotations of the MacGuffin, see Slavoj Žižek's edited volume, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan...But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (London: Verso. 1993).

box resolutely and stares blankly as the film reveals that which is, by now, the singularly repeating thematic element of *Klikt*—the startling close-up reveal of the completely empty box. The presence of the box, or MacGuffin in the film, and the protagonist's varying reactions to it, represent the highest creative, or stylistic, ebb to be found in *Klikt*, and the film truly reaches its apex in unpacking, as it were, its existential revelations. However, since the film is without dialogue, we are again stifled in determining how deep the semiotic relations of the box go—it is some kind of supernatural conduit, connecting the quotidian existence of the protagonist with his phantasmal interlocutors? Is it a stark reminder of the absurdity of life that spurs him toward a moment of existential crisis, madness or delusion? Alas, no characters speak, so no further information is given.

What “dialogue” there is in the film is restricted to that of the internal monologue (we presume although no voice actor is credited in the film) of the protagonist. The film opens with the narrator intoning “I am no longer the man I once thought I was” and proceeds, throughout the succession of days, to recount incidents from his life, as if being interviewed. There is the story of a grandfather who used to play violin to the protagonist as a kind of lullaby and a hidden door in the library during the protagonist's youth, which, while never ventured through, seemed to beckon him. The narrator then speaks frankly about the death of his father, which remained both an “unsolved case” and a painful memory for him and his family. Finally, the narrator states that “everything burns—dust settles,” describing some kind of celebration (with “fireworks”) that carries with its convivial depiction ominous overtones of finiteness, closure, and possibly death. The sound quality of these “interview” sequences is garbled, as if conducted over the phone or recorded on some kind of machine, reintroducing the trope of mechanical reproduction as a vain (and often futile) effort at gaining insight or clarity. The characters themselves never speak and these recorded offerings provide no explication, exposition, or depth to the action seen on screen.

Each action of the film is never quite the same, never quite different. Shots that were once clear become distorted just long enough for the audience to wonder if it was distorted. The same scenes are re-shot and re-cut leaving one to wonder if it truly was the same. Did the knife fall in a different location? Did the chess piece get moved differently? Did the knock at the door happen at the same time? Is that the same box? And we get caught up, ironically, searching for all the differences in the film in order to demand that it speak a self-similar narrative. The differences and the creation of them belie the fact that it is the simulacra and simulation that binds us to the man's experience. The viewer experiences the “same” thing. We are on an uncomfortable journey where we witness, from the outside, a series of images that are themselves both reproduced (a statement on film itself), re-cut (an extension of a previous short), and copy of itself (a function of the narrative itself). The effect is to make the viewer realize the emptiness of the film and life itself under endlessly repeating conditions that show no narrative closure, no emotional satisfaction, and ultimately nowhere else to go. Just as its protagonist, we must only remember one simple thing—to shut the door when we leave.