

THE TRANSLATOR'S ECHO: LISTENING TO BIRGIT HEIN'S *BABY, I WILL MAKE YOU SWEAT*

In this essay I will listen to a film by Birgit Hein that is exemplary of the thought of Martin Heidegger. The choice of Heidegger is not arbitrary. Both filmmaker and philosopher carry out an experience with language. Moreover, the film calls for a philosophy of conscience and reality that speaks from a phenomenological perspective. *Baby, I Will Make You Sweat* (1995, 63 min.) will therefore be approached as a work that bears a productive comparison with what Béla Balázs imagined under a term translated into German as "Filmlyrik," a word reminding us of achievements in German lyric poetry.¹

For over twenty years, until 1988, Hein's name was joined to that of her then-husband, Wilhelm. Together the two of them developed an international reputation for activities in film and performance, including their founding of XSCREEN in 1968 and organizing the experimental film division of Documenta 6 in 1977. But by 1990, Hein had separated from Wilhelm and accepted an appointment teaching film at HBK Braunschweig, where her students included Matthias Müller, Bjørn Melhus, and Michael Brynntrup. For the next twenty years she built a reputation separately from Braunschweig, enjoying retrospectives at Montréal and Rotterdam and screenings at the likes of the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the San Francisco Cinematheque.

Baby is among the titles to Hein's credit in 16mm film. In the film, she makes several trips to Jamaica, where she pursues sexual relationships with various men. In her description of her first sexual encounter, Hein mentions a financial arrangement and describes a single night. Otherwise there are two different men with whom she spends time during the course of the film. Although Joe and Ron appear to work as prostitutes, at no point during the rest of the film does she make any reference to a contractual agreement. My concern being language in film, I will take up directly Hein's translations for the DVD of the film.

Instead of adding subtitles in English and French for *Baby*, Hein recorded her own voice speaking German, English, and French for the voiceover. The menu of the DVD lists the three different listening options. Hein says she herself translated her original German voiceover into English and French and created separate tracks for each.² The soundtrack of the film is otherwise identical for all three versions, and no version is identified on the DVD as the "correct" or "original" language. Thus, the viewer is invited to view the film in the language of his or her choice, which will presumably be the viewer's first language. In this way she preserves the integrity of the image while inadvertently enriching the work's interest as language. In the English soundtrack, for example,



Hein is more easily perceived as a tourist by someone for whom English is a first language. And, someone who understands both German and English will recognize that meaning is lost in the translation from German to English. When she is about to leave for Germany, her lover, Joe, tears up her notes and threatens to throw her camera into the woods. After he recovers he calls out, "We can give it one more try, Baby! . . . Baby, I will make you sweat." When Hein relates Joe's words in German, she speaks the first of these sentences in German and the second in English. Thus Joe seems to be quoting something in English, perhaps a pop song he has heard in Jamaica. In the English version of the audio, however, we do not hear this switch, the whole track being spoken by Hein in her English translation. Joe's use of English for this particular sentence suggests in the German soundtrack that he is addressing Hein as an anonymous English-speaking tourist, someone who will hear his reference to a line in English. The translation into English, however, obscures the context in which this switch occurs.

The German also enjoys a pace, assurance, and expressiveness that gives access to an experience far more intimate than the spoken English can. Listen to her when, for example, she is describing the new body that living with Joe has given her: "eine goldene!" ("a golden one!") But there is a larger question at issue here. What is going on when subtitles are refused in favor of speech? It is not just that the image would suffer were it to be overwritten with English subtitles. There would indeed be time lost in reading that could have been spent in looking, but there is something else at issue. Isn't Hein's decision a reflection of a priority given to speech over the written word, to language as sound rather than image?

I also want to insist on a particular orientation toward language in film. For Walter Benjamin, certain linguistic works are eminently translatable into foreign tongues. The translator's

task resembles calling into a wood and “aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one.”³ Of course, entries into a journal are not to be confused with the literary works Benjamin has in mind. And yet there is an analogous form of translatability into film. In this case, the original consists primarily of conversations, captured in handwritten and videotaped recordings. To Benjamin, literary translation reflects a great longing for linguistic complementation. The original and its translation are fragments of a “pure language” embracing the languages of each. In a case like *Baby*, images and sounds must be understood as mediums for translation. If translation extends the life of its source, the Hi-8 footage shot in Jamaica, its 16mm transfer, and the DVD now available might be said to be translations. Here too there is a longing for complementation, but of “language” still more broadly construed. Essential to the translator’s task, for Benjamin, is that the translation augment its original and extend its life. And in any good translation, the language of the translator is also altered.

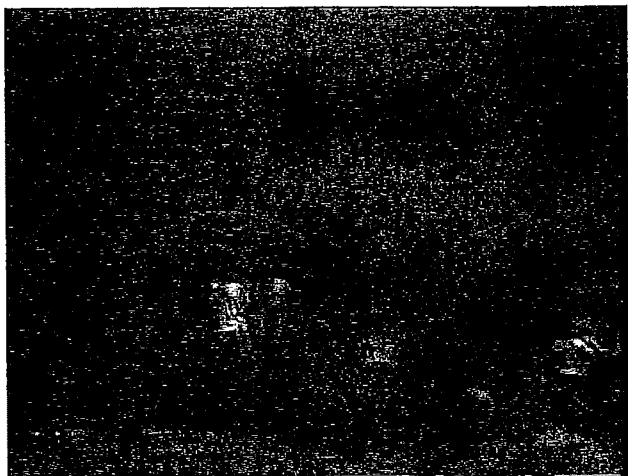
With this in mind, let’s return to specific examples of Hein’s words in the German audio. The final voiceover line in the film is “Lieber kurz brennen als langsam verlöschen” (“Better to burn briefly than to go out slowly”). Burning suggests living passionately. In *Baby*, however, it also signals guilt and perhaps fear. To burn is a form of punishment and brings to mind a spectacular suicide. But then this concluding line of spoken audio tells us that punishment or suicide is better than “going out slowly.” I suggest that “going out slowly” is what Heidegger has in mind in *Being and Time* (1927) when he calls our “fallen” state “beruhigend” (“tranquilizing”), “verführerisch” (“tempting”), and “entfremdend” (“alienating”). Although he was trained in theology, Heidegger’s use of the German “das Verfallen,” the translation of which we will accept as “falling,” should not invite familiar associations with a fall in Christian thought. Nor should the description of this condition as “tranquilizing” or “alienating” be taken to constitute Heidegger’s contribution to sociology. These terms characterize an experience of losing oneself in the “they,” in what Heidegger identifies as Dasein’s public existence.⁴ By “Dasein” he means what you or I refer to when one of us uses the personal pronoun “I,” but only on the condition that we do not thereby make any assumptions about the nature of that existence, such as that it is a subject, substance, ego, human body, or rational being. Heidegger takes pains to explain this fallen condition of Dasein in terms of what he calls the “unheimlich.”

Several years before completing *Baby*, Hein completed another 16mm film for which she has not provided alternative audio tracks. In *Die Unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women, 1992, 63 min.), she uses archival footage to focus on those dimensions of the feminine that have given women the appearance of being terrifying strangers on earth. Early in the film, Hein asks herself what distinguishes her from the female perpetrators of her mother’s generation who were tried at Nuremberg. In the soundtrack she says she suffers from a fear “daß ich meiner Selbst nicht sicher sein kann” (“that I cannot be certain who I am”).

It is important that we leave aside any medical or psychiatric diagnosis. What Hein describes as “unheimlich” (a word she uses several times in *Baby*—to describe her sexual appetite, her rage, and the sound of howling dogs) is for Heidegger the condition of being-in-the-world, existence itself for Dasein. In *Being and Time* he uses the term “unheimlich” to name the condition of existence from which Dasein flees into the company of others. Falling consists in this flight in the face of existence itself, in escaping from oneself into everyday activities that Heidegger describes as an anonymously “at-home” public existence.⁵ For Heidegger, Dasein’s moods or attunements and states-of-mind disclose the world. These states disclose what “matters,” and in *Baby* they include anxiety and a longing for love. In both *Baby* and *Frauen*, the anxiety of existence is disclosed in the uncanny. But anxiety serves a purpose, as we like to say in English: “On the other hand, as Dasein falls, anxiety brings it back from its absorption in the ‘world.’”⁶ Anxiety is thus to be embraced as a condition for the possibility of becoming authentic.

Love Stinks (1982, 82 min.), a 16mm film Hein made in collaboration with Wilhelm, might well have begun with a title card: “Mein Körper und ich passen nicht mehr zusammen” (“My body and I are no longer suited for one another”). This earlier film is without any voiceover and consists primarily of body art scenes staged either by Birgit alone or by both Birgit and Wilhelm. The above line occurs, however, not as such a title card but as speech during the opening minutes of *Baby*. Aging is like a sickness, Hein says there. In this conception of sickness we can again recognize the uncanny. And in the images from both *Baby* and *Frauen*, bodies appear in preparation for consumption, bandaged after being wounded, as sexually threatening, embalmed, organic, or in a state of decay. Bodies are a kind of depository for uncanny experience, for feeling out-of-place, in these films.

For Heidegger, fallenness consists in being absorbed in everyday distractions that constitute a flight from the uncanniness of “being-toward-death.” This being-toward-death is not merely the recognition that everyone eventually dies, but is a feature of “being-in-the-world” itself. Falling transforms the anxiety this produces into a fear of an oncoming event, tranquilizing Dasein and recommending the consolations of whatever interpretations of death come along. If sex is often such an evasion of the anxiety of existence, it is nevertheless difficult to settle on this interpretation of the sex in *Baby*. Indeed, Hein’s sexual encounters seem to bear more on self-understanding and self-determination than on fallenness. When she first arrives in Jamaica, the prospect of having sex with a man young enough to be her son gives her a new sense of the possible. Such an appreciation of the possible is just what it means, according to Heidegger, for Dasein to have an understanding of itself. In Dasein, understanding consists in a relationship with “possibilities,” where a possibility is not something to grasp conceptually. For Heidegger, that would reduce the possible to the contents of a mind. Self-understanding is instead a kind of designing or “throwing” of possibilities conceived as moods. Dasein is a vacuum that sees its understanding sucked away by public opinion from the



projecting of possibilities thrown before it. What is uniquely your own as a possibility for being (Seinkönnen) “belongs essentially to Dasein’s thrownness [Geworfenheit], which reveals itself in a state-of-mind (mood) in one way or another.”⁷

This thrownness of possibilities is to be conceived in relation to being-toward-death. Death is such a possibility for Dasein. We can see more exactly how this is so by comparing *Baby* with another of Hein’s films, *La Moderna Poesia* (2000, 67 min.). Here Hein travels to Cuba to explore the significance of Che Guevara to visitors of the island like herself and to the island’s residents. Both *La Moderna Poesia* and *Baby* put death on display. However, only *Baby* lets the possibility of death be as a possibility. If there is an “understanding” that stamps out the possible and one that lets it be, to conceive your death through the former is to take flight in a hypothesis or imaginary situation. Actually being-toward the possibility of dying requires not ducking or dodging it by means of concepts or images, not covering it over or giving into a new interpretation such as one offered by Christianity. Like anxiety, death individualizes. It is uniquely your own. When exactly it will occur remains indefinite, but it can happen at any moment. *Baby* throws such possibilities as possibilities before Dasein. In this way it lets the possible be possible, instead of trying to delimit what possible might mean in this case. “Egal wohin!” (“It doesn’t matter where to!”) Hein says with disgust at the start of the film before her first departure from Germany. The film doesn’t “document” trips to Jamaica or sexual encounters there. Nothing in it was simply out there waiting for Hein’s camera, and nothing can really be said to be “represented” in this film. The anxiety in the face of what might happen takes priority over any pretence of accuracy about “the world.” “Warten macht unglücklich” (“Waiting makes one unhappy”), Hein tells herself. *Baby* is like one’s last day to live.

Language makes up an important dimension of this film, and Hein’s use of language could easily be construed in terms of its

structural characteristics. But what we mean when we speak of language in film ought not be confused with the transposition of the technique of linguistic composition onto the screen or soundtrack. Language “needs human speaking.”⁸ Moreover, while speaking is vocalization, it “is of itself a listening.”⁹ “We do not merely speak *the* language—we speak *by way of* it [wir sprechen *aus* ihr]. We can do so solely because we always have already listened to the language.”¹⁰ That language itself speaks, as Heidegger puts it, reminds us of Benjamin’s description of translation as listening for an echo. Language in film must be understood as repeating back what is allowed to be said. In an essay included in the collection *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (1959) called “Das Wesen der Sprache” (1957–58) Heidegger relies on the thought of the German poet Stefan George to approach the relationship between word and thing. Using George’s poem “Das Wort,” he invites us to imagine with the poet a situation in which the poet is at a loss for words, as we say in English. When no word can be found, the precious experience for which one is sought vanishes from the poet’s hands. This search for the right word illustrates what it means to undergo an experience with language, Heidegger says.

Consider what is left unspoken in Hein’s film. Listening closely to the German of *Baby*, one might well suspect that Birgit fell in love with Joe. Her subsequent relationship with Ron feels different, arrives unexpectedly, and finds us longing for what Joe brought with him. It might be that Hein’s English expresses greater vulnerability with respect to social mores, but it is only in German that we hear this intimation of love. “Only he who already understands can listen.”¹¹ What then does it mean to say something? “Doch was heißt sagen?”¹² When Heidegger asks this question (which we might provisionally translate “What does saying mean?”) he is making reference to another question, “Was heißt Denken?” In his essay bearing this second question as its title, he proposes to understand the question to be “What calls for thinking?” rather than “What do we call thought?” “Was heißt sagen?” analogously asks what calls to be said. Moreover, saying and speaking are not the same. A great deal can be said without uttering a word. “Gerede” is used in *Being and Time* to name speech that communicates “by following the route of gossiping and passing the word along.”¹³ This is speech with nothing to say, something we could also say of a good deal of writing. “Gespräch,” by contrast, is what Hein calls in *Baby* “eine richtige Unterhaltung.” Here the subject of conversation is “appropriated in a primordial manner.”¹⁴ Such speech has its source in actual encounters. What calls for saying need not be actually uttered, but if spoken it can only be as Gespräch. In *Baby*, sex with Ron is said to be like a deep conversation (Gespräch).

Heidegger himself never seems to have discussed love, and so it is Jean-Luc Nancy who adds love to the poetry with which Heidegger associates thought. For Nancy, thinking is love, but it’s a thinking that “should learn to yield to this abandon [of love’s diverse forms]: to receive the prodigality, the collisions, and the contradictions of love, without submitting them to an order that they essentially defy.”¹⁵ This yielding to which Hein gives expression would, to follow Nancy, also be accompanied

Above
Still from *La Moderna Poesia* (2000) by Birgit Hein

by reticence. But to keep silent, one must also speak. And if love calls for reticence, as Nancy says, reticence also belongs to the conscience, according to Heidegger. For Heidegger, the conscience is not to be conceived in terms of acquiring debts, breaking rules, or causing deprivation in others. The bad conscience of Dasein is not a deprivation or lack of something, but rather a primordial condition.¹⁶ This is what makes it possible to recognize one's bad conscience in those familiar ways when we fail to live up to some standard or suffer from regrets about the past. The "voice of conscience" is made particularly audible in those moments when we struggle over our past conduct, but it is not a response to that conduct. Nor is the appeal of conscience only noticed in regret. Conscience calls Dasein forth (*in die Situation vorruft*).¹⁷ Our fallen state makes this difficult to recognize, Heidegger argues. But *Baby* can make it evident. The film seems to invite us to pass judgment. It provokes us to assign guilt, but also to accept it. Hein does not say how much she pays for sex, nor does she ever attempt to dispel the moral reservations we are likely to entertain. The call we hear in this film is not so much to measure up to an ethical standard imposed from elsewhere as to undergo an experience in the face of our anxiety before death and the conscience.

The imagery in Hein's film can also be said to be Heideggerian. Flames and hands recur frequently in *Baby*. Perhaps the flames suggest sexual desire. If so, they also characterize Heidegger's concept of spirit. "Das machen sie wenn ihnen ein Geist begegnet" ("That's what they do when they encounter a spirit"), Joe explains late one night as the two listen to howling dogs. Hein's greatest fulfillment is with Joe, the one shown in an extended slow-motion shot wearing a Star of David pendant. During the 1980s, Jacques Derrida devoted a good deal of thought to Heidegger's use of the words for spirit (*Geist*) and gender, sex,

race, or generation (*Geschlecht*).¹⁸ This essentially untranslatable word, "Geschlecht," in Heidegger's work leads Derrida to what Heidegger says of the hand. For Heidegger, thinking is a form of handwork. Drafts of notes for an essay are written out by hand, one can speak with the hands, give and greet with the hand—and for Heidegger, the hand is exclusively and essentially human. But the hand is also perceived to be threatened by technology. And by virtue of this threat to the hand, speaking and thinking are threatened as well. What Hein calls in *Baby* "die technischen Verletzung" ("the technological injury") when she is speaking of Joe's anger about the racism in Germany and Canada, we can hear Heidegger speaking of in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*. There he makes reference to an attack on language concealed in "the elaboration of logic into logistics."¹⁹ Abstract concepts, rules, methods, and techniques have nothing to do with thinking, he argues. Nor do they have anything to do with the significance of language in film.

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NOTES 1. Quoted in Werner Zuhuth, "Die Sprache in der Filmkunst," *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* 13 (1965), 1079. 2. Conversation with Birgit Hein in Berlin, June 7, 2012. 3. Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," in *Schriften*, Band I (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955), 48 (translated "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations* by Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken Books, 1969], 76). 4. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 177–8 (translated *Being and Time* by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], 221–22). Henceforth cited as SZ and BT, followed by page numbers of the German and English versions. 5. SZ, 188–9 and BT, 233–4. 6. SZ, 189 and BT, 233. 7. SZ, 251 and BT, 295. 8. Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Tübingen: Verlag Günther Neske, Pfullingen, 1971), 256 (translated *On the Way to Language* by Peter D. Hertz [New York: Harper & Row, 1971], 125). Henceforth cited as US and WL, followed by page numbers of the German and English versions. 9. US, 254 and WL, 123. 10. US, 254 and WL, 124. 11. SZ, 164 and BT, 208. 12. US, 252 and WL, 122. 13. SZ, 168 and BT, 212. 14. *Ibid.* 15. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Shattered Love," in *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Lisa Garbus and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1991), 83. 16. SZ, 291 and BT, 337. 17. SZ, 300 and BT, 347. 18. See Jacques Derrida, "Heidegger's Hand (*Geschlecht II*)" trans. John P. Leavy Jr. and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. II, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 27–62; and Derrida's *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 19. US, 116 and WL, 25.