

by Dardis McNamee

British film scholar Antonia Lant spends a lot of time in Vienna – you could almost say she commutes, flying back and forth from Manhattan, where she is Professor of Cinema Studies at New York University, to Vienna where she is a frequent guest professor at the Uni Wien's *Institut für Theaterwissenschaft, Film und Medien* (TFM).

We met in late February at Café Eiles in the 8th District to learn about her current project "Texture Matters", a three-year study led by her colleague of long standing Univ. Prof. Dr. Klemens Gruber, the latest in a series of collaborations between the two universities over nearly two decades.

It had begun with an article she wrote in the mid nineties called Haptical Cinema (yes, I had to look it up!) about the capacity of film to alter the experience of space, where a flat screen became a world of perceptual depth that characters inhabit. The current project is far broader, looking at a century of efforts to understand the relationship between the sense of sight and the sense of touch.

The waiter appeared at our side. I had arrived first and was still nursing my Melange. He turned to Lant. "Ich hätte gern eine heiße Schokolade," she said in accent-free Viennese German. I must have looked surprised. "My grandmother used to speak to me in German," she confided. "I had forgotten all about it until I began classes [in Vienna in 1994]. It came quite easily to me, especially the accent." She wasn't so much learning as "reactivating". Still, it was impressive.

We turned back to the study. Like so many things, it was a tale that began in the ferment of the fin de siècle Habsburg capital.

"Vienna was a very important taking-off point for these ideas," Lant related. Particularly with one Alois Riegl, the "k.&k." curator of carpets, whose treasures formed the basis of the collection of the MAK, Vienna's famed Museum of Applied Arts.

"Alois Riegl was a real radical," she said, her eyes lighting up. They do that a lot. "He insisted – to the irritation of the art establishment! – on taking 'lowly objects' like carpets seriously, to take the 'decorative arts' as seriously as high art." To the elites, the role of art was to transform the given world through the perceptions, through the mind, of the artist to achieve some kind of higher truth; so everyday things were simply not

In Vienna, Antonia Lant muses on the future of flat screens and the meaning of home

Touching the Mind's Eye



British film scholar Antonia Lant chatting over hot chocolate at Café Eiles Photo: D. Reali

art, and could never be art.

Riegl disagreed. "He proposed that there was a kind of looking that is informed by our sense of touch," said Lant. It is this premise that has become the basis of their study, surveying a century of change from the education of the Bauhaus in the 1920s, where students made textured "touch wheels", through the hippies of the 1970s, with their Afghan coats, macramé and velvet pants, to the rise of remote control gadgets and digital screens that led to the touch screen technologies of today.

This is an old battle in western culture over the Platonic ideal, a tradition that has held the spiritual above the bodily, thought over emotion, mind over matter, a dualism permeating philosophy, religion and social values.

"The sense of touch has usually inhabited a lowly status in relation to the sense of sight," she agreed. But perhaps not always. So the study will examine who actually did share this idea. And who didn't. Wittgenstein, Schnitzler and Freud immediately came to mind. In turn of the century Vienna, Riegl would not have been alone in insisting that, as Lant said, "you can't separate touch from sight, you can't separate touch from thinking."

Here, "Texture Matters" joins the cutting edge debates in communications, and the implications of touch screens and digital media on perception and learning.

"We think there might be a crisis in texture now," Lant said, "because screens may be reducing all forms of touch to just one kind of touch." So far, there is little to go on, other than isolated statistics, like the resistance in sales of e-readers for children.

"Parents seem to have some kind of instinct for paper when it comes to early learning." But the issue may solve itself, as Lant suspects that the touch screen is a temporary form: "It's going to go the way of all things," she said. "And then we'll have embedded touch screens, or screens that will become textured in new ways. There'll be *ersatz* papers."

We waved to the waiter and ordered a second round, of coffee (me) and hot chocolate (her). And once again, I was struck by the naturalness of her German. Her father hadn't wanted to pass the language along? "At home in England everyone laughed at my Grandmother; German was considered a dirty language, because of the war," Lant said. "Also my mother didn't speak German – it was considered useless."

Not any more. For scholars and artists, Austria has re-established a reputation as a place where creativity is valued and supported, in stark contrast to either Great Britain or the United States.

"That's one of the reasons why I'll always be interested in being in Austria," she said, "that a small country, which has had an incredibly rocky history through the 20th century, still has something to contribute in terms of design and the arts. So why is that? Why hasn't [its impact] shrunk?" There is a great commitment here, she said, something that lies deep in the culture. "It could have been just cut off through a concentration on the need to build up the economy, or tourism..." But it wasn't.

Still, it could be seen as an unusual choice for someone from a Catholic-Jewish "mixed" background like hers.

"Because ('and you must get this, too?') I

nodded.) the typical reaction I get in the States, in New York, is a wrinkled nose and a sour feeling about anti-Semitism, or anti-immigration policy... All of these things, my colleagues and friends in New York feel I should be put off, and find somewhere else to go."

But Antonia Lant is one of a relatively small group of people from lost émigré families, who, in spite of the nightmare that forced their parents and grandparents to leave, has reclaimed a deep reservoir of shared cultural values that have somehow also survived.

"There is a network here of families whose histories are all intertwined with the anti-Semitic, Nazi past. Families that have survived" that include the actor Otto Schenk, a family friend, or opera director Markus Kupferblum. So I would say, it's the support of the arts and humanities that's enabled a film scene, an arts scene, a theatre scene, a music scene to thrive and be valid."

And that makes Vienna make sense to Antonia Lant and other talented children of the lost émigré families, who in spite of the nightmare that forced their parents and grandparents to leave, reveals a deep reservoir of shared cultural values that have somehow also survived.

Antonia Lant returns to Vienna each time as to a beloved second home, familiar and yet refreshing, feeling liberated perhaps, but also deeply attached.

"This time as I landed, I thought, what is it that I notice when I arrive here? How does it set in?"

The first thing, she decided, was the sight of the hooded crow, feeding on the green borders of the runways. "This is a bird that's only in Central Europe – it never came to England, and it never came to the States – and there's that wonderful Schubert song *die Krähe*."

When I first saw the hooded crow here, when I was 17, I thought that's the kind of crow he's talking about! Then, it's the onion domes, the *Zwiebeltürme*, that tell you how very eastern Austria is. And the long, glued-together German words in the airport the *Geldwechselstube* (Currency Exchange Window) the all-important *Gepäckabholbereich* (Baggage Claim Area)... She laughed. "And it goes on from there!"

"Most of all it is the feeling that people have time here," she said, "that you have time to go for a coffee, that you have time to discuss what you'll have for lunch, and then actually take time for lunch." And I was sure I heard her sigh. ♦

"Texture Matters. *The Haptical and Optical in Media*" is a joint project of the University of Vienna Institute of Theater Studies, Film and Media, and the NYU Dept. of Cinema Studies

Books and Articles by Antonia Lant

The Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writing on the First Fifty Years of Cinema
Ed. Antonia Lant, with Ingrid Periz
Verso, London, New York (2006)

Blackout: Reinventing Women For Wartime British Cinema
By Antonia Lant
Princeton University Press,
Princeton, New Jersey, (1991)

"Haptical Cinema"
October 74, Fall 1995, pp 45-73
October Magazine/MIT (1995)

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