

Hotel Redux: The Social Content of the Form

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Otto Berchem's *Hotel Redux* might be seen as a fictive parallel to a situation in late eighteenth-century France. For many centuries painting was at the centre of all intellectual discussions concerning the role of art in society. In eighteenth-century France polemical argument focused on ideas of what should be represented, and how. Neoclassicists and Romantics initiated an intense debate about the adequate subject matter for a painting. Each school of thought attempted to invent a vocabulary of representation that was not only a formal language, but also a new means of understanding the political and moral influence that art and the artist could have in society. The two models proposed different moral and political values. While art, in this particular moment in history, was far from understanding itself as a documentary practice, the argument taking place in the art world was an extension of debates taking place in the streets and parliaments. Art was then able to create and recreate public opinion.

We can consider Berchem's work as an attempt to propose some sort of social aesthetic, an ironic contemporary equivalent to the moral aesthetics of the classical period. *Hotel Redux* reinvents the dynamics between artistic practice and the creation of a new subject position in political and social terms, using the emblematic, but already fictionalised, everyday life activity in a well known hotel in Liverpool. By reworking the notorious soap *Hotel* into a new fiction, a cartoon, Berchem makes us aware of the rhetorics of TV narrative. His hybrid of realism and fantasy works with the tools of the entertainment industry – not with escapist intent, but in order to make us face certain striking symptoms of our age. The cartoon proved to be the perfect working choice, providing a rare blend of humour and social commentary. The medium establishes an interesting beginning for the investigation of how art can participate in a critique of the visual culture that is so central to today's lived experience.

How can the work operate from inside the image to describe the cultural conditions pertaining to it and to its context? How can the film depart from the most mundane situations and lead us into a riveting examination of our flawed society? *Hotel Redux* can be seen as a playground, a curious and ironic rehearsal of the real, using the cartoon-like dramatisation of life as a game-situation, as a model to explore forms of human interaction. In a game, we do not need an exact definition of each of the elements at play. It is the interaction between these elements that decides their roles at every moment. Otto Berchem uses *Hotel Redux* as a metaphor for modern living. Each player, each character, organises himself or herself as an individual and conforms to the expectations of the others. The players are not necessarily linked to each other by mutual dependency but they nevertheless share and accept, by common agreement, the rules of the game. The microcosm that is *Hotel* life, with its overlapping stories and narratives, offers a perfect terrain for action and interaction, where the individual and collective needs of the characters converge. The work revels in the vocabulary of popular culture as part of a very careful artistic strategy: the reference to the real soap becomes at the same time the embodiment of the insight into our media culture and its critical terminology.

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