

## Trost in Tränen\*

### Appearances and disappearances in Diego Marcon's films and videos

#### Michele D'Aurizio

Who is Ludwig, the protagonist of Diego Marcon's most recent, eponymous, video work? Or, actually, wouldn't the more accurate question be: *what is Ludwig?* I'm starting from this ontological interrogation because the character is, in the first instance, an apparition. He emerges from a dense obscurity and becomes visible of his own accord: namely, he lights a match, which he holds in front of his face until it has fully combusted; he burns his fingers and suddenly falls once again into darkness. In the few seconds of feeble light offered by the match, we catch glimpses of him: he's a child; he might be about seven years old; he's blond but his eyes are dark; he has rosy cheeks, but also unexpectedly pronounced bags under his eyes. Ludwig, alone and defenseless like a real "little match boy." He's singing a song accompanied by a non-diegetic piano: "*Diooo, come son staaanco / mi seeento prooprio giùùù / Vooorrei tiiiraar le cuooioa / E nooon peeensarci piùùù. / Eppure...*" [Oh Lord am I exhausted / I feel so low and blue / I'd like to kick the bucket / then it would all be through. / And yet ...] The flame reaches his translucent fingertips and with a little shout—"Ahi!"—our boy soprano is eclipsed. The piano grows louder, but neither Ludwig's voice nor his little face show up again. With a coda, the melody too exits the scene. *And yet ...*

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Ludwig is the latest in a series of animated characters that have appeared in Diego Marcon's art practice since 2014 when the artist created Dick the Stick, a soldier alienated by the routine of military life. Dick, like Ludwig, is an apparition. In the video animation that first presented him, *Interlude (Introducing Dick the Stick)* (2014), an off-screen voice recites: "To the North, nothing. To the South, nothing. To the East, nothing. To the West, nothing. In the center, nothing." The shot consists of a blank sheet, a desert wasteland made of paper. The soldier appears only at the end of the video, when the voice comes back to remark on the emptiness of the white sheet, so that the drawing can emerge. "A tent" appears "in the center." And "in front of the tent, an orderly busy polishing a boot." There he is: Dick the Stick, caught in an inexpressive, automatic, evolution-less action. A few seconds later *Interlude* ends. And so, we're led to ask: who is Dick the Stick? What's his story? In the family of works that will be born in relation to the video—vinyl stickers and a neon sculpture—Dick gradually acquires "humanity": he's bored, he takes a nap, he despairs, he makes a phone call (to his loved ones?). In one of the stickers we actually see him terrified, while bullets fly by around him (*The trench*, 2015); but in another, to date the last one in the series (*Any body suspended in space will remain in space until made aware of its situation*, 2015), the helmet and the stool with which he's always been depicted are suspended in mid-air, above a cloud, suggesting a fall into the void!—no trace of Dick. Has he survived the war? Will he ever reappear?

The animation techniques that Marcon makes use of are varied: from direct animation, where the drawing is made directly onto the celluloid (the five films in the cycle *Untitled [Head falling]*, 2015), to the appropriation of existing animations (*Untitled [All pigs must die]* 2015, a fragment "found" in the Walt Disney cartoon *Winnie the Pooh*), to computer-generated imagery, or CGI, namely animations created using computer graphics software (some of the characters in *Monelle*, 2017; in *Ludwig*, 2018, both the character and the setting). The specific techniques aside, animation is not only responsible for branching Marcon's practice into a new imaginary—that of childhood—but implies a *modus operandi* that programmatically departs from the documentary tradition in which the artist took his first steps as a video-auteur. Etymologically, "to animate" designates the act of instilling life (the anima or soul) into a lifeless form. It is the most Promethean of artistic creations.

Marcon embraced animation as his thinking on the audiovisual medium involved an increasingly acute questioning of its relationship to mimesis. The act of filming an event (whether scripted or not) necessarily presumes embracing a "mode" of representation. His animations need to be read in this light: they don't present the spectator with a surrogate of reality in which to seek a metonymic transposition of certain events. Rather, the artist resorts each time to a determined creative process, so that process—and not the characters or their stories—can be the instrument through which to explore reality.

Marcon has explored this commingling of narratives and audiovisual languages in a gradual but absolutely diagrammatic trajectory. Already in his first work—*SPOOL* (2007–ongoing), a cycle that currently counts seven videos of varying length, in which the artist acquires and re-elaborates films from family archives, producing images that are as ordinary as they are alienating—Marcon broaches an "uncanny" realism that attacks the naturalist tradition of amateur filmmaking. *SPOOL* is followed by videos shot by the artist himself which explore a sort of alchemy of visual production. In *salut! hallo! Hello!* (2010), for example, the video camera enters into a printing press with the intention of recording the process of printing a postcard. Though the video's starting aim is dispassionately documentary, the camera progressively lingers on the machinery in a way that's more and more morbid. The resulting images participate in the intimate wearing away of the machine: more than descriptive, informative images, these images deteriorate, are entropic.

But it's with the Super 8 film *Pour vos beaux yeux* (2013) that Marcon approaches a subject and a technique that allows him to touch—literally—the action of representation in the documentation of reality. *Pour vos beaux yeux* registers the formation of masses of clouds in the sky above the Île de Vassivière in France, the location of an art centre where Marcon was an artist-in-residence in 2013. The cloud is a mass of watery vapour which, from a distance, seems endowed with its own volume—from an earthly vantage point, it's as though the atmosphere worked like a lens, filtering the observer's visual perception and bringing the image into focus. The cloud thus "appears" only in the distance: it's a paradoxical subject, for which a greater proximity implies only a greater transience. Marcon filmed the masses of clouds with a Super 8 camera and developed the film himself: "I wanted to make a film in which I could physically see the images emerge out of the darkness of the celluloid."<sup>2</sup> In *Pour vos beaux yeux* the filmic image should not be considered a given; rather, it's a vision that is made to emerge maieutically from the dark—a gift for the spectator (*pour toi*). In the light of Marcon's future production, *Pour vos beaux yeux* is a proto-animation. Isn't his process, after all, that of "drawing" the figure of the clouds from out of the atmosphere's gaseous formlessness, a "dig" inside the negativity of film in search of the image? And doesn't the same process fully embrace the handmade as in traditional animation techniques?

Marcon installs *Pour vos beaux yeux* by retro-projecting the video onto a suspended panel, about the size of a 22-inch screen. Compressed on such a reduced surface, the brightness of the projection reaches an intensity that impedes its fruition. Blinded by the excessive whiteness of the image, spectators avert their gaze; but those who linger on are invited to mentally discern the clouds. In a certain sense, Marcon asks us to engage in a process of "digging" similar to his own, to make the image emerge out of the formlessness of our own visual memory—which means inviting us to turn the gaze towards the intimacy of our own selves.

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In many of Diego Marcon's video works, what appears very quickly disappears. Ludwig shows himself for less than a minute; then he returns into the darkness. Dick met a similar fate: there's no more trace of him; he's evaporated into the whiteness of the drawing paper. *Litania* (2011) is a video in which the frame

gradually dissolves into black—one might say it's a video that disappears itself. But, among Marcon's works, the one that best incarnates this dialectic of appearance/disappearance is certainly *Monelle*. *Monelle* is a 35 mm film shot inside the Casa del Fascio in Como. It's a dark film ("a film during which you can fall asleep and wake up to find it still there, unchanged"),<sup>3</sup> with the exception of a few rare shots, visible for the infinitesimal duration of a camera flash. In those moments of light one can glimpse: parts of the inside of the building—it's hard to say whether even the most expert eye could, in such a prohibitive time span, recognize the features of Giuseppe Terragni's architectural masterpiece; curled up in the space, little girls that seem to be asleep; and, finally, some vaguely macabre characters (an old man in sporty clothes wanders around the building urinating on himself; an elderly, elegant woman rests on all fours on the floor; an adolescent girl wearing only a light nightgown squats on some steps; a boy, bald, sits on a railing with his legs dangling; an ageless man falls off a ledge; a woman, elderly and distinguished, is dragged feet-first by an invisible entity). The characters don't interact with the girls, and yet, awkward as they are, they can be perceived as threats—are they the materialisation of the girls' nightmares?

Marcon's flashes surprise the sleeping girls just as Marcel Schwob (re) discovers his protagonist in his novel *The book of Monelle*:

I came upon a place, cramped and dark, but perfumed with the sad scent of smothered violets ... And, feeling blindly about me, I touched a little body, curled up sleeping as before, and I brushed over hair, and I passed my hand over a face I knew, and it seemed to me that the little face was frowning under my fingers, and it became clear that I had found Monelle, sleeping alone in this dark place.<sup>4</sup>

Inspired by the young, consumptive factory worker whom Schwob came across one night while walking home, and whom he married a few days later, Monelle is the "young prostitute" who steps out of the shadows to alleviate with her affections the solitude of those she meets—then, she sinks back into the darkness. "I am she who is lost as soon as she is found,"<sup>5</sup> she'll state. Marcon's *monelles* are her "sisters," as Schwob would also say. In the darkness of the projection room, the girls' flash-like appearance/disappearance grants the spectator a flare of humanity—a humanity caught in the grip of two powers: the biopolitical, exercised by the building, and another, the unconscious, personified by the mysterious presences. (It's no coincidence that in the film the sleeping girls are played by actresses; the other characters are CGI animations; and the architecture is an administrative building whose formal qualities of geometry and pureness suggest a "virtual" exercise of power.)<sup>6</sup>

Faced with so many reiterated disappearances, Marcon can't really fault the spectator for wondering why she is being given a "gift" only to be immediately deprived of it; a question that becomes all the more legitimate if we observe that all of the artist's characters appear to communicate a certain frailness, which is also a vulnerability in one's context. That is, why does the artist stimulate in the spectator a feeling of empathy towards his figures when he doesn't even offer her the possibility—the physical time—to rid herself of it?

Given that Marcon stages the disappearance and "loss" of an affective object, we could invoke here the Freudian theory of reaction to loss [*Verlust*] in which mourning is compared to melancholia. According to Freud, whereas in mourning "there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious," the melancholic patient "knows *whom* [*wen*] he has lost but not *what* [*was*] he has lost in him;" "this would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss [*Objektverlust*] which is withdrawn from consciousness."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Marcon's animations all revolve around themes that concern the representation of melancholy—their protagonists manifest pathologies

traceable to the old clinical profile of the melancholic patient: narcolepsy (*Untitled [Head falling], Monelle*), hypochondria (*Il malatino*, 2017), apathy (*Dick the Stick's saga*), catatonia (*Untitled*, 2017), etc.<sup>8</sup> Faced with the disappearance/loss of the protagonist/affective object, the spectator of Marcon's animations finds himself also touched by melancholia: they can't give a name to the lost object and, not being able to ascribe the sense of loss to a real reason, end up reversing it onto their own self.

Meaning a state of mind at once gloomy, lethargic, and contemplative, melancholia pervades all of the artist's works; among these, however, *Ludwig* is the most synthetic because it is "structurally" melancholic. The video-animation is informed by the dialectic of appearance/disappearance, which in Freudian terms induces melancholia (the lost object is the defenseless Ludwig—but who is Ludwig?); and, on a thematic level, it insinuates the protagonist's self-harming tendencies (Ludwig sings: "I'd like to kick the bucket / then it would all be through."). Above all, however, it hinges entirely on Ludwig's song—we might even say that it's an incomplete music video. And that song is what in the musical tradition would be called a lied. The lied is the quintessential expression of the *Sturm-und-Drang* tendencies of European romanticism: where it doesn't explore pastoral scenarios, the lied indulges in the theme of romantic love, which is by definition unrequited or, very often, "lost."<sup>9</sup> The lied, in Freudian terms, is a "complaint" (in the old sense of "funereal lament") in the face of the loss of a loved person or of an abstraction—one's nation, for example. In this sense, it's a vector of the melancholic feeling. Ludwig's song conveys an ambivalent loss: the child is weary, overwhelmed by world events. However, there's a nobility of the soul that transpires from his song that emancipates his lament from groundless victimhood (from being emo, we'd say today). Indeed, Marcon dresses him in a yellow polo and a blue sweater—the colours of the European Union, that invention rooted in the romantic project of communion with the other, now in ruinous decline. The spectator who watches Ludwig coming out of the dark, and who loses him to the darkness, doesn't miss only the filmic image, but a character with whom they can't help but empathise; and, not least, an ideal of collectivity.

When the match dies out, the spectator finds himself in the darkness of the projection room, dealing with the retinal impression imparted by Ludwig's loss; this impression, which they perceive only in the solitude of their own self, is the mental image of their own melancholy. I can't guess its form; but I can affirm with certainty that it is anything but the canonical representations that our iconographic memory associates with melancholia—the allegories of Albrecht Dürer (*Melancholia I*, 1514) or Cesare Ripa (*Melancholicus*, 1603), for example ... This image is, precisely, "real," but situated beyond modes of representation.

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And yet ... Not everything that's lost is lost forever. Monelle will also say: "Do not be surprised ... It is I, and it is not I; / You shall find me again and you shall lose me; / Once more shall I come among you; for few men have seen me and none has understood me; / And you shall forget me, and you shall recognise me, and you shall forget me."<sup>10</sup> *Monelle*, *Ludwig*, and many other video works by Diego Marcon are projected in a loop. More than exasperating the dynamic of appearance/disappearance structurally denoting those videos, the loop transforms that dynamic into a repetition that in the long run smacks almost of slapstick comedy. Ludwig, lighting up a match to make himself visible, as though turning on a reflector, and then burning himself on it; and, after a brief pause, coming back to try again and getting burned again; all that while singing his self-pitying lied—it might look like he's performing a gag. Likewise, the girls in *Monelle* are caught in the deepest sleep while around them the animated characters get up to all sorts ... The loop situates the melancholy of Marcon's video works within the realm of the tragicomic. In the animations

from the *Untitled (Head falling)* cycle, the dangling head of the protagonist caught between sleep and waking is a farcical echo of the indolent scholar. In *Il malatino*, the rasping, bedridden child is trapped in a perpetual convalescence: "He can neither heal nor die properly."<sup>11</sup> He's a hypochondriac à la Moliere or Woody Allen: the dupe of a charlatan doctor or the neurotic prone to psychosomatic reactions.<sup>12</sup>

It's this comedy, emerging from the repeated failure to evade the human condition, that, paradoxically, frees Marcon's characters from being mired in the human condition: they may be "thrown" into the world, but they recognise the pathetic nature of their existence. In their actions, in their songs, Marcon seems to echo Thomas Bernhard when he has his "World-fixer" utter: "It's desperation / that makes everything bearable."<sup>13</sup> So knowing who Ludwig really is may not be that important—thus does his "complaint" echo our most intimate alienation while, at the same time, letting us glimpse an attachment to life: that adversarial hook, that "and yet ..."

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\* *Trost in Tränen* (Consolation in tears) is the title of a lied composed in 1814 by Franz Schubert that sets a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to music.

- 1 The work's title is the first "law" of the so-called "Physics of cartoon motion." Codified between the 1930s and '40s, this manifesto describes the ways in which animation allows for the bending or disregard of laws of physics, for the purposes of irony or drama. See "O'Donnell's Laws of cartoon motion," in *Esquire* (June 1980).
- 2 From a conversation with the artist, February 2018.
- 3 Federico Chiari, "Diego Marcon. Il bianco degli occhi," *Flash Art—Edizione italiana* 47:317 (July–September 2014), 95.
- 4 Marcel Schwob, *The book of Monelle*, trans. Kit Schultzer (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2012), 84.
- 5 Marcel Schwob, *The book of Monelle*, 6.
- 6 For a broader treatment of the role of the Casa del Fascio architecture in Diego Marcon's *Monelle*, see Eva Fabbris in conversation with Diego Marcon, "Lack of Light," *Mousse Magazine*, 62 (February–March 2018), 182–93.
- 7 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and melancholia" (1917), in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, volume XIV* (1914-1916): *On the history of the psycho-analytic movement, papers on metapsychology and other works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 244.
- 8 See Jennifer Radden, ed., *The nature of melancholy: from Aristotle to Kristeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 9 See Rufus Hallmark, ed., *German lieder in the nineteenth century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996).
- 10 Marcel Schwob, *The book of Monelle*, 3.
- 11 From a conversation with the artist, February 2018.
- 12 See Brian Dillon, *Tormented hope: nine hypochondriac lives* (Dublin: Penguin Ireland, 2009).
- 13 Thomas Bernhard, "The world-fixer" (1975), in *The world-fixer* (Riverdale, CA: Ariadne Press).

## DIEGO MARCON: LUDWIG

Earl Lu Gallery  
Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore  
LASALLE College of the Arts  
1 McNally Street  
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2 February – 10 April 2019

Ludwig is the most recent character to emerge from the work of Italian artist Diego Marcon. Marcon chose CGI (computer-generated imagery) to compose *Ludwig*, whose namesake protagonist is a lone blond boy with dark eyes confined to the pitch-black bowels of a ship at sea. Chiaroscuro—contrasts of light and shadow—are replayed as the animation loops endlessly. Ludwig sings an aria that observes the European Romantic musical tradition of the lied, usually a composition about lost love, death, night or dreams. The score was written by Marcon's collaborator, Federico Chiari, and sung by a boy soprano from the prestigious Coro di Voci Bianche dell'Accademia Teatro alla Scala in Milan. The images and the song's refrain each magnify the work's unsettling effect—the combination of animation and classical music is jarring.

Diego Marcon began his investigation into images, memory and the construction of emotions by looking at analogue film archives. Recently he has employed digital technologies, examining how they change an artwork's form and content. The protagonists of Marcon's films are young children—more archetypes than people—who tend to embody melancholic traits.

*Ludwig* is presented on a six-monitor video wall. The display reflects the hyper-technological forms of visual advertising ubiquitous in Singapore.

Artist Diego Marcon (born Busto Arsizio, Italy, 1985; lives Milan) works in drawing, film, video and installation. He has exhibited in festivals and exhibitions including Fondazione Prada, Milan (2018–19), the sixth Moscow Biennale for Young Art (2017), and Artspace, Auckland (2013). In 2018 he received the MAXXI Bulgari Prize for *Ludwig*.

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