

Emanuel Licha, Hotel Machine, Centre Pompidou, Paris. Cinema du Réel, World premiere, 24, 25, 26 March 2016

Stephen Horne

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Emanuel Licha

Hotel Machine

Centre Pompidou, Paris
Cinema du Réel, World Premiere
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With his new feature film, *Hotel Machine*, artist Emanuel Licha, based in Paris and Montreal, continues his questioning of the place of media and the mediatization of place. His process takes him to the “front lines” of recent warfare – at least, the front lines in the sense of media communications. Taking the relationship between architecture and mass media as a topography, *Hotel Machine* is a cinematic inquiry into the possibility of doing film differently, especially as far as documentary and journalism are concerned.

There are many precedents for this ambition to do film “differently,” but two in particular stand out. The most historically obvious would be that of Dziga Vertov, an early Russian documentary innovator, here noteworthy for the architectural sensibility of his vision manifested in statements such as, “I am a kino eye. I am a builder. I have placed you, whom I’ve created today, in an extraordinary room which did not exist until just now when I created it.” Licha has integrated this aspect of building and framing in previous work, especially the installation *Pourquoi Photogénique*, presented at Galerie SBC in Montreal in 2010. That work, the filming for which he carried out onsite in an American military training camp at Fort Irwin,

in the Mojave Desert, featured an innovative approach to documentary pioneered by British filmmaker Peter Watkins. Watkins’s docudrama *War Games*, produced by the BBC in 1965, had the interesting distinction of having won an Academy Award and yet being censored and withdrawn by its state-run producer. His use of re-enactment or retelling of events “as they actually happened” challenges any easy linear framing of past and present or here and there, and Licha adopts similar strategies in his building with narration.

In *Hotel Machine*, co-workers exchange stories, casting us back into the last several decades in which the workings of journalism, cinema, the military, and architecture overlap. What is crucial is the claim of this film to describe the “equipment” of warfare in a media-constructed environment. Licha’s approach is to pursue the contours of the everydayness that pervades every workplace, including “the war hotel.” Hotel workers describe the operations of equipment, such as the machinery that lifts elevators to the fortieth floor, in a contemporary business hotel. Equally important is the sentiment present in the stories, in which admiration for some of the journalists is expressed but also a certain nostalgia that helps situate the film with respect to the movement of time in the event, the time of filming and the time of viewing, these being by no means secure in their compartments.

A hotel might simplistically be considered a large house, a base away from home for temporary visits – short

stays for tourism or business activities. Terminology from the military context permeates art language, the best example perhaps being “avant-garde,” but in the case of *Hotel Machine*, the hotel is clearly identified with the concept of a “base” as a type of command post, in spite of its apparent “civilian” status. In this concept the base owes everything to its positioning as an “em-place-ment” and its status as “secure.” In Licha’s film, the hotel employees themselves explain what their buildings have that made them “media fortifications” during wartime. The most important of these, of course, is their having been engulfed within war zones, in which they functioned as observation points for the journalists who temporarily occupied them. However, in terms of mass media’s role in contemporary wars and considering the multi-directionality of media dissemination, the war hotel is also a site from which “orders” are issued to distant consumer publics.

This architecture of observation is where *Hotel Machine* begins, with windows and surfaces being cleaned and polished, their transparency or reflectivity enhanced. This is daily maintenance as performed by the hotel workers who contribute to the question of “reality” as posed within the film. They are cleaners, porters, kitchen workers, chefs, security workers, clerks, receptionists, and all the other people who keep these massive hotels operational. In Licha’s film they contribute to “the body” of the hotels that are the core of the film. At the same time

they function within the “machine” that is the hotel, following Le Corbusier’s often-cited expression regarding the house as a machine for living. In this case, *Hotel Machine*’s viewpoint is from actual hotels, such as the Mayflower and the Commodore in Beirut, the Holiday Inn in Sarajevo, and the Al Deira in Gaza.

Licha presents an ostensibly simple ground-level look at the everyday workings of the hotels used during a period of intensive conflict such as the Balkan or Syrian wars. Most importantly, with its “fictional/documentary” method the film steps back from the strong imagery and urgency that we might expect to accompany his ostensible subject and instead presents an aesthetic dimension within the language of its medium, and this is essentially a sensitivity to the absence that is an aspect of any challenging communication. This incorporates an experience of the weight of the medium, its materiality, and its construction. The weight of film or video is, of course, temporal; film does not unfold at the pace of a viewer’s choice or whim, it resists and redirects, and Licha employs this quality in a film that is all the more remarkable for the aesthetic subtlety and rigour within its topicality.

Stephen Horne splits his time between Montreal and France. He writes on contemporary art for publications in Canada and abroad.



Hotel Machine, 2016, film, 67 min., courtesy Emanuel Licha et Les Contes modernes