

# Aneta Szylak

## Burska: Notes to a Subjective Interpretative Code

### RED

Blood is the motif, while red is the colour which most frequently recurs, persistently permeating the whitened frames of her photos, installations and films. It juts out into the foreground, it penetrates. The plasticity of this colour lies not only in its realistic and symbolic function in image building but, also, its materiality: stickiness, fluidity, and density. Red reveals the artist's painting experience, so it vibrates in a painterly way, too. Blood – or its substitutes – soaks and penetrates through different materials, either making images more dynamic or slowing them down. In both her motion and motionless pictures, it is either genuine or fake, yet, its genuineness is of no importance; what matters only is its colour-determined, substantial, symbolic and narrative potency.

Thus, it (red, blood) functions as a builder of suspense and a narrative vehicle; after all, it needs time to spread all over, to ooze from a cut or a crack, from the inside of a body, an open wound, a head which has been cut-off. Long before she undertook video creation, where blood so significantly enhanced the plasticity of the image, Burska built her stories by painting directly with her palms on canvases, church windows, and the floors and walls of exhibition halls. Each of her installations became an imagined crime scene, an escape from a house of torture, or other liminal experiences of pain and/or vio-

lence, opening the body. A horrifying space, forcing our imagination to rewind "the film" to the moment where such a scene could have appeared. Refraining from the depiction of a chain of events – the artist leaves this to our imagination – she is only asking us to guess what might have happened here, only blood being her active tool of narration. Burska writes scripts and shoots films in our minds, and it is in our minds where she refashions them, making use of the things we have already seen, the knowledge we have already acquired, as well as the expectations we have. Therefore, before she has completed the editing of the first of her films, she has already planted several of them within us.

Concurrently, the function of blood is extremely aesthetical here, too. This is the main paradox in Burska's way of constructing image. Painstakingly and precisely cutting the images of bleeding from films, documenting red traces on snow, or painting with hands on walls, the artist lures us into an artistic trap. The way of gazing at blood or the bloody quality of paint intertwines awesome repulsion with a delightful indulgence in the abstract beauty of colour and matter. However, the less we are aware that we are dealing with blood – as, for example, in her series of macro-photographs *Crystals* (2005-2006) – the simpler we find it to search for beauty in fractal irregularities. At this point, it becomes the easiest to detect the fact that Burska plays with our habits, aesthetical idiosyncrasies, hidden fears and the ways we remember images. *Crystals* also di-

rects our thought to the role of photography in science, consequently, towards what is punctilious and precise – the two important features of the artist's work, these features, however, are stashed well beneath the fabric of the sensual, dynamic, ecstatic, cruel, nostalgic and pathetic images which she offers us.

### PASSION

The first of the artist's *found footage* films *Rain in Paris* (2004), a story of passion in desire, spins with a rocket-like speed. Paris is the sole setting, the eponymous city which has provided the framework and background for so many a film romance. The bigger dynamics here have scenes of violence, cruelty and rejection – threats which we gradually reach in a somewhat chronological way after scenes of seduction and immersion in love and ecstasy. Actually, the film tells us about the loss of control over one's life and the danger of one's submission to the other person. This work, composed from dozens of film-cuttings, is a compressed introduction to the modes in which film shapes our concepts of love, passion, risk, the trespassing of limits, and the inevitable dynamism of relationships marked by loss.

*A Piece of Jade* (2006-2007) locates itself at the opposite pole. It is the editing together of fragments from *Lolita*, *Chinese Box*, and *Damage*, linked by the figure of the main male character, Jeremy Irons. It is the story of this illusion which accompanies desire, the destructive price of the satisfaction of desire and the final, disappointing parting. What is interesting, *Rain in Paris* shows a woman as the victim and is built in a way which suggests one self-identification with the heroine, while *A Piece of Jade*, in which the entangled narration of an obsessive love song is told from behind the screen by a man, operates with the myth of an impossible feeling towards a woman who is practically out of reach. This is caused not only by the fact that love in the latter case is limited by cultural taboos and geo-political barriers but, finally, because this love is addressed to a woman emotionally inaccessible. Impossible and forbidden loves appear over and over again in this film, endlessly, while the story told is a prayer of unfulfilment; such love, after it has been

lost, leaves an insatiable void. The greatest tragedy for such a love would be its fulfilment, because this fulfilment does not lie in desire, and nothing would be possible after its realisation. Desire, described in this way, finds its sense and consequence in a lack of fulfilment, and so it is here, in the field of contemporary film, where the struggle with the romantic paradigm takes place.

### A CUT

To create a new film you need to cut. The motion picture once edited by someone is painstakingly re-edited by Burska. She abstracts the same characters, methods, scenes and recurring motifs from their context. Or – the other way round – she only leaves identical elements in a story or the concept of a character, gluing the story told over and over again by the figure of the actor/actress or their *emploi*. The artist is a patient seeker of narrative schemes, endlessly telling the same story again and again. Thus, Burska "opens up" films, bestowing them with a new potential. In a way, she speaks about the cinema itself. In doing so, she lets the cinematic blood ooze, patiently, methodically, painstakingly.

This dismembering of stories and their re-composing anew, somehow, brings to mind those activities of the artist in which she took photographs of limbs sewn back after amputation and juxtaposed them with close-ups of peony flowers – their meaty, weirdly condensed petals, reminiscent of healing tissue (*Life is Beautiful, Algorithm*, 2002). Again, one might think here about what it means to open something up, to slit it open, to cut it, to see it from the inside, thus building a new order from it, or see order where it was not expected.

In one of her earlier works *Margareth* (2006), Burska filmed her own face, neck and décolleté area in the gilded, oval frame of a mirror. She made "necklace-like" cuts using a dagger, so the beads of blood formed a *rivière*. She performed the activity leisurely, as if, indeed, she was making herself up, performing a beautifying activity. In doing so, she manifested an aesthetical dimension of suffering and its fetishisation in art. To achieve her effect, she used a trick, a special film effect, because her works are not a documentary on the experience of pain but analyse ways of picturing it.

The artist scrutinises suffering, desire, and cruelty, with cognitive precision. She works on the sub-cortical aspects of the cinema, which pre-programme the viewer, composing material into patterns and orders. Her gaze is cool, analytical, despite the vortical emotion on the screen. She catalogues and indexes, searching for logical links and algorithms. She demands that we gaze again onto the things which we fear in the quest for an aesthetics beyond the canon, restricted by our anxiety. Yet, she also indicates that cinema is a type of meticulously pre-planned procedure, supposed to elicit emotions in us which have been dexterously pre-conceived.

#### WEAVING

She interlaces her story with an intensification of the most exciting moments of the original, complete works, to which we are led by its narration – original climaxes. Burska condenses the original, weaving a new story, however familiar it seems to us. This is a form of data compression, packed onto a relatively small “data carrier”, which in this case is a film meant for a gallery space. The data is arranged into files of threads, characters and themes, instead of the original titles and paths. Each of her works divulges this data, becoming a leak of the secrets of which the magic of the cinema is composed. They reject the myth-generating power of the cinema, while at the same time being a dare to and use of its seductive might.

The Greek word *arachne* means spider and is the basis for the taxonomy of the species, but we, who are educated in mythologies, associate the title of Burska's video from 2003 with the story of the artist changed into a spider in punishment. She was so dextrous a weaver that she was even better in the craft than Athena herself, the goddess of wisdom. She claimed that her skill and talent were not due to the gods but herself only and, finally, she dared to challenge Athena to an artistic contest. When they stood at their looms, the Goddess wove a beautiful fabric, depicting illustrious scenes from the gods' lives. The earthly woman made a fabric of a more subtle weave, outstanding in every aspect and was

judged to be better. However, Arachne's fabric depicted the lascivious life of Zeus, mating with women of mortal frame under the guise of a bull, a swan and golden rain. In her fury, Athena drove Arachne to suicide, but later restored the woman's life in the form of the eternal weaver – the spider.

We can re-interpret the myth of Arachne today as a story about the change in outlook on the function of art and the artist's freedom, along with the cost of this freedom. Burska's work in the form of a super-sized projection of a hairy spider walking across the space of a boudoir directs our thoughts towards the unpredictable and disobedient female subject; towards those things which have no legitimation to be represented. Abjection and awe intertwined with arachnophobia, which comes first in the case of this work, can also be interpreted on the level of both subconscious fear and the cultural potential of its representation, asking simultaneously whether this representation should be apologetic and lofty, like Athena's fabric, or divulging and critical, as in Arachne's case.

Remembering Arachne-spider we enter the gallery of historical, mythical and stereotypical female figures set up by Burska, whose typology has been built by culture, including the cinema: Elizabeth – the virgin queen, Margot, Gretchen, Margerita, nymphets and *femmes fatales*; heroines of the erudite culture of the West. However, this mythological reference, we have to admit, features mostly women who are white and predominantly heterosexual, the perfectly beautiful heroines of the mass imagination. These figures are like beads on a string: the string being the hegemonic role the West plays in shaping women's (self-)image.

#### COLOPHON

The nimble-fingered weaver Arachne lived in Ionia, in the city of Colophon the name of which was supposed to denote a place at the edge, at the end, the word itself meaning “a finishing stroke”. It is said that this word was also given to the name of the page in a book with the editorial note – the colophon. This is the page where we find information about copyright. And now, when holding Burska's book in our hand, we can ponder upon female authorship.

Burska's writing of a play, *The Nest. A Play On How to Misuse Things and Also How Not to Waste Them*, which she finished and published in 2013, is a natural result of her own, specific mode of control over narration. *The Nest* cleverly reflects her gift for observation which, as it turns out, embraces not only cinema but literature and the life of the artistic milieu, too. In this case, she does not derive her ideas from the depository of the cinema but from the phrases of a national poem and the myth-creating power of the theatre and its writings. If the diction of *The Nest* sounds out of the ark, something stashed away on the shelves with books from a school reading list, it is because Burska again wants to play with convention. After all, a national poem is supposed to awaken our conscience and stir us from listlessness, its bombastic language adding loftiness; thus, this play, however sarcastic in its expression, calls for change. Here, Burska manifests her skill in the sampling of diverse repositories of culture. However, here also, she not only deconstructs a historical narrative through a work of art for the first time but, additionally, our way of listening to the language of art. The world represented here appears to be A Grand Impossibility, a continual state of threat, a shaky capital of market values, political stances, examples of financial unfeasibility, institutional catastrophes and celebrityism. Burska has pieced her play together from outstanding descriptions of the types of characters in the art world and situations she has noticed, which is similar to the selection of patterns for the film stories but, this time, she follows the *dramatis personae convention*.

Here, a sudden thought comes to mind: the real field of the artist's activity and analyses is manipulation, a somewhat automatic concentration on this function of art which impresses its mark in our memory and subconscious. Burska manifests her subjectivity as one who tracks, singles out and reshuffles art conventions; here she makes a feminist affirmation as the-one-who-controls-the-story-being-told, a story told previously by others. The auto-thematism of *The Nest* is additionally enhanced by the presence of the feminist subject in Burska's play, yet here she takes control without a direct declaration. The male director disappears into a crowd of men similar to himself, who

supervise film images and narration, because she, the (female) artist, although invisible, becomes present as the pathfinder of the traces they leave. If men construct images of women and their own relationships with women in the majority of cases, projecting their own fascinations, expectations and fears into the minds of their male and female viewers, Burska crumbles these images, changing them into her own insubordinate records, independent of the duty to tell a story till the very end.

She discovers her own modes of telling us about an unhappy love, passion, heroism and art, showing us a collection of moving scenes as a collection of means that are accessible, and which can be used in various, discontinuous and non-canonical ways. The colophon, the editorial page, emphasises this possibility as a type of personal authorisation of *écriture féminine* – this one cutting across the lines of a story which we already know and, supposedly, because of its familiarity: as in cinema.