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Critical *Déjà Vu* – about Bogna Burska's Movies

"Cinema is true. A story is a lie" – these are the words which Jean Epstein, a director, film critic and one of the first theoreticians of the cinema, wrote in his *Bonjour Cinéma* (1921). Epstein saw in this still, at that time, new medium much more than a mere vehicle for a plot, proving that telling a story is something which harnesses the cinematic element, trying to tame and subdue it. Yet, this element – the element which is sensual, audio-visual – does not give in, revealing itself in the cracks of the narrative, flooding the screen whenever the action is called to a halt for a while. "The real tragedy is in suspense [of the action]", wrote Epstein. "It looms over all the faces; it is in the curtain and in the door-latch. Each drop of ink can make it blossom at the tip of the pen. It dissolves itself in the glass of water. At every moment, the entire room is saturated with the drama. The cigar burns on the lip of the ashtray like a threat. The dust of betrayal. Poisonous arabesques stretch across the rug and the arm of the seat trembles. For now, suffering is in suffusion. Expectation"¹.

In these few intense sentences, Epstein convincingly describes a perceptual experience known equally well to the creators and the viewers of found footage films. He cuts out a short fragment from a feature film (in this case, a melodrama *The Honour of His House*, 1918, by William C. de Mille), and watches what it becomes when taken out from the whole film. How is its reception changed when it is transformed from something constituting only background into the primary figure, from something servile to the functioning of the plot, into something autonomous? Does it tell its micro-narrative (often contradictory to the order of the macro-narrative) or does it change into a certain audio-visual object which attracts the eye but tells no story?² Two things are striking in Epstein's description – the extraordinary sensuality, the density, and the weight, which the elements in the frame gain when freed from the arrangement of the plot (which „tremble“, „burn“, „dissolve“), next to the inevitability of the plot which lurks just behind the edge of the image (behind the

curtain, behind the door), which has stopped only for a while, but is just about to set off again. As Roland Barthes emphasised, the cinema evades the plot with difficulty and never completely – there is always something „happening“ in the cinema, something occurs after something else, at least in the form of a loosely connected chain of audio-visual events³.

Jacques Rancière notes, quoting Epstein's example in an introduction to his collection of *La Fable Cinématographique* (2001), that in this way, he [Epstein] „undertakes a work of de-figuration. He composes one film with the elements of another [...] from which he erased the traditional narrative aspect in order to create another dramaturgy, another system of expectations, actions, and states of being“⁴. Although, the composing of a film from the elements of another, sounds like the general description of the found-footage practice, for Rancière it is also „a constitutive fact of the cinema as experience, art, and idea of art. [...] From Jean Epstein to today, making a film on the body of another is exactly what the three main figures spawned by the cinema have been doing all along – directors, who »film« scripts they themselves have nothing to do with, the audience, for whom cinema is a potpourri of mixed memories, and critics and cinephiles, who extract a work of pure plastic forms from the body of a commercial fiction“⁵. In light of Rancière's commentary, the practice of found footage would not only be one more way of film-making (moreover – a doubtful way because of its „parasitic“ attitude to other films), but it would also actually something fundamental about the cinema as such.

Rancière does not subscribe to Epstein's vision according to which one should differentiate „the truth of

the cinema“ from „the lie of the story“. In other words – to pick out „the essence of the cinema“, to clean it from the plot, which would be something external and alien towards it. As he demonstrates, what Epstein would like to see as „the pure cinema“ – the experience of a particular, sensual, (audio)-visual intensity – is only possible against the background of the traditional, feature melodrama, subjected to de-fragmentation of the plot. The cinema, suggests Rancière, has no „essence“ understood in this way, it is rather based on the constant conflict between the order of the narrative (*mythos*) and the purely sensual dimension of the spectacle (*opsis*). It is a conflict in which each side either gains or loses dominance, neither of them, however, being able to finally win. The *mythos* and the *opsis*, which Rancière evokes, are the two out of six components of the tragedy described in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where, however, there is no mention made about any conflict – the *mythos* („arrangement of the incidents“⁶) dominates over the *opsis* absolutely⁷.

The cinema breaks these power relations – the creators of film (directors, cameramen, editors), contrary to the poet who, according to Aristotle, freely shapes sensual matter, specific to himself, can never fully rule over the *opsis*. This is because of the work of the camera which – by virtue of being a non-human, mechanical eye – will always register something more than the film creator would like it to. As Walter Benjamin wrote „evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. [...] The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses“⁸. In other words, film – contrary to the other

¹ Jean Epstein, *Bonjour cinéma*, [in his:] *Écrits sur le cinéma*, Seghers, Paris 1974, p. 86, [quoted after:] Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. E. Battista, Berg Publishers, Oxford/New York 2006, p. 1.

² Godard seems to have realised this fact, too, when he takes out props from Hitchcock's films, depriving them of their narrative function, and scrutinises them as autonomous, fascinating objects, film fetishes *par excellence*, in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. "We've forgotten why Joan Fontaine leans over the edge of the cliff and what it was that Joel McCrea was going to do in Holland. We don't remember why Montgomery Cliff was maintaining eternal silence or why Janet Leigh stops at the Bates Motel, or why Teresa Wright is still in love with Uncle Charlie. We've forgotten why Henry Fonda is not entirely guilty and exactly why the American government employed Ingrid Bergman. But we remember a handbag. But we remember a bus in the desert. But we remember a glass of milk, the sails of a windmill, a hairbrush. But we remember bottles in a line, a pair of glasses, a passage of music, a bunch of keys, because it's thanks to them that Alfred Hitchcock succeeded where Alexander, Julius Caesar and Napoleon failed: he became master of the universe," Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, ECM Records, Munich 1999, p.p. 42 – 43, [quoted after:] Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Reaktion Books, London 2006, p.p. 145.

³ Cf. Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. L. Coverdale, University of California Press, Berkeley 1991, p. 17.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, p. 5.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by S. H. Butcher, on-line <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.1.1.html>.

⁷ *Opsis* is located at the absolute bottom of Aristotle's hierarchy, he writes, "the spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet". Ibidem.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Sohn, Schocken Books, New York 1988, p.p. 236-237.

arts – is always composed of both consciously used elements, resulting from the forging of the audio-visual matter in accordance with the (conscious) will of the creators, and those which are unconsciously applied, without (or, even, against) the creator, by the mechanical eye of the camera⁹. If the *mythos* is usually conscious and volitional, the *opsis* is, to a large degree, located on the side of the unconscious.

Artists creating *found footage* who – thanks to contemporary digital tools have gained open access to images – often analyse that “optic unconsciousness” which, although recorded in film frames, can only be revealed after suitable processing of “the found material”, thanks to pausing, slowing-down, repetition, blowing-up, etc. Therefore, they act like psychoanalysts – psychoanalysts of film who, instead of listening to a stream of speech, gaze into a stream of images¹⁰. “In the course of this process, hitherto unexpected meanings can be found hidden in the sequence, as it were, deferred to a point of time in the future when the critic’s desire may unearth them” writes Laura Mulvey, who herself analysed the films of Douglas Sirk in this way, and Marilyn Monroe’s dance in *Men Prefer Blondes* (1953). “In this context, textual analysis ceases to be a restricted academic practice and returns, perhaps, to its origins as a work of cinephilia, of love of the cinema”¹¹.

Bogna Burska’s *found footage* films definitely stem from such an understanding of cinemaphilia. The artist works on “found material” from popular, full-length feature films (with the noticeable predominance of Hollywood productions), through whose fragments she subverts/suspends original plots by cutting particular shots from narrative and signifying chains, and organising them in collections of motifs (as in the works *God is Vain*, *A Heart So White*, *Wind* or *Rain*

in Paris) or into new, alternative plots (like in *Shooting Star*, *A Piece of Jade*, *A Very Bad Dream of the Count Monte Christo* or *Remake*). In the first case, she often gains a similar effect to that described by Epstein and Godard – fragments, taken from the narrative whole, compose themselves into micro-plots (a short exchange of sentences, the course of a single emotion) or lead to a peculiar “transfiguration” of film motifs which, deprived of their narrative function, gain a new way of being on the screen¹². This is the case, for example, in *A Heart So White*, which is a collection of images featuring blood (a motif also known from Burska’s other works, not necessarily of the *found footage* type, such as *The Thaw* or *The Road*). The whole film is a catalogue of situations and contexts where blood appears in the mainstream cinema: from the shoot-out in action cinema to blood consumption in vampire stories. Images of blood, extracted from their narrative frameworks and accumulated as an imposing collection seem to become denser and sublimated, going from action to an almost palpable, bloody, visual substance, which thickens on the surface of the screen.

Burska’s collecting of the same gestures in films and the same motifs and/or situations has a double impact: on one level it acts by virtue of accrual and repetition – Burska reveals that we are dealing with a cliché, and she uncovers this cliché to be just a cliché (visual, narrative, ideological, gender-related). On another level, however, Burska restores visibility to the cliché, permitting one to actually see and scrutinise it anew, thanks to the extraction of this cliché from the narrative course, which operation makes the cliché transparent (as in the film *God is Vain*, exploring the motif of looking into the mirror). Such a repeatability also has its affective dimension, akin to what Freud dubbed as “the uncanny”

(*das Unheimliche*). According to Freud, the feeling of the uncanny raises something “that has been repressed and then reappears”, something which “reminds us of the (repressed) inner compulsion to repeat”¹³. The feeling of the uncanny elicited by Burska’s films suggests the correspondence between the inner repetitive compulsion and the repeatability of clichés on which popular culture is based. As much as the repression of the repetitive compulsion preconditions a pleasant sensation in the subject (the awareness of this urge being unpleasant for the subject by suggesting that the subject lacks full control of him or herself), similarly, the prerequisite for the pleasure of participating in popular culture depends on the repressed awareness of its repeatability (which pop culture makes easier by supplying constantly new articulations of the same pattern). And this is where film critique carried out through *found footage* triumphs fundamentally – thanks to its affective element – over regular critical discourse on film. This is because the former not only diagnoses repeatability, but – even – forces the viewer to stand up to his own, repressed inner compulsion to repeat.

The second strategy of Burska, mentioned above, is plot reconstruction – cutting fragments from a film narrative and juxtaposing them into new, alternative plots¹⁴. In this case, the artist usually uses fragments of films with the participation of the same actor (from two to several dozen films, depending on the project) – Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer in *Shooting Star*, Jeremy Irons in *A Piece of Jade*, and James Caviezel in *A Very Bad Dream of the Count Monte Christo* and *Remake*. Similar to her other collections, the juxtaposition of the fragments of various roles reveals the often (uncanny) repeatability of the same actors’ gestures, tricks, grimaces; the repeatability of characterological types for which

these actors are usually given roles (and consequently, the narrative situations they have to face). Burska’s films scrutinise the phenomenon of the actor’s persona who, carried from film to film, devours concrete characters in films; showing the actor’s body as a subsequent film cliché. However, her films manage to achieve more – each of them, despite being simply cut-out fragments arranged to resemble a linear plot, also constitutes the record of parallel lives none of which is original but only variations. Burska dismantles the narrative order of the plot to show the infinite potential of human fate – an unsettling potential because of its being free from any rules, being unpredictable¹⁵. Simultaneously, the artist reveals that the plot – Aristotelian “arrangement of the incidents” operates like a defence mechanism which casts the cause-effect mesh onto “open” fate, squeezing the latter into a three-act scheme of scenarios with defined turning points and climaxes. In this way, Burska’s film becomes like a report from a specifically contemporary experience, described by Slavoj Žižek: a new “life experience is in the air, a perception of life that explodes the form of the linear centred narrative and renders life as a multiform flow – even and up to the domain of »hard« sciences (...) This perception of our reality as one of the possible – often even not the most probable – outcomes of an »open« situation, this notion that other possible outcomes are not simply cancelled out but continue to haunt our »true« reality as spectra of what might have happened, conferring on our reality the status of extreme fragility and contingency, implicitly clashes with the predominant »linear« narrative forms of our literature and cinema”¹⁶. Which form will become the proper expression for such an experience? – Žižek continues to ask. Although the author himself proposes a hypertext, it seems that *found footage* can be one such

⁹ In this sense, the cinema realises the ideal, dubbed by Rancière “the aesthetic regime of art” – “cinema, in the double power of the conscious eye of the director and the unconscious eye of the camera, is the perfect embodiment of Schelling’s and Hegel’s argument that the identity of conscious and unconscious is the very principle of art”. Rancière, op. cit. p. 9. On Rancière’s regimes of art, see: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. by Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, London/New York 2004.

¹⁰ Some of them, like Martin Arnold or Peter Tscherkassky, openly refer to psychoanalysis when commenting on their own works.

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, op. cit. p. 144.

¹² A practice popular among the surrealists, who would rush into the cinema theatre in the middle of a film only to watch it for as long as they began to understand the plot, which can be considered a specific kind of de-figuration.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, [1919], trans. by David McLintoc with an introduction by Hugh Haughton, Penguin, London 2003, p.p. 152, 145.

¹⁴ It should be noted that Burska does not hide editing, she does not subordinate it to any principle which could make her film coherent, more fluent, consolidated, reaching the state of an harmonious whole. On the contrary – her *found footage* exposes its own fragmentary character and open form, being rough, broken, and heterogenic (various formats of images, and their different textures).

¹⁵ In her *Remake* from interwoven scenes from *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) by Mel Gibson and *the Count of Monte Cristo* (2002) by Kevin Reynolds (both films starring James Caviezel), such openness has grave theological consequences. Burska, using scenes from *Monte Cristo* permits Christ to escape from prison, thus rewriting the Gospels in a way no less provocative than *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Kazantakis. Similarly, the artist uses similar fragments from both films in *A Very Bad Dream of the Count Monte Christo*. Considering that in the new film *Escape Plan* (2013), Caviezel plays, for a change, a prison supervisor, we can assume Burska may decide to develop her series in the future.

¹⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Is There a Proper Way to Remake a Hitchcock Film?*, on-line <http://www.lacan.com/hitch.html>.

form; using Žižek's words the fragile, montage-based and linear plot in Burska's films is constantly "haunted (...) by the spectre of what might have happened" – every subsequent fragment, composing the plot of *Shooting Star* or *A Piece of Jade*, makes references to another plot, an alternative, parallel fate which we, as viewers, remember from the films used by the artist. Therefore, the form of Burska's films is both linear and open¹⁷.

Thus, Burska's films are an example of a film-critical *found footage*, a critique of film using film (critique in the strong, philosophical sense as an analysis of the condition of the possibility of film); *found footage* as a tool for critique, analysis, and the cataloguing of contemporary cinema, which is an alternative methodology to more traditional discursive tools. *Found footage* understood in this way, appears to be the development of a theoretical and methodological programme formed by the German theoretician and historian of art, Aby Warburg, in the 1920s ("a genuine theoretical programme for the future", as Georges Didi-Huberman labeled it¹⁸). In the years 1924-1929, Warburg compiled his revolutionary *opus magnum* entitled *Atlas Mnemosyne*, which has been a challenge for art historians ever since. Each subsequent panel among the dozens in the *Atlas* (which today's users of social media cannot fail to associate with the Pinterest) is a constellation of images from various epochs and orders, from reproductions of canonical pieces of art, to cuttings from daily press and catalogue illustrations. In this way, Warburg created an atlas of visual culture where the past overlaps the present, an atlas of visual analogies and tensions, differences and repetitions, condensations and displacements. However, the radicalism of

Warburg's project stems not only from the rejection of hierarchies and "montage regimes", obligatory in traditional approaches to visual culture, prescribing what, with what, and under what conditions they can be juxtaposed and compared. Save for a short introduction to the *Atlas*, the images collected in it can do without any external discourse, written or spoken commentary, which would provide a general, ordering narration, teaching one how to read them and elucidating the criteria of a particular collation. In other words: the images in the *Atlas* can only rely on each other – they analyse, criticise and undermine each other. The chief strategy of Warburg's study is montage, which makes his *Atlas* a pioneer, proto-film-like undertaking (a fact Michaud, Didi-Huberman and Agamben, among others, have turned our attention to¹⁹). Warburg experimented with montage in his several dozen wooden screens, with a passion equal to that of his contemporary Sergei Eisenstein – he juxtaposed different planes, searched for visual rhythms, provoked dialectical clashes.

Because the label *found footage* is often applied to every artistic activity in which found visual material is used, one should differentiate between projects limited to the editing-montage of found material only (the proper "Warburgian" *found footage*, as it is in the case of Burska's films) and those projects which place such material in an external, discursive framework – either as a parallel lecture, illustrated by film fragments or an off-screen commentary, gluing subsequent images (as happens, for instance, in Mark Cousins' film series *The Story of Film* (2011), composed predominantly from found material)²⁰. In the latter case, the fragments of *found footage* are often reduced to an illustrative role and subordinated to the general logic of the spoken discourse. These two types of interpretation of visual

material, on the one hand – a discursive commentary, external to images, and provided in the form of a text or a recording from an off-screen commentary, on the other – montage as a precise intervention into the found footage material – can be compared to the two models of interpretation in psychoanalysis. Probably the most popular model (which has also become popular in other schools of psychotherapy) is that where an analyst listens to the utterances of the analysed person and then gives his interpretation, exposing the proper meaning of the words which the analysed person used (as the Freudian cliché goes, you say "umbrella" but, actually, you mean "phallus"). Thus, the analyst's speech functions like an off-screen commentary, supported by the authority of the psychoanalyst as "the subject supposed to know" and the authority of psychoanalysis itself (additionally, in the classical, psychoanalytical spatial arrangement, the analyst sits "off-screen" – behind the back of the analysed, beyond their field of vision). The French psychoanalyst-dissident, Jacques Lacan, criticised this model, proving that it reinforced the position of the analyst too much, while making the analysed person passive. In Lacan's alternative model, the analyst restricts himself to short and precise interventions into the analysed person's speech – interrupting, processing, changing intonation, clashing words, and creating neologisms. In other words, the analyst is like an editor who works solely on found material (more precisely – the "heard" material) which he cuts, slows down or speeds up, copies and/or loops. By changing the arrangement of and the relation between signifiers, the analyst opens up what the analysed person says to reinterpretation, but shuns away from pronouncing it himself – he suggests the key, symptomatic points, around which an interpretation could spin, and permits the analysed person to formulate it him- or herself.

Bogna Burska activates her viewer in this way. Being aware to what degree contemporary popular culture (whose flagship is Hollywood cinema) shapes both collective and individual fantasies, the artist draws her viewer into analysis of the contemporary cinema, thus leading him or her to self-analysis, to a critical look at his own entanglement in audio-visual clichés and narrative schemes. Being an example of "a pensive spectator" herself, about whom Mulvey writes, Burska encourages her viewers to "sharpen their cognitive focus and (...) ludic sovereignty" which characterises the editor at the editing desk²¹.

¹⁷ On top of that, this type of openness and potentiality characterises the contemporary status of film which, thanks to the evolution of data formats, is instantly disseminated in several possible versions, none of which is final (e.g. DVD with division into chapters, access to different soundtracks, and sometimes – various edited versions: "original", "director's", "expanded", etc.). Not to mention the fact that the digital format opens up unlimited access to a film, making it extremely "fragile" and susceptible to digital deconstruction.

¹⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante*, Minuit, Paris 2002, p. 461.

¹⁹ See Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. by P.P. Hawkes, MIT Press, New York 2004; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas Mnemosyne jako montaż/ The Mnemosyne atlas as a Montage*, Polish trans. by T. Swoboda, [in:] „Konteksty”, no. 2-3 (293-294) 2011; Giorgio Agamben, *Aby Warburg i narodziny kina/ Aby Warburg and the Birth of the Cinema*, Polish trans. by M. Salwa, [in:] „Konteksty”, no. 2-3 (293-294) 2011, p. 148.

²⁰ Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* are a separate case, which many critics consider the filmed counterpart of Warburg's work, being closest to the latter's project. In Godard's series, film fragments are accompanied by both words (both heard from the off and visible on the screen), as well as a kind of meta-space, original shots in which the director appears himself). However, Godard's voice, although recognisable and charismatic, is not the decisive voice but just one of the many which appear in this montage-based Gordian knot which the *Histoire(s)* are. The comments which come from off-screen – often elliptical, poetic – do not serve to explain the relationships between images and make these relationships plain, on the contrary – they compound their intricacy.

²¹ Annette Michelson, *The Kinetic Icon in the Work of Mourning*, [in:] "October", spring 1990, no. 52, p. 23, [quoted after:] Laura Mulvey, op. cit. p. 193.