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The Content as a Formal Element. About Bogna Burska's *A Piece of Jade*

The artistic activity of Bogna Burska has evolved from painting to video art for the last dozen or so years. The artist has always tried to ally the critical dimension of her works with a vehement aesthetical element (please, remember that she graduated from Leon Tarasewicz's atelier at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts) and, by virtue of this, she has occupied a rather unique position in terms of Polish critical art of the first dozen years of the 21st century, her work having a documentary-biased form, subordinated to a particular discourse. The current stage of Burska's work, concentrated on *found footage* pieces, only seemingly over-balances her creation in favour of the critical deconstruction of the contemporary iconosphere of the media. The issue of a specifically understood autonomy of the form is still strongly present in the film creation of the artist who, being focused on analytical studies of plot-related features, has discerned a series of issues which have proved to be very important for the contemporary Polish art scene.

On the one hand, Bogna Burska's *found footage* can be strongly rooted in the context of an increasing interest in narrative in contemporary artistic strategies, these strategies having various manifestations from the so called "cinematographic turn" to references to the art of the old masters. On the other hand, this creation fits into the current trend to return to analytical studies of the film and/ or photographic image. However, this return does not concentrate on the media so much, rather it analyses the media in the wider context of cultural and social changes.

The fact that contemporary art suffers from a chronic inability to build narration, create a protagonist and/or tell a fictitious story, after years of dominant avant-garde and modernist strategies, has recently provoked a considerably strong reversal in Polish art. For example, the so called "cinematographic turn" has appeared, which means that many artists have moved from the field of the visual arts to the creation of full-length feature films. In this way, artists such as Wilhelm and Anka Sasnal, Zbigniew Libera, Anna Molska, and Agnieszka Polska, have created their own feature films, consequently, facing problems with which they are not able to cope, as the discourse of contemporary art could not have prepared them to do so. This is because, on the one hand, in a feature film it is man and his actions who is the basic medium; furthermore, there is the representational approach and emotional identification, along with the narrative and dramaturgy to be considered. Thus, these artists have begun to merge the determinants of the two disciplines in interesting ways. On the other hand, the current interest in narrative among contemporary Polish artists means that they revert to the art of the old masters and its figurative, anecdotal and literary features. The creations of Aleksandra Waliszewska, Jakub Julian Ziolkowski and Maciej Sieńczyk are closer to the domains of culture such as theatre, literature and film, where the protagonist, his story and the drama of his existence is the most important. These artists, rejecting the reductive and hermetic traits of inter-artistic references, have applied their imagination to the creation

of extraordinary worlds, characters and stories, using a universal language, a fact which has translated itself into their success beyond the field of contemporary art.

The creation of Bogna Burska stems from her interest in narrative, but she demonstrates a more analytical approach. Her work is, in a way, a counter-reaction to "the cinematographic turn". The artist's films are not created from the point of a very strict, critical distance to the professional feature film, but they result from her re-working of its fundamental features. They introduce a different type of element to video art, one which is very strongly saturated with cinematic features. This is strictly linked to the proportions between the analytical distance of the "structural" (structure-oriented) film and the immersive and depicting qualities of the cinema, her proportions being different from what have been used to date. Certainly, Burska's *found footage* should be viewed as her own particular disagreement with the ready-made and rather limited formats of film narrative; nevertheless, we will not be able to discover the most important stratum of her artistic strategy if we stop at this level of analysis only. Her work reaches far beyond a mere deconstruction of mainstream cinema.

In her work, *A Piece of Jade*, Burska makes analytical operations based on the juxtaposition of three film "modules". The linking element here is the actor (Jeremy Irons) and the melodramatic plot of three films in which he has acted (Wayne Wang's *A Chinese Box*, Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* and Louis Malle's *Damage*). All three films consist of a "melodramatic filming" of emotions which do not have much in common with real life. We can say that Burska, using the techniques of editing typical of the art of appropriation, stratifies the texts of the analysed films and divulges what they hide. On top of this, she has created her works after the so called "cinematographic turn", so the proportions between fascination with the analysed field and its criticism are disturbed here (certainly with the bias towards fascination). However, I am convinced that Burska introduces a significant innovation into this model – which is rather familiar and common in the field of critical video art – namely, she blurs the borders between the strategies of the structural cinema, concentrated on the formal qualities of the image (its specific rejection of

too strong a textual aspect), and the art of appropriation which tends towards a specific over-production of the text in the deconstruction of the film being analysed. These two strategies have determined the most popular vectors in the development of *found footage* films but, to date, they have remained separate. Burska joins them, treating a part of the films she analyses as a strictly formal element. This is co-related to the overall approach to the issue of emotions in film. Burska, performing generative operations on the contents of the films with Jeremy Irons she analyses, makes their emotional dimension (which predominantly seems to be a love story) gain a purely formal context. This is an extremely interesting operation, I believe, following in the vein of the strategies of analytical and minimal art of the 1960s and 1970s, with a significant innovation, however. Those films observed the division into form and content in a restrictive way, while Burska, by her modular, almost mathematical, operations of juxtaposition and de-composition intensifies the visibility. By doing so, she scrutinises a given motif in an overt way, treating the motif as the palimpsest of the same elements accruing over and over again. Thus, she emphasises its purely formal status and waywardly builds the effect of distance. This effect is encapsulated in operations which render the content of the film autonomous. Here, the autonomy, caused by the treatment of the content as the formal element, becomes a sort of criticism and the point of resistance to the too strong automatism of our reactions towards both the professional feature film and video art, operating with the strategies of deconstruction of the overproduction of text.

Burska's work takes the films with Jeremy Irons from the field of simple affection, automatic "feelings", to the area where our response to the content is not so automatic, where we enjoy a specific freedom of decision. Certainly, this is not the modernist fight against "theatricality" of art, understood after Freud as the production of objects meant to raise the defined reaction of the spectator, which is presented as the negation of art. The point in Bogna Burska's *A Piece of Jade* is a rather different type of experience. What is at stake here, is thus, transition on the level of the receiver from a spectator to the subject.