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A game with the shifting mirrors¹

The artistic activity of Bogna Burska may be analysed with tools from the area of film studies with regard to two issues: female authorship and subversion in the cinema. Both of them are present in the projects: *a game with the shifting mirrors* (2006-2008) and *A Thousand Deaths* (2010-2011), which testify to the artist's cinematic fascination, as well as her way of "reading" and interpreting motion pictures.

The notion of female authorship appears in the works of such authors as Judith Mayne, defining women's cinema, or E. Ann Kaplan², who analyses the presence of women in the cinema "at both sides of the camera": as screen heroines, as well as directors and viewers. Burska also adapts diversified stances towards film text, being both a receiver and creator who gives it a new shape. Notwithstanding her artistic education, she can be considered an author operating within the framework of women's cinema whose determinant exactly is this diversity of approaches which women can demonstrate within and towards the spectacle of film; the changeability of roles becoming women's opportunity to gain a new means of expression, facilitating the re-definition and re-invention of cinematic mechanisms and conventions.

One can say about Burska's creation that it is a form of alternative "cultural production"³, as female scholars label the activities of female directors and artists, based on the negotiating of aesthetical and narrative solutions on the borders between different poetics, styles and media. The effect of Burska's footloose shifting between techniques, styles and types of narration of particular films is reflected in the collage-like construction of her own film works. Her mosaic-like images offer the outlook of poetics, genres and story lines from different epochs. Simultaneously, they become the elements of her game with screen images of concrete people (Christ, Count Monte Christo, Elizabeth I), types of personality (a Lolita, a star, an ageing man), themes (mirror and identification, success and power) or experiences (loneliness, desire, escapism).

Contemporary reflection on the cinema emphasises its dynamism, resulting from the use of electronic and digital technologies. New carriers of image determine not only the method of its recording and reception but, also, its circulation among the public. Consequently, the cinematic potential fostering the evolution of (super)codes of representation increases; similarly, the principles upon which films function are apt to

evolve, whether those currently being created or archival ones. The majority of tropes and stories tackled by Burska proves that she sees potential in a free, continual re-creation of cinematic tradition, restrained neither by historical, aesthetical nor communicative frameworks.

Such an approach of hers, as well as her theoretical considerations are reflected in the works *A Piece of Jade*, from the two series of *a game with the shifting mirrors*, and a film *A Thousand Deaths*, both showing that, indeed, the cinema can be treated as "a source of metaphors facilitating reflection on difficulties in understanding history"⁴. In the case of *A Piece of Jade*, these would be pondering on the history of masculinity, featuring a protagonist with the face of Jeremy Irons, who is a participant and also co-creator of this history. The story of the protagonist is a merger of as many as three film narratives: *Damage* (1992) by Louise Malle, *Chinese Box* (1997) by Wayne Wang, and *Lolita* (1997) by Adrian Layne. In each of the stories, the figures and events which mark the climaxes and turning points in the lives of the depicted characters appear. Burska refashions⁵ episodes to show that, despite narrative variations, the construction of a single, multi-faceted version of the individual life stories of the characters is possible, taking into account different masculine experiences and feelings, as well as the deliberations related to them.

The work *A Thousand Deaths* shows female life-stories in a similar way, pinpointing the most important facts from the lives of Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth I. Both become the protagonists of a collage-like tale, showing how one particular narration can assume different faces, depending on the form of the film used, style of acting, costumes and modes of characterisation. The juxtaposition of dozens of historical threads, made by the artist, permits us to follow the changes in the interpretative approach to British queens, taking also into account cultural and feminist perspectives. Such a de-

piction of female life stories makes Burska's work an example of a message that assumes the specificity of various incarnations of the main female protagonist and contexts related to them. As a result, Burska's message permits us to notice the invariance of representations and readings, linked to "the unspoken history of women that has become mysterious because unrecorded by male chroniclers and overlooked by male historians"⁶.

On the one hand, Burska's "film" projects are the records of a reflective cinematic reception, based on introducing orders into plots and images, in accordance with dominant styles or themes. On the other hand, they are the expression of her fascination with the matter of cinema – its history and heritage. As she admits in one of her comments, she is intrigued by the vision of a parallel world in which "[...] all cinematic narratives happen, forming a single, coherent reality. We perceive them as separate stories only because we watch them separately – as particular films. [...] We can, however, imagine that there is another world and what we are seeing are only fragments which don't look like they are connected with each other, but on closer inspection – they all suit each other very well"⁷.

Burska's approach to cinematic visions and the tradition behind them is linked to the technique of *found footage* which she uses and which is related to the second issue, mentioned above, namely, subversion. The notion of *found footage* itself refers to such a film creation which takes previously existing tapes and recorded images as the starting point. The core of this type of activity lies in the reconstruction of narratives and their depiction in such a way which permits the generating of new meanings that reflect, among other things, the dynamism related to each, subsequent re-playing and re-reading of a given material.

¹ This text uses quotations from essays and interviews used in a chapter devoted to Bogna Burska's work in the book *Władczynie spojrzenia. Teoria filmu a praktyka reżyserki i artystek*, Ha!art 2010.

² Judith Mayne, *The Woman at The Keyhole. Feminism and Women's Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1990; E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of The Camera*, New York: Methuen Inc., 1983.

³ Corinn Columpar, Sophie Mayer, *Introduction*, [in:] *There She Goes. Feminist Film-making and Beyond, Film*, ed. Corinn Columpar, Sophie Mayer, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2009, p. 3.

⁴ Laura Mulvey, *Introduction to the Polish edition*, trans. Jakub Majmurek, [in:] Laura Mulvey, *Do utraty wzroku*, Polish edition of selected writings, ed. Kamila Kuc, Lara Thompson, Kraków 2010, p. 32.

⁵ Bogna Burska co-operates with the film editor Michał Januszaniec.

⁶ Laura Mulvey, *Kino, feminizm i awangarda*, Polish translation of *Film, Feminism and the Avant-Garde* by Jagoda Murczyńska, [in:] Laura Mulvey, *Do utraty wzroku*, Polish edition of selected writings, ed. Kamila Kuc, Lara Thompson, Kraków 2010, p. 61.

⁷ Ewa Gorzadek, *Bogna Burska*, see: http://www.culture.pl/baza-sztuki-pelna-tresc/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/bogna-burska (12.09.2013).

Due to the use of film-editing tools, the tradition of the cinema becomes a repository of images, subsequently transformed into "structural media hybrids"⁸ through creative interference; consequently, the viewers experience even familiar films differently in new situations and contexts, configured with other texts and media messages.

Burska in her works follows her interests concerning the exploration of the cinematic domain, so she admits: "I was curious what the limit to exploring this theme would be. I like watching films and I have always been astonished by all of those parallels and repetitions"⁹. The artist's method is to familiarise herself with these films and reuse them in her works as *found footage*, permitting her to manipulate the narrated stories and images, thus generating a new type of quality. The artist's concept behind the use of "recycled images"¹⁰ transforms "the recycling and reuse of someone else's film tapes" into a creative act, subordinated to a dialogue with the model and the repository of the cinema. In such a dialogic form, based on quotations from other people's works, a subversive element can be embedded, linked to a critical and interfering approach to cinematic heritage and tradition. Subversion, as seen by Amos Vogel¹¹, can be realised twofold in the cinema. First, by violating the convention of classic film narration and the destabilisation of its scheme through the breaking of the principles of objectivism, transparency, unequivocalness and comprehensibility. In effect, the viewer loses the sense of the coherent homogeneity of the fictional world presented to him. This makes him realise that different outlooks and modes of presentation exist. Secondly, subversion can find its realisation through violation of the content which dominates the mainstream cinema, whilst the formal requirements of the cinema of narration are still observed. The latter approach helps her to

accentuate the particular and extraordinary character of a given representation because of things such as minorities (sexual, racial), or controversial and unpopular themes (sex, illness).

The first type of subversion can be found, for example, say, in Burska's *A Thousand Deaths*, where the schematism of a historical record is broken by a multitude of differentiated images and stagings. The seeming multiplication of the main character and scenery shatters the coherent and consolidated structure of a chronicle-like message, simultaneously imposing a definite point of view.

The other type of subversive activity appears in Burska's *A Piece of Jade* – where the first type of subversion is also present – however, the interference mainly touches upon the theme: a man's life and his self-realisation (or its lack), mostly through love and a relationship with a woman. The juxtaposition of three different titles permits Burska to show the process of growing old of the main character and his increasing loneliness, the man becoming more and more separated from reality, whilst sinking into the past and his own memories.

Both of the artist's works result from her application of the *found footage* method, aiming at the transformation of filmed images on the level of their content, form and message. Technical processing predominantly changes the meanings related to the issue of identity and its construction from a gender perspective. Similar strategies in women's cinema, first serve to de-mythologise femininity, depicted in a stereotypical and ideological way in classic cinema, leaving no room for deeper psychological portraits of women and/or the specificity of their experience. Thus, formal experiments and avant-garde solutions have become the method for breaking the restrictive conventions for many female creators. In some ways, *found footage* alludes to this tradition, so

that in using this technique Bogna Burska gains the use of critical tools. The technique is based upon "mistrust towards the accruing and increasingly all-embracing world of industrially provided images, on the one hand, and, on the other – doubts about this way of recording the reality of looks and appearances. [...] mistrust and criticism, and anarchy against the dominance of the type of culture where the image is a commodity"¹².

The disassembling and re-assembling of film narratives and images permits Burska to develop a discussion on the ways identity in popular and artistic cinema become image, as well as cultural phenomena related to identity as such. As an example, one can quote the work *Shooting Star*, which closes the series called *a game with the shifting mirrors*, and which has both a monographic and mythological character. The series is composed from fragments of films with Al Pacino, showing the repertoire of his incarnations and the possibilities of his acting style. This peculiar monograph is ordered by dominant traits, related to the types of personalities he has acted, their temperament, as well as the types of activities and functions which his characters play in the social sphere. A symbolic gathering of the actor's filmography into one story make both him and his output even more intriguing than if each of his roles is admired separately. The effect of the whole, based on juxtaposition and accumulation, corresponds to Burska's desire to make them non-homogenous and ambiguous in total: "I strive for this ambiguity. I also want my work to be more than a mere collection of images – something which offers the same pleasure we enjoy while watching a film, a story"¹³.

This creative presumption, expressed in such words, is linked to another, mythical dimension of *Shooting Star*, which both records an actor's career and illustrates the American mythology of success. Using different images, Burska composes a hero of

many faces, who actualises in various ways the model of masculinity based on career, status, dominance and power. The issue of masculine identity constantly recurs in films with Pacino, whatever the theme or genre of the films are. Collecting all of these threads into one whole facilitates the game with cultural patterns, being translated into stereotyped, popular images and cinematic plots. Therefore *found footage* is the artist's method of working with "narration and against it"¹⁴ in the mode of female directors-experimenters, which gives her the possibility of re-constructing cinematic codes of gender presentation.

The work *God is Vain* – its title repeating a sentence spoken by the heroines of the film *The Colour Purple* (1985, Steven Spielberg) – tackles images of femininity. Black female farmers admire the beauty of the world, reaching the conclusion that the effects of creation result from God's vanity, who confirms his greatness in this way. The composition of the work is subordinated to the images of women who are linked with each other by the motif of a mirror, which they gaze into, admiring themselves. Each of the motifs, which cement images into a whole, concentrate on a female body and sexuality, next to homo-eroticism and desire. These categories create the relationships between the women, prepared either by editing from already existing films or the juxtaposing of selected shots, hindering the viewer from forming a unequivocal definition or the reduction down into a single, universalising pattern. This concerns especially the ambiguous relationships found by Burska in, among other things, *Single White Female* (1992, Barbet Schroeder) which the artist used for her own work. A shared dwelling becomes the terrain of struggle between two women, while one of them tries to take over the identity of the other. A selection of single frames from the intriguing story somehow pin-points the most important elements of that psychological drama, indicating the key moments of the characters' personality transformations.

⁸ Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, *Przeobrażenia sztuki mediów (od filmu do sztuki interaktywnej)*, [in:] Widok WRO media art reader, no. 1 Wrocław 2009, p. 40.

⁹ Kamila Wielebska, *Fatal Attractions Will Liberate Us*, Kamila Wielebska interviews Bogna Burska, <http://www.obieg.pl/rozmowy/4398>, (10.10.2010).

¹⁰ Piotr Krajewski, *Obrazy z recyklingu, obrazy z odzysku. Remix, Sampling, Scratching... O kinie found footage*, [in:] Widok. WRO media art reader, no. 1, Wrocław 2009, p. 72.

¹¹ Amos Vogel's book, *Film as subversive art* is discussed by Łukasz Ronduda in his work: *Strategie subwersywne w sztukach medialnych*, Kraków 2006, p. 51.

¹² Piotr Krajewski, *Obrazy...* op. cit. p. 73

¹³ Kamila Wielebska, *Fatal Attractions...* op. cit.

¹⁴ Teresa de Lauretis, *Guerrilla in the Midst: Women's Cinema in the 80s*, „Screen”, no. 31, 1990, p. 9.

¹⁵ Teresa de Lauretis, *When Lesbians Were not Women*, <http://vsites.unb.br/ih/his/gefem/special/special/delauretis.htm>, (16.09.2010).

Sectionalisation is Burska's tool used here also to construct the images of such women whom Teresa de Lauretis calls "eccentric subjects", because they do not fit within "the institution of heterosexuality"¹⁵. The reason for this maladjustment to the dominant order lies in the feeling of independence, world-views and sexual "non-normality", emphasised by women gazing at each other and their tender gestures. The scene of Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti dancing together in Julie Taymor's film *Frida* (2002), inserted into *God is Vain*, highlights the sexual tension between the two heroines which is not always possible to realise in accordance with the conventions ascribed to gender; the latter also pertaining to other cases. The fact that Burska exposed this particular aspect of female relationships means her work tackles the issue of "ideologically pre-conditioned socio-sexual categories"¹⁶ with which the creators of women's cinema have struggled, denouncing and criticising it. Burska considers the very juxtaposition of selected fragments denunciatory, the juxtaposition permitting her to educe defined associations in her viewer and make the viewer realise the mechanisms behind such categories. As she commented on one of her projects: "[...] the fact that you are able to tell a twenty-something-minute-long story, [...] with an understandable plot shows how our imagination works. We accept many things automatically. [...] Showing this is part of my work"¹⁷.

The construction of particular films in the series *a game with the shifting mirrors*, suggests the presence of the motif of a mirror and reflection, which is particularly conspicuous in the part *God is Vain*, which – as the artist summarises it herself – tells us "about symmetry, reflection, doubling up. [...] About looking at one-

self, and the quest for self-confirmation, too"¹⁸. The two motifs of reflecting surfaces and images visible in them, and the exchange of looks are coupled with the issue of (self)-identity, inscribed in the nature of the spectacle of film. The use of the *found footage* technique permits the artist to reconstruct, as well as negotiate the mechanism of cinematic reception. This, in turn, helps her to provoke a situation where the viewer, following a created image with its numerous connotations and surprising connections, will simultaneously acquire the consciousness that "[...] things might be utterly different, events might follow a different course, [...] and that beneath each image, audio-visual sequence and/or event – elements of the diagenetic sphere – lurks a different image, a different audio-visual relation, and different possible events"¹⁹.

Bogna Burska edits and refashions film iconography, poetics and themes in her works, thus revealing the flickering of identity, which, according to Lena Voss means "being both oneself and someone else, while playing with images differently tailored"²⁰. One can say that the effects produced by Burska through editing and juxtaposing of original frames and/or dialogues confirm "the inexhaustible power to grip our imagination. [...] keeping it reined to screened images"²¹.

The artist's output can be interpreted within the tradition of women's cinema, linked to experimentation with film language, causing "shifts between a cinematic form and the material it represents", which permits "ideas to enter into a relationship with fiction, and thoughts – with acts of the imagination"²². Additionally, Bogna Burska as an author places herself in the position of a "pensive spectator"²³ who views film images in

a way permitting her/him to transfer these images into new temporal and spatial dimensions, along with finding links between them, beyond established patterns and/or juxtapositions.

¹⁶ Chloë Hope-Johnson, *Becoming-Grrrl: The Voice and Videos of Sadie Benning*, [in:] *There She Goes. Feminist Film-making and Beyond*, Film, ed. Corinn Columpar, Sophie Mayer, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2009, p. 177.

¹⁷ Kamila Wielebska, *Fatal Attractions...* op. cit.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, *Przeobrażenia sztuki mediów...*, op.cit. p. 42.

²⁰ Lena Voss, *Filmowe stwarzanie. W konstelacji kobiecych twarzy*, Panoptikum, 2005, no. 4, p. 80.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 83, paraphrased by the author of this paper.

²² Laura Mulvey, *Kino, feminizm i awangarda*, Polish translation of A Reflective Viewer by Marek Stuczyński, [in:] Laura Mulvey, *Do utraty wzroku. Wybór tekstów*, [Selected writings in Polish] ed. Kamila Kuc, Lara Thompson, Kraków 2010, p. 70.

²³ Laura Mulvey, *Widz refleksyjny*, A Polish translation of *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* by Marek Stuczyński, [in:] Laura Mulvey, *Do utraty wzroku. Wybór tekstów* [Selected writings in Polish], ed. Kamila Kuc, Lara Thompson, Kraków 2010, p. 306.