

Stanisław Ruksza

The Past as the Venue of Fantasies. Discussing Historical Representations on the Margin of Bogna Burska's *Found Footage* Films

Found footage films, created by the artist since 2006, occupy a considerable part of Bogna Burska's exceptionally diversified work. These films are one of the many methods/tools of expression which the artist uses. Burska is a versatile artist who carefully adapts a form to a well worked-out concept, which often yields works of a very different character, and which is against the intellectual laziness and inertia of the art world, where many critics and curators are accustomed to an artist's defined method and will commission (reproduce) works from the artist which are similar to what they already know. The artist, in turn, becomes simply a supplier responding to demand.

Bogna Burska in her *found footage* concentrates mostly on the analysis of narrative methods and the modes of representation used by the cinema, both functioning as contemporary carrier of myths, strongly constructing up-to-date imagination for more than a century. However, she has already tackled the issue of the "organisation" and impact of

myths in her earlier works, which permits us to fathom the origins and development of such a stance.

The artist's early works already tackled the oppressive character of myths, as well as the violence embedded in them. They also penetrated the thin border between the abject and the beautiful, and the seductive and the repulsive, as in *Arachne* (2003), where we can view a hairy bird spider crawling in a posh lady's boudoir, or in the artist's blood projects: pictures painted with hands covered with red pigment, stained glass in an unused church (2002, 2004), where paint imitated splashing blood, or, finally, in her corridor and/or room installations flooded with blood (2001-2002). That latter project, as an installation, also bears many features of film, revealed in her skilful construction of suspense.

In her other works, Burska used the technique of juxtaposition of phenomena, e.g. in *Life is Beautiful* (2002), where she composed a set of representations of surgical operations and plants, and *Algorithm* (2002) where she amalgamated images of blooming flowers

with photographs of amputated limbs. Perhaps, it was in these where she unleashed her "listing imperative" – a painstaking method of organising and analysing critically our collective imagination, which resulted in a series of more than twenty *found footage* films.

The *found footage* genre is today perceived as a fully grounded trend in contemporary film, as well as being a subversive and critical activity with regard to the legacy of motion pictures. The genre has also become interesting thanks to its genesis, which stems from a heritage of working in archives and the construction (editing) of atlases of phenomena and notions, preceded by the act of the gathering of things. The leaven of civilisation were hunter-gatherer communities (!), followed by those who encapsulate culture in "the craze of the infinity of lists" (Umberto Eco), akin to the desire for a systematic organisation of knowledge. On the one hand, this over-surplus of accumulation and enumeration indicates chaos and infinity, while the adaptation of a chosen order and cataloguing in accordance with some features, has created an impression of alleged control, on the other hand, it has also been the foundation of scientific methodology.

Manfred Sommer states in his book *Sommeln*. "that today, an aware and rational lifestyle has emerged, based on the production of knowledge through scientific research and studies, recording their results in writing, and their orderly arrangement as a system. The gathering of experience also means the accrual of facts and data, made accessible in a printed form in libraries and in an audio-visual form of computer memories"¹.

The issue of the accessibility of material in the context of *found footage* films is another question, pertinent to policies of copyright and the public domain, especially in connection with historical image in the mass-cinema, which is interesting to us, because it constitutes a tool for the engineering of social imagination.

Each cult and myth needs its own initial moment, its act of foundation which usually launches a historical policy (let us remember, however, that history is an attitude towards the past in Western culture mostly, not in

every culture, though), and the so called "practical past" (Michael Oakeshott's label) in historiography – the way in which groups, institutions and/or individuals perceive the past in their practical daily activities. The past is not free from political dependencies while every representation is indispensably conditional.

As for activities related to the use of history, film art has always played a substantial role, most often serving a dominant ideology (also because of financial concerns – the cinema, as a so called "expensive art", similar to architecture, depends on big financial means), with the exception of a few examples of contemporary historical cinema of an emancipatory nature. The filmed history of humankind and its social perception could constitute a subject for separate studies by itself. The sense of Lenin's sentence "The cinema is the most important art" is premeditatively embodied by various authorities (not only dictatorships), as well as constituting the momentum of all kinds for discourses.

We are not able to access our past directly. A representation is a *clue* to the way we see history, the past. Art history in its development has followed a path from the registration of content to the registration of form, and its critical analysis. Actually, the past does not exist next to its representations but "is the venue for fantasies", as an American scholar of historiography Hayden White wants it. Thus, there is no single history, there are different meanings imposed onto past events instead. One can only compare different versions of the past, acknowledging the most persuasive one. The cinema, in turn, is the ideal venue for persuasion. "It does not give you what you desire but it tells you how to desire", quoting Slavoj Žižek.

Bogna Burska has also undertaken the thread of the historical analysis of events transfigured by the cinema. One of them is *The Battle of Grunwald*, the other – *A Thousand Deaths*; both leaning upon filmed representations of past events but also having very important prototypes in painting.

A Thousand Deaths is an attempt at the reconstruction of the English Tudor Queen, Elizabeth I, called The Great. Material is composed here from twenty

¹ Manfred Sommer, *Sommeln. Ein philosophischer Versuch*, Polish translation by Jarosław Merecki, Warszawa 2003, p. 452.

feature films containing her story, and other films dealing with the history of England, not necessarily those in which Elizabeth played a key role (the moment of the moment of the future monarch was taken from films about Henry VIII in which the figure of Elizabeth was marginal to the story of the king's marriage with Anne Boleyn, those films offering something like a trailer to future history).

In the chronological narration, adopted by the artist, the queen always remains in the centre of the action and picture. Elizabeth's entourage is reduced to the necessary minimum, facilitating the readability of the course of events. The anachronic narration of the story of "Pan-god" who rules and is the nub of the story, has deliberately been preserved to replace the today's analysis of ideological "contraptions" and political-economic conditions which fostered historical events. Burska, amidst such traditional story-telling, purposely chooses women form among many other characters and introduces them into the historical arena, as women have only recently been ruled out of common history. Thus, besides the queen herself, other heroines also occupy much space in this compiled biography: her mother Anne Boleyn, sister Mary I and Mary Stuart Queen of Scots.

What becomes conspicuous here is the emancipatory bias of these biographies. Bogna Burska in her artistic statement on the *found footage*, emphasises that *A Thousand Deaths* is "the portrait of a woman who trespassed the limits established by culture and who undoubtedly can be called one of the most interesting personalities of the past millennium"².

The artist uses a similar catalogue of references for the heroine in her video *Margareth* (2006), where we can observe the protagonist cutting her neck in the form of a bloody necklace. The artist makes references here to the archetypal and cursed eponymous character, referring to women such as: Gretchen (Faust's beloved), Margot (Queen of France) and Margerita (from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margerita*).

As Hayden White writes in his essay on *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*: "The ability to imagine a set of events as belonging to the same order of significance requires some metaphysical principle [...] in other words, it requires the presence of a 'subject', common for all of the references [made] in various sentences, recording the occurrence of events. If such an object exists he is 'The Lord' whose 'years' are considered the manifestation of His potency which makes events take place"³. There appears the need for a central principle, organising the discourse, which is both "realistic and has a narrative structure". Usually, it is the figure of someone holy, a ruler-demiurge whose activity is legitimised by historical necessity. In Burska's film it is the subject of Elizabeth, whose figure constitutes a way-word clasp, enfolding the whole like a feminist manifesto: "There is only one Lady", "No man is going to rule over me", "Let tyrants fear".

Among the images of the rulers of modern Europe, the iconography of Elizabeth I is worth special attention. Certainly, every ruler understood the importance of the symbolism and representation of power. That was one of the main tools of the hierarchical arrangement and the vertical direction in communication between the ruler and their subjects. Elizabeth was exceptionally aware of the power of images so she meticulously controlled and shaped them, also because of the rare situation where she was a female on the throne (instead of a man as a ruler). In comparison to other monarchs of modern Europe who ruled for a long time (for instance Spanish the Philip II) she has few portraits. The majority of them are a frontal representation of her in her glory as the Virgin Queen. "Private" renderings of her are very scarce, e.g. *Elizabeth Playing the Lute* (the end of the 16th century) by Nicholas Hilliard. In *A Thousand Deaths*, Burska additionally includes the catalogue of the filmed iconography of Elizabeth, exceptionally favoured by British directors

of series (including para-documentary series) in the 20th century.

The films from which the artist composed her film also permitted the artist to "humanise" Queen Elizabeth I and enrich her legend with new attributes. We can see private situations, the fight against convenience, hesitation and weaknesses (the words expressed being: "Am I from stone?"), growing old (an obsessive removal of mirrors) – everything, in fact, which is missing from former iconography and which has been compensated by literary fantasies to date. The material on which the artist worked indicates an extraordinary consistency in the Queen's legend – the same gestures, words and actions fluently move from one film to another, from one actress onto another; the catalogue of the protagonist's similarity of gestures, suggesting a precisely worked-out iconography.

The story is seemingly broken/complemented by the faces of different actresses who "offer" their faces to the original model hiding behind them. The artist undertook a similar theme in her works *A Star* (2006/2008) and *A Very Bad Dream of the Count of Monte Christo* (2006/2007) where the situation is the reverse – the face of the same actor gives film life to different characters.

The motif of the construction of identity emphasises the artifice of the cinematographic image of reality and, at the same time, facilitates our distance towards the persuasive power of the cinema (situationists have used this quality of *found footage*). Paradoxically, however, Burska's film causes one to become engaged in this, despite one's absolute awareness of how the material is constructed – partially, this is because one knows the theme, the story and its representation and, partially, because one expects a surprise – perhaps a shift in the linear thread or a denouncement of its exceptional mode of representation caused by its palpable multiplication. The film deliberately adds aesthetic aspects to history to make it more attractive (beautiful and demanded) than it might have actually been in reality. Commercial historical films, addressed to a wide public, have usually been criticised by professional historians for their being too literary or too feature-biased (similar to the earlier case of "historical paintings") in which the narration applies tricks to

grasp and sustain the viewer's attention and suspense. Burska consciously undertakes such a mode of narration, spinning the action by subsequent incarnations of the heroine. Nowadays, history has ceased to be the domain of historians.

Bogna Burska's film *The Battle of Grunwald* (2011) was realised for the exhibition *Side by Side. Poland – Germany. A 1000 Years of Art and History*, in Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau, curated by Anda Rottenberg, tackling a Polish-German neighbouring in which *The Battle of Grunwald* has been, many a time, a tool of historical politics.

"The framework" of the film is the eponymous painting by Jan Matejko (or, practically, its film copy) from Stanisław Bareja's sitcom *Alternatywy 4*. The film opens with a scene with a group of porters (one of whom says: We've got only one picture left) who carry a huge canvas up the stair-well in a block of flats in communist Poland. Next, the camera registers the painting itself, however – because of Burska's interference – it transforms into Tomasz Bagiński's trailer of a 3D project of *The Battle of Grunwald*. Subsequently, fragments appear from, among others, Aleksander Ford's film *Krzyżacy*, computer games featuring the battle elements, youtube films featuring Lego bricks with the motif of the Grunwald Battle, photographs of historical documents, and shots of the actions of reconstruction groups enacting the Mediaeval battle.

What comes into the foreground in *The Battle* are the politics of history, the event itself, as well as works of propaganda created for political reasons, the screen fantasy of a given time and the conscious transformations. The battle under discussion has been a tool for national politics in Poland, Germany, Lithuania and the Soviet Union since the 19th century. In various times and systems, it reinforced, for instance, anti-German stereotypes (Poland after 1945 and the USSR from the 1930s), anti-Western feeling (during the cold war the Teutonic Knights were the representatives of imperialism fighting against the progressive powers of socialist Europe, or national awareness (Poland from the end of the 19th century or Lithuania from 1918 on). Matejko's vision of *The Battle of Grunwald* (1875-78, National Museum in Warsaw), deliberately painted to "cheer up

² Quoted after: Bogna Burska, portfolio of *found footage* films, made accessible to the writer.

³ Hayden White, *Znaczenie narracyjności dla przedstawiania rzeczywistości*, Polish translation of *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, by Marek Wilczyński, [in his:] *Poetyka pisarstwa historycznego*, ed. Ewa Domańska and Marek Wilczyński, Kraków 2000, p. 157.

hearts” consciously neglected the true course of historical events, offering an explanation of the teleological victory of the Poles over their Teutonic oppressor (at the time of its painting, it embodied the Prussian occupant). The persuasive power of this painting is documented by materials selected for the film by the artist. Jan Matejko’s canvas, along with a later novel *Krzyżacy* [*The Knights of the Cross*] by Henryk Sienkiewicz from 1897–1900, were the first influence on Aleksander Ford’s film *Krzyżacy* from 1960 which has since been the main source of common knowledge about the event and the “sparkling” of the myth. The fancifully transformed narration of the film, nowadays generally acknowledged (e.g. infantry did not take part in the battle) determines the route taken by Burska’s filmed catalogue.

The artist facilitates our realisation of how new versions of the story are comfortably accommodated in the Matejko-Ford myth of Grunwald, and how they depend on it. In doing so, the artist includes, among other things, video recordings of reconstruction groups, a type of a romantic *fantasy-story*, indulging in the fancy of the Middle Ages. The latter are a fancy escape from the real to the spectacle, in which it is costume which determines the activities. From a scientific point of view, a reconstruction of a battle has no sense unless it brings something new to the perspective of knowledge.

Burska’s operations bear some comical traits, which, in fact, makes her analysis of myth a pleasure to watch. For example, the artist inserts the shots of Lego-brick “knights” (Polish and Teutonic) singing the Bogurodzica [Polish: *Mother of God*] hymn, or a collective watching of an international match (today’s equivalent of a battle) against a huge copy of *The Battle of Grunwald*, bent to suit the measurements of the walls of a flat (film material from *Alternatywy 4*). The artist depicts the commercial power of history in its pop version which, against its pathetic presumptions, makes its own world infantile because of its popularising tricks, thus stripping it of its own myth.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 169.

There is also, on one level, reference to artistic tradition in Burska’s work. Matejko’s painting, as well as the person of the painter himself (corresponding to the figure of Henryk Sienkiewicz in the field of literature) is the stereotype of painting in Polish society, his representation of Grunwald – one of the most important masterpieces of Polish art. Nevertheless, the painting has gained a couple of way-ward paraphrases. Various artists made reference (most often ironical) to both Matejko’s painting and Ford’s film. Recently these have been: Edward Kłosiński (1997), the Łódź Kaliska group (1999), Kamil Kuskowski (2008), and Edward Dwurnik (2010). In Bogna Burska’s film the “authority” of the work of art, as well as a fantastic and heroic national myth are undermined by the preservation of its allegedly coherent and teleological narration, built in accordance with the nineteenth-century principles for a historic construction. The latter, woven from clichés, is in fact the protagonist of the work, showing how the new versions of the myth, which are continually exposed to political and marketing manipulations, can locate themselves comfortably in its fabric.

To finish, let us recall Hayden White again, who wrote about history gaining narrative-like features, saying that the narrative representation of real events emerges from the desire for the events presenting a coherent, integral, full and complete image of life which can only be imaginary. A con-fiction, that sequences events that bear the formal traits of a story, telling of imagined events, could only have its source in the sphere of wishful thinking, day-dreaming and fantasies⁴.