

NEWSREEL 55: WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

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Newsreel 55, a work created by Nika Autor in collaboration with Marko Bratina, Jurij Meden and Ciril Oberstar (whose names appear in the film's credits), is an exciting exploration of the possibilities offered today by what was perhaps the most widely exploited documentary genre. The title was a pragmatic response to the fact that 54 newsreels were filmed in Slovenia between 1946 and 1951; *Newsreel 55* thus continues the tradition from the point where it ended more than sixty years ago. But this "continuation" takes place in a distinctly unique, authorial way, one that pays homage to the newsreel form but at the same time subverts a series of its main characteristics. *Newsreel 55* is at the same time a wholly specific film, a cultural and political venture in which Nika Autor constantly undermines its basic orientation, which encompasses a series of formal newsreel characteristics, by adding elements from a number of other documentary (sub)genres. The subversion of content and form lies principally in the first-person approach – the filmmaker's inscription in the body of the film, which unhinges the objectivistic discourse by which the "incontestable truth of events" is conveyed. Instead of an attempt at affirming the documentary vision of authenticity, we are faced with questions and reflections concerning the quest for the most suitable image for conveying class struggle. This adds a personal dimension to the work, giving it the feel of an essay. Nika Autor's film is evidence of the fact that every historical revival of established film forms inevitably involves an awareness of their necessary subversion; for the choice of form is first and foremost a political and moral decision that necessarily demands a reconsideration and reformulation every time it is revived for the purposes of a struggle for freedom.

Newsreel 55 is a highly complex work in terms of both content and form, going beyond the relatively simple conventions of the newsreel genre itself even though it remains within the broad formal parameters of certain classic newsreel approaches. Its basic formal conception is based on an episodic form, but its structural line is shaped by a logic that diverges radically from the traditional approach. Instead of the standard hierarchical organisation of an established sequence of contents, we follow various thematic sections that are elliptically connected according to the dynamics of the relation between the chronology of the growing class struggle and the psychopathology of the capitalist system that transforms everything into consumer goods for its own benefit – including the most incisive forms of critique aimed at it. The internal logic of the film's elements is governed by the filmmaker's first-person commentary; her personal experience forms the basis for the interweaving of the vision of individual

memories with the search for the possibility of a suitable – new or renewed – image of class struggle. In the context of the affirmation of general newsreel characteristics, we should draw attention to the film’s episodic structure, the predominant emphasis on current events, the use of collage, the journalistic approach and the inclusion of protest music.

The subverting, or at least relativising, of basic newsreel characteristics in Nika Autor’s film is much more complex than their affirmation. We can speak of three degrees of subversion: formal, formal and content-related, and content-related (the importance of this last one is in no way diminished because the form of the newsreel determines the content). The subversion of form involves in particular the use of a first-person narrator, with the result that an objective approach is replaced by subjective emotion, while interviews are replaced by the filmmaker’s commentary. The way the filmmaker addresses the viewer directly from the standpoint of her own personal experience of the events and her thoughts about them is a key characteristic of *subjective documentary* (with all its subgenres), but it is clearly anomalous in the context of a form that is deliberately “objectivistic” in nature. The second visible deviation from classic newsreel is the introduction in the background of the symbolic leading figure – Slava Klavora (a partisan and World War II national hero), who is omnipresent throughout the film. The key deviation in form and content can be seen in three narrative lines that elliptically intertwine, shunning the principles of linear causality – the individual historical, the formally journalistic and the politically engaged narrative lines. Each of these belongs individually to the narrative infrastructure of the newsreel, but if they are intertwined they can be seen as a relativisation of established characteristics. The main content-related subversion here is personal reflection, which is present both explicitly and implicitly. This personal reflection represents the paradigmatic thematic anchor of *essayistic documentary filmmaking*, while a traditional newsreel, on the other hand, is as a rule not directed towards itself, but merely towards the interpretation of events, which is crucial for the affirmation or reinforcement of the information provided and consequently its “truthfulness”.

The last subversion, however, represents – perhaps paradoxically – one of the two central points of the film by which Nika’s vision of the newsreel as a whole succeeds or fails. At the core of the film’s explicit self-reflection lies a dilemma regarding the status of the image, and the very possibility of the image, at a time when the fact that “there has never been a document of culture that is not simultaneously one of barbarism” (in Benjamin’s words) has become self-evident (if we paraphrase the diction of the film itself). In contrast to the traditional newsreel approach, which takes the “real image” as a formal starting point, Nika Autor includes the dilemmas she faced with regard to the appropriateness of images among the project’s main thematic axes, both at the

individual, personal level and the universal level. On the former level, she questions her personal image of the past, which, despite its personal charge, possesses a historical character supported by a Benjaminian argument, for in her recollection of being accepted into the Union of Pioneers this image symbolises one of the iconographies of the former Yugoslavia. In order to become meaningful, this personal image must necessarily be recognised in the present, otherwise it is inevitably threatened by oblivion: “What image would I have shot if I had had a camera in 1989? The real image of the past whooshes by. Shattered images that not even memory or celluloid tape can wrest from oblivion.” This commentary from the film refers directly to the aspect of Benjamin’s *dialectical image* (as a form of materialistic historiography) that represents the possibility of resurrecting the past by referring to it – a reference that is not necessarily bound to the visual value of the image, but to all possible forms of legibility. This is why the quotations, writings and intertitles as used by Nika Autor are a legitimate composite part of its structuring.

The dialectical image is therefore bound up with a dynamics in which the relation between past and present changes according to the way we contemplate the past. This is what the filmmaker of *Newsreel 55* had to recognise before she could even start thinking about the dilemmas regarding the possible images of current events, images that enable one to trace the darkest horizons of those current events. The dialectical image is the uncertain image that the film defines in all its fragility: “A simple image: Inadequate – but necessary. Inaccurate – but true.” At the same time, the dialectical image also opens up a path to another reflection aimed at more general aspects of its appropriateness. This path emerges in perhaps the most traumatic segment of the film focused on the tragic fact of the Omarska concentration camp during the war in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The commentary taking place against the abstract visual transition between the 1992 archival TV footage and present-day scenes of the 2012 commemoration ceremony in Omarska raises a few key questions regarding the possibility of visually representing genocides and the status of images when discussing them: “The image became a monument. Created in a vacuum, without the air for inhalation or the space for exhalation, it roused the oblivion buried alive in the memory of the Holocaust and triggered the conflict regarding its own reality.” This text refers to a heated debate about the (un)representability of intolerable images from the most horrific episodes of human history – the question of whether the impossibility of comprehending the dehumanising experiences of people in Nazi death camps and their contemporary equivalents across the world can be conveyed in images or represented. Is the (audio)visual representation of the Holocaust possible, or can certain events simply not be represented? Can we thus talk of a specific unrepresentability in which no image can show the reality of a crime without the risk of being obscene? Nika Autor thus extends the genocidal facts of Omarska

and other concentration camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina by stating explicit dilemmas that crystallised with the conflict mentioned: “They said: Es war ein falsches Bild. A misleading image. Falsches Bild . . . created with the shooting angles and editing. Falsches Bild . . . another false witness of hell on earth. Falsches Bild . . . a tool for erasing historical non-events.”

The next fundamental point of *Newsreel 55* can be seen in its approach to examining the relationship between individual and collective identification. This point opens an important dialogical link to the discussions about the gap between the concept of collective consciousness and the commitment to a personal conception of freedom, as well as the reflection on the paradigm of (the resurrection of the necessity of) class struggle. What is essential for Nika Autor’s project in the various forms of relations between collective and individual identification is that she effects a double (self)identification: in order to inscribe herself as an artist in the collective regime of resistance, she first inevitably has to reflect on and affirm her own (even if uncertain) position in the world and to the world. It therefore comes as no surprise that the first third of the film focuses on questioning the personal possibility of “preserving” the world’s image. For what is needed first is the filmmaker’s own “recognition” (self-recognition), individual self-awareness or intimate subjectivation – as a way of reshaping the experiential field – on the basis of which she can realise the film’s key act: the performative act of naming the people of the resistance: “We are marching towards Liberty Square in the footsteps of the workers from 24 years ago. Where organised industrial workers marched, today there troops the mob forgotten by the state. We.” The naming that extends beyond its immediate meaning must also receive its visual expression in order for the performative (in the context of the performative documentary mode) to be completed. Visual confirmation is provided by the footage of demonstrations marked by the characteristic guerrilla approach of being right in the middle of the action, whence we cannot expect an “impartial” image but only an audiovisual recording whose viewpoint is subjected to chaotic action. Within the interweaving of such “mobbish” pictures and sounds, the naming of a new group of people – the community of rebellious resistance – has characteristics similar to the action of the opposing side, which transforms the “protests” into “resistance” by banning them. The performative aspect of the banning of the protest becomes its legitimation, as the film’s narrative (narrator) highlights: “With the excuse of the demonstrations being illegal, they finally give us the right to resistance, expression, political thought.”

In terms of its visual conception, the work’s decisive quality can be seen in the way various kinds of visual material are composed. The first kind is the spontaneous expression of the event filmed by Nika Autor, which is presented in a rough and raw way. In *Newsreel 55*, this can be seen most clearly if we

compare the scenes showing the 1988 workers' protests with the footage of the 2012 uprising in Maribor. While the archival footage had clearly gone through the entire distillation process of the medium of television, for which it was filmed, the shots from the heart of the uprising are simply a rough, unfiltered set of pictures, which can also be distorted to the point of unrecognisability due to the specific conditions of their making. That is why the chaotic nature and uncertainty of the situation and the atmosphere in which they were shot represent their main "mobbish" trait. The second form of guerrilla pictography concerns the way images are combined with the same charge but different semantic values and appear at different points in the film, but connect associatively at a higher synthetic level. This is evident, for example, in the consonance between the shot directly into the dazzling searchlight of the police helicopter monitoring the event in the overcrowded streets of Maribor and the eye of the camera looking directly into the sun in the broiling sky over Omarska; or the blurred abstract elements that underlie the semantic emphases of the (written or spoken) commentary, but with their "imagelessness" at the same time also underscoring the status or question of the (im)possibility of a certain kind of image.

In our examination of the relationship between the affirmation of established newsreel practices and their subversion in *Newsreel 55*, we have not yet touched upon the basic characteristic of the newsreel genre – its seriality – for the very simple reason that *Newsreel 55* is the first work that sets out to form part of the development of the series discontinued as long ago as 1951. The number in the title suggests not only looking to the past but also the possibility of continuing "a new count" and it is to be hoped that the series is continued. We are convinced that further use of the newsreel form as a research and propaganda tool with the formally analytical approach and intuitively poetical touch demonstrated by Nika Autor systematically confirms and actively affirms the realisation that Thomas Waugh declared to be the necessary starting point of committed documentary filmmaking as long ago as 1984: "To paraphrase Marx, a committed filmmaker is not content only to interpret the world but is also engaged in changing it."