25

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:
Barren Battles: Reconstruction
author:
Iwona Kurz
source:
Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 25 (2019)
URL:
https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2019/25-present-history/futile-battles
doi:
https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2019.25.2102
publisher:
Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture
affiliation:
SWPS University
University of Warsaw

keywords:

re-enactment; photography; panorama; memory of war

abstract:

Commentary on Agnieszka Rayss'o It's War(2019)

Iwona Kurz - B. 1972. Works in the Institute of Polish Culture at University of Warsaw. Main field of interests: history of Polish culture of XX century in visual perspective, anthropology of body and gender, anthropology of visual culture. Author ofTwarze w tłumie (Faces in the Crowd. Views of the heroes of collective imagination in Polish culture 1955–1969; Bolesław Michałek Award for the best film studies book in 2005; Nike Literary Award: short-listed for the best book in 2005), co-author ofObyczaje polskie. Wiek XX wkrótkich hasłach (Polish Everyday Culture. 20th Century in Short Entries,2008), editor ofFilm i historia. Antologia (Film and History. Anthology, 2008), co-editor of readersAntropologia ciała(Anthropology of the Body,2008) andAntropologia kultury wizualnej(Anthropology of Visual Culture,2012).

Barren Battles: Reconstruction

Panorama



Agnieszka Rayss, *Landscape with a corpse* (project *So It's War...*), 2019

In the texts accompanying the exhibition *This Means War*, photographer Agnieszka Rayss[1] and curator Agnieszka Pajączkowska directly set their project's discursive frame by invoking books by Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, and Nicholas Mirzoeff. These concern criticism of the visual construction of wars, waging them by means of technologies of vision and recording, and producing pictorial narratives about them. Their context mainly embraces modern (World War II for Sontag) and contemporary wars (with a focus on Vietnam for Sontag and on the "humanitarian intervention" in Iraq in September 2001 for Butler). Employing the concept of the "complex of visuality" as proposed by Mirzoeff in *The Right to Look*, we may mention here a battle complex of visuality, which constructs the desired political visions of war to the same extent that it determines the frames of conducting military campaigns using techniques of image production, reproduction, and distribution.

However, Agnieszka Rayss's work is not analytical. The multiplicity of images and imaging devices of war serve as its background and, in a sense, its source. The relevant point of reference here is to historical re-enactments as practices that feed on such representations. In her series of photographs and short videos, the artist proposes a variation on this theme – a reconstruction of the practices of re-enactment.

Her photographs evoke the visual genre of panoramic painting.

An all-encompassing representation that seeks to frame the vastest possible section of a battlefield[2] and produce the illusion of bursting these frames, an illusion of reality based on the fact that the space of the panorama is (strives to be) the only visibility available to the viewer. It is also noteworthy, however tautologically, that such representation is picturesque. Yet the modern-day panorama proposed by Agnieszka Rayss abandons a specific battlefield and gravitates toward a generalized landscape of war, constructing it by means of literally just a few signs: a corpse, a break for grazing, a tank, smoke from explosions. The signs are not abundant, and at the same time are devoid of the density of a symbol,[3] purged of cultural references; they are associations that operate instead on a ready-made basis.

Susan Sontag noted that what we remember are not events, but their image. However, what she meant was the image as the record of an event, a testimony. Nowadays, such individual and collective memory feeds rather on images as reconstructions and imaginary visions of events, situated in the world of fiction. Their context is neither history nor the moment of publication, much less the event itself, but rather other images, be they documentary or fictional. With time – and it does not necessarily need to take long – documentary representations detach themselves from their historical context; they lose their references or become deliberately altered to serve as tools of persuasion, to preserve an image desired by the dominant political or entertainment narrative. Above all, they merge with fictional representations, thus forming a single generalized vision.

The proposed "panorama of war" is already detached from any narrative, whether historical or fictional – it is simply some kind of image that we saw somewhere in the past, but outside the chain of images that form a story. The viewer is trapped and resorts to

guesswork: September 1939 or the Polish–Soviet war of 1920? But the details are blurred, the knowledge uncertain, and different wars of the 20th century and their various images overlap. Armed forces resemble armed forces, war machines resemble war machines. Such an image would appear similar to an afterimage, if we were to choose from various forms of images of memory: it provides outline and composition; it can be recognized. However, as opposed to an afterimage, the physiology of the eye, which retains on the cornea the effect of the experience of seeing, is not at work here. These images are not indicative of *longue durée* or succession; they are not rooted, even weakly, in memory and in the body; their character is mechanical rather than organic. Agnieszka Rayss presents them in a sterilized aesthetic form – not only are her photographs and videos detached from the context of events and history, but also reduced in emotional terms as they do not work with affects; anger, pain, fear, and aggression are absent. The subdued colors and consistent use of the long shot, devoid of details (unlike 19th-century panoramas), reinforce the impression of sterility.

Cannonade

The project owes its title to the initial words of the "special announcement" broadcast by Polish Radio after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. "This means war" – stated the radio announcer,and added: "All of our affairs and issues lose priority, all of our public and private life now follows a different track, [...] we are all soldiers." He also promised to fight until victory. We can venture to say, however, that while many of



Agnieszka Rayss, *Landscape with an explosion and running soldiers* (project *So It's War...*), 2019

us remember the excerpt "This means war" from "somewhere," we do not necessarily know or remember the rest of the announcement.

The memory of the sounds of war – sounds of fighting and audio records – appears to be much less recognized in research terms than the memory of images. In the Polish context, World War II – an event of central importance for the collective imagination – mainly remains mute in documentaries or speaks through just a few radio recordings. However, on a scale incomparable with the modern-day operations of television, it was radio that served as the main medium which mediated communal experience of the historical event.

In her videos, Agnieszka Rayss "dilutes" and at the same time sterilizes the sound of war. Fernand Léger wrote about his experience of World War I as follows:

> The war came. The war was gray and camouflaged; light, color, tone were forbidden on pain of death. A life of silence, a nocturnal, groping life; everything the eye could register and perceive had to be hidden and disappear.
> Nobody saw the war – hidden, disguised, creeping on all fours, earth-colored – the useless eye saw nothing. Everyone "heard" the war. It was a vast symphony that no musician or composer has yet equaled.[4]

In a film or a photograph, the viewer must see and recognize. This is a truism, but it emphasizes the fact that in war narratives it is the audio layer that usually serves to express cognitive confusion. A cannonade in which center one finds him or herself – unlike a panorama – serves to convey the perspective of an individual lost in battlefield chaos. The audio layer in Agnieszka Rayss's short films becomes diluted as it is reduced to a single kind of sound. There are no screams; sounds do not vary depending on the distance, intensity, or type of shelling. What

remains is the majestic sound of explosions, it may even encourage contemplation, a distant echo of war. *This Means War* works at the level of sound, just like the "special announcement" and, like the images in the project, it refers to something we have already heard but do not know the whole it forms part of. If it arouses anxiety, it happens precisely because – as in the case of the images – everything has been sterilized of the affective context and reduced to a singularity deprived of historical roots.

Parade



Agnieszka Rayss, *March* (project *So It's War...*), 2019

The project features another disturbing dimension of the audio layer. In one of the films, a re-enactment of a parade is accompanied by the sound of marching. The participants – civilians first, followed by soldiers – take part in an event that is difficult to define: is it an escape, an attack, a passage, or perhaps a pilgrimage that has nothing to do with war? There is a painting at the front, and everybody, regardless of their uniformed affiliation, walks with similar steps and in harmony. Snare drums beat out a rhythm that may not entirely set the rhythm of the steps, but effectively dominates the performance. The march is a parasitical musical genre – understood here as an external organism that takes control of the host. According to Pascal Quignard: "Music's prey is the human body. Music is invasion and capture of this body." And further: "In hearing, man is held captive."[5] Quignard pursued his reflection in the context of the popular classical pieces, often marches, played by the concentration camp orchestra at KL Auschwitz. Through rhythm,

they enabled the unification of music with the body, thus subjecting the body to the discipline of even steps.

In the film *The Third Man* (2010) (www.erikbunger.com/the-third-man), Erik Bünger, a Swedish artist and researcher, explores exactly the same connections between music and the body discussed by Quignard, suggesting that the mechanical character of popular music, the appeal of melodies that we like because we know them, manifests their parasitical power:

> [It] infects humanity at some point in prehistory and then spreads like ripples from body to body. Some researchers propose that song may constitute the very first technology in the history of humanity; a way to control the emotions and movements of other beings before words and weapons.[6]

Hidden in the mind of each of us, this parasite also eats away our memory, leaving a void in which a song is nevertheless constantly repeated – as Bünger boldly interprets an example of popular tune by Abba. This song may also be replaced with the drumbeat of a military march. The participants of the parade reconstructed by Agnieszka Rayss have forgotten where they are going, for what cause, and in which war – but the rhythm carries them within the ruins of history.

Susan Sontag compared the experience of an event to its photographic image as follows: "In the real world, something is happening and no one knows what is going to happen. In the image-world, it happened and it will forever in that way."[7] It seems that what she meant was the paradoxical duration of a moment preserved in a photograph, its eternal freezing of motion. However, as I have written elsewhere,[8] nowadays something that happened and was preserved in a photograph will always happen that way; it will be constantly repeated, re-enacted on the basis of a photograph in a unique photographic-performative alliance.

Rebecca Schneider calls this a "durational event – ongoing through the circulatory aspects of the hail, the reverberatory mechanics of interpellation in call and response."[9] What is in a photograph will surely happen again. What is happening now has already been captured previously in a photograph. The parade reconstructed by Agnieszka Rayss, a sterile reconstruction of historical re-enactment, would refer to Schneider's concept, in which the re-enactment of an event is based on memory or on "residue" embedded in the body, "in a network of body-to-body transmission of enactment."[10] But this transmission long ago lost its directness, or rather it conveys indirect experience. It is also not based on an organic impulse, but on external, mechanical stimulation.

The first ever grand narrative of war – Homer's *Iliad* – begins with a call to verbalize affect:

> Sing now, goddess, the wrath of Achilles the scion of Peleus, ruinous rage which brought the Achaians uncounted afflictions.[11]

Various kinds of postmodern historical re-enactments – so popular as a hobby nowadays – also brim with emotions. These are turned inwards, however, founded on a narcissistic living out of the self that lives out the experience of performance, on aesthetic self-congratulation – uniformed and with weapons. They arouse anxiety as a form that awaits, perhaps ready to become fulfilled. Agnieszka Rayss reconstructs re-enactment as such an empty form, demonstrating its barren character. This may inspire hope for the abolition of wars, given that we are moving so far from them. But it may also send out an ominous message about the ongoing spectral reproducibility of parades, marches, and cannonades, about "soldiers" wound like mechanical toys by a stream of sounds and images.

1 Agnieszka Rayss, *This Means War*, curator : Agnieszka Pajączkowska, Fort Institute of Photography, September 20 – November 10, 2019, http://instytutfotografiifort.org.pl/wystawy/agnieszka-rayss-a-wiec-wojna.

2 For the record, *The Racławice Panorama* is 114 meters wide, 15 meters high.

3 An example of such a symbolization process can be found in the use of photographs from liberated concentration camps, as described by Barbie Zelizer. Immediately, practically on the way from the photographic darkroom to the magazine printing press, they were losing their status as testimony and turning into a symbol accusing the Germans of their atrocities, transforming from an image of record into an image of memory. Cf. Barbie Zelizer, "From the Image of Record to the Image of Memory: Holocaust Photography, Then and Now," in: *Picturing the Past: Media, History and Photography*, eds. Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

4 Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting*, trans. Alexandra Anderson (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 120.

5 Pascal Quignard, *The Hatred of Music*, trans. Matthew Amos and Fredrik Rönnbäck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 145.

6 Erik Bünger, statement concerning the film *The Third Man* (2010), www.erikbunger.com/the-third-man (accessed April 10, 2020).

7 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 168.

8 Cf. Iwona Kurz, "Obrazy Zagłady, obrazy uchodźców," *Dialog* no. 3 (2016), 38–49.

9 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 140.

10 Rebecca Schneider, "Performance Remains," *Performance Research* 6:2 (2001), 102.

11 Translated by Rodney Merrill.