

Projection & Past

Interview with Zbyněk Baladrán / Ingrid Commandeur, Metropolis M magazine, Utrecht, 2004

On view at Manifesta 5 was Zbyněk Baladrán's Projection 1.2., a DVD installation comprising historical found footage. Why does this young Czech artist see the need to produce 'art of historical reflection'? An interview.

Ingrid Commandeur: At Manifesta 5 you showed your DVD installation Projection 1.2. in which you combine all kinds of old Czech motion pictures, both historical news-items and home video's of the Stalinist period of the 1950's and 1970's. You stated in the catalogue: 'It's kind of like when an archaeologist more or less accidentally uncovers a layer of earth and finds traces of the past', and 'each of the images is part of our past and memory, even if it isn't a historical fact'. Can you further explain this?

Zbyněk Baladrán: *'At the end of my studies, I discovered by chance our family's 8 mm film reels from 1965. I realised that there exists a kind of undiscovered parallel history in motion pictures that portrays the past in fragments and from many different angles. I had the feeling that my distance and knowledge of the past somehow prevented me from viewing it in an unbiased manner. I wanted to some extent penetrate events that had taken place before I entered the world. I deliberately used an analogy to archeology because descriptions and explanations of its methods help me grasp how to view historical images. That is to say, I don't look for these films in public archives, that are most certainly full of an inexhaustible amount of material. Instead I use classified ads to seek films individually from various private owners. They are probes into a specific field. Each film has its own story, such as the reason it was made or why it was saved: I perceive this as part of what they are depicting. The films that I edit from this material are my own interpretation. I try to recognise relations in them that we understand and that evoke a possible feeling of belonging to the past in us and, above all, help us grasp relations in the present.'*

What do you mean by 'even if it isn't a historical fact'?

'Each of the found films is, in the ensuing interpretation, contaminated by our experiences, our knowledge of the depicted. Old films appear to be faithfully recorded, indubitable sources that portray events as they happened. But the contrary is true. These films depict a combination of motivations and reasons why they were made, how they were to have appeared and what impression they were to have given in their day. The patina, black and white colour, scratches and various imperfections, etc. play a role in how we perceive them. The resulting picture is thus different, each time.'

How did you select the different fragments of Projection 1.2.?

'In this project, over the course of half a year, I put together from responses to my ads and from various acquaintances roughly 14 hours of various films in various formats – from family films to weekly newsreels to feature films. I took excerpts from them and rearranged the fragments, respecting only their era and added period music that I was looking for along with the films. Thirteen short films were created from this, each localised in a certain era.

The oldest was from the 1930s and the most recent was from the 1980s. For Manifesta 5 I chose the eight that were more comprehensible for a European public or at least for a public which was broader than just a Czech one.'

The connection between the different fragments seems rather arbitrary. Does the title refer to the fact that you want the viewer to make a personal projection of the past out of a given set of fragments, or is it your personal projection of the past which you want to share with the viewer?

'I view the individual fragments joined together as a probe. I definitely did not try to use connections that would be immediately clear since then it would be part of a certain shared perception of a certain period. I wanted the possibility of various interpretations based on certain ambiguities – an open field for multiple interpretations. The projection of the past as I'm presenting it is, owing to means of searching for materials, my projection of the past. But I hope that the means that I've chosen opens the possibility for each viewer to participate and watch through their own projection.'

Your work seems to confirm the Western cliché story of the Eastern European nostalgic soul. What is for you the necessity of this art of historical reflection?

'A similar cliché exists in the Czech Republic about the Russians. I think it's a question of approach. Then again, in my view Europe suffers from a kind of nostalgia for the construction of utopia, a more just society, an imposing avant-garde project. In viewing a gigantic prefabricated block of buildings and the remnants of the social structure in Eastern Europe, tears appear in the eyes of every left-wing intellectual as he recalls the tattered dreams. Reconstruction of the past is not the same as nostalgia for me. Reflection of the past is for me a basic prerequisite for understanding the future. Unfortunately, in my country the past is, I think, really a subject of nostalgia and not of reflection. I realise that if a viewer confronts my work with a nostalgic approach, he won't see anything special, but he might become emotional.'

You also made a video about the Czech modern art history interpreted in a series of interviews with contemporary artists and curators. Why?

'Prague's avant-garde was one of the most active and most progressive during the first half of the 20th century. Artists and architects were full of energy and wanted art to change the world. Fantastic projects arose that brought together art and life, whether architecture, art or manifestos. Theoretician Karel Teige, as the leading spirit of the avant-garde, influenced an entire generation of artists. But that changed in the mid 20th century. The German occupation and the later political situation completely demolished the entire project. Avant-garde ideas mutated into a socialistic farce.

Fellow artist Jano Mančuška and I are interested in whether a continual line can be traced, maybe even a parallel and official concept of the history of modern art that begins sometime before the 1980s in the middle of Europe and ends with our viewpoints, convictions and attitudes. We attempted to create our own history of Czech modern art in the 20th century. We used pictures of architecture and public installations that can still be seen in Prague. We made a different picture of Czech modern art in which important figures and events in art are intentionally left out, while other figures and events, possibly marginal for some, are accented.'