

Călina PARĂU

Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University
Cluj, România
E-mail: calina.parau@gmail.com

ASSEMBLING “BARE LIFE” AS NATIONAL CORPOREALITY IN CINEMA

Abstract: The following paper addresses two different ways of constructing social and private visibility by means of cinematic investments of corporeal territoriality. Drawing upon transgender and national identity issues in *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005) it formulates the sense of belonging in relation to body representation. The other type of bodily material belonging is investigated through the cinema of Kusturica. In these films, images of the private are constructed as impossible self-portraits, generating new politics and poetics of human gestures as they appear inside visual representation or inside the sensory adaptations of the invisible. Exploring the possibilities of the gaze inside national representation, the analysis keeps coming back to the expressions of the body as borders between visibility and invisibility, presence and non-presence, discourse and non-narrative evidence, nationalized self and denationalized self. This paper also indirectly examines the way in which cinema regulates the flow of materiality and territoriality inside the Real, creating content and meaning for the politicized images of the private.

Keywords: image, gaze, representation, Subject, visuality, Real.

Introduction

The western sensibility and thought has agreed upon the fact that nation and ethnicity are culturally constructed ways of belonging to a community and they are just the underground extensions of ideology. After the first publication of *Imagined*

Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism of Benedict Anderson, in 1983, we seemed to have acquired a concept that allowed us to think about nationality in terms of human invention, even human fantasy. For Benedict Anderson nationality functions as a substitute for the divine legitimation of the religious societies that have turned into civic societies. Even though we have the historical perspective that makes obvious the link between nationhood and identity and we are able to trace the birth of the concept of “nation” back to Enlightenment and, later, the spread of industrialism, we still have not isolated the embedded nationalist specter from the daily practices of discourse. Most of the times the critique of the sense of national belonging is rationalist, one that lacks the proper discourse for the hard-core of nation-ness which is, as Benedict Anderson puts it, a *profound emotional legitimacy*. We cannot define this emotion only in terms of ideology, evolution, anthropology while the concepts of nationalism and ethnicity are still bearing wars as we speak. Taking feature films as the points of our analysis we will try to address the modern sense of national belonging as the one that regulates memory, forgetting, the common and, most of all, the body, by means of replacing the old narrative construction with a visual one. As Rancière believes, the emancipatory politics has failed because it has not defined itself as the politics of the other¹. We will try to pin down the concept of nation inside the politics of the other, allowing ourselves to think outside the dichotomous structure universality vs. particularity. For the people that operate with national distinctions and ways of belonging, the hereditary rights and genealogical ties are the foundations on which they distinguish between life and non-life and they are also the compulsory markers of a sense of continuity that generates the living. National belonging is not only about inheriting an identity, but also about inheriting the structures of life.

*Once upon a time there was a country*²

The first two films we are referring to both have in common the theme of the fictional construct of foundational myths, national stories and heroic historical depictions. Both movies become at one point films about the making of a film, being ironic about the symbolism of the sensibility upon which national legitimation is

¹ Jacques. Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization”, *The Identity in Question* 61 (1992)

² This is a line from the movie script of *Underground* (1995)

constructed. The film of Kusturica, *Underground* (1995), won the Palm d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and it has received many critics after being awarded because Kusturica, the film director, was accused of Yugoslav-nostalgia, nationalism and an unethical taking sides concerning the post-Yugoslav war due to the fact that he included in his fictional movie documentary footage of Nazi troops being welcomed by the local people in the capitals of Slovenia and Croatia and deserted images from Serbia where they found resistance from the locals. This has been interpreted as an intentional act of portraying the pro-Nazi Slovenes and Croats in contrast with the heroic and resistant Serbs. The ending of the movie (the characters are fictionally re-united at a wedding that takes place on a departing separated piece of land like an isolated utopia) has also been criticized for the supposed Yugoslavism and nostalgia for the period before the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The movie is not just about this, being a complex fictional movie set on the historical background of three wars: WWII, the Cold War and the Yugoslav Wars. The plot is about two friends that have recently entered the communist party, when the bombings of Nazi Germans start falling upon the city of Belgrade. They create an underground shelter for the small community that manufactures weapons for the partisans. One of the friends knows that the WWII is over but keeps telling those in the cellar that the war goes on and they need to provide weapons. He keeps them there 20 years, staging bombing sounds from his house above the cellar and delivering printed news about the ongoing war. When one of the major characters comes out of the underground he sees a movie that is being filmed about his heroism in defending his country against the Nazi. We are presented with the staged events that have taken place in the movie up to that point and their representation seems a mockery of the way in which we construct history, heroism and nation forging shared stories.

Lost in Karastan (2014), a UK-Georgia-Russia-Germany production, is a comedy set in a fictional independent state in Caucasus where a foreign British film director is invited to the local Film Festival to give a speech before the screening of his movie. The strange atmosphere on the streets, the tanks, the omnipresence of the figure of the president are all seen through the eyes of a western foreigner who is incapable of understanding the difficult political situation in Karastan. The President asks him to make a film portraying the legend of the founder of his people, offering him whatever he needs and mentioning that the whole country is a movie set, unlike Hollywood where you need to pay for everything. Even if the people from

the village are brought by force to the film studio, this does not seem to bother the English director who is making a movie in a language he does not understand. *Lost in Karastan* was shot in the beautiful landscapes of Georgia and it is indeed a movie about the post-soviet small countries struggling to formulate a national identity in order to get out of their isolating reality and face the global world. There is again the theme of the national myth turned into a movie that would perpetuate belief and national belonging outside the borders of mythological self-representation.

The narrative is the one dictating collective memory, as we have seen in the movies too, by turning the common into the point of identification. It is no longer the sense of belonging which is at stake in representations of nationhood, but a sense of identification that is much more reductive and limited because of the subjective internalization of the *impersonal* (an exterior reality becomes mine because I identify with it). Rancière draws a distinction between identification and subjectivization, making it clear that subjectivization is the relation of the self to the other, an identity that takes place in the inbetween of this structure, while identification no longer retains the interval, but only the identity:

“And the concept of narrative itself, like the concept of culture, is highly questionable. It entails the identification of an argumentative plot with a voice, and of a voice with a body. But the life of political subjectivization is made out of the difference between the voice and the body, the interval between identities. So narrative and culture entail the reversion of subjectivization to identification.” (Rancière: 62)

The national narrative is about the limits of identification that draw the country, the shared and the common as the meeting point between acquired narrative structures and not as the meeting point between people and their realities. Identification constructs a one-layered Real, territorializing experience, while subjectivization renders the Real as a two-worlds montage (the self and the other) investing experience with the double connotation of human imprint. National belonging does not have to dissolve inside the globalizing force of contemporary world, but it has to redefine itself as subjectivization and not as identification. Rancière believes that identity is not so much about desire and death, but it is deeply rooted in the fear of the other. This fear articulates our national belonging realities,

but the same fear creates our intuition and lucidity towards the existing presence of the other, keeping us alert in front of the infinite possibilities of subjectivizing the other.

Nationality and the rhythmic narrative of the body

Agamben draws the distinction between two types of life using the Greek words *zoe* and *bios*. *Zoe* is the bare, physiological life of the private sphere, the animal dimension of existence, while *bios* is the life of the public sphere, where speech and action take place, where gestures, practices, words acquire social, political meaning. Rancière argues that politics is not concerned with *bios* and *zoon politikón*, because politics is all about drawing the line between the life of the private sphere and the life of the public sphere. Politics is the way in which we distinguish between the two spheres and the effects of this separation. Usually the national belonging discourse is not based only on foundational myths, popular beliefs and language, but it also concerns the invention and practice of private sphere particularities like stereotypes about the way a certain nation eats, washes, talks, copulates. That is why I want to argue that the internalization of nationality is a way of politicizing *zoe* by capturing the private life inside the discourse of national belonging and regulating the picture of the bare life. To follow Rancière we should also add that it is about negotiating the line between the private and the public aiming at a naturalization and territorialization of behaviors and beliefs. Nationality tends to offer a narrative of the body where a self-regulating visuality arranges the Real as a physiological and organic memory of the corporeal identity. In *Underground*, the major characters are always filled with an excessive vitality and a sort of earthly connected energy which are culturally associated with Balkanism. As Žižek says, in his article about *Underground*, the Balkans are the timeless space on which the West projects its phantasmatic content. The camera in *Underground* is always spinning, shifting and it forces an appropriation with the collective body in order to render the spectacle of life, intense passion and rhythmic pulsations as physical as possible. The bodies of the Serbian major characters are strong, filled with intense sexual desire, violent gestures, exuberance, quilt and the ecstasy of war. After the Bosnian war, the international community started to operate with “cinematic” projections in which, as Žižek observes, the Serbs are perceived as invincible warriors and winners, while Bosnians are confined to the role of

suffering victims. The private experience of one's body is written by a culturally and imaginarily invested geographic area. The space fills the bare life of the private and opens it towards discourses of identity that regulate not only the politics of remembering, forgetting, belief, but also the physiological body of intensities and pulsations.

The whole country is a movie set

Lost in Karastan unveils the western gaze as the insufficient gaze of the stranger who is incapable of understanding the new world he arrived in and who cannot penetrate a reality that threatens his well-defined cultural instruments. The excess resulted from the insufficient western gaze that can cross just the first level of the newly met reality is phantasmagorically recycled inside representations of nationality. At one point in the movie the English film director gets lost in Karastan (or more precisely gets lost in the streets of Tbilisi, the movie being filmed in Georgia) and he reaches a desolate place with big communist blocks of flats that look dirty and on the verge of collapsing. Washed worn out clothes are hanging from the small dark windows and the children are running in the mud. The faces of the locals look distant and strange, refusing empathy and hiding in phantasms. Neither the camera or the fictional film maker can stand the sight for too long. We quickly turn back to the mysterious woman from Karastan, to the funny but powerful dictator, to the filming of the national epic, etc. The western gaze retains that alienating image but it builds phantasms and cultural constructs of nationality and ethnicity in order to level and integrate the social, economical and lifestyle differences between the West and the underdeveloped countries. Whether we are talking about the Balkans or the Caucasus, there is a mythological aura there that makes poverty, misery, religious extremism and fundamentalism the specificity of a de-realised, quasi-real piece of world. Nationality is a mediating bridge of the impossible encounter between the reality of the West and the quasi-Real of the East.

The metaphor used in *Lost in Karastan*, when the president/dictator tells the foreigner that this whole country is a movie set, is full of meaning when it comes to the need for national legitimacy of the post-soviet countries. When the English director is filming the national epic, the landscapes and the beautiful views are more absorbing and engaging than the action and the staged legend. This points to the fact that in the technologically and globally transformed world, modern nationality

is now a visual construct more than a narrative or a discursive one. The force of the myth has been replaced by the force of the mediating image that enforces national projections. The modern sense of national belonging grows stronger, the image being even more easily internalized than the myth. The collectively forged national Real is based upon a sense of territoriality (a visually constructed one) which thanks to the new media, is much more immersible than the narrative. Images of territoriality are now the face and “heart” of the modern immersible national belonging. Even the faces of the locals become territories in order to fit the landscape and assemble the world pictures of a regionally constructed Universe.

In the following section we will discuss the concept of national belonging in relation to the movie of Irish film director Neil Jordan, who manages to subtly draw the problem of national identity around the transgender problematic in *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005). The Irish identity is constructed, in this movie, as a *quest* for finding the Phantom Lady, the mother that has abandoned Kitten (our main character) in a small town in Northern Ireland and then emigrated to England, where *the big city has swollen her*. The Phantom Lady is a very good metaphor for the spectral dimension of internalized nationality, and the search for this genealogical tie imposes another kind of temporality that allows the national collective memory to be articulated as personal memory, inside a narrative of acquired remembering of a certain belonging which is constructed as if it was always there, but it just had to be traced back. Memory is closely linked to issues of nationality and identity, and we will also try to analyze the way in which the memory of the past, also implied as national inheritance, is the one shaping not only the national sense of belonging, but also the corporeal sense of belonging. The transgender self-image is connected to a visual representation of the body that strongly particularizes the nationally emptied body in order to re-insert it into a narrative of the self after having taken it back from a narrative of the community. The sense of corporeal belonging is mediated by the fictionalized memory of the past that our main character has created around a mother that is invested as the image of a vanished territory which constitutes the sense of belonging. For Kitten, the construction of the body starts inside the small town community where the impossibility of identification is sublimated into mimetic acts (the scene with Patrick as a young boy putting some lipstick on) of a distant reality (the one from the television, Mitzi Gaynor and the fictionalized memory of the Irish mother). The

absence of these distant realities is materialized as bodily visual markers that specify the denationalized self as a corporeal entity.

The Genealogical Silent Wave- The Phantom Lady

As Diane Negra argues, in US network television, Irishness is used as

“an access route into a purified vision of family and community life that specifically compensates for the exigencies of contemporary US culture.” (Negra: 229)

Following the same logic we could say that in most of the cinematic representations, nationality is codified as a search for a forgotten genealogical tie that usually fills the blank spaces between individuals and members of the family. This ideological sense of completeness drawn inside representations of family is invested by discourses of nation-ness in order to make sense of the restrictive lifestyle patterns imposed by whiteness. This same sense of completeness, which is nationally codified, is the one that Patrick/Kitten is longing for when she is searching for her mother, in London. It is not just another temporality inside this closed circle of the *quest* (the quest for identity and belonging), but also another history that concerns itself with family ties and genetic heritage and not with collectively inscribed events (classic history). *Breakfast on Pluto* has a certain nostalgia for duration and lived experience which are indistinguishably clustered in history and collective representations. The transgender identity seems to be a way of getting lived experience out of history and collective representations by imposing another visuality and another corporeality image. Irish nationalism finds its ground not on representation, but on mystical ties between generations, grandfathers and grandsons, mothers and daughters, tangled families etc. That is why the Irish sense of belonging is not nullified by the transgender identity (which breaks the heterosexual, white male national representation) and it actually comes back along with the “mystical tie” between Kitten and the Phantom Lady, her mother. The action of the movie is set in the '70s, in the middle of the Irish Troubles, so that national belonging is strongly present as an exterior insistent reality, although it cannot be completely assumed and internalized. The scene where Kitten is taken for a terrorist after the IRA bombing from the club exposes a strong violence that is not

only physical, but it is also an expression of the way in which national identity functions as an external pressure over the mutilated body that is being forced to speak the language of nationality.

Diane Negra also talks about the

“behaviors rooted in the belief that to rediscover one’s ethnic past was to break free from the contemporary crises of identity which accompanied the decline of triumphal Americanism in the 1960s and 1970s.” (Negra: 230)

The same feeling that, by re-writing her ethnic past, she can gain independence towards the political and personal crises accompanies Kitten in search for her exiled and culturally transformed mother. The transgender identity of Kitten also mirrors the cultural deformity inscribed in the image of an exiled Irish mother that has been *swollen up by the big city*, dissolving the cultural and national possibility of identification. At one point in the movie, one of the characters tells Kitten that *the only border that matters is the one between what's in front and what you've left behind*, actually stating that the contours of the sense of nationality are built in the personal distinctions between past and present and not inside geographical or spatial distinctions. What our main character in *Breakfast on Pluto* is trying to do is to trace a lineage between families, individuals and events that aims at a ‘re-assembling’ of history. Among the IRA bombings, the anti-colonial feelings exercised by the Irish republicans and the big conflict between nations, Kitten is searching for her identity, articulating political history as personal history (re-assembling historical reality). This fictional act of re-assembling history (be it personal or collective) through *genealogy* internalizes and makes intimate the acknowledged chain of events. This attempt has to do with an Irish need of gaining independence in relation to macro-history and it also deals with the endeavor of taking their self-image beyond political identity.

We need to draw a distinction between what it means to be politically alien and existentially alien. The feeling of being politically alien is based on the impossibility of belonging, while to be existentially alien has to do with the feeling of being alien within a time, not just a space that is not yours. A time that is not yours is a time where facts and events are confiscated into a sort of documentary and collective framing, where, for example, community and Catholicism impose

patterns of existence. The story from *Breakfast on Pluto* is an attempt to get time out of the traditional framing and understanding by turning it into a time of unconscious human inter-relations (e.g. the relation between Kitten and her mother). It is definitely not the time of personal story or national identity, but the time between stories and between identities. *Breakfast on Pluto* plays with the transgender in-betweenness of identity and also with an in-betweenness of genealogy / belonging that generates the corporeality of Kitten.

The denationalized body as territory

In *Breakfast on Pluto*, the picture of the bare, denationalized life is regulated inside the transgender identity where the body becomes visual because it is not covered in national ways of belonging. When the body does not tell the narrative of the national, it becomes a visual force that turns identity into an image. The body of Kitten is always an image in *Breakfast on Pluto*; the image of a body without territory that has turned its own corporeality into a territory. The denationalized body as a new territory transforms Kitten's transgender identity into another way of political belonging that is not nationally codified. It is the body of Kitten that takes back the memory and the past creating a territory where *the only border that matters is the one between what's in front and what you've left behind*. Thus, corporeal territoriality becomes a way of undermining national and regional territoriality.

Conclusion

By creating, delimiting and even staging territories of visibility cinema opens up the possibility of experiencing layers of materiality as various ways of visual belonging generated by the different territories of visibility. The way we experience materiality is regulated by the possibilities of configuring self-portraits inside the borders drawn by aggregating territories of visibility that allow new visual and cultural self-insertions which create new dynamics of the sense of belonging. The dimensions of corporeality implied by the “bare life” are the not yet prolonged roots of self-representation and belonging. Cinematic expressions trace the motion of “bare life” and tries to define it inside culturally closed circles that accompany the representational needs of belonging to framed and pre-figured landscapes.

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