

Hito's Voice

It has been a long time since we have seen such a sincere mixture of reality, fiction and a questioning of the strategies behind the creation and manipulation of history. Hito Steyerl's latest film, *November*, released in 2004 within the context of art and experimental cinema, has left its mark wherever it has been screened.¹

November is a documentary with its own singular texture and tempo in which the director's lifetime and creative decisions are made immediately clear. Although the starting point is in itself an appealing one—a reconstruction of the life of the director's teenage friend, Andrea Wolf, fatally wounded in 1998 in Kurdistan, probably the victim of an illegal execution by members of the Turkish armed forces—the treatment and approach end up winning out over any morbid detail the synopsis might suggest. Hito manages to give a partisan, sentimental, look at the issue, while at the same time revealing all the fragments she has used. She places them, dismantled, face up on the table, allowing us to put the pieces together ourselves, in a way which is much easier than after viewing an ordinary, supposedly “objective” documentary².

Hito soon realised that she would have to make up her own narrative: “I underwent the experience of discovering that there was no possible form of discourse that would enable me to express my personal grief over the Andrea Wolf's death. Obviously, the official state discourse on her death was not enough, but neither could I do it within the parameters of the particular discourse on political martyrdom put forward by various political organisations that shared her ideas. So there was no language that would in any way articulate that grief. So the film might be seen as being an attempt to create a new language to express this sort of deadlock”.

Perhaps the first thing that fascinates us, though, along with those disturbing images of the martial arts films Andrea and Hito made in their adolescence, is Hito's Voice. The director's voice brings together the various pieces that make up the narrative. The timbre, the untrembling tone as she comments on or counterpoises the pictures we are seeing; she expresses herself unhesitatingly with statements like the one at the beginning of the “Attitudes and Gestures” section: “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to violence. Word and action. Violence devours everything it touches and its voracious appetite is hardly ever sated. However, violence not only destroys, it also creates and shapes. We are going to take a close-up look at this dangerous diabolic creation, this new race, encased and contained within a woman's soft skin”.



Courtesy of the artist

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Her voice is imperfect, an amateur voice, internal. Ultimately, that was another conscious decision: “What can you do? Use an actress to say: ‘This is me’, when you show a photo of me on the screen? That would be weird too. The fact is that this story is made up of so many fragments, each of which pulls in a different direction, that it needs a point of coherence simply to tell Andrea’s story and what happened to her. At the same time, the narrator is also a very unreliable and often quite paradoxical guide. What she says does not always coincide with the picture on the screen. There is often a certain tension between the image and the narration, which is not resolved or which creates a new significance which hangs over the two”.

This tension Hito speaks about, this unstable territory in which the ghosts of politics swim alongside the ghosts of sentiment, lends its own character to a film which addresses a series of ideas, such as the concept of terrorism, the history of Kurdistan, the unworkability of ideology and so on, while at the same time paying tribute to her friend. It unmasks the way in which political propaganda and its symbols pervert political causes. To do this, Hito challenges the existing images and deciphers them, superimposing the veil of desires, the dreams of autonomy and liberation we all have. “In those days we used to imitate female militant icons—

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Andrea herself was later to become one of them. But these processes of transformation never occur in a linear fashion—there were, one might say, many problems in translating from fiction to reality, and for me these translation problems came to be a very important object of contemplation. It is here that ideology comes into play, only allowing certain forms of visibility and invalidating others”[...] “I tried to attract other images into the frame, images that one would not necessarily connect with the visual discourse of terrorism, such as martial arts films and things like that to show that the idea we have of the phenomenon called terrorism is based on an economy of images and desires which is much more general and less exceptional than we tend to believe”.

And within this documentary jumble which mixes archive documents from the time (real video and cinema pictures of Andrea in the Kurdish cause, and the films that the two girls made in their youth), perhaps it is those Super-8s they made when they were sixteen which produce a certain empathy and some unusual duplicity in the spectator, foreshadowing, as they do, subsequent events. “Going back to the Super-8 film we made together was the only way of finding a sincere approach to this story: it not only shows her involvement as a militant in the world of militant myth, pose and gesture, but also my own as a film-maker. And the film includes this double path—her overlapping in the maze of travelling images, but also my own. There is one scene in the film where I suddenly appear on television as a Kurdish demonstrator—when in fact what I was trying to do was simply to document this situation. What this means is that nobody, or at least not me, is innocent: we are all involved in this constant creation of propaganda—or to put it in a more neutral way, this constant transfer between fiction and political reality—whether we intend to be or not. In this Andrea and I were, in principle, no different; we simply took different decisions in life”.

Another of the nuances this work contributes, as well as its capacity for disassembling the control strategies of propaganda, is its commitment to feminism. Hito places herself unambiguously in this movement, being very aware of the way in which women continue to be excluded from the militant patriarchal discourses: “...The subject of the film is the subject



of a militant form of struggle for specifically feminine emancipation. I wanted to show that this form of struggle is very ambivalent, that it relates representations of female empowerment with male fantasies of dominant pin-up women, who despite everything continue to be sex objects. In many liberation armies the problem of women’s equality has never been resolved and in many others it has never even been addressed”[...] “For me this is one of the reasons why the old model of national liberation has failed in most of the world. In the best of cases, it has created a limited emancipation, which has often excluded women, minorities, and often the working class itself as a whole. Naturally, this applies not only to the armies of liberation but also to the entire project of liberal democracy. Gender equality continues to be a utopia. And as long as this continues to be the case, new feminist projects are and will be increasingly necessary”

Hito’s voice conquers; it is at once a sinuous and brave voice. We soon want to know what projects and concerns she has been caught up in... and she doesn’t disappoint us: “I start from a personal experience—making a living working as a semi-nude model in the Japanese porn industry and

then, after I ran into problems with the mafia, as a producer of fetishist underwear. I literally paid my way through college by selling my underwear. In some ways this is the material basis of my subsequent career as a film maker. It would be difficult to imagine any more absurd working experience. The world of desire and fantasy turned into merchandise provided me with one of the most bizarre working experiences anyone could have. Historically this type of work is anchored in the social sector of creative work and sex work, which was called the “floating world” in eighteenth-century Japan. It produced beautiful art, mostly wood-carvings which came to exercise a great influence on the form acquired by modern western art, particularly French impressionism. I think this fleeting world made up of dreams and desires and solidly grounded in blackmail, violence and instability has broken out of the confines of prostitution and the sex industry, and become a global reality for many deprived workers working in equally absurd conditions. The floating world is the mirror image of the total flexibilisation of the economy and the economy of desire turned into merchandise which characterises the working life of many women. It is a place many of us inhabit today, with temporary jobs, no type of social security, subject to pressure, threats and often violence”.

If you have seen *November*, you will agree that it is difficult not to read these quotes: from the interview with Hito without superimposing the memory of her voice, connecting the labyrinths of our mind and interweaving our experiences and reflections, that which has been believed, desired and missed, but from a mood which, although critical, exudes humour and optimism: “But, despite everything, as well as being a place of violence and terror, the floating world is also a place of beauty, grace and even humour. It is this last aspect I am trying to highlight”. ❀

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HITO STEYERL has carried out a number of works as a filmmaker and author associated with the field of essay and documentary film and to post-colonial criticism, both at production and theoretical level. Her work stands at an interface between cinema and fine arts, and between theory and practice. She also works as a political journalist, film critic, author of catalogues and books, and compiler of feminist film programmes. Films: *Germany and Identity* (1994), *Land of Smiles* (1996), *Babenhausen* (1997), *The Empty Centre* (1998), *Normality 1-9* (1999), *Normality 1-10* (2000/2001), *November* (2003). She also co-edited with Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez the book *Can the Subaltern speak German? Postcolonial Critique and Migration*. Münster : Unrast Verlag, 2003; and “Dokumentarismus als Politik der Wahrheit” in *Differences and Representations*, published by Geranium Raunig, Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2004.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1 Hito Steyerl was born in Munich in 1966. Her video *November* was first screened in November 2003 as part of the Tester season (www.e-tester.net), organised by Fundación Rodríguez in San Sebastian, from June to September 2004 within the San Sebastian *Manifesta 5*, and subsequently in last autumn’s *Cine Casi Cine* programme, organised by the Audiovisual Department of the MNCARS in Madrid. Synopsis: *November* is about a close teenage friend of the director’s called Andrea Wolf. It starts with a feminist martial arts film made by the two girls in Super 8. Andrea Wolf would later end up being considered as an enemy of the state, after she went underground and joined the PKK, the Kurdish guerrilla movement. She was fatally wounded in 1998 in Kurdistan, probably the victim of an illegal execution by members of the Turkish armed forces. The video asks what remains of the dreams of the internationalist left in an era of global war on terrorism. It also examines the role played by images taken in a global context in relation to women’s resistance in popular culture and its political implications, and the icon or image of the militant woman.

2 Hito remarks: “I felt that a sentimental approach (which to some extent is the classical documentary approach), with the film based on people’s recollections of the person, told more or less objectively from a range of different perspectives, would be the worst of all possible options. For example, you might show Andrea’s friends and then the police who were chasing her as a terrorist and then possibly also the guy who killed her. What for? Is that the actual truth of the story or just some hypocritical attempt to keep what really happened at enough of a distance for one to feel safe with it?”