



BERLIN

Deimantas Narkevičius

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

“We put images and sounds together, but we never discuss with the audience, with people, what it means to do this.” English director Peter Watkins thus describes every filmmaker’s predicament, in Deimantas Narkevičius’s DVD projection *The Role of a Lifetime*, 2003. Narkevičius, who questions the documentary genre, has found the subject of a lifetime in Watkins, whom he interviewed in Lithuania, where the filmmaker now lives. This self-imposed exile reflects Watkins’s professional ostracism, which began in 1966 when the BBC banned *The War Game*, his vision of nuclear warfare. In works like *Punishment Park* (1970) or *La Commune (Paris 1871)* (1999), Watkins has challenged what he calls the “monoform”: cinematographic editing that reduces disparate visual and acoustic parts to a narrative whole.

Both interviewing and honoring Watkins, Narkevičius undoes the monoform by putting together images and sounds that do not match each other in what appears to be a biographical documentary. As we hear Watkins talk about his life and work, we see stills of the director—drawn in pencil—and of the Lithuanian socialist theme park Gruto, where he speaks at one point, along with Super-8 clips of people enjoying the weekend pleasures of an English seaside town. Yet the film scenes are too idyllic and too recent for the traumatic World War II childhood that Watkins recounts; a summer hum of birds and insects accompanies his description of the Soviet monuments collected in Gruto, and the pencil sketches of the park show a thick layer of snow covering the defunct socialist heroes. Maybe the wizened man in the stills is not Watkins but the protagonist of yet another history.

More dialogical than monological, *The Role of a Lifetime* ends up highlighting distinct bodies of work and visions: Narkevičius’s audio interviews with Watkins, drawings by Mindaugas Lukošaitis (filmed by Audrius Kemežys, who catches Lukošaitis’s hand), and archival footage of Brighton filmed by Geoffrey Cook in the ’60s. In his role as master editor, Narkevičius mismatches these silent images and invisible sounds not only to question documentary’s veracity but also to begin that elusive discussion with the audience, who must put the parts

together. Experiencing the gap between Watkins’s eloquent remarks on creativity and Cook’s quirky views of Brighton comes close to participant observation: We never quite fit into the story, and neither does Watkins nor Cook. Cook’s Brighton initially appears to be part of Watkins’s childhood memories, only to emerge as the eye of yet another filmmaker; in this shift, the cathartic hit of nostalgia, instantly delivered by Super 8, dissolves into two visions of the past, whose incommensurability makes them all the more fascinating. This discordance between image and sound has the strange ability to sharpen our perceptions.

Once in the XX Century, 2004, starts a discussion with its title, as the “XX” could be the twentieth century or a blank to be filled in by the viewer. Editing archival footage from a Lithuanian television station, Narkevičius shows how easily any filmmaker can lie: Scenes of the dismantling of a Lenin statue in Vilnius in September 1991 were rearranged to make it look as if the colossal statue were being erected for the cheering crowds. The other DVD projections shown here—*Energy Lithuania*, 2000, a sad homage to an outdated electrical power plant, and *Disappearance of a Tribe*, 2005, a collection of black-and-white family photographs, filmed in succession—present public and private history in a way that forces each viewer to come up with the final story. If every filmic and photographic reproduction—by virtue of its appearance—is a tombstone for time passed, then Narkevičius would have the spectator write the epitaph.

—Jennifer Allen



Deimantas Narkevičius, *Once in the XX Century*, 2004, still from an S-VHS transferred to DVD, 8 minutes.