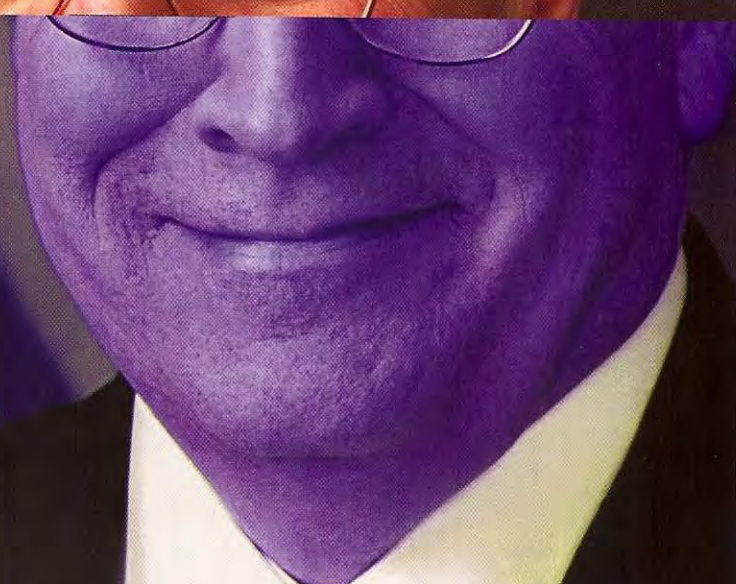
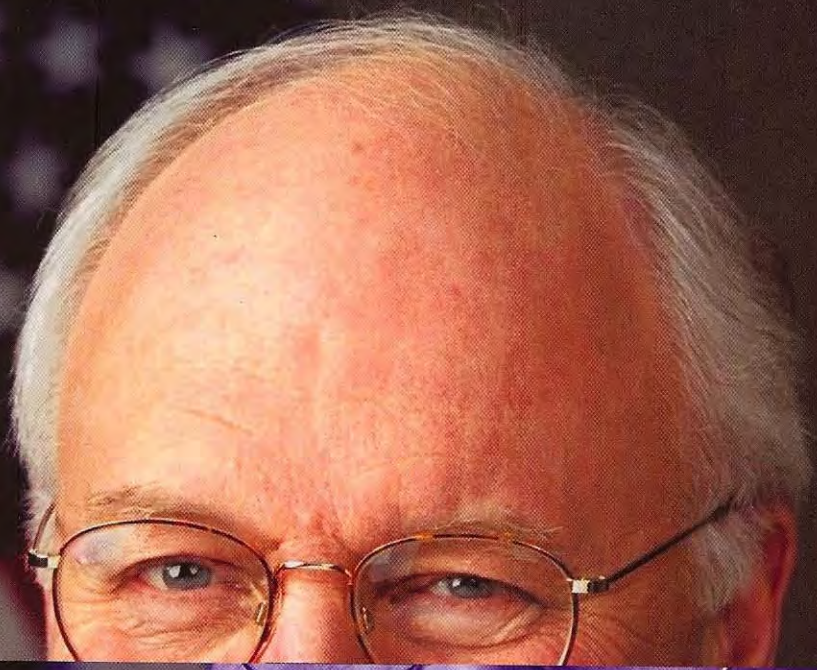


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RECONSTRUCTING REALITY

THE SUBJECTIVE DOCUMENTARIES OF DEIMANTAS NARKEVICIUS

words by CECILIA CANZIANI



The Dud Effect (film still), 2008
 Courtesy: gb agency, Paris, Jan Mot, Bruxelles
 and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

The history of Lithuania, the history of Europe, history tout court. This is the complex and painful subject of an artist who uses video, and in particular archival material, to “remember without celebrating.”

“Even a peaceful landscape, a meadow with crows flying over it and people reaping, even a road on which cars and pairs of lovers pass, even a village built for people to spend their vacations, can lead to a concentration camp. Stutthof, Belsen, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz, Dachau and Mauthausen were names like any other on a map.”

This is not an excerpt from one of Deimantas Narkevičius’s videos, but from a film that, similar to the work of the Lithuanian artist, raises the question of art’s responsibility towards history and the handing down of memory. The film in question, Alain Resnais’s documentary *Nuit et brouillard* (Night and Fog), was commissioned in 1954 by the French Committee for the History of the Second World War so that, just a few years after the liberation of the concentration camps, the vegetation already starting to cover their ruins would not blot out their memory, too. The text, written by former deportee Jean Cayrol, comments on the images: stock photographs and clips from Nazi films in black and white that alternate with a long take of internment camps in Germany, shot in color by the French director. *Nuit et brouillard*, Cayrol was to write later, “is not a monument erected to the scattered memory of our dead,” but a testimony to the Holocaust and an act of resistance against “unimaginability,” the impossibility of representing what lies beyond our comprehension.

History, and the way in which it can be told, is the cornerstone of Deimantas Narkevičius’s work. Through subjective documentary, the present and the past of Lithuania, where Narkevičius was born, act as a metaphor for the radical changes which both the East and the West have undergone—changes which everyone seems to be in a great hurry to forget.

It seems particularly appropriate that, at a moment in history when the very notion of democracy is being tested by the reemergence of forms of fascism, by limitation of the rights of the individual in the name of unspecified security threats, by the abuse (and relative emptying of significance) of the word freedom on the part of the mass media and by the betrayal of the ideals on which civilized society is based, a major retrospective has been devoted to Narkevičius. Staged first at the Reina Sofia in Madrid and then at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, it is scheduled to move on to the Kunsthalle in Bern in October.

“Today there is no need for monuments. It is necessary to resist any form of commemoration,” declares one of the two narrators of Narkevičius’s film *Kaimietis* (*Countryman*, 2002), almost in response to Resnais from a distance of half a century. Does the monument outlive history? Does it recount it? And in what way?



The Head (film still), 2007
Courtesy: gb agency, Paris
and Jan Mot, Bruxelles



Revisiting Solaris (film stills), 2007
Courtesy: the artist
Collection: Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven



The Head (film still), 2007

Courtesy: gb agency, Paris and Jan Mot, Bruxelles

In all his works, Narkevičius asks himself and us how it is possible to remember without celebrating, given that memory only seems to stay alive when it is transmitted and made part of the present? In *The Role of a Lifetime* (2003), the artist appropriates the words of the director Peter Watkins to probe the meaning that a theme park like Grūtas, which now hosts the statues erected in squares by the Communist regime and toppled after its fall, can have today. In the broad sense, the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) in Vilnius, the subject of the film *The Scene* (2003), and the town depicted in *Energy Lithuania* (2000) are monuments, too: they are the expression in the form of architectural objects of an ideology whose staying power has changed since the Velvet Revolution.

After studying sculpture at the Art Academy in Vilnius, Narkevičius soon abandoned it, turning instead to another medium with the capacity to bear witness to the past. The monument is not important in itself, it tells us nothing; what matters, however, is what surrounds it. "The process, how it is done, the story behind it and its circumstances are of importance: everything around the monument is of significance, except the monument itself," he said in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. The film—which is almost devoid of substance, which is purely indexical, *images malgré tout*—is able to communicate memory precisely because by resisting objecthood, it remains in a state of constant "becoming," and therefore cannot escape the judgment of the present. Siegfried Kracauer considered Resnais's documentary to be one of those films that, while they cannot prevent the repetition of events, redeem their memory—which is the highest function of the "film of fact."

How, then, do we recount reality, when our subject is history? For Kracauer, mere photographic documentation is not capable of conveying the continuum of space and time. It does not offer us a testimony, but on the contrary risks burying its meaning. Instead it is through *montage*, i.e. the breaking down of a film sequence and its reconstruction, that the filmmaker is able to impart truth. With his *Theory of Film*, Kracauer combined realism with a montage influenced by constructivist film: reality is recounted through its reconstruction, and not by a supposed objectivity. This does not tell the whole story, but rescues fragments of it that would otherwise be destined for oblivion.

The work Narkevičius created for *Skulptur Projekte* in Münster in 2007, entitled *The Head* (2007), is perhaps his most complex and complete reflection, and seems to encapsulate the preoccupations and suggestions that run through all his works. "The removal of monuments from central squares of East European cities visually softens or falsifies the development of the history of art and politics," Narkevičius stated in an unpublished text: this is the problem which Resnais and Narkevičius tackle, the same one that the West has had to deal with since the Second World War; in this sense, Narkevičius's Lithuania can be considered a symbol for a common sense of unease in the face of history. By proposing to move the monument to Karl Marx from Chemnitz to Münster, Deimantas Narkevičius analyzes—as he had already done in his previous films—the crisis of representation and its reception through the mediation of history.

The purging of the Soviet past has taken place on the symbolic plane, passing through the plane of reality, and from this perspective *The Head* seems to be an ideal follow-up to *The Role of a Lifetime*.

The reference to the community in the formulation of judgments, in decision-making processes and in maintaining a critical attitude toward history and politics is a pivotal element of the Münster operation, almost a response to the problem of the authoriality of the cinematographic medium raised by Watkins: "We put images and sounds together, but we never discuss with the audience, with the people, what it means to do this. What effect is this having on society, on our personal feelings, on the way we speak to each other? What effect is it having on time, space, structure, process?"

Actor, director and audience are equally responsible for the creation of meaning, and so the analysis of reality becomes a joint process and the documentary a medium through which we can play an active part in society and in the construction of history.

—Cecilia Canziani is an independent curator. In January 2009 she was appointed Head of Programming at Nomias Foundation, Rome along with Ilaria Gianni. She is founding member of the non-profit organization, 1:1projects.