

Ciné, ma vérité:
**Memory as a Creative Force in the Process of Constructing
Subjectivities**

Kamila Kuc

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.

Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975)



Batum (2015), production still. © Daisy Rickman. *Putting ourselves into the text: Batum's entirely female crew: Genie Kaminski (actress/voice artist), Nina Zabicka (second camera), Daisy Rickman (stills photographer) and myself.*

I owe the first part of this essay's title to Chris Marker's witty word pun on the tradition of *cinéma vérité*. I chose Marker's phrase because it challenges the notion of any collective cine-truth, as proposed by Dziga Vertov in his theory of *Kino-Pravda*, for example. Instead, Marker alludes to the inability of film to capture any truths beyond a filmmaker's own subjective experiences of the world.

The main impulse behind this essay is to explore some of the themes and methods I employed in *Batum* (2015, Super8, 12 mins), a film that takes as its starting point my personal experience of near drowning in the Black Sea of Batumi, Georgia. As such, *Batum* is induced with a desire for an auto-ethnographical self-interrogation as I wish to move towards creating a personal cartography of my experiences. Images that feature in the film are a constellation of memories that are mine (one may think of

Roland Barthes' *punctum* here), and those that I acquired through the knowledge of history and culture (Barthes' *studium*). The latter ones I call *prosthetic* and they are exemplified here by the poems of Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Stalin, among other cultural tropes. Mikhail Bulgakov's unpublished play *Batum* resonates throughout my film, least of all in its title. While making *Batum* I was set to explore a certain displacement of identity that emerges when we encounter past experiences. I sought to *experience* how memories become fiction once recorded and how in this process of recording, the camera itself held a mysterious agency. I am, above all, always interested in ways in which film, as one of the technologies of memory, can be seen as an innovative creator of memories themselves. The complex relationship between personal and collective memories often subverts the social and political identity constructions, which I tend to explore in my films.



Rob Godman's authorial 'thinking underwater' sound is merged with a remix of Georgia's 1918-1920/2004 National Anthem.

Large part of *Batum* relies on affect that was created through a careful sound composition mastered by Rob Godman. We wanted to imagine how it is to be able to hear and 'think' underwater. Remembering is always accompanied by forgetting as memory remembers and neglects and nobody really knows how it is to hear underwater. At this point the film's original, inherent silence was met with an artificially created sound. This process reflected upon a general sense of displacement in *Batum* - displacement of images and sound, as well as of identity. This way both sound and image are united by fiction. They gradually become more fictional as memories of the past merge with various trajectories of the present.

Memories are fragile beings. They are most of all unreliable and depend upon our current circumstance; they carry an aura of an irrecoverable loss and dereliction - just like Super8 film does. Invented to *create* (home) memories, Super8 was supposed to preserve them, i.e. preserve positive images of the family life for posterity. I think here of Alina Marazzi's delicate *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* (*For One More Hour with You*, 2002) and Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012) in which the *re-creation* and *fabrication* of memories, respectively, signify the use of Super8 as a defining measure of the filmmakers' artistic strategies. In both films personal memories become public, the boundary between private and collective is blurred. For a split second the medium undergoes a process of de-subjectivisation. Time is suspended and fantasies of other people's experiences can be re-created as their own in many viewers' minds. 'Truth' in any case is contingent upon the filmmaker and the audience as memory is somehow stretchable. As the filmmaker herself remains in a state of displacement that is cultural, geographic and linguistic, such process of momentary disorientation is necessary to a creation of any subjectivity within a film that takes memory as its core theme. Self-reflexivity too constitutes a deliberate artistic strategy that contributes to the demystification of the filmmaking process itself and illuminates the filmmaker's ideological position.

The past is realized in and through the present as memories have a tendency to invade our consciousness. Still alive, they often cause a disruption in and to the present. I was unaware of the complexities of this process until the editing of *Batum* began. In order to access certain parts of one's memories, a filmmaker must become, in Walter Benjamin's words, an archeologist, 'a man digging' and a man that returns 'again and again to the same matter.' The previously hidden and highly sought after images may then emerge 'like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery' preserved for our 'later understanding.' Benjamin's vanishing point of history doesn't reside in a distant past, but rather in the present. The conventional view of history as receding somewhere behind us and disappearing into a nonexistent time is challenged here by Benjamin's claim that the vanishing point of history can always be found in the present moment. I am also reminded here of Vladimir Nabokov's seduction of the past whose demands cannot be balanced by the future, since the future does not exist. In *Batum* existence is suspended between past, present and unattainable future; there is only contingency and no certainty; perspectives shift continuously as we attempt to escape fixation. In *Batum* subjectivity is negotiated through memory: cinematic time identifies itself with psychological time as editing aligns itself with memory.

Memory and imagination are intertwined. Imagination translates sensory data into mental images but it is also capable of producing images independently. Imagination, to some degree, facilitates memory's desire to come to the surface. While investigating one's relationship to one's personal history, a certain syncopatisation, physical and otherwise, can be witnessed in the process of re-creating versions of events. Here documentary-like elements blend with fiction. For Jean-Luc Godard 'all great fictional films tend towards documentary, just as all great documentaries tend towards

fiction.' A mélange of the two invites a possibility of exploiting multiple forms of subjectivity since there are as many truths and realities as there are filmmakers (and viewers). To this end, we can only speak of identifications, not identities.

Filmmaking is a process of mediation, thus the access to any form of authentic past is denied by default. *Batum* grants a superficial entry to a past experience, but can never render it present. The experience will always remain elusive.



Re-enacting the past: re-staging of subjectivities, Genie Kaminski. Apparatus creates life itself.

Genie Kaminski re-enacted the parts of my near-drowning, and provided a luminous Russian voice for Mandelstam's and Stalin's poems. Re-staging of the events and memories constitutes a re-staging of my own subjectivity. Needless to say, this re-enactment is not a duplication of the original event. It can never be. It is a snapshot of, a metaphorical close-up on a detail that is crucial to the film's skeleton. When used in a non-narrative, non-fiction context, performance further underlines the impossibility of any authentic representation. Performativity itself is a strategy. The subject who is filming is the one whose life is being re-enacted, i.e. created in front of her eyes. The presence of a director manifests itself in her physical absence but it is *embodied* in the movements of the camera. Camera is a tool in self-inscription as the filmmaker's own authorial voice is channeled through the scripted titles and chosen images.

Perhaps it is not the life itself that creates autobiography. Instead, the actual process of writing and making invites life to unfold itself for us to record, i.e. to create. Filming life in retrospect (in a narrative or non-narrative form) is a creation rather than representation of that life. The impulse to tell a story gives life a shape, it

produces its multiple versions. The apparatus itself has an agency: in *Peeping Tom* Mark Lewis' most defining moments are intensified only when he is looking through the lens. It is the apparatus itself that creates (records) and destroys life (the tripod's knife kills the women as Lewis is seen filming them in a close-up) at the same time. A film's camera is thus not an objective piece of machinery, *she* is an active agent in the process of formulating a story.



Stalin's 'To the Moon' and Mandelstam's 'Epigram Against Stalin' are recited by Genie Kaminski.

Batum is an attempt at offering a glimpse into my experience of near-drowning. While making the film I became aware of how entangled I was not only with the forces of nature, but more violently, with the forces of History. As Judith Butler stated: 'When the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration: indeed, when the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include the conditions of its own emergence, it must as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist.'

Biographical note:

Kamila Kuc (www.kamilakuc.com), Ph.D., is a writer, experimental filmmaker and curator. She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. She publishes widely on the subject of film and media. Her films have been screened at international film festivals, including Experiments in Cinema. She is the 2016 Basement Films Artist in Residence.

Bibliography:

Barad, Karen, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)

Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage Classics, 1993) [1980]

Benjamin, Walter, 'Berlin Chronicle', *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: New Left Books, 1979) [1932]

Birnbaum, Daniel, *Chronology* (Berlin: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005)

Butler, Judith, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005)

Chivoiu, Oana, 'Toward an Aesthetic of Displacement in Ana Vaz's *Sacris Pulso*', *Senses of Cinema*, issue 68, September 2013 at <http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/cteq/toward-an-aesthetic-of-displacement-in-ana-vazs-sacris-pulso/>

Cixous, Hélène, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Summer, 1976

Daniels, Jill, Cahal McLaughlin, Gail Pearce, eds., *Truth, Dare or Promise: Art and Documentary Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2005)

Mulvey, Laura, 'Women making history: gleanings and the compilation film', unpublished essay

Rascaroli, Laura, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009)

White, Hayden, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.7, no.1, 1980

Yates, Frances A., *The Art of Memory* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016) [1966]