

Film plan - 'Polonyna'

Taking a collaborative approach, 'Polonyna' combines the methods of direct cinema with staged performance and elements of documentary-essay. The film is composed of three modes. The first mode is based on Khrystyna Bunii's visual archive; by means of story-telling and voice, it provides context and gives the viewer a sense of the personality of the main protagonist. The second mode is constructed around Bunii's field trips; we accompany her as she travels around the villages of Hutsulshchyna, documenting the emergence of the archive, specifically the process of collecting photographs, and the encounters it produces. These sections are partially shot by Bunii herself. The third mode is a staged musical performance with a local orchestra from the village of Kryvorivnya during a local festival. As the second (and central) mode of the film takes an observational approach, the text below is somewhat speculative. Nevertheless the basic structure of a journey and the strong presence of the main protagonist allow us to visualise various types of encounters and scenes.

Below are details of the three modes of filmmaking employed in Polonyna, each somewhat distinct from the others, but which will be woven together in the editing to form the final piece.

Mode 1: Photographs do not speak for themselves

Khrystyna Bunii started her research in 2017, and has digitised around 2500 photographs from people's private archives to date. These pictures, at once quotidian and compelling, span the breadth of the twentieth century, showing farmers and artisans, musicians and quilt-weavers, village feasts and funerals. 'Polonyna' is interspersed with images sourced from Bunii's digital archive, accompanied by her commentary - a conversation recorded late at night in a cabin in Hutsulshchyna. The voice lingers on the materiality of the photographs and meanders through stories of people, objects, animals and places in the context of their colonial past, and the precarity of the region. Bunii follows threads linking images from different times and places, drawing associations between photographs that were forgotten or unknown. A compelling story-teller and passionate expert, Bunii navigates her heritage and chosen lifestyle, addressing acute contemporaneous questions on solidarity and sustainable living. Her involved reading of the photographs, as much as an ethnographic pursuit, is a loving civic duty, political practice and proposition towards a different mode of living.

References:

Khrystyna Bunii's instagram;
The opening scenes of Paweł Pawlikowski's 'Cold War';
Radu Jude's 'The Dead Nation.'
Hollis Frampton's 'Nostalgia'.

Mode 2: The Journey

This part of the film is composed of a series of semi-autonomous scenes following Khrystyna Bunii as she conducts her research, forming a non-linear navigation of Hutsulshchyna. As we accompany Bunii, the villages prepare for a major annual festival. Each year, in the end

of May, shepherds leave their houses and lead the flocks of sheep up into the high meadows (*polonyny*) for summer pasture. The annual celebrations, involving music and rituals, stretch throughout the whole month and last until the final Вихід на полонину (*vykhid na polonyny*), which can be translated as 'exit to the high meadows'- the final procession up the hills. This section of the film places the intimate scenes of Bunii's encounters against the backdrop of the celebrations. The encounters usually take place inside of people's houses and document the exchanges and conversations that emerge between the main protagonist and her interlocutors. In essence, through its observational approach, the film bears witness to these encounters.

We also travel with Bunii between these intimate scenes, and in this way the film plays on the genre of the road movie. It is a rather anti-heroic journey though: roads in rural Ukraine are some of the worst in Europe and progress is often slow, employing a combination of buses, cars, rides from locals and hiking. The backdrop is sometimes romantic, but far from unspoilt, with the remnants of Soviet infrastructure and a dysfunctional approach to contemporary capitalism intermingling with the rural landscape and its traditional way of life. Hutsul culture has outlasted numerous regimes, but Hutsulshchyna also bears the marks of each one, producing a complex palimpsest of the past century of life in the region.

References:

V. Paravel & J.P. Sniadecki 'Foreign Parts'.
I.Barbash & L.Taylor 'Sweet Grass'.
Ben Russell 'Atlantis' (3'08"-8'15").
J.P Sniadecki & L.D. Cohn 'People's Park.'
S. Spray & P. Velez 'Manakamana'.

Mode 3: Musical performance

In one of the backyards of the village of Kryvorivnya, a local orchestra comes together to practice before their concert for this year's festival. They perform a couple of traditional songs from their repertoire, singing about labour, exploitation ('Chumak song'), desire and love ('Zabilili snizki'). There is a small ensemble of singers accompanied by cello, Hutsul bagpipe, dulcimer and trembita (a wooden horn, around two meters long, originally used by highlanders as a signalling device).

The performance is staged for the camera, with the players arranged in a theatrical mise-en-scene. One camera stays with a wide shot of this setup, while the other uses slow pans and zooms, capturing the body language of the individual musicians, their outfits and expressions, and their energy as a group.

As part of her ethnographic research, alongside her Instagram, Khrystyna Bunii maintains a Soundcloud account featuring rare and important records from the Carpathian region. In Hutsul culture, as in many traditional cultures, music plays an important role in the articulation of history, trauma, cyclical time and celebration. With no non-diegetic music in the soundtrack, this mode of filming plays an important role within the emotional register of the work, embodying much of the affective weight of Hutsulshchyna. The musical

performance says much that is otherwise unspoken, linking those in the present to the lives of past generations portrayed in the photographs.

References:

Alia Farid's 'At the Time of the Ebb'

The opening scenes of Paweł Pawlikowski's 'Cold War.'

Experiment and methodologies

Experimental filmmaking can be understood in many ways. As making a documentary film involves equal amounts of intellectual, aesthetic, practical and ethical engagement, the experiment can be situated on visual and conceptual levels, and in the process and ethics of making. For me, being experimental means challenging conventional ways of working, established and normalised by the film industry, which range from using traditional narrative tools to employing strict production hierarchies. The shooting of 'Polonyna' is a participatory process, in which the main subject is an actual collaborator who shares in the decision-making and labour of the production.

'Polonyna' also avoids many documentary tropes such as a conventional voiceover, a musical score, or talking heads interviews; and it follows a non-linear trajectory. Instead it is composed of three stylistically distinct modes which, rather than following a narrative arc, operate side by side. The central journey of the film splits further into semi-autonomous sequences, each treated almost like an individual form, with its own interior logic.

Lastly, 'Polonyna' calls for a more engaged relationship with viewers, placing trust in its audience and allowing space for their imagination and associations, instead of providing easily digestible statements. I will provide further details of these filmic and ethical strategies below.

Documentary style and story-telling tools

People portrayed in Polonyna speak for themselves, on their own terms. The film does not include a conventional voiceover or interviews, cut-aways or a musical score. It predominantly uses observational, vérité-style footage and prolonged shots in order to 'present the world to be witnessed'; the events unfold as time passes, sometimes slowly. There is a focus on images charged with meanings, images that tell stories; on filming actions and events rather than reporting on them. This implies an involved, participatory camera which provides context within the film itself. The film uses strategies of opacity, blockage and partiality; the camera eye is not omnipresent and challenges the epistemological claims which historically accompany the methods of cinéma vérité. Rather it allows for actions to take place further away from its lens, to be partially obscured by something in the first plane, or to be barely visible (when filming at night for example).

Experimental sound

In these cases the usage of sound is crucial, stimulating the imagination and supplementing what is not seen. The film pushes the potential of diegetic sound, while allowing for the

possibility of poetic transgression later on in the editing process. Time is devoted not only to recording dialogue and hard effects, but to extensive field recording and ambience gathering, in order to render detailed textures, creating an authentic but heightened sense of place. Alongside conventional recordings, various more experimental methods are employed, using contact microphones, hydrophones, geophones, overnight 'drop-rigs' and electromagnetic inducers. We take inspiration from Ernst Karel's expansive approach to cinematic sound, films such as Anocha Suwichakornpong and Ben Rivers' *Krabi 2562*.

Experimentation in observation

Documentary film is historically tied to forces of domination, such as the colonial gaze. Despite this, I believe that in our times of ecological and political crises, the methods of direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* have the potential for the reparation and retrieving of overlooked narratives. This kind of filmmaking - which for me implies intimate camerawork and a close relationship with the subject - is an appropriate tool to talk to and about communities without the desire to paint a full picture, to fully represent them. Moreover it provides space for the relationship between filmmaker and subject to subtly manifest without being didactic. Another aspect of direct cinema is to be open and honest about the intervention of the filmmaker in the lives of the films' subjects; elements of dramaturgy are present, as with the musical performance (mode 3).

A participatory process

Making a film in a foreign culture and language asks crucial ethical questions about how to represent the other. We are trying to approach these questions responsibly at every stage of the production and therefore we advocate for a participatory approach. The film is a collaboration between Nick Thomas (sound recordist), Khrystyna Bunii (the main subject, B camera) and Marta Hryniuk (A camera) and the collaborators are consulted regularly and take part in the decision-making process. As part of the pre-production process I have been learning Ukrainian language in order to be able to communicate with the subjects directly and understand well the conversations between Bunii and her interlocutors. An attempt to speak the language is a way of being tuned in, and sensitive to a foreign culture.

During the preproduction stage the group collaborates on a written document, in which we define the workload and duties of each person involved in the film production. This considers shooting days, preparation required for shooting days, and the work done before and after filming. It names all tasks and duties, ranging from practical ones - for example, the daily transfer and run-through of the footage, rough initial translations from Ukrainian to English - to conceptual, ethical and aesthetic decisions.

During the production stage, we follow Khrystyna Bunii as she carries out her research, so she is responsible for choosing locations and leading conversations. In an attempt to do justice to her work and let her present her own narrative, the camerawork is split between the cameraperson (Marta Hryniuk, Camera A) and Bunii (Camera B). Camera B is however not a conventional second camera. Instead, it gives an outlet to Bunii to film anything she wishes which falls outside of the predefined structure of the film. Bunii is a designer by profession, and an extremely visually literate person, not to mention someone who is intimately familiar with the locations and their history. Giving her a camera allows for her to input into the film in a way that I might not anticipate as an outsider. The organisation of the

shoot also reflects these ethics: prior to the shoot the crew discusses their approach and goals; together with Bunii we decide what gets filmed and how; the process respects the capacities of the crew and follows a protocol which we will have agreed upon beforehand regarding each person's range of duties, how much time will be spent shooting, etc. The editing will be shared with Nick Thomas and an additional editor. During this stage we will share rushes and consult on the editing process with Bunii.

Camerawork, approach to sound and the presence of the crew

When shooting, I wear my camera gear at all times, introducing myself to the people I meet with my camera present, in a way that everyone knows I am there to film. This is simultaneously the most honest way to operate and the one which puts people at ease: everything is out in the open, there is no subterfuge. Moments of awkwardness when grabbing the camera from my bag and turning it on are diminished; my gear - the camera and shoulder rig - is an extension of my body. The camera is at the same height as my eyes, so it sees exactly what I see. By having it on my shoulder I enable my body to move relatively naturally in all directions, I can turn the camera, follow the subjects and react quickly, just like my body does. I don't mind people breaking the fourth wall and occasionally addressing the camera directly, but I don't want this to be the usual way of filming. I want my presence to be sensed when watching the film, but in a subtle manner, rather than as a major feature. I use the equivalent of a 50mm lens where possible, and I'm close to the subjects of the film, producing a certain intimacy between my body and theirs, resulting in close-ups and tight portraits.

My aspiration for the camerawork is for it to be patient, and for scenes to unfold through time spent in each location and with Bunii and other subjects. As such there is extensive use of long shots. The interior shots are generally close ups and mid shots. The outside/ landscape shots are wider, giving the image more room to breathe. The camera is dynamic and follows the subject; however, I allow the action to flow in and out of frame, predominantly using a 50mm lens, producing a certain intimacy between my body and those of my subjects and protagonists.

The approach to sound for these scenes is similar, with Nick Thomas wearing his equipment at all times, and using sensitive microphones to pick up subtle moments and off-camera actions, producing an immersive soundscape. The perspectives of camera and sound are not wedded to one another (although the camera will also have its own microphone), rather the microphones take up positions that are sometimes oblique, or antagonistic to the camera. Sound is recorded for its own sake and not always to serve the image produced by the camera.

Crew

The crew is minimal and intimate; it consists of Marta Hryniuk (camera A, NL), Nick Thomas (sound, NL), Khrystyna Bunii (subject, camera B, guide, UA) and Aleksandr Debych (production coordinator, UKR). Members of the crew have different tasks to do with both filming itself, as well as practical and organisational tasks. The labour is shared as equally as possible. We won't work with a translator on the set in order to keep the group small and intimate. Part of the process of making of the film is to attune to the language (which

includes regular Ukrainian lessons for myself) so that there is as little gap, and as much appreciation for the people filmed, as possible.

Spectatorship

There is an important question that comes with every film: what will viewers take away from the work? Contrary to much conventional documentary, I believe in providing space for the audience to make their own connections and to have an active engagement with what they are seeing and hearing. Explication and context are provided sparingly and poetically: not everything needs to be explained. This approach mirrors Bunii's practice (one of the reasons I am attracted to it): she is led to people by chance, rather than through an overarching strategy, ethnography done on a non-pathological, human scale. And so the film is also itinerant, connections between objects in the archive are not sequential but happen across time and space. We are led by these visual referents, by the sounds and rituals of the region, and by Bunii's singular approach. As such, viewers can engage with each aspect on its own terms, unfolding its meanings, speculating, accepting opacity and producing their own readings.

Urgency

The history of Hutsulshchyna with which Bunii is concerned provides copious inspiration for contemporary political practices. As a transnational ethnic group that has often been subjected to larger political forces, Hutsul modes of living and self-identification have regularly diverged from fatigued concepts of national borders and citizenship, an attitude which Bunii embodies in her practice. Questioning the representation of a particular place, and narrating a relation between a young researcher and her heritage, the film will touch on notions of self-identification, ways of relating to one's own culture and speculate on radical modes of cohabitation based on communal values in rural areas. It will also consider the role of documentary - in the broad sense of the word - through its examination of Bunii's relationship to ethnography, a document of what is itself an act of documentation.

We have considered at great length the ethics of documentary and ethnographic filmmaking, and asked ourselves questions about whether to compensate the participants and subjects of Polonyna outside of the immediate crew of four people. Our research in this area draws particularly on 'Cross-Cultural Filmmaking' by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, which includes many accounts of filmmakers paying their subjects, building schools in the local village or buying a round of drinks, not always resulting in the intended outcome. Our intention for Polonyna is to contribute in kind to those who give us (and Khrystyna Bunii) access to their archives, by giving them a print of a photograph taken during the visit. The photograph will be a staged portrait of the subject(s), most likely standing outside of their house, taken on a high quality medium format camera. The photograph is intended to be a contribution from us to each subject's personal archive, as a way of reciprocating their generosity in allowing us to film and in contributing to Bunii's archive.