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Visual haiku of Sharon Balaban

Films of the Israeli artist **Sharon Balaban** (born in 1971) may be described as moving pictures. Very short film impressions, usually showing a selected part of the body, object, item or combination of body part and object, the films are in principle very simple, but as a result of the filming method, specific perspective and certain quivering, they become a kind of visual haiku.

Using everyday objects, elements from everyone's surroundings, fruit or other consumer products, Balaban exploits the issue of closeness between the body and objects. She cuts out a shoe from bread (*Bread*), squeezes out an orange on her breast (*Orange*), whereas in another film she puts an orange into the mouth and changes it into the tongue (*Tongue*). In other films, Balaban performs animation – though only seeming – of inanimate matter, by showing for example a body-like figure created by a stream of water flowing down from the tap (in *Domestic Landscapes* series)... In those films, even a dead bird (*Bird*) or banana skin (*Banana*) fly in the sky.

Everything seems to live its own life here. Moved by a delicate puff of wind and swaying on a thin surface of water, a pasta shell in one of the films in the *Domestic Landscapes* series resembles a sea creature, but it also causes associations with something very bodily, perhaps even with feminine sexual organs. A heart made of red jelly (*Heart*) vibrates and pulsates as if it was real.

Body parts, shown in some of the films, seem to be independent beings. The penis or buttocks of persons performing everyday activities (brushing one's teeth, cleaning the washbasin) seem to be completely insubordinate and independent from their owners (*Penis* and *Bottom*). A hand becomes transformed into the back and buttocks of a dancing figure (*George*) or it tries to settle itself on an iron (*Iron*). In one of the films (*Outside*), a pulled out tongue seems to be guiding its owner through the city and, because of the close-up applied, the tongue seems obscene in this landscape. From body parts, Balaban creates certain hybrids and sometimes this hybrid character results from a combination of body and objects, as it happens in the film entitled *Pulke*, where a sort of hoofs or bones are attached to bare feet as if they were high heels. In fact, various myths concerning monsters which exist in our culture concern the crossing of divisions between species and the question of border between what is human and inhuman. Nowadays, this border is becoming increasingly liquid, the cyborg nature of our body is emphasised and the nature itself appears as a cultural interpretation of the nature¹. In this film, Balaban demonstrates that the natural body is a fiction, that – pursuant to contemporary cultural messages – it can be transformed in any manner and adapted to various needs.

¹ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London 1990. Polish translation: *Uwikłani w płęć. Feminizm i polityka tożsamości*, translated by K. Krasuska, Wyd. Krytyki Politycznej, Warsaw 2008.

The films, referring to our experience of our own bodies, balance on the border between beauty and obscenity, some of them recalling the feeling of pain or being hurt. Looking at a hand “sitting down” on the iron, one cannot help thinking whether the iron is hot and the hand is going to be burnt. Cutting of an orange held in someone’s mouth, resembling the tongue with its shape, seems cruel and painful. There is something abject in it. According to Julia Kristeva, what is most important in the establishment of an entity, occurs on the basis of uncertain borders between the subject and the object². As a result of inability of defining borders between the interior and surface of the body, as well as inability of unambiguous determination of experiences related to areas which may be defined both as pain and pleasure, edges of the body become crucial points in the defining of one’s “self”. Subjectivity is formed by sensing the body as a consistent whole and rejecting what exceeds the border and what is considered to be dirty and filthy. That makes a pulled out tongue seem obscene, as it denies the illusion of the body as a closed surface. Kristeva claims that while defining one’s “self”, we reject bodily functions, we relinquish them as they evidence our unclosed, indefinable form. The very term of *abjection* contains significant ambivalence: it denotes something which is rejected and repulsive, but which at the same time attracts and fascinates³. Repulsion is caused by vomit, urine, faeces, menstrual blood – whatever crosses the threshold between the interior and the surface, between the subject and the object, between the “I” and others. If something causes our rejection, we – at the same time – do not want to look at it, but also must look at it, as we are tempted by the “image” of the abject (even that of vomit, faeces, dead birds or cats, which we sometimes see in the streets of our cities; but also of ill and deformed body). The image almost pushes itself into our brain, it is more glaring than the surrounding reality, more overwhelming, painful, but also fascinating. In the case of Balaban, it is constant attraction and repulsion that we deal with. A deformed body frightens and attracts (as it happens in the film *Ecstatic*). The dead bird may cause disgust, even though its “flight” (which, as a matter of fact, constitutes a filmed image in the water of a bird “made to fly”) seems real and beautiful. Squeezing of an orange on the breast may be associated with pain, although the view of juice flowing down is fascinating. Blowing of a paper tube in the film *Blow-up* with gases coming out from the anus seems disgusting, but the sight itself amuses and fascinates.

Moreover, there appears surprising closeness between the body and objects shown, which also seem to be extremely bodily. The gutting out of bread to make a shoe from it seems to be violation of the bread; the uncatchable stream of water takes a very bodily form, and the pasta shell seems delicate and defenceless. One will also find visual analogies between the body and landscape, as it happens in case of a path guided among hair (*Path*). Another surprising similarity appears in one of the films in the *Domestic Landscapes* series, where a blue plastic cup with water held by hands causes unavoidable association with an x-ray presenting chest bones. As a matter of fact, it is not only about the abject, but also about the area of visual associations caused by ordinary objects. From the point of view of the artist, those objects

² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, translated by L.S. Roudiez, New York 1982. Polish translation: *Potęga obrzydzenia. Esej o wstręcie*, translated by M. Falski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2007.

³ Kristeva, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

(but also body fragments) lead their secret lives. There appears a question concerning the border between what is live and what is dead, as well as an implication that the border is something very uncertain. Thus, the artist creates a specific phenomenology of the body and objects, trying to reach what is intrinsic in them, but also trying to find the unusual in something which seems ordinary, namely in something belonging to the zone of everyday life (this, above all, concerns films from the *Domestic Landscapes* series).

A philosophy of everyday life is proposed by Jolanta Brach-Czaina in her book *Szczeliny istnienia (Cracks in Existence)*. The author writes: “The basis of our existence is the everyday life. As the fact of existence is experienced by us as a very important one, we become amazed whenever we realise that we spend it on trifles. Therefore, everyday life constituting the existential background of extraordinary events which we expect – often in vain – may determine everything. Its dimensions are minor. Its frequency is high. It is unnoticeable”⁴. In fact, nothing exists without everyday life, without everyday life we would not understand the importance of unusual, extraordinary and great things.

However, in this everyday life there lurk “monsters”, which may also be related to Balaban’s films. Don’t the objects – which seem to live their own lives, which in a way become “subjects” – become dangerous as a result? “Monsters” live in our everyday life which, seemingly insignificant, ordinary, trivial and requiring little effort, may in fact scare us. In most cases, we do not notice the drama of everyday life. Constant tidying up, rhythms of the day determined by meal times, its dynamism caused by our biology, bustling during preparation of meals and cleaning after them, ordinary though dramatic events – such as chasing a bus or fighting with the upheaval of dirt which constantly recreates itself – all that, claims Jolanta Brach-Czaina – is fuss and bother and it proves our rooting in everyday life. We are doomed to the fuss and bother, and it “settles everyday life in the metaphysical order of things, in which existence is confronted with nothingness”⁵.

In the sense of being confronted with the nothingness and with the inexorable – passing of time, power hidden in the bodily existence which at the same time is a vital and destructive force (in fact, our life aims at an inexorable end), the considerations of Brach-Czaina have much in common with the reflections of Julia Kristeva on the issue of abject. In both cases, the intention is to show that forces determining our existence remain in what is ordinary, trivial and rejected. It is precisely this aspect that is brought out by the works of Balaban which, although minimalist, gain an enormous striking power because of focusing on the visual character of the body and objects.

In this manner, the artist brings out the areas in-between – between the body and object, between the live and dead, between fascination and disgust, but also between the image of what is ordinary and everyday and our associations which appear in the imagination. The latter issue is tackled by Ernst Gombrich in his outstanding book entitled *Art and Illusion: A*

⁴ Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Wydawnictwo eFKa, Kraków 1998, p. 55.

⁵ Brach-Czaina, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

*Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*⁶. Gombrich says that representation is always something mysterious and it is always based on illusion. What is more, one cannot make precise differentiation between perception and illusion. Perception uses all available measures to eliminate harmful illusions, but it may fail to “refute” an incorrect hypothesis. Our knowledge, visual stereotypes which we use, our being used to the reality influence our way of “reading” what we see. Therefore, symbols and conceptions could not exist if we were not able to extend the categories of objects over their rational content, if we did not react to basic images. But indeed we do see – different shapes in things which have nothing in common with those shapes, e.g. shapes of animals in clouds. We also assign characteristics resembling other shapes to objects – sometimes the shape of a face. Therefore, the language and metaphor evidence that the collection of objects in which we close the notions of, for example, eyes, lips and face, greatly exceeds the knowledge of anatomy. In our perception, a window may be an eye, whereas a jug may have lips or ears. The differentiation between a narrower real set and the broader metaphoric set, building of barriers between imagination and reality is indeed the matter of intellect. Comprehension, as Gombrich proves, dominates over perception. That is why in the image of hand in Balaban’s film we see a fragment of back and buttocks, an orange may replace the tongue, whereas hands holding a cup deceive us with an impression of the chest x-ray. Worse even, when we “switch” to this kind of associations, it becomes difficult to return to the idea that we are only dealing with a hand, orange, or plastic cup. The same happens in case of the famous picture presented by Gombrich at the beginning of his considerations, showing at the same time a duck and a rabbit (but one may only see a duck or a rabbit at a time, never both). It is the skill of projection that Balaban uses in her films – projection which appears in our mind and which, as Gombrich says referring to the words of Leone Battista Alberti, lies at the foundation of all art. Indeed, it is because of the ability of projection that Balaban’s images may cause us pain and disgust, but also fascinate. What is associated with the body is felt by us through our own bodies; thus, while viewing works of art we include our reactions which are not only caused by the fact of viewing.

In his book, Gombrich cites the Chinese saying that “speculation will save the painter’s work”. The author of the book on art and illusion draws attention to the charm of incomplete representations, to which the viewer must add something. We perceive such images as fragment of a greater whole, seeking finished patterns in them, or we even see something which is not there.

At the beginning I referred to Balaban’s films as a kind of visual haiku, as haiku is a brief poetic work, often containing as little as one line⁷. Translated into the visual language – one line is one scene in the film. Moreover, haiku is usually associated with joke, it uses paradox, subtlety and aesthetic minimalism. Balaban’s films are minimalistic, brief, but also extremely subtle, that being the reason why they open the possibility of various associations. They may also be considered to constitute a kind of joke. Haiku does not speak about one’s “self” (we

⁶ Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation Sztuka i złudzenie. O psychologii przedstawiania obrazowego*, translated by J. Zaranowski, PIW, Warsaw 1981.

⁷ Haiku (jap. 俳句) – brief Japanese poetic form, developed in the period of Edo (1603-1868), but also popular to date.

do not learn anything about Balaban from those brief films), in fact one never knows precisely what it speaks about, as the best haikus do not allow specific interpretation, but they leave an ephemeral feeling in the recipient that the poet caught something significant. Haiku is sometimes compared to an image on which an artist presented the unusual character of the ordinary world in its most trivial manifestations. Associated with the Zen philosophy, it expresses admiration for this world, including its most ordinary elements and forms of life. As in the case of Balaban, whose films are a kind of haiku praising the body and objects; they present banal, ordinary and even repulsive reality, but it is the reality in which they allow to notice the unusual character of life and the world.