

## Don't Turn Your Back on Me

Renata Poljak's film and photo collages titled *Partenza* (Italian for departure, as used in many of Croatia's coastal dialects) express the global insecurity of contemporary society and the fragility of human existence. Metaphorically, they address a story about departure, anticipation and separation, dictated by migrations. In the early 20th century, it was usual yet traumatic for men to leave Croatian islands due to poverty and hunger. One of these tragic stories is weaved into the artist's own family history; this series of works is inspired by the life story of Renata's great-grandmother who lived on the island of Brač and whose husband went to Chile looking for work in order to secure his family's future. Like many of the island's women, she waited for her husband who, like many of those men, never returned.

*Partenza* is simultaneously the homage to the contemporary tragedies of migrants at sea. The author uses this phenomenon as a connecting thread and a reminder that not so long ago, and even nowadays, we are in the same boat. Therefore, Poljak links two stories about migration – the one of Croatia from the early 20th century and today's plight of African and Asian refugees. The work utilizes migrant and refugee stories that constantly repeat throughout history. It powerfully and suggestively points to the human condition as fragile and susceptible to political, economic and social changes.

Renata is an artist of a powerful personality and an exceptional visual delicacy who uses up-to-date technology to tackle socio-political themes and the issues of new visuality. This differentiates the author from the activist works by numerous other artists. Part of the reason may be the iconography, which is an important part of the author's visual expression that does not shy away from narration. Quite the opposite, it emphasizes story, most often dressing it in poetic garb, and sometimes in explicit black-humor satire. Such expression can be seen as a reflection of contemporary times that embrace representational imagery; according to this, even socially engaged art that strives to be conceptual and radical has also appropriated narration.

Though it may sound sacrilegious to some, I would classify the major part of Renata's *oeuvre* as an interpretation of Neo-Baroque. The Neo-Baroque isn't a homogenous style; rather it signifies a state of spirit and an act of individual artistic expression that investigates and questions new artistic possibilities. The gist of what we consider the Neo-Baroque sentiment may have been best expressed by Angela Ndalianis, the professor of new media and history at the University of Melbourne, who writes: "As was the case with the seventeenth-century Baroque, the current expression of the Neo-Baroque has logically emerged as a result of systemic and cultural transformations, which are the outcome of the rise of conglomeration, multimedia interests, and new digital technologies. Cultural transformations have given birth to Neo-Baroque form."

The Neo-Baroque articulates the spatial, the visual, and the sensorial in ways that parallel the dynamism of seventeenth-century Baroque forms, but that dynamism is expressed in guises within a completely different technological context...”

(Angela Ndaljianis: *Neo-Baroque and Contemporary Entertainment* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004.)

By addressing the issue of migration, Renata also speaks about cultural changes and resulting civilizational problems by comparing them with the past, when numerous migrations and ethnic pogroms created the reality and the future of humankind. If the artist came close to the Neo-Baroque sentiment with the aforementioned, then the next aspect where I find parallels is intertextuality, which occasionally and subtly appears in Renata’s work. This intertextuality is immanent in the Neo-Baroque and could be seen as a continuation of postmodernism; it is primarily used to blur the relationship between representation and illusion. This is another important characteristic of Renata’s artistic creation that applies also to *Partenza*.

The film opens with a wide-angle shot of a sandy incline at which, in fast rhythm succession, appear women wearing garments typical of Croatian islands from the beginning of the last century. That scene can be read as a kind of homage to the western movies of John Ford or Anthony Mann, just like the later portraits of these women recall the close-ups of Sergio Leone, the first Neo-Baroque film director. Even if these film sequences echo western movies, I am not certain that this was the author’s intent: she could have simply wanted to evoke the atmosphere of that period, just like the film directors mentioned, and so similarities became unavoidable. The black and white photography of Boris Poljak, one of Croatia’s best directors of photography, emphasizes the film ambience similar to those distinct Hitchcock-like atmospheres from the 1950s. This is most evidently manifested in precise framing and contrasts between individual frames, which brings a necessary and carefully dosed dynamic to the story. The very action happens in a loop of sorts, using repetitions that silently evoke permanence and the tension of anticipation. This is highlighted through the coexistence and juxtaposition of frames of Bol’s lunar-like seashore (the film was shot on Zlatni Rat beach) and the distant contours of mountains that encompass the dark and fearsome surface of the sea. The culmination of the film is the suicide by drowning of a woman who lost all hope, which the artist represented by shifting from black and white to color, a method also used by Tarkovsky in his film *Andrej Rubljov*. The blackness of the sea bottom, which just a couple of scenes earlier was dappled by broken sun rays (like the Holy Spirit lights up St Theresa in Bernini’s Baroque sculptural group), is now bathed in an endless sea blue. From underneath the sea, fluttering like Baroque draperies, pieces of contemporary clothing emerge, gradually sinking. And so symbolically the Bol seashore becomes the undersea of Lesbos or Lampedusa. With this, the author leaves a mark of equivalence between the past and the present, and at the same

time relativizes reality and illusion.

While utilizing all of these Neo-Baroque attributes, it seems logical that Renata Poljak also quoted Caravaggio – one of the greatest masters of Baroque painting. While she was preparing *Partenza* project, Renata, in her own words, rediscovered painting and art history. The two photo collages titled *Don't Turn Your Back on Me* hold clear references to Caravaggio, more precisely, to his work *Madonna with Child and St. Anna*. This is probably the most important painting by Caravaggio from his religious body of work. It features Madonna lifting the child up to the air while stepping on a snake; the whole scene is unbiasedly, from distance, observed by St. Anna. Because of this, for Caravaggio's times, atypical and slightly provocative religious composition (St. Anna is realistically depicted as an elderly wrinkled woman, Virgin Mary is given as a common caring mother while baby Jesus is presented naked and uncircumcised), the painting was seen as scandalous and removed only two days after its hanging to one of the altars of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Using such typical genre scene, with adding provocative elements, was a highly uncommon way of representing the life of saints, especially because Caravaggio used "immoral" Roman women as his models. Undoubtedly, this painting broke with the existing artistic principles and cleared the way for more liberal reinterpretations of sacral motifs. Since she studied art history, Renata was familiar with the importance of this painting and the reaction and changes it caused in the painting history. The artist chose it not only because of its painterly excellence but also because of its social context – quite in the line with her own social engagement and continuous quest for change. It was definitely a conscious choice to approach Caravaggio while thinking about the work dealing with the migrant crisis; Caravaggio was a migrant himself, due to his tumultuous personal life and numerous exiles. If one studies his work in details, it can be noticed how the paintings were indeed not contradictory to his lifestyle. The question remains whether this turbulent existence was the result of the painter's egoistic arrogance (as historians like to say) or his continuous rebellion (indeed present throughout his work).

For her two photo collages, Renata purposely removes Caravaggio's *Madonna with Child* from St. Anne; between these two characters as well as on the edges of compositions, the artist inserts the images of our contemporaries. While the first collage presents the younger, the second one presents much older characters. The works paraphrase Renata's preoccupations, this time by not speaking through metaphors but through direct narration. They embody the artist's interest in permanent interference of time and space, estrangement, anticipation and hope. These collages are certainly closest to Neo-Baroque, not only because of the direct quotation of Caravaggio, but also because of their composition and iconography and clear distinction between the present and history, which creates a balanced and conceptually strong unity. They remind me of the seminal Neo-Baroque piece - Derek Jarman's film *Caravaggio* from 1986. Certainly, the loose temporality of the film's story is not Jarman's invention;

however, the director discreetly introduces contemporary motifs (such as a typewriter, a digital calculator, cigarettes, a motor bike and a car) into a detailed reconstruction of the Baroque interior, thus revealing his own sensibility and innovative approach to filmmaking. Jarman stays true to the original motifs of Caravaggio's compositions, however only through the set and the models. The paintings, in the film being in the process of making by Caravaggio, are very remote from his original style. The painted scene in which the painter portrays a woman features a model situated in the space created in Vermeer style; a close-up reveals her head painted in a manner of Botticelli; while Caravaggio himself is making his painting in the style of Degas – the whole situation typical for Neo-Baroque.

As much as Jarman's films, Renata's photo collages go well beyond their space and time, even if the artist makes, by means of new technologies, a clear distinction between historical and contemporary times. The photographs of contemporaries are digitally manipulated through chiaro - scuro effect, also typical for Baroque; their background seamlessly melts with the background of the painting. There is still a sharp contrast between the warmth of historical and coolness of today's figures. The older personas seem washed away, lonely and deserted, whereas the younger ones, with their eyes absent and harrowed, still look for and await some hope, not wanting to have the Orwellian future of their fathers. Today's people depicted by Renata's collages, by turning towards the past, hope that humanity and individuality will not desert us for good.

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