

Sissi Tax on Vivian Ostrovsky

Allow me to say that a second time. The word is not the thing, but the flash of lightning which enables us to perceive it. So, to make it flash once more, the poetic in Ostrovsky, in the diction invented by Gertrude Stein 66 years ago, and I quote:

And now all this has everything to do with poetry and prose and whether now whether there really is now any such thing. Poetry and prose. I came to the conclusion that poetry was a calling an intensive calling upon the name of anything and that prose was not the using the name of anything as a thing in itself but the creating of sentences that were self-existing and following one after the other made of anything a continuous thing which is paragraphing and so a narrative that is a narrative of anything... In the beginning there really was no difference between poetry and prose in the beginning of writing in the beginning of talking in the beginning of hearing anything or about anything. How could there be how could there have been since the name of anything was then as important as anything as anything that could be said about anything...Prose and poetry then went on and more and more as it went on prose was more and more telling and by sentences balancing and then by paragraphing prose was more and more telling how anything happened if any one had anything to say about what happened how anything was known if anyone had anything to say about how anything was known, and poetry poetry tried to remain with knowing anything and knowing its name, gradually it came to really not knowing but really only knowing its name and that is at last what poetry became. (from 'Narration')

And now we come to the question of how Ostrovsky's poetry comes about. For that, I turn to the Austrian poet Ernst Herbeck: "A text about a poem. A poem is a prediction. The poem is a why. The poet arranges language in short sentences. What is left over is the poem itself." What constitutes the process of condensation? Ostrovsky reduces and minimizes, cuts things down, as we would say in the

medium of writing, selects from enormous masses of material, from an abundance, an overabundance of material that has been shot, and cuts back radically. The shooting ratio, if we can put it like that, is 1: almost infinite, and that which is left out becomes that which is left over, becomes the film. Film becomes remains. What remains is the poem itself. Ostrovsky's elegant, slender and idiosyncratic oeuvre – these 'minimal movies' – have their place in a specific cinematographic tradition – though they have not yet been canonized themselves, they form part of that tradition's canon – of the filmmakers of 'independent cinema', of experimental film, whose impetus has always been to give their images freedom, or perhaps to give them back their freedom.

Now, "in order to allow us to see more than we know, the ordering elements that over centuries made the world manageable have been removed from these images", writes Frieda Grafe about an American experimental film that was made 42 years ago. Her mother comes from Russia, her father is of Czech extraction. Vivian Ostrovsky herself was born in New York on 17 November, as it says in a biographical note. For those with a passion for etymology, the Slavic *ostrov* means 'island'. She was born in New York, grew up in Rio de Janeiro, and studied in Paris, where she also often lives.

A kind of American woman in Paris, whose concept of image construction relies upon transitoriness and a diversity of locations. For those forms of image construction which are organized heterarchically rather than hierarchically, everything possesses equal meaning. But to designate Vivian Ostrovsky – who calls her working context 'Jet Lag Productions' – an American filmmaker would be equally amiss. Her idiom, both that of her manner of speech and that of her aesthetics, contradicts a linear, singular designation. This "aesthetic of the non-identical, as it could perhaps be called, is founded in the dissolution of the unity of the concept of the sign, of the unity of the material bearer and meaning, image and voice", according to Rike Felka in her book *Duras: Der India-Song-Komplex*.

So what are the specifics of Ostrovsky's signature style? It is the humorous, the

everyday, and the use of music and rhythm. The humorous, without making fun of what is being depicted, the people. In a dry manner and presented in time-lapse. The everyday series, sequence, list. The intrinsic use of music and rhythm. The dynamising element of the music and of the vocals and instrumentals and of the voices. The music becomes the canvas, I almost want to say the *leading character*, the protagonist. Here I would like to mention the following poetic forms: sound poems, tone poems, noise poems, voice poems, sung poems, talk poems, and the following name, which is also present in her films (well, not the name, perhaps): Kurt Schwitters. We could say that the visual material sings. They are sound films in the sense that they privilege the sound. Not in an illustrative or subordinate or psychologizing way. There is an autonomy of sound which sharpens our hearing and listening. I would like to just quickly sketch out these specific features, which constitute her signature – in its gentle or forceful, round or pointed, very rapid or rapid variants – by way of the example of the films *Eat, Work and Progress* and *UTA MAKURA (Pillow Poems)*. *Eat*, which is also the name of a film by Warhol – which was filmed 35 years ago with a static camera in a single take, in which a man eats a mushroom for hours. The flip-side of this film is *Eat* by Ostrovsky, a 15-minute observation of the table manners of humans and animals. The montage produces a semblance between the animals and the humans. Which is funny, releases associations with the realm of comedy, as occurs in a different way in Tati.

Gertrud Koch says the following of Tati:

What is specific about Tati's films though is not so much the way their effect of inducing laughter, as many comedians intend; what seems specific about Tati's aesthetic of the comical is for me more the refusal of this affect and effect. What is singular and irritating about Tati's films is precisely the hovering state in which he suspends comedy. Perhaps it is a consequence of the primacy of visual construction. The visual is after all already an evolution of an originally tactile need. It is already founded upon a form of abstraction which balks at the ribald physical comedy of 'slapstick'. Careful observation, active contemplation – in short, a

fascinated expectation – are prerequisites for having any understanding of Tati's constructions of the comical.

Eat displays the barbaric element of one of civilization's 'cultural technologies', undercut by a lyrical melody – and the critters look on, chewing, ruminating. The gaze of the ethnographer at their own culture, which becomes foreign. "L'ethnologie du blanc" is what Carl Einstein called this, as he wrote the screenplay for *Toni* together with Renoir. Which means addressing the construction of the myths, the collective conceptions and customs among Europeans. That which Roland Barthes later called "mythologies". In this film, everyone is a star as their own star, while at the same time maintaining their status of anonymity, and the borders between the documentary and the fictional become blurred. In one sequence, sung in a Yiddish-American song, matzo becomes a sponge in the hands of a baby which is also sung in this song, on which the baby joyfully sucks, sucks out the joy of life.

On the films *Work and Progress* and *Uta Makura*, I'll just say something very briefly. Vivian Ostrovsky and I are both available later on, because I find that these 'minimal movies' also require a certain 'minimized blah blah', to quote Ostrovsky. The film *Work and Progress* – and I'm emphasising the conjunction *and* – was filmed in 1990, meaning it marks the downfall of the Soviet empire, after the fall of the wall. At the beginning of this film we see the word *конец* in Cyrillic script. So it begins at the end. The film is a dual screen projection, which is interesting. Once again Warhol, *Chelsea Girls*, also a dual screen projection, although Warhol said of *Chelsea Girls* that he chose the dual screen set-up in order to make the boring films – in Warhol's words – that he had previously produced, these long films filmed with a statically mounted camera in which nothing happened, so to speak, which were so boring, and so with two projections, perhaps it would be more interesting, he said. I don't think that was Ostrovsky's intention. I would also like to very briefly address something else, because it forms part of an aesthetic principle of modernity which is also very strongly present in *Uta Makura*, in the 'pillow poems', both in the film by Ostrovsky and in the book written a thousand years ago by the court lady Sei Shōnagon, this aesthetic principle of lists, series and sequences. The list of the

sound, of the soundtrack of *Work and Progress* is in and of itself an insignia of its contemporary moment. That is: Sofia Gubaidulina, Dmitry Shostakovich, Serge Rachmaninoff (please excuse any potential mispronunciations), Mister Molloy, Lenin, Tchaikovsky, *Silk Stockings*, Modest Mussorgsky, gypsy songs from the '60s. Once again, Lenin, Ligeti, Eduard Kolmanovsky, Dmitry Shostakovich, Serge Rachmaninoff and the Beatles. So a political drama *ex negativo*, which begins with the Russian avant-garde, namely Vertov and Eisenstein, who of course at the beginning of the revolution viewed themselves as revolutionary forces.

So I had an enormous amount of paper available and began to fill my notebooks with strange facts, stories from the past and all means of other things, often the most trivial of material. All in all, I concentrated on things and people that I found enchanting and great. My notes also include comments on trees and plants, birds and insects. That sounds like the concept of Vivian Ostrovsky's poetics, but that was written by Sei Shōnagon, as her poetics, and I'd like to leave it there and wish you a very pleasant evening and a great deal of insight with the films of Vivian Ostrovsky. Thank you.