

## Dream Hunters

In Banovic first film, *Dream Hunters*, she returns to Serbia after ten years of largely enforced absence. There, she participates in a number of traditional, still frequently performed, rituals.

The film is divided into various episodes. The first comprises dark images of a female figure (the artist), who takes part in the Eucharist while the slow voice-over (again Banovic) expresses a sense of abandonment by God. The second section is entitled *Paraskeva*, after the patron saint of women. The voice-over – that seems to emit from a dream or trance, asks the artist her name. “*Koššana*”, she replies, “*Koššana Paraskeva*”. If the expression of abandonment by God can be understood as a sense of being thrown back on oneself – that can in turn be connected to the war in Yugoslavia – and if the question about the artist’s name can be interpreted as a question about identity, both sections are key in understanding the film that was created in a response to Banovic’ sense of alienation from herself and her background. Undergoing ritual is more often used as a means of communication, of coming into contact not only with her country of origin but, by extension, with the ‘Other’ in herself. Because, as Russell also states: “If for Benjamin the Other was the proletariat, in postmodern culture it is, (...), the cultural other. But for many filmmakers, this cultural other is “within” – within themselves, their families, their communities and nations.”<sup>i</sup>

In the exhibition catalogue *Transformers* Ralph Rugoff describes a theory relating to identity that is widely adhered to by postmodern theoreticians, in which the individual is seen as a “being who is centerless and divided, a compilation of partial identities where disparate potentials freely compete (...)”<sup>ii</sup> But where, for example, he cites artists like Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura who seem to embrace this postmodern notion of identity wholeheartedly, Banović seems to long for an identity rooted in the past, as though she is striving to express a sort of ‘purity’. Purity is a theme that also returns in the rituals, including a baptismal ritual undergone by Banović in *Dream Hunters*. Were it not for the fact that this yearning demands complete surrender, rendering it a sort of blind desire, Banović’ longing for purity could be branded romantic. However, the artist undermines this notion in several ways - for instance simply by imperfectly staging the amphora scene. The background clearly comprises ordinary wallpaper and Banović’ piled-up hair is a little too unruly by classical standards.

By employing poetical texts in a voice-over that often references a reality never visualised, non-linear narratives and elusive symbolism, *Dream Hunters* apparently presents a reality that bears a direct relation to a statement by Russell about how contemporary experimental ethnology deals with visualising reality. She writes: “The real” conceived as history differs from “the real” of referentiality in that it includes the spectator and the filmmaker in its scope. Beyond the limits of representation exist other realities of experience, desire, memory, and fantasy.<sup>iii</sup>” Indeed, the presence of Banović in the film not only plays an active role, but also acknowledges the presence of the viewer. This occurs in the section *Taking leave of Satan*, in which the artist is baptised. The complete baptism scene is filmed in slow motion, which not only lends it a

certain aestheticism but also captures the atmosphere of the baptism ritual. Or perhaps the atmosphere is closer to a fantasy about a christening rite: the slow motion images evoke a sense of 'trance' that goes far further than the 'ordinary' sacred aura one imagines during such a ritual. The camera angle, the hand-held camera and the lack of voice-over in this scene – that, however poetic, would have introduced a certain distance – give viewers the feeling of actually being present at the baptism.

Banović disrupts both this impression and the (illusion of) trance when, immediately after the actual christening – and still in slow motion – she turns to the camera with a mysterious smile. Her oblique glance meets the eye of the viewer. Is she trying to say that she has actually been purified by the ritual? Perhaps, but her self-aware, almost theatrical movement seems contradictory. What we are witnessing could be an almost ironic distancing from the events – surely, if she had actually given herself over to the rite, the artist would have denied the presence of the camera? Scenes with voice-overs from later episodes seem to be conclusive in affirming that the purification process failed to establish contact with the supernatural. In a later scene, which shows the painting of a saint, the voice-over says: "You are mute. You don't answer." As Banović herself indicates, *Dream Hunters* is not only a quest for a lost identity and a return; it is also a farewell.

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i Ditto, p.24

ii Ralph Rugoff, *Transformers*, exhibition catalogue, New York 1994, p. 12

iii Russell, p. 25