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Luncheon

Tomasz Gubernat
CUNY Hunter College

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Luncheon
by
Tomasz Gubernat

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Date

Michael Gitlin

Signature

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Date

Steve Gorelick

Signature of Second Reader

- **Abstract**

Documenting the apparently prosaic activities of nearly two hundred Polish immigrant senior citizens, “Luncheon” is an observational portrait of a place that seems foreign and significantly removed from its New York City surroundings. For this dwindling demographic, daily activities and commemorative performances provide a way to revivify collective memories and maintain individual identities that are still deeply connected to a place far removed in both space and time. “Luncheon” is an exploration of how memory and identity are constructed and maintained, nationality imagined, and communities preserved.

- **Project Description**

As a portrait of the Krakus Senior Luncheon Center in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, “Luncheon” examines sentiments of displacement and loss as experienced by foreign-born senior citizens in New York City. It is a film that offers an understated glimpse into human interaction and bears witness to the basic desire for belonging and compulsion towards community. Using visual metaphors to articulate these ideas, emphasis is placed on movement and action within activities at the center, and on the complicated relationships among various members of the Krakus community.

Every weekday a staff of three prepares the day’s menu in the kitchen of the Krakus Senior Luncheon Center. Visitors eat, socialize, and engage in a variety of activities

including performances of distant and recent Polish national history and cultural mythology. For this dwindling demographic of North Brooklyn, daily activities and commemorative performances provide a way to reawaken collective memories and maintain individual identities still deeply connected to a place far removed in both space and time. The narrative arc of our story observes the calendar of the Center. Following a somewhat flexible schedule of events from 9 A.M. to 2 P.M., members engage in a series of elective activities. These function to inform our audience about the experience and challenge of aging. For example, Teresa and Kristine spend every moment together at the center and are enthusiastic self-portrait painters. Every Monday they sit in front of a mirror and paint while remarking on every contour of their face – essentially turning art lessons into reflections on aging and the influence of time. In the next room, Mr. Zajac quietly enters this week's entries into the Krakus Archives, which he began fifteen years ago. His chronicles consist mostly of clippings from Polish language newspapers and personal photographs. Simultaneously, a group of nameless men rehearse vocal exercises beside a piano and banter amongst themselves, teasing one another, and offering light elucidations on the competition they share with one another. Their childish and playful nature, apparent through their interactions, allows for familiar sentiments to emerge. On the stage, another group of seniors engage in their third choral rehearsal, arguing over which solo is more appropriate for the approaching holiday. While in one respect, these interactions offer an implicit glance into the process by which a group of people form and negotiate community; they also imply an ironically melancholic tone to the joys of aging.

The motivations behind making this documentary, and the resulting choices made during production and editing, are rooted in a personal sense of attachment to Greenpoint, Brooklyn as a neighborhood. It is where I lived throughout my childhood and remain in my adult life and it serves as a link within the larger body of work I have completed while enrolled in the Integrated Media Arts program of Hunter College.

It is a deliberate choice to document quotidian activities of Polish Greenpoint in that they may inform any audience as to the motivations of this community, but also serve as an archive of events and customs at risk of desuetude. Once a thriving enclave of Polish immigrants, complete with store front bakeries, butchers, delicatessens and travel agencies catering to its non-English speaking residents, Greenpoint has experienced considerable changes that are not uncommon in most large cities. Displacement, gentrification and rapid development have left the area entirely unrecognizable, not only in terms of its built environment, but also in the makeup of its residents. A 2005 rezoning plan generated by the City of New York drastically shifted the perception of North Brooklyn from a sleepy post-industrial working class community to an untapped resource for luxury development. This shift in perception occurred not just in the real estate market, but across cultural lines as well. Popular television programming, including the HBO series, “Girls” had a significant influence on property rental prices and heightened demand.¹ It was commonplace to use North Brooklyn, and Greenpoint specifically, as backdrop in cop drama television and romantic comedies, associating

¹ Zacharyk. “Greenpoint’s ‘Girls’ Effect.” The Real Deal Miami, The Real Deal Miami, 3 Apr. 2013.

dilapidated urban decay with youth culture, desolation with self-discovery, and perpetuating a mythical narrative of an undiscovered frontier – void of inhabitants and ripe for discovery. The implication that Greenpoint was uninhabited left many local residents, including myself, feeling unrecognized, ignored and overlooked. These reactions developed into a desire to document events, individuals and stories within the North Brooklyn area as a means of defense.

My work is motivated by a desire for preservation and the impending loss that this implies. I record activities, events, and moments with people on the verge of disappearance, displacement or dissolution. My documentation of the long-established institutions of this community reflects a personal sense of urgency to record what is being priced out and forgotten. The tension between existing communities and new residents plays an important role in my work. I rely on an observational approach to filmmaking, rooted in a balance of visual distance and physical intimacy. I record subtle, emotive expressions between people and emphasize these exchanges as tools of narrative structure. This reflects a conviction that minor, quotidian occurrences, when carefully observed, significantly enrich our understanding and disclose important ideas that would remain hidden by a didactic or thematic approach.

My professional and creative work exist parallel to each another. As a media archivist, I am concerned with the moving image as an artifact and site of cultural memory. As a documentary filmmaker, I feel that my work serves as its own archive of a community in

which I am deeply invested. In both cases, my work revolves around the notions of timelessness, obsolescence, and loss.

- **Research Analysis**

My first initiation into the immigrant senior demographic of New York City, specifically Greenpoint, was as a volunteer videographer for a local nonprofit. I had finished my undergraduate studies in film and was working freelance in post-production. The nonprofit was involved with securing affordable housing units for local seniors and lower income residents of North Brooklyn. My role entailed recording and editing the varying protests, events or field activities that were organized. We had worked on a number of short documentary projects that primarily served the nonprofit as documentation for its grant application proposals as well as promotional material for its web content.

Personally, these projects served as routine practice in documentary cinematography and spurred my interest in the condition of the immigrant senior citizen. Notions of loneliness, poverty, nostalgia for a home left behind, coupled with a comedic sense of sarcasm in comparing the attributes or disadvantages of Capitalism versus their memories of life under Communism served as charismatic ways of sharing insight and developing relationship. These moments, and the individuals I met, some of whom have passed, still linger in my mind.

Subsequently, I began work on a feature length documentary on Community Boards in Brooklyn. Focusing on Community Board #1, which includes all of North Brooklyn in its precinct, allowed me and the production team to delve deeper into the question: do

individual citizens have any real influence over their government and policy. From a visual standpoint, our major obstacle was tackling the severe monotony and mundane motionless nature of civic meetings. Large tables with appointed members sitting across from one another possessed very little cinematic value. As a cameraperson and editor on this project I began to develop an interest in articulating ideas through visual metaphors. Finding transitions in the visual composition of the frame, using shapes, changes in color and light, I could emphasize certain techniques of visual storytelling over others. My strategy was to focus in on the changes in facial expressions and the fleeting discreet gestures of body language between city representatives and community liaisons.

The emphasis of fluidity in camera work and the importance of captured movement are directly influenced by the films of Leonard Helmrich.² His “single-shot” cinema concept and his emphasis on the importance of the moving frame influenced an effort in my work to refrain from the traditional sit-down interview – that filmmaking can inform by seeing action and showing events as they happen, not as evidence to a statement or testimony. This is related to another aspect of my work that functions as a visual theme that ties “Luncheon” to the previous short documentary work I completed in 2016, titled “Girls and Boys.” I attempt to portray the subject of my films from the voyeuristic perspective of a child. By placing the camera below eye level and at a distance, I am treating that which is in frame with a level of reverence most children might possess. Choosing dark exposures and shallow depths of field give the image a certain amount of weight. They place the viewer in an unnaturally closer proximity to the subject, which suggests a

²The opening shot of “Position Among the Stars” is perhaps the most widely known example of Helmrich’s signature camera work.

heightened intimacy with that image. The psychologically dramatic effects of these techniques are intended to encourage a closer relationship with the reality of that which is captured inside the frame.³

“We view films in the context of darkness. We sit in darkness and watch an illuminated world, the world of the screen. This situation is a metaphor for the nature of our own vision. In the very process of seeing, our own skull is like a dark theater, and the world we see in front of us is in a sense a screen. We watch the world from the dark theater of our skull.”⁴

Dorsky’s interpretation of the human experience and its relationship to cinema has deeply motivated my visual style in both “Girls and Boys” and “Luncheon”. It is an approach to filmmaking that is organized on principles of poetry and visual experimentation.

The Community Board project served to enrich my interests in cinematography as it relates to the recording of human behavior, to focus on the gestures and mannerisms of individuals and how that could be reassembled to emphasize larger revelations on the human experience. I became aware of the potency of these techniques to inspire an emotional response in an audience. The resulting psychological aspects of cinematography and shot selection became a primary motive in my camera work and in my approach to subject matter.

With those influences and concepts in mind, I began work on the short documentary, “Girls and Boys”, which uses observational techniques to record the interactions of a stern dance instructor and her distracted students. I was drawn to the charismatic

³ Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Vol. 1, P. 36.

⁴ Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*, p. 25-26.

pedagogy of the instructor and aimed to describe those shared moments between herself and her students. For inspiration, I drew from a number of documentary films that examine the role of the educator.⁵ “Girls and Boys” is a film that examines adolescent encounters of intimacy, love, and gender. The rehearsals take place in the basement theater of a Greenpoint church belonging to the local catholic parochial school. It is the last remaining Polish Catholic School in Greenpoint and the rehearsals are electives initiated by parents determined to have their children learn the traditions of their national and cultural heritage.

In “Luncheon”, I used those visual story-telling techniques mentioned above to examine how immigrant communities promote their own national heritage. I wanted to further explore the narratives and performative aspects of nationalistic gestures and reflect on their objectives. For a large percentage of seniors at the Krakus center, the historical events informing their theatrical productions gave them a great deal of pride. It may stand as no surprise that most performances revolve around religious celebrations or military achievements, and that these two elements apparently have a distinct and important role in defining memory and constructing heritage.⁶ “Luncheon,” as an observational portrait, does not aim to answer the questions, “Why do these sentiments exist?” or “What inspires any generation within a community to harbor sentiments of national pride?” It is simply a reflection on the means with which a group of people construct memory and the relationship to homeland and place that exists in the minds of

5 “To Be and To Have”, offered the most inspiration in its capacity to challenge gender stereotypes of masculinity by featuring a male in the nurturing and gentle role of a preschool instructor.

6 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 12, draws a relationship between the two main pre-nationalist cultural systems of religious community and dynastic realism. While not directly considered to be ‘producers’ of nationalism, there does seem to be some relationship.

immigrants. The relationship these seniors share with the home nation that offers them so much pride remains ostensibly tangible only through the television screen and news broadcasts. It is seemingly nationalism through nostalgia. While xenophobic sentiments are on a rise across all of Europe, recent events and the political climate in Poland suggest they have particular importance there.⁷

- **Thesis Production Process**

“Luncheon” started as something inward looking. It was rooted in an interest in the subculture of Polish immigrant seniors and their reenactments of history. Drawn to the methods of how people envision their past national histories, I was interested in the relationship between people and their present. I wished to learn more about the current political climate of Poland through the interpretations of Polish seniors living in the United States. While a good portion maintained strong ties with relatives “back home”, there was an undeniable sense of detachment from Poland coupled by a longing sense of nostalgia. Admittedly, this was a personal interpretation – an assumption thrust upon the subjects by me the filmmaker, but as I became more familiar with certain individuals and conducted more in-depth interviews with patrons of the Krakus center, this assumption was eventually confirmed. What appeared striking was how the television functioned as a portal. The entire dynamics of the room, otherwise noisy and chaotic, would hush during the allotted portion of the day when the news program from Poland was broadcast. It is an experience that serves as an important component to the documentary as it

⁷ Taylor, Matthew. “‘White Europe’: 60,000 Nationalists March on Poland’s Independence Day.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 12 Nov. 2017.

demonstrates a general sense of timelessness that permeates the space. Unchanged décor, outdated event calendars, appliances that have remained functional for decades and worn wooden furniture collectively create the impression of a space maintained but unchanged over time. The room sits several feet below ground level with small rectangular windows along the top wall allowing intermittent light and the occasional appearance of pedestrians, but its subterranean position only adds to the sense of this place frozen in time, buried in a sense, as an artifact of something new generations may only want to forget. This is a sentiment directly addressed by the pianist in “Luncheon” and shared by many of his fellow seniors.

When confronted with the question if “Luncheon” is a critical interpretation of the Krakus center and the motives of nationalism, or on the other hand, if it is a glowing reflection solely focused on the positive aspects – I’m not certain it is singularly one over the other. Just as Frederick Wiseman describes in a podcast interview with Thom Powers,

“As much as there are differences there are similarities, you find the film in the editing. But the goal in each case is the dramatic narrative structure... I think it’s just as important to show people doing good work, achieving something, as it is to show incompetent people doing poor, or damaging or disastrous work. And I am not one of those that thinks documentaries are going to save the world. I am interested in showing as wide a variety of human behavior as I can.”⁸

Most, if not all, of my work is influenced by the approach to filmmaking Wiseman established. Even the title, “Luncheon” serves as a respectful nod to the functional and

⁸ Powers, PN55: Wiseman.

utilitarian way in which he has titled his own work. Where I choose to find places and groups of individuals as an overarching theme, Wiseman generally chooses institutions or organizations. I subscribe to his “fly-on-the-wall” approach to filmmaking where a massive amount of footage is shot and collected without a direct insistence on establishing narrative structure until the editing process formally begins. I, like he, believe the story is found in the editing room.⁹

During the production and well into the post-production process, the most difficult obstacle was rooted in the ethical implications of observational filmmaking. Using the cinematography techniques discussed earlier of shallow focus, long depths of field and a voyeuristic approach, the objective seemed to gravitate towards catching people unaware of the camera so as to allow their natural state to emerge. Yet this resulted in my uneasiness with the process. I felt that while everyone was certainly consenting to being filmed, I’m not sure they knew exactly how it is they would ultimately be represented. That is because not even I knew how that would happen. While my presence and that of my recording was always visible and seemingly difficult to hide considering the layout of the room, I often was consumed with an uneasy sense that I was capturing or stealing the shots. I had obtained permission from the center staff, acquired countless release forms and made several announcements both to the larger group and in personal interactions with seniors. While that should have calmed my apprehensions, I was still consumed with a sense of guilt that is best described by Calvin Pryluck in his essay, “Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking”. Here Pryluck compares the

⁹ Powers, PN55: Wiseman.

gains and losses of observational cinema and gives varying scenarios that explain the inherently manipulative nature of signing consent over to filmmakers. His grievance is not simply in the methods filmmakers use, but in their inability to foresee the outcome of the footage they collect. If shooting in the observational style demonstrates an honest and unobtrusive approach to the subject, then that authenticity is lost in the edit. It is in post-production where time is shifted, perspectives and words adjusted, and the implicit suggestions made. It is the edit that overpowers the original authenticity of observation. With this in mind, my goal is to ensure that the people being represented, however accurately, be treated and displayed with dignity. It is imperative that they approve of their own representation.

“It is a surprise to see people react to seeing themselves recreated in cinematic language and see their stories told back to them in cinematic grammar”¹⁰

Within a year of filming “Luncheon”, I prepared an edit to show on the main television at the Krakus Center. I made an announcement asking those interested in seeing the film to stay just a few moments after lunch and a good number of them did, most importantly Teresa and Kristine. As the two women engaged in the self-portraiture classes, they are a major presence in the film and I was eager to understand how they felt about seeing themselves in the film. They sat at one of the tables alongside the guest art instructor, Charmaine Wheatley, and would laugh, snicker and joke whenever they appeared on screen. While the general audience of seniors seemed only partially engaged in watching themselves on screen, Teresa and Kristine appeared enthusiastic. After the twenty-

¹⁰Chase Whiteside, co-director of “America” Mar 29 2018.

minute cut had finished, I approached each group of seniors who remained and asked what their impressions or feelings were on what they saw. For the most part they politely nodded and encouraged me to continue filming, offering kind words of appreciation. However the most encouraging response was that of Teresa who offered in a sarcastic tone, “Oh good, you’re the one who is going to make us famous.”

- **Audience and Exhibition**

“Luncheon” is a film that aims to give insight into the experience of the immigrant senior citizen in New York. The primary audience is intended to be the community of Greenpoint, those appearing within the film and their relatives. Additionally, I hope this film will pique interest in those working and living with seniors on a daily basis as well as those interested in the value of experimental documentary. It is also my intention that this film offers some insight to a Polish audience as to the daily existence of Polish-American seniors in the United States. I anticipate “Luncheon” may serve various institutions and organizations within Poland looking to explore and investigate the narratives of emigrants to the United States and elsewhere. It is also my hope that the themes and ideas expressed by the seniors in “Luncheon” might resonate with immigrants from other countries, and that the universal sentiments associated with the life of an immigrant be shared with a wider audience.

“Luncheon” is the second installment of a proposed trilogy on the subject of the multigenerational experience in New York City. Preceded by the short documentary,

“Girls and Boys”, in which an afterschool dance rehearsal informs the audience of the experiences of adolescents learning dance according to Polish folk traditions, “Luncheon” provides reflection on the experience of their grandparents. Two generations removed, they explore the physical and psychological aspects of aging as immigrants. The third installment, yet to be produced, will explore the “1.5 generation”¹¹ of Poland. Having immigrated here in their teenage years, they exist comfortably both as Americans and as Poles. As a trilogy, these films aim to present a full spectrum of the Polish immigrant experience in New York City, and demonstrate the symbiotic relationship across multiple generations and the filial responsibilities that bind them.

¹¹ A term first used by Ruben Rumbaut in the 1990’s, it is a term commonly used to refer to Latino immigrants, but here it applies to immigrants of Polish descent.

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