

WITHOUT CORRESPONDENCE

A note on *Voiceover* by Valentina Knežević

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Why are there no pictures of war? This could be the perturbing question prompted by *Voiceover* (2017) by Valentina Knežević. Over six-and-a-half minutes, the moving image do not show any weapons, explosions, victims or oppressors. No shouts, roars or blows assault the soundscape. The architecture appearing in the video is cold and impersonal. Its surfaces are white, gray and pale flesh pink; they are clean and bear no trace of any massacre. On the inside, only a body explores its spaces.

Why then, do we expect images of war? There is an element, and not a secondary one, leaving the audience intentionally bereft of images. It is a voiceover. It speaks in the second person, yet never addresses the audience. «You need to train harder, you're a hero» – it states. It is certainly an inner voice, but we cannot affirm with certainty that it comes from the person we observe moving around the space. It is an internal monolog, but external to what we are witnessing. It marks the rhythms of a time of war: wait, sit, then look and kill. It reveals war's cruel material reality: «you are the weapon, the last element in a line of command». The first to fall.

In *Voiceover*, image and word do not correspond. There is a dissonance between what is being seen and what is uttered. It is exactly this discrepancy between what is visible and what is spoken that leads the viewer towards a feeling of anxiety, otherwise inexplicable except by conceptually separating the two senses and making them independent. They work in unison, yet they receive completely different stimuli. By reacting inside us, they activate a feeling of alienation. Anthony Vidler affirms that the uncanny cannot be an innate property of space itself. This means that, as is the case in *Voiceover*, this feeling must not be produced by the architecture represented in the images. It is rather «the representation of a mental state of projection that [...] elides the boundaries of the real and unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity»¹. The feeling of alienation is caused by the conflict between what we see through the voice and what we do not see through the images. The uncanny plays, thus, on the discordance of perception.

In Jacques Rancière's words «The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought»². Knežević's iconoclasm does not upset the senses to lead the viewer to an imaginary world, but rather to actually redirect the audience to the real world, which is concrete but cannot always be seen. It is true that the media overflows with images of war – devastating, terrible, alarming – but, since images them-

¹ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, MIT, Cambridge (Mass.) 1992, p. 11.

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and transl. by Gabriel Rockhill, 2004, p. 38; or. ed. *Le partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*, La fabrique éditions, Paris 2000.

selves are always *made* and never *taken*³, we should always ask who produced them, who possesses them and how they are shown. Among the countless images of war that are made visible, in which and in how many of them are the last elements of the death machine – the soldiers – given a voice? We certainly see them being seen and we see them seeing, but do we ever get to see them seeing themselves? Are they given any chance of expression, thus to exist in the world of representation? Do they produce images? And if they do, how are these images shown? By creating a fiction that excludes images of war, *Voiceover* singles out their system of production of reality, explicitly calling attention to those images that do not exist or that are being excluded from the perceivable world. It evokes them by denying – from the viewer’s field of vision – those other images of violence that are constantly shown in the media.

The construction of the work is also the result of conversations that Knežević carried on over years with soldiers and veterans, both men and women. In #4b5320 (2019), a later work, somewhat complementary to *Voiceover*, these conversations become written word. Once again, images are excluded, to make room this time for a monochrome green (the title coinciding with the hexadecimal code of military green) which saturates the background of the four prints which constitute the work. The reported voices describe war as a mathematical evaluation, as ordinary trigonometric calculation, or as a form of suppression of the emotional self to reduce oneself to an operative machine, as a part of a collective organism that is the platoon. Sometimes there is not even a direct involvement of the body on the battlefield, as the soldier becomes an IT executor elaborating data and observing the lives of potential enemies, waiting for the final order that will transform them into targets to be eliminated with a click.

One of the voices of #4b5320, however, does not belong to the military, but instead to an aspiring soldier: a twenty-one-year-old suffering from dyslexia and living in a state of poverty. For many young girls and boys entering adulthood, a military career is a job like any other, offering them the chance to escape from a precarious existence that often promises no future. The boy’s words lack any form of patriotism; they only show a desire for being acknowledged, by his family and acquaintances, as someone who has finally found a place in society, with a precise and recognizable role. Yet, he has no knowledge of the life awaiting him in war. The question Knežević often asks herself – what leads someone to voluntarily enlist? – digs deep in the factors of family life, of the received or missed education, of the social and economic context as well as of the disillusionments that wait for us at the end of adolescence.

Noam Carmeli, the dancer performing in the video, was also a soldier in his twenties. He was part of a special body of the Israeli army, before emigrating to study architecture and later discovering dance. In front of the video camera, his body confronts the memories of his experience in places of conflict. He can see them, but we can’t. We can only perceive the lines of force marked by his movements; or the fields of tension, such as that generated around the void where, sitting, he stretches out over a balustrade, clinging to a thin border separating existence from non-existence. This is a tension that amplifies our sense of uncanniness without resolving it, as it does not resolve the dancer’s last gaze at the camera, addressing our space of existence, beyond the border of the screen. It is so because, as the voiceover says, nobody trains these people to leave the army, to go back to

³ The reference here is to the work *You Do Not Take a Photograph. You Make It.* (2013) by Alfredo Jaar, where the artist reminds us how every image bears a conception of the world within it.

their civilian lives. How to handle the huge psychological pressure normalized during war missions? How to manage social life knowing you killed another human being? These are the issues emerging from the post-traumatic stress caused by war situations, already investigated by Harun Farocki in *Serious Games III. Immersion* (2009).

There is another question addressed by this artwork. Who do these soldiers kill for? Or, better to say, who employs them? Government is not always the answer. It's often Private Military Companies (PMCs). These are companies structured to provide military services with financial gain as their only end. They have an internal structure managing not only the recruitment of human resources (soldiers), but also prospective careers, benefits, social welfare, paid leave, and a regular job contract – just like any other company. In this case, however, the job requires the elimination of enemies indicated by the clients, these being not only national governments, but also international organizations, NGOs, development and humanitarian agencies, individuals and multinational corporations⁴. In the latter case, the aim of the required military action is the securing of mineral extractions, mainly petrol and diamonds⁵.

War is a function of capitalism. This comes as no surprise if we recall the speech made in 1972 by Eugenio Cefis at the Accademia Militare di Modena⁶. In the words of an Italian businessman, he especially highlights what was then the already clear identification between politics and economy, and thus the subsequent subjugation of sovereign nations to those businesses that already hold the economic power of the contemporary world: multinational corporations. These become the entities where economic and political power coincide. It is thus evident that warfare is no longer aimed at serving one's nation state, except to the extent to which it directly relies on multinational corporations. They have the deciding power and, as a consequence, it is to them that the armed forces answer. The existence of PMCs is ascribable to this order of the world.

At this point, it is inevitable that we detect a further form of uncanniness surfacing in Knežević's work. If we resort to Freud's words, according to which «the uncanny is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar»⁷, then we should ask ourselves what is familiar to us in *Voiceover*. We have already pointed out the alienation provoked by the dissonance between what should be and what is actually present in the scene – hence a form of uncanniness playing with the senses. The other uncanny settles within knowledge instead, in the tendency we have to erroneously acknowledge ourselves as uninvolved with the perpetration of violence. It settles in the unfounded assumption that the geographical distance of warfare corresponds with a distance from responsibility. We know how much our daily life is increasingly saturated with

⁴ Marina Caparini and Moncef Kartas, *Private Military Companies*, in «DCAF Backgrounder», 4, 2006, p. 2.

⁵ Lindsey Cameron, *Private Military Companies. Their status under international humanitarian law and its impact on their regulation*, in «International review of Red Cross», vol. 88, 863, 2006, p. 576.

⁶ Eugenio Cefis, *La mia Patria si chiama Multinazionale*, in «L'erba voglio. Servitù e liberazione di massa», vol. 2, 6, 1972, pp. 1-21 (supplemento). Our translation.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Il perturbante*, Theoria, Roma-Napoli 1993; ed. or. *Das Unheimliche*, in «Imago», 5-6, 1919, pp. 297-324.

the presence of multinational corporations, both in terms of the goods we purchase and the services we benefit from. Such abundance is guaranteed but not free; it comes with a price. Its existence depends on the maintenance, through acts of violence, of the hegemony of those entities over territories and exploited populations, as well as on the relations of inclusion and exclusion of certain given bodies. The stories of the soldiers interviewed by Knežević are the manifestation of the inner workings – among the most invisible ones – of those entities. Thus, the coming to life, through *Voiceover*, of these voices that were previously excluded from our daily life and its representations, disturbs us because it upsets our fragile and false knowledge of not being responsible. It makes us aware instead of how our daily choices have direct consequences for the existence of the reality of war and of its normalization.