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Liaison Officers, Imagined Love-and-War Affairs, and History Displaced¹

Katarzyna Bojarska

It is the energy needed to fill in the negative other/wise that sutures both the photograph and the woman to the ontology of the copy. Always already linked to a reproductive body, the ontologies of women and photographs are profoundly matched.²

In Warsaw by the Vistula river there is a bronze statue of a certain mermaid. She has been the symbol of Warsaw for a long time; since the 14th century. Her monumental incarnations are many, much like the legends of her origin. The facts however, are that she has always been armed: carrying a sword and a shield in case of a sudden need for offense or defense. This particular monument by the Vistula was erected in April 1939, authored by sculptor Ludwika Nitschowa. This symbol of insurgent Warsaw, of the courageous city-as-woman, was given the face of Krystyna Krahelska, a poet and a fighter. The sculptor described her creation in the following manner:

The face I sculpted for the Warsaw Mermaid is Krystyna's face, but monumentalized, so that Kryisia would not be so easily recognized when walking along the street, which might have uncomfortable for her. Because she walked the streets of Warsaw; tall, straight, shining with a smile of internal youthful joy and strength, ready for everything that was just, honest, and beautiful.³

Krahelska was a member of the Home Army. A courier and liaison officer, she transported weapons and worked as a nurse.⁴ In 1939, and from 1943 onwards, she was based in Warsaw. On the first day of the second Warsaw Uprising, the events of August-October 1944,⁵ she was shot three times while trying to help a wounded fighter. "Despite being operated on, she died the next day. Her poems remained with the fighters in the form of songs, until last days of the Uprising and are inscribed into the collective memory of these events. She provided the

paradigmatic image and fantasy of a heroic, tragic and beautiful woman and city, one who fights and who dies too young, but never surrenders. The brief and all-too-familiar fate of this young woman and the story of her image provides not only an anecdote, a historical background for what follows, but also an ambiguous and ambivalent, as I shall argue, point of reference for the title question of Darek Foks' and Zbigniew Libera's book, *What Does a Liaison Officer Do?* What has she done to the shape of this past, and to our shaping of the past more generally?



*What Does a Liaison Officer Do?*⁶ is a book by writer and poet, Darek Foks, and visual artist, Zbigniew Libera published in Polish as, *Co robi łączniczka*, in November 2005 by Ars Cameralis Silesiae Superioris in Katowice⁷. The work is a textual-verbal project, a catalogue of individual memory tinted by fantasy and filtered through pop-cultural figurations of desire and loss. Inspired by the history and memory of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, there are sixty three chapters written by Foks, which can be read in the framework provided by Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* (1947) and Raymond Roussel's *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (1932). Each opens with a similarly constructed sentence: When the boys are doing one thing, the liaison officer is doing another, for example: "When the boys are denying, the liaison officer is raising her voice" (Chapter 1), or "When the boys are building a barricade, the liaison officer is taking notes" (Chapter 3), or "When the boys are leaving the city center, the liaison officer is opening her mouth" (Chapter 41). Each ends with a "quotation" from the enemy's lifestyle magazine, which accidentally draws the liaison officer's attention: "We have friends in common, and others with whom we rather meet separately" (Chapter 35), or "Those who do not run should be ashamed" (Chapter 45), or "When I am visiting a friend whom I did not see for two months, she looks at me and asks me, if I am seeing anybody." (Chapter 51). In between these lines, war-stories are being narrated. The narratives are accompanied by Libera's photomontages featuring movie stars in the photographic landscape of the ruins of Warsaw, which, in turn, might be situated against the tradition of inter-war photomontage and 1970s appropriation art. The chapters are arranged in a kind of mirror composition: up

until Chapter 32 we see images on the left and text on the right page, while from Chapter 33 onwards the order is reversed. The reversal is marked by the following sequence: chapter 31 opens with "When the boys are drinking..." and is accompanied by an image of a facade, a chair and a woman in the background with her back to the onlooker; chapter 33 opens with "When the boys are having hangover..." and accompanied by the mirror reflection of the same image. As if Chapter 32, which opens with "When the boys are standing with their legs apart..." – jokingly pointing to their being one leg in the first half of the story and the other in the second – with a portrait of Sophia Loren as a liaison officer was a kind of turning point for the book, an axis story with a very telling punch line (in quotation from a magazine) "she joined the lesbians."

The authors refer to the myth and/or legend of the Warsaw Uprising as an historical event, which was one of the greatest battles of World War II. It is estimated that 10 000 fighters perished while another 7,000 went missing. The city lost approximately 200,000 civilian inhabitants, and more than 500,000 were expelled.⁸ The city as such underwent total destruction. Despite the fact that the Uprising failed, it has become a crucial part of national heroic legend and still remains a core of disagreement among historians, as well as a tool in recent discussions of historical politics and memory wars for which the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising provides a rightly contested platform. Annual celebrations of the uprising provide an occasion for readdressing the most essential questions of military and strategic as well as affective and symbolic reasons for and consequences of, this event.



What interests me in particular in this project is a critique of history and its interpretation, carried out through this unique and intriguing combination, or montage, of word and image; a history understood here in particular as an ideologically saturated myth, a dominant fiction. It is my intention to argue, with reference to specific avant-gardist and pop-cultural practices both visual and literary, as well as theoretical montage, that this work belongs to a very interesting tradition whose potential as a critical tool in understanding the meanderings and politics of memory is yet to be (re)discovered. *What Does a Liaison Officer Do?* proves that the strategy of appropriation remains a pertinent visual and critical

practice for it responds in an accurate and topical way to a certain "radical temporal incision"⁹ and a "suspension of historical continuity," so characteristic of the contemporary moment. As Jan Verwoert has rightly observed the difference between the appropriation practices of the 1970s and the 2000s has mostly to do with a thorough transformation of historical experience after the fall of the Iron Curtain: "from a feeling of a general loss of historicity to a current sense of an excessive presence of history, a shift from not enough to too much history or rather too many histories."¹⁰ It is not so much the case, the author notes, that historical time lost its linearity and progress oriented direction (as imagined in Modernity), rather it has become a "multitude of competing and overlapping temporalities born from the local conflicts that the unresolved predicaments of the modern regimes of power still produce."¹¹

It seems then that the starting point for Libera and Foks is this multiplicity of histories which re-emerges as a certain potentiality in the specific historic moment after 1989, and that they employ both visual and literary practices to reactivate the social imagination. They play with the signs that echo historic meanings of different orders, weights, and styles. Clearly, the aim is not mere analysis, nor does the authorial duo function here as the public's spokespersons, ethnographers or advocates for the underprivileged and excluded, but rather as members of a critically creative counterpublic who try, by producing this aesthetic experience, to escape any disciplinary regimes of memory.¹² Their example proves that one cannot do without the affective cognition associated with aesthetic experience, as it provides an alternative modus for critical judgements, not only about cultural, but also social forms.¹³

Foks and Libera have no direct immediate memory of the events of the Uprising, but they grew up in a world dominated by, on the one hand, narratives and images (mostly of the insurgent or ruined city) alluding to these events, and on the other, the texts and images of a popular culture peopled by pin-up beauties and films stars, "obscure objects of desire" such as Jean Seberg, Gina Lollobrigida, Maria Schneider, Sophia Loren, Monica Vitti, and Catherine Deneuve. This combination provided them with a palimpsest sensibility; it fed their imagination and triggered their project.

If one thinks of experience as the result of integrating events into discourse via

terms and positions provided by the symbolic order, it seems that experience ceases to be solely individual. Recalling the words of Joan Scott, "since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. And this implies by extension that memory is always at the same time cultural memory."¹⁴ What is equally important in this context is that this shared background behind experiences and memories also makes them "sharable." It seems crucial to state, however, that the discourse that frames these cultural forms should not only allow them to be conveyed to others, but also to be undermined, contested, and rejected. Memory is a product of individuals and collectives who share a certain culture, and so is its critique and/or re-writing. Memory as such is located at the intersection between the past and the present, and is constantly subject to re-negotiations and re-visions. Images as much authentic as invented, owned and borrowed, stolen and appropriated, become developed from the darkrooms of memory. Thus framed remembering boils down not so much to the return of the dead as to the return of the depicted, imagined, and the desired; of events staged as stories and historical protagonists posed as pop-culture icons, and vice versa. Critical intervention in the discursive and institutional frameworks determining the production and reception of memory is what constitutes the framework for Libera's and Foks' collaboration. Their aesthetic capacity concentrates on construing mnemonic experience as a means of resistance against national unifying and homogenous heroic myths and the homogeneity of identity.



How do they do it?

The tradition of photomontage (as a tool of cultural and political intervention and critique) seems to be a crucial point of reference for understanding Libera's visual, photographic palimpsests illustrating the persistent layering of images in one's memory. This is a practice that ignores the modernist division between high and low genres and the historiographic division between document and fiction. Libera's is an intervention into images, photographic images, which by now have become not so much an illustration of events as events themselves. One could even dare to say that the past is a photograph. As Eduardo Cadava put it

Everything happens as if we understood and shared the discretion,

everything happens as if we all acknowledged the massive role that photographic technologies—their productions, diffusion, and manipulation—have in what we call 'our historical reality.' Indeed, no single instant of our life is not touched by the technological reproduction of images.¹⁵

Libera's 63 photographic collages, as if mirroring the 63 days of the Uprising, consist of documentary photographs from the time of the Uprising, film stills, press photos, images downloaded from the Internet, etc. These ready/unready made photographs deconstruct themselves; one can easily see the seams, lack of focus, grid of pixels, or points of color, faults, as if they were conceived in a hurry, before the 'actual' image disintegrates. And this is absolutely intentional on the part of the artist. The titular female liaison officers “wear” the faces of films stars; they smile seductively, innocently, they tempt. Libera thus re-makes histories-as-

photographs, visual documents constituting the archive. He offers alternative versions with new (better) casts and scripts; variations of the images that this particular national collective carries in its (collective) head. He does not undermine the status of the events as such; they remain out of his reach, and – one could argue – interest. What he knows about them is what he has seen, heard and imagined. The discontinuities, ruptures and absurdities present in – at times even overwhelming – the collages, find their counterpart on the verbal level.

Darek Foks offers an aberrant, fragmentary subjective narrative, close to but at the same time detached from Libera's images. His 63 histories of 1800 characters each lead nowhere and tell of nothing; they do not construe any consistent, traditionally understood narrative. His efforts concentrate on the defamiliarisation of the language, not so much of the Uprising, but of recollection. Foks rebels against stereotypes of conventional narrative schemes and by rejecting them, offers a mechanism that disrupts the tissue of solid images (and stories) of historical “emplotment”¹⁶ and opens up a new space for the formation of senses and subjects alike. In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson asks “how History as a ground and as an absent cause can be conceived in such a way as to resist such thematization or reification, such transformation back into one optional code



among others?"¹⁷ He then calls for a "radical restructurization" of the material figuring history as Necessity. For if "history is ... the experience of Necessity," and as such it "refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis"¹⁸, it needs to be overcome and invented anew. This restructuring or retextualization (or reimagining) of History should serve as a radical break from the very system or modus of structurization, escape Necessity and open up the past (and future) for other forms of figuration.

The fragmentary, imperfect character of Foks and Libera's project can be read as a response to all official, complete, and coherent narratives, to the very impulse or need for such figuration of History. After all, every coherence is achieved at the price of exclusion and repression. What they provide us with instead are absurd adventures as certain "exercises in style" both verbal and visual; microscopic insights into what boys and girls do, or rather, what boys do when girls do something else (every story is based on the same narrative opposition); juxtapositions of gestures, grimaces and actions. Foks and Libera take the past upon themselves; past as sets of words and sets of images, deposited in collective (even if unofficial) archives. Those are stirred and shuffled by the authors. In their artistic operations words and images reacquire a living context, continue to exist in time, rather than being arrested as figures and figurations of the past. At the core of the authors' strategy is the technique of collage, fragment, quotation, repetition – politics of play, strategies of *détournement* taken from the Situationists.

Collaboration / Contamination

No doubt the ambiguous and multilayered relationship of image and text in this work is crucial for understanding what this book actually does. How is one to classify this image-text and a tradition to set it against? Certainly the text does not explain the images, narrate or describe them, nor do the images illustrate, exemplify or clarify the verbal. There remains a tension between the two; is it then a photobook? Photopoem? Photo-word-montage? Photomontage essay?¹⁹ More questions follow: what is the relationship of one to the other and to reality, to the reality-effect and the truth procedures of historical politics? What seems crucial here is, on the one hand, the highly problematic nature of photography as



a “historical practice” that does not escape from the difficulties of evidence and of the “constructed” nature of historical understanding. On the other hand, there is the fact that words and pictures routinely appear together – words supplying credit lines or captions, pictures supplying illustrations. We therefore need to look for some estrangement of the *status quo*.

One could look to Bertolt Brecht's *War Primer* for help: a collection of 69 “photograms” where he juxtaposes war photographs and short, four-line epigrams (1955)²⁰ which serve as a “perverted” guide to a constellation of snapshots of history. This new kind of war poetry allows Brecht to combine the need to provide a strong political commentary on the horrific escalation of terror throughout much of Europe with his increasing interest in more experimental media of the time other than theatre, such as film and photography. Thus he conceived of a multimedia project that could reflect on war from a distinct point of view, that of the outside observer (*der Beobachtende*). Brecht's collection of images as history presents the reader with many contradictions and paradoxes. It is through the contradictions interwoven into the very fabric of photography that one sees that there is no definitive truth claim offered, either by the image or by the author. One could read Brecht's *War Primer* as a performance of social history engaging with and defamiliarizing both word and image. Multimediaticity is more than just a formal solution here. It undermines the nature and the import of these “historical” dislocations: the *War Primer* wants to teach us about reading history as image(s) and it does so through short epigraphs and through the particular arrangement of the whole.²¹

In his reflection on photographic clusters as archives in the 20th century, Benjamin Buchloh stresses the importance of the “mnemonic desire” that is animated in moments of (historical) crisis when discontinuity enters all the previously stable models of family, ethnicity, nation-state, culture, tradition, class and social habitus. It is particularly photography as an ambiguous medium that is responsible for performing both the enactment and the destruction of historical experience, as well as the framework for “material bonds among subjects, between subjects and objects, and between objects and their representation.”²² And it seems that only through conscious and critical operations using photographs is one able to navigate through all the newly constructed signs and languages that have fallen out of available mnemonic forms of experience. The desire for identity needs to be

satisfied in altogether imagined or reinvented representational regimes and forms.²³

There is no doubt that Foks and Libera play with the notion of a photograph as an *aide-mémoire* and with (historical) subjectivity as an archive. Their disobedience, capacity to question, to engage in dialogue, to laugh at and deconstruct authorities, all these deliberately tease the reader by subverting the conventional uses of word and image in a very particular context and instead offering them a different course (of memory) and (mnemonic) discourse. Both words and images are deprived of their claims to originality and/or truth. Their claims thereof are exposed as fictions, as being always a representation, always-already-seen and always-already-spoken. The words and images in *What Does a Liaison Officer Do?* are purloined, confiscated, appropriated, stolen. Yet at the same time the book does not, as has already been said, provide a counter-story to "traditional" narratives from the war times. Rather, it points to the way in which "representation" forces out "presence," and everything becomes detached, obscene, and hyperreal. Their perverse play with image and word demystifies but also allows for a different look, a look from awry; for a re-vision proper.



Myth, Male and Memory

Myth is depoliticized speech. Myth is ideology. Myth is the act of draining history out of signs and reconstructing these signs instead as 'instances' in particular, instances of universal truths or of natural law, of things that have no history, no specific embeddedness, no territory of contestation. Myth steals into the heart of the sign to convert the historical into the 'natural' – something that is uncontested, that is simply 'the way things are.'²⁴

This quote comes from a Rosalind Krauss' essay on Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Films Stills*, the series which seems to be an important point of reference for Foks and Libera. Suffice it to say that one of the photomontages in the book is based on her *Untitled Film Still #7*. This might be the most obvious but not the only link between the two. Sherman as great *de-myth-ifier* allowing and encouraging us to distrust any cultural forms – even as she is also showing us the tremendous allure of myths

– provides a mother-figure for the authors of *What Does a Liaison Officer Do?* Just as Sherman deals not with women but with images of women – protagonists caught up in narrative webs of romance and intrigue, specular models of femininity projected by the media, so do Foks and Libera deal with images of things (past); only the battlefield seems to differ.

It seems that myth is precisely what Foks and Libera are aiming their critique at, as mythographers, demystifiers of myth, de-myth-ifiers. Or maybe, their effort reaches even deeper into the realm of the sign. Because, as Roland Barthes observed, “it is the sign itself which must be shaken; the problem is not to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning, is not to change or purify the symbols, but to challenge the symbolic itself.”²⁵ In other words, one needs to go so deep as to challenge the adequacy of stories to the representation of the reality whose meaning they purport to reveal. It is then, when belief in this adequacy is undermined, that the crisis occurs, and thereby creates a condition of possibility for laying bare the “epistemic authority, its cultural function, and its general social significance.”²⁶



Such an “adequate story” could also be named the dominant fiction, which according to Kaja Silverman is “more than the ideological system through which the normative subject lives its imaginary relation to the symbolic order. It is also informed by what Ernesto Laclau calls a ‘will to totality’; it is the mechanism by which society “tries to institute itself as such on basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences.”²⁷ The dominant fiction neutralizes the contradictions that organize the social formation by fostering collective identifications and desires and luring or even erasing any seams that might have emerged in the process of cultural sewing. Social formations depend on dominant fictions for their sense of unity and identity as well as for their survival; “both the symbolic order and the mode of production are able to protect themselves from interruption and potential change only so long as the ideological system commands collective belief – so long, that is, as it succeeds in defining the psychic reality of the prototypical subject.”²⁸

In the context of Polish culture one observes the centrality of the discourse of war to the construction, not only of the conventional masculinity, but also of collective consciousness and identity. This discourse works to solicit civilian belief in the dominant fiction and shape subjective experience of armed struggle and survival. The Polish experience of World War II remains dominated by the schema of heroic battle between the forces of Good and Evil. The authorial subject of *What Does the Liaison Officer Do?* oscillates between traditional martyrological narration and blasphemous narrative. By creating this sur-real construction they convince viewers that the trauma of the war past, coded within heroic narratives and images, or should one rather say, covered or veiled by them, can be disarmed; memory will no longer be the guard of the museum of Polish imagination and the symbolic but instead will become a critical force, a force breaking off from mainstream narrative and construing one's own, private museum. This is a shift from history to discourse, from the third to the second person mode of address, where the centrality of the spectator, dialogism, heteroglossia, parody, contestation, and disguise, as well as the shifting of roles, prove central. As Foks himself said in one interview: "The Uprising is being manipulated on a grand scale, we do it on a tiny scale. The city built the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising for itself, we made ourselves our small private museum on 130 pages which can be taken home and kept there."²⁹ Paradoxically however, even such a "small private museum" is not fully individual. As Frank Ankersmit quite rightly put it, any memory, even the one considered the most private, is a collective memory.³⁰ And this is crucial here, it is the collective that is at stake rather than an individual's asylum in their own niche.

Appropriation *avant-la-lettre*

In 1962, in the ninth issue of *Ty i Ja* (You and I), a monthly illustrated magazine published from 1960–73, one can find a pictorial entitled *Exotic Warsaw*. It consists of seven spreadsheets, montages of black and white photographs by Bohdan Łopieński of the ruined sites in Warsaw with colorful cut outs from recent French fashion magazines (pictures by Jean Jacques Bugaty,



Guy Bourdin, Melvin Sokolsky) with captions by one of the journal's editors, Teresa Kuczyńska, that describe both the site depicted in the picture and the latest trends in fashion presented by the models.³¹ From today's critical perspective this material

is breathtaking and doubtless deserves a separate analysis. But I would like to point to several elements of the pictorial that continue to disturb, and that could be relevant to a reading of *What Does a Liaison Officer Do?*

Firstly, the relationship between the images, the pictures of the remnants and ruins and the figures of models, seems ambiguous, to say the least. Some of the figures are fitted into the postwar landscape; gloomy and grey, they stand in doorways, lean against the walls, pose on the streets, "play" with the elements of the buildings. Others do not fit at all; they are too big, for example, and at times fall out of the frame. Secondly, the relationship between the descriptions and the comments in the captions occasionally seems awkward:

There is hardly anything these walls don't remember.

The discovery on the wall of a Russian sign is for us as interesting as the discovery of the pictographic language. "Lord, it was so long ago" Wertyński used to sigh. Beauty with a mole is no longer a poetic metaphor but a fact. A mole, i.e. a bow tie is a mark of beauty and of fashion for this season. At the gate

a riding coat for young ladies, slightly widening towards the bottom.

Costume made of wool known as the guinea fowl, with black gusset in place of a blouse, with a significant décolleté. Could work for an afternoon.



Or

Ruined facade on Żelazna covered with vivid vegetation (a large tree is covered by a big hat with black speckles, very fashionable), for years it has intrigued passers-by with this ventilator. On the right hand side, the skeletons of the new, of course.

Or

Photographer recorded the last relics of Warsaw B – a Warsaw of dirt and backwardness but not of poverty.

It is hard to say what role these numerous displacements, as we would want them to be seen today, played back in the 60s. What function was the allusion to war and ruination supposed to play? What were the documentary elements (both

visual – the black and white record of the city, and the verbal – topographic details and descriptions of architecture) supposed to do, side by side with the glossy French *prêt-à-porter*? Where, if at all, did irony reside, and was there any attempt at a critical revisiting of the heroic and martyrological discourse of the combatant city vis-à-vis the flat images of its grim facades – the pathetic scenery of death for a playful and lively modernity incarnated in Western females? Is that very particular revision of the city possibly a critical and productive look backwards? Can the language of fashion (of the pure *Jetzt-zeit*) provide a critical discourse for the language of History (ruined buildings as its inscription)? Does this project in any way allude to the Uprisings of 1943 and 1944, to the mass death that covered / uncovered, remains the (omni)present experience of Warsaw? Are these disguised female characters from another world displacing the war-time liaison officers and nurses? What is the otherness in these pictures published in the lifestyle magazine: the ruined city or the cut-out women? What is the History-as-photograph that they relate to, and what is the present they comment upon? Where could the recognition and resemblance be derived from, what would the cultural models, or the cultural screen more generally, be that these photomontages and captions could address? Last but not least, what is the function of these blunt juxtapositions of the descriptions of the urban landscape, social condition, and descriptions of clothing?

There is no evidence that Libera or Foks knew of the pictorial from *Ty i Ja* but it seems that there is no need for such evidence. The temptation or even urge to put together an image of a glamorous female body and a sublime image of the city has long been there, surfacing in the figurations of the half-naked symbol of Warsaw, or in filmic, novelistic and popular depictions of beautiful and self-sacrificing female fighters and female companions of male fighters. This amalgamate of beauty and loss, of violence and the sublime, of desire and distress, seems to sum up a specific fantasy of the grandeur of history that “mothers” all of us.



Screen Unseen

As Sigmund Freud, for whom memory remained an unfathomable phenomenon,

suggested, memories are themselves recast and shifted every time they enter the consciousness or are called to mind. Memory is thus always rehearsed in a specific context. In *Screen Memories* of 1899 and in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* of 1909 Freud asks and elaborates on the question of why some memories (especially those originating in childhood) are preserved, while others tend to disappear:

the content of some people's earliest memories consists of everyday impressions that are of no consequence and could not have affected the child emotionally, but were nonetheless noted in copious detail ... whereas other, roughly contemporaneous events are not remembered, even though the parents testify that the child was profoundly affected by them at the time.³²

It seems that what affects us does not necessarily need to remain on the surface. One could argue that the processes of displacement and substitution organize and reorganize the mnemonic economy: some memories stand in or substitute for more disturbing, painful ones, remaining affectively charged and marked with desire. These are called screen memories. Their content usually originates in projections from repressed memories of events happening at the same time, after or before the actual, present event. As conceptualized by Freud, they are authentic rather than based on pure fantasy; they both reveal and hide that which has been suppressed, thus establishing multilayered and multidirectional networks of relations between memories, and shuffling them between the conscious and the unconscious.

The operations of memory are paradoxical and enigmatic. Before reaching the consciousness, perceptions travel across the psyche and never disappear without a trace. However, these traces left behind are anything but a straightforward inscription or record of the real. On their way, the perceptions are worked over and reworked by both internal censorship and fantasy. The affective value attributed to some of these perceptions also seems to be in flux, and thus, as Kaja Silverman pointedly observed "certain objects perceived may partake of some of the value which emanates outward from those wishes which eternally persist and insist at the level of the unconscious."³³ And, as she claims in the remainder of the argument, and which seems especially important from our point of interest, these attributions

and displacements work both to consolidate the dominant fiction, and to do quite the opposite.

The unconscious manifests a striking indifference to the question of what is conventionally assumed to be important or worthless at the level of the cultural screen in the process of waving its associative webs. It often transfers psychic value from one term to another on the basis of what would, in waking life, seem a completely inappropriate analogy.³⁴

Inappropriate analogies are the domain of children and dreams, or so we tend to allow ourselves to think. However childish the boys' play with a female liaison officer, or rather a played female liaison officer, would seem, it is extremely serious play, and the stakes are high. It is the present because, as has already been said, the present has to constantly renegotiate itself in the face of the pressing past. As artists born after the end of the war, Foks and Libera face the second Warsaw Uprising and its living memory as an impossible challenge, one that can only end in failure. Despite this burden they manage to overcome the limitations imposed by the role of secondary witnesses and guards of memory, the mourners of loss or the praisers of heroes. They do not falsify nor yield to temptations on the way to 'profanation'. One could search for a key to this success in their meta-consciousness and ethical stance. Foks: "For me personally, this book is not about the Uprising, rather it is about us, our childhood. About what we were given and what we were never allowed to have. About how we were shaped by TV and films," Libera:

I wandered once through the streets of Warsaw and saw ruins instead of houses. I live on Twarda Street in a place where fighters defended the city until the end of the Uprising. Walking west towards Wola, one sees empty fields where there used to be streets and houses. And then one begins to see clearly that we are living on the corpses. Everywhere one digs, one finds red brick. This city is an open wound.³⁵



3. Dział: obraz i język
Kiedy obraz i język łączą się, tworzą coś nowego. Programy telewizyjne, filmy, reklamy, plakaty, oprawy książek, strony internetowe, komunikaty – to wszystko jest językiem obrazu. Język ten ma swoją specyficzną grammatykę i składnię. W tym numerze „Cahiers du Cinéma” proponujemy wam kilka przykładów, które pokazują, jak obraz i język mogą być używane w sposób niezwykle kreatywny i skuteczny. Zapraszamy do lektury i oglądania.

These statements show how direct experience combines with an appropriated and mediated one, seriousness and joke, the seductive yet traumatic charm of ruins and the charm of cinema, that is everything which constitutes the matter of contemporary historical experience, the experience of memory and the failure of

any experience – trauma.

Visionary / Revisionary

As has already been indicated, images that intervene between us and the world and mediate are primarily photographic in nature. This photographic nature also seems to influence “human nature” in the sense that we tend to see, remember and offer ourselves to the gaze of others in the form of an imaginary photograph. And there are stories ready to be told and lived: “The screen or cultural image-repertoire inhabits each of us, much as language does.”³⁶ And consequently we seem to apprehend new phenomena (people, objects, events) mediated through “that large, diverse, but ultimately finite range of representational coordinates which determine what and how the members of our culture see – how they process visual detail and what meaning they give it.”³⁷ The question that therefore demands attention is as follows: how to reach beyond that repertoire, how to see outside of that range? Or, in the context of the work discussed, how can one work out the backwards look, or the remembering look, in relation to the past, one that would be productive and redemptive (that would save us from History as Necessity)?

Inherently imperfect memory displaces rather than reproduces. Had it been perfect, the remembering collective would forever inhabit one master cultural order without a chance for a leap outside, or a doubt. In the productively remembering look, as Silverman writes convincingly, an imperative to return has given way to an imperative to displace, and thus the eye is able to seize and produce the most unexpected and critical connections, operating beyond the available framework of associations and dislocation, becoming truly radical. The productive look backwards is a movement forward which has developed an “independent momentum.”³⁸ In order for such a look to overcome the constraints of reproductive seeing, it has to perform displacement until its most radical finale, i.e. until it reaches the self-displacement that introduces difference not only into the world outside the subject but also, and especially, into the subject itself.

It is, I would like to claim, by the above described procedures of image and word deformation and transformation, juxtaposition and montage, and by a stylistic regime imposed on the subsequent episodes that Libera and Foks work out a certain imperfect remembering and offer a productive look backwards, one that

reintroduces the elements they play with into dynamic relation with the frame of our experience of the present and present experience of the past, oscillating between that which is available for a male individual and a male-female collective. It is worthwhile to pay some attention to the very object this book is. The artists themselves claim that it looks like a reprint of yet another book whose pages are not made of paper. Through its format, choice of paper, colors, and meticulously worked out coarseness, it alludes to the aesthetics of underground works published in Poland before 1989. As such, the book as an object is itself a historical re-enactment.³⁹

One might be tempted to say that the potentiality of femininity in the face of the project of a critical, productive look backwards resides precisely in the fact, that as Luce Irigaray has pointed out and Peggy Phelan summarized so neatly in the epigraph to this essay, not only is "woman ... the sex which is not one,"⁴⁰ but she also reproduces and is being reproduced by the forces of physiology and desire, and also memory. It cannot be easily ignored that in Polish, "war," "history," "photography" and "ruin," are all female and are all virtually compulsively reproduced in identity narratives of a "certain Polish-ness." The liaison officers from literary and historic accounts, Warsaw Mermaids, pin-up girls, models and actresses all work collectively for the sake of this reproduction whose safety has so far been guaranteed by the very fact it was not exposed. The reproduction Libera and Foks perform is nothing like sculpting the face of a heroic girl in marble or bronze, rather it has to do with liberating the female past and present from the liaison officer's fate and image, letting her do whatever she likes, even if those doings would be nonsensical, even if futile or funny. The images, figures, tropes and narratives they appropriated in the course of their work, when brought together touch not only upon the role of singular images and stories within the current order of the present, but also upon the different temporal and generic modes they inhabit and contest, they reveal the relations and dynamics that have long determined the order of things past and present.

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Footnotes

- 1 This essay is a reworked version of a paper delivered during a conference of the Word and Image Association, *Displaying Word and Image*, at Ulster University, Belfast, Northern Ireland, June 2010. Cf. Katarzyna Bojarska "Pamięć z dobrą obsadą. Co robi łączniczka Zbigniewa Libery i Dariusza Foksa" in *Obieg* 3/2006, and "Co robi łączniczka w ruinach Warszawy, w ruinach pamięci", *Kultura artystyczna Warszawy*, eds. Andrzej Pieńkos, Michał Wardzyński, (Warsaw: Neriton 2010)
- 2 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge 1993), 70.
- 3 After <http://wolnapolska.pl/index.php/item/2-sierpnia-1944.html> accessed March 30, 2014. Also the image of the monument in the text comes from this site. See also Hanna Michalska, *Słownik uczestniczek walki o niepodległość Polski 1939-1945* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1988), 211-212.
- 4 For more on the participation of women in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 see: Weronika Grzebalska, *Płeć powstania warszawskiego* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, Narodowe Centrum Kultury), 2014.
- 5 The first Warsaw Uprising during that war was the uprising in the Jewish Warsaw Ghetto in 1943.
- 6 All translations of Foks' text by the author of this essay. The word "liaison officer" in the title is not quite an accurate translation of the Polish noun "łączniczka" – a (most often young) woman serving in the military whose task is to maintain communication among outposts, between the unit and a commander, to pass on reports and orders. Together with a nurse, female liaison officer became a kind of icon of the Warsaw Uprising, as well as of the vitality and beauty of the untamed city. As Iwona Kurz has rightly pointed out, one should bear in mind a possible echo of "dangerous liaisons" (which is an English translation of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* about seduction games played by men and women.
- 7 In 2013 Libera's gallery, Raster, published a special, hand made portfolio, an

edition of his 12 photograms entitled *Łączniczka / The Messenger Girl*. For more see: <http://en.rastergallery.com/prace/laczniczka/?kontekst=artysta> Accessed June 1, 2014.

8 The numbers vary according to sources. I am referring here mostly to the *Report on the War Losses of Warsaw*, released in 2004 by The City Hall, eds. Wojciech Fałkowski et al.

9 Jan Verwoert, "Apropos Appropriation: Why stealing images today feels different", *Art and Research. A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*. Vol. 1, no 2 Summer 2007, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/verwoert.html> accessed June 1 2014.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid. Referring to the texts of Douglas Crimp, Frederic Jameson and Craig Owens, Verwoert claims that "the sudden dissolution of historical continuity charges postmodern material with an intense sense of a presence without historical meaning."

12 See: Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (London: Verso 2006), 72-73. On the notion of counterpublic see: Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).

13 On the "affective operations of art" see: Ernst van Alphen, "Affective Operations of Art and Literature", *RES* 53/54 (Spring/Autumn 2008): 20-30.

14 After: Ernst van Alphen "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory and Trauma," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds, Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College: University Press of New England, 1999), 37.

15 Eduardo Cadava, "Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History," *Diacritics*, Vol. 22, No. 3/4 "Commemorating Walter Benjamin" (Autumn - Winter, 1992): 86.

16 See: Hayden White, *Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

17 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 101.

18 Ibid, 102.

19 A certain context can be provided by projects from the 1930s and 40s, mostly documenting and commenting on economic and political state(s): Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's and Mary Benedetta's *The Street Markets of London* (1936), Berenice Abbott's and Elizabeth McCausland's *Changing New York* (1939), Robert Capa's and John Steinbeck's *A Russian Journal* (1948), Margaret Bourke-White's and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen their Faces* (1937), *North of the Danube* (1939) *Say, Is This the USA?* (1941), Walker Evans' and Carleton Beals' *The Crime of Cuba* (1933), James Age'e's and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), as well as Jean-Paul Satrtre's and Henri Cartier-Bresson's *From One China to the Other* (1954). Quite a separate group of works are books devoted to landscape photography, such as John Muir's and Anselm Adams' *America's Wilderness* (1941), Nancy Newhall's and Paul Starnd's *Time in New England* (1950), or Anselm Adams' and Nancy Newhall's *This Is the American Earth* (1960). Among the slightly different kinds of collaborations in the later 20th century one should not omit Jean Mohr's and Edward Said's *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1998) and, of a different character, Jean-François Bonhomme's and Jacques Derrida's *Athens Still Remains* (1996), which much more than the first one provides a meditation on photography as such in its relation to history and the history of philosophy. Also photographer Jean Mohr's numerous collaborations with writer John Berger. As much as the above works provide an important historical framework, they offer little help for reading of *What Does a Liaison Officer Do?* For a discussion of some of these works see Jefferson Hunter, *Image and Word: the Interaction of 20th Century Photographs and Texts*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.

20 Not published in English until 1998, Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer*, ed. and trans. with an afterword and notes by John Willett (London: Libris, 1998).

21 Interesting comments on Brecht's work can be found in: Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Œil de l'histoire - Tome 1: Quand les images prennent position* (Paris: Minuit, 2009) and J.J. Long "Paratextual Profusion: Photography and Text in Bertolt Brecht's *War Primer*," *Poetics Today* 29 (1) 2008: 197-224. An interesting contemporary interpretation and reworking of Brecht's strategy is Adam

Broomberg's and Oliver Chanarin's *War Primer 2*, London: MACK 2011

22 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive," *October*, Vol. 88. (Spring, 1999): 136, 138.

23 Ibid, 140.

24 Rosalind Krauss "Cindy Sherman: Untitled" in: *October Files: Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 99-100.

25 Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 167.

26 Hayden White, op. cit., x.

27 Ernesto Laclau, "The Impossibility of Society", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, vol. 7, nos. 1 & 2 (1983): 24.

28 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margin* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54-5.

29 "Pinup girls z kanału! Z Darkiem Foksem i Zbigniewem Liberą rozmawiają Dorota Jarecka i Justyna Sobolewska." *Gazeta Wyborcza* "Wysokie Obcasy" weekend supplement, 4 Feb. 2006.

30 See: Frank R. Ankersmit, "The Postmodernist Privatisation of the Past", in *Historical Representation* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

31 I owe my gratitude to Łukasz Gorczyca for sharing this material with me.

32 Sigmund Freud, "Screen Memories", in *The Uncanny* trans. David Mc Lintock (New York: Penguin, 2003), 5-6.

33 Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold Of The Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 180.

34 Ibid.

35 See: "Co robiła łączniczka! Ze Zbigniewem Liberą i Darkiem Foksem rozmawia Sebastian Cichocki," in: *Co robiła łączniczka* (Bielsko Biała: Galeria Bielska BWA, 2006).

36 Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold...*, 221.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid, 181.

39 It seems worth mentioning here that the book was printed by the museum of printing in Cieszyn.

40 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked...*, 70.