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View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:
Haiti and Speculative History
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source:
View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 25 (2019)
URL:
https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2019/25-present-history/haiti-and-speculative-history
doi:
https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2019.25.2083
publisher:
Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture
affiliation:
SWPS University
University of Warsaw

keywords:

Haiti; Faustin Wirkus; revolution; speculative history; potential history

abstract:

Commentary on Róża Duda and Michał Soja's work Never Embrace Burning Statues (2019).

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Haiti and Speculative History

As far as Western history is concerned, nothing really happened on the Haitian island of Gonâve during the American occupation of 1915–1934. But according to Róża Duda and Michał Soja it was precisely then and there that we find the potential for change, even revolution, on an unexpected scale. Their installation *Never Embrace Burning Statues* (2019), an example of speculative history, offers a window onto an unknown and uninstantiated past – one opening up the possibility of a promising future. The hero of this work, Faustin Wirkus, was an American junior naval officer of Polish descent.

The sources tell us that Wirkus – born in 1897 in a mountainous Pennsylvanian town, died in 1945 – was a "Yankee King of the Tropics." In 1920 he became the administrator of the island of Gonâve. There he dealt with tax collection, the development of infrastructure, and the introduction of Western standards of social organization (hygiene, good manners, trade) into the daily lives of the local population. He represented the occupying powers, as well as the violence of the Banana Wars, which gave the USA control of Haiti. Wirkus was, however, an attractive character for the American narrative, as he stayed on Gonâve for twelve years and was crowned by local inhabitants, in a *Vodou* ceremony, as the "White King."

The precise circumstances of this coronation remain hazy, but most versions have it that a coincidence of names played a decisive role. Haiti was ruled, from 1847 to 1859, by Faustin Soulouque – first as president, then as the self-declared Emperor Faustin I. A former slave, a *Vodou* adherent and a Catholic, Soulouque first fought in the war of independence with France and then advanced rapidly in his military and political career. As president he strove to unite Haiti and repel American influences. He declared himself emperor to strengthen his dictatorial rule. In the end, however, one too many failed military campaigns

against the Dominican Republic forced him to flee to Jamaica. A legend grew that he had foretold his return to power in Haiti, and that Faustin Wirkus was supposed to be the reincarnation of the Haitian emperor.

In Duda and Soja's film, the American soldier is first presented as a small plastic figurine – a child's toy, though one kitted out with the accoutrements of force: a military uniform and weapons. Wirkus – a white man – walks step by step underground in a space that resembles a mining tunnel. He enters a factory where a black oily liquid is being poured into a tank. Images of jungle in black intermingle with the black mine and the black factory. Scenes of revolution and history from various times blend into a unity that pulsates behind the familiar. In the underground corridors, in the middle of the jungle, a ritual takes place on a tall platform. Wirkus is crowned while at a dance, in the glow of lights and to the rhythm of techno. This is not *Vodou*, but neither is it just a contemporary party. What we see on the screen goes beyond time and context. The movement of black bodies surrounding the hero brings out the potential of historical events. Wirkus could have rebelled and held back the machinery of slavery; he could have undergone a transformation and turned against his superiors. Would Gonâve then have become a symbol of revolution? Would this have entered Western history as the beginning of a new order, a new epoch, a new politics?

Susan Buck-Morss saw similar potential for Haiti and the Haitian revolution in her essay *Hegel and Haiti*,[1] in which she connected the Hegelian categories of master and slave with the events of 1791–1804. Buck-Morss shifts our perception, not so much to introduce postcolonial thinking into the historical discourse but to take a step further: to create a new universalism in which the Haitian war also defines a fundamental change in culture in general. One that concerns and defines us all.

An interesting role in this story is played by Polish soldiers serving in Napoleon's army. After reaching Haiti, legend says

that they felt there was a similarity between their own domestic situation and that of the Haitian people, and so they refused to fight against the rebel slaves. However, as Leszek Kolankiewicz says, the truth is somewhat less impressive: the cases where Polish soldiers went over to the Haitian side were limited to regular soldiers, often those who were sick or had been taken into slavery.[2] Nevertheless, Poles were mentioned in the first Haitian constitution as the only white nationality, alongside Germans, who were allowed to settle on the island. This historical fact opens up the possibility of developing different narratives about the past and potential future. The black Pole is a figure of speculative history with great subversive potential. In the village of Cazale on Haiti, where the descendants of Polish soldiers live, a different Polish history and a different history of Poland persists.

Bartek Konopka probably went furthest in actualizing the Haitian history of Poland. In his documentary *Sztuka znikania* [*The Art of Disappearing*], he recounts the fate of a *Vodou* priest, Amon Fremon, who came from Cazale to Poland with Jerzy Grotowski in 1980. Fremon took part in Grotowski's Theatre of Sources [Teatr Źródeł] and participated in activities at Grotowski's center at Brzezinka, near Wrocław. He was prevented from leaving Poland because of the introduction of martial law. When he returned to Haiti, he stopped performing rituals and died alone. In Konopka's version, Fremon leaves Brzezinka to go on a journey around Poland. He sees harvest festivals (portrayed as sacrifices made to *Vodou* priests), queues, poverty, and misery. But he also sees Lech Wałęsa (the priest of Erzili – the *Vodou* goddess, one of whose embodiments is Our Lady of Częstochowa [Wałęsa would wear a pin with this form of Mary]), the Gdańsk shipyard, and the triumph of Solidarity. Sensing that Solidarity – in his eyes a *Vodou* movement – will bring about the same violence that accompanied the Haitian revolution 200 years earlier, Fremon performs his ritual, uniting

Haitian and Polish forces. As a result, Poland regains its freedom. *Vodou* saves the country and brings about the elections of 1989.

In the aforementioned *Never Embrace Burning Statues* Polishness and Haiti once again enter into unexpected relations. Wirkus – the white king – had Polish roots and grew up in a mining town in the USA. Though an American soldier, his interior monologue here is conducted in Polish. The inner transformation he undergoes, the journey through the blackness and darkness, follows the rhythm of the exotic language of his ancestors. Like Amon Fremon, Wirkus is also *polonais*, though his transformation takes place in the opposite direction: where Fremon became white in his own perception, Wirkus acquires many changing colors that deepen into dark, hidden, nocturnal spaces of history. The slave, soldier, miner, and worker combine to form a single figure, as do the Haitian, Pole, and American. The visual synthesis of darkness and spatial context allows for the flickering of all these identities. The identities never quite disappear, but reveal how histories intertwine, bringing revolutionary potential. Wirkus is the embodiment of the intersection of these possibilities, the locus where the possibility of rebellion is born.

The dynamic of the film is based on dance. Combining various dance aesthetics and cultures, the movement of bodies establishes a different level of visual narrative. Dance – as a ritual that releases deep forces and possibilities – brings forth change in Wirkus. The dancers are dressed partly in modern clothes and partly in ritual dress; with huge head coverings, feathered wings, and masks they enter a trance. Wirkus is drawn into a space that transcends distinctions, where not only his identity but time itself undergoes peculiar manipulation. History is no longer the past. Dance suspends the linear passage of time, marking out a moment of unlimited speculation. And we are not witnessing attempts to imitate the rituals of *Vodou*, known mainly from Maya Deren's unfinished film. *Vodou* – as in her

experience of it – remains unrecordable. It can only manifest as a ritual transformation, changing not only the individuals involved but the whole story; in the case of Wirkus, this even happens retrospectively.

Like Wirkus, Deren – an American dancer, choreographer, and artist – had a complex identity. She was born Eleonora Derenkowska to a Jewish-Ukrainian family. In 1946 the Guggenheim Foundation granted her a stipend in recognition of her artistic achievements combining film and dance. This award made possible her journey to Haiti in 1947. She planned to spend six months there to study the body and dance techniques used in *Vodou* rituals. One of her research tools was a camera directed at dancers, in a trance, "possessed" by the *loa* – Haitian ancestral spirits and gods. But Haiti was too absorbing for Deren, and she traveled to and from it until 1951. She never completed her film about *Vodou*, leaving the raw materials that her husband, Teji Ito, finally edited after her death, making the film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, named after the book Deren wrote,[3] one of the most shocking parts of which recounts the moment of possession. The author resists for a considerable time, trying to fight off the power of the ritual, finally succumbing to a trance. She describes her state of a lost sense of self and of her language representing the world, with an accompanying schism in consciousness, as a "white blackness" – a state that cannot be rationalized; a state that increases our awareness of new possibilities, other realities, other temporalities.

The camera was not the right instrument to capture the dynamics of the trance that opens one to a unique void. In *Vodou*, it is neither aesthetics, choreography, nor bodily technique that is most important – its power lies outside the individual. The only medium of this dance is the body – the collective body, rooted in the past and stretched out toward the future. It was just such a dance that inaugurated the 1791 revolution in Haiti. For Róża

Duda and Michał Soja, *Vodou* tears away from its specific cultural context and becomes a concept that frees the body for change, toward the transcending of time and narrative, to alter the course of history. In the feverish rhythm, in the dance's trance, the "white darkness" manifests itself less as the space of an indefinite, new, unknown reality, but as a reservoir of possibilities that, though imperceptible in daylight, are within reach.

Sight does, however, hold a key place in this construction. The screening of the film is accompanied by two monitors projecting images of eyeballs in constant motion – as if during REM sleep. The irises contain black parasites. The creators explain that this is a metaphor of the fact that what structures our vision prevents us from seeing other possibilities – limiting sight to certain desirable contours of reality. The parasites ensure that the eyes do not sink into creative darkness, that they constantly look for the light that would define what is visible and what is not. Everything we see on the screen is at the same time impossible to see.

Faustin Wirkus's final journey never actually took place. As a loyal soldier, he left the island of Gonâve after twelve years upon receiving his orders. But he returned as a tourist. He took part in a film about *Vodou* shot in 1933 (but today lost) and wrote a book called *The White King of La Gonave: The True Story of the Sergeant of Marines Who Was Crowned King on a Voodoo Island*. Róża Duda and Michał Soja see the moment when Wirkus leaves the island as a defining one, turning him into a "revolutionary-impotent" figure. The missed opportunity – the path not taken that led to a different future – makes Wirkus an embodiment of passivity. In a speculative gesture, the artists make their hero grasp some scrap metal and launch a revolutionary rush. At the same time, his eyes, attacked by parasites, turn pale – reminding us of possibilities that remain unfulfilled. And so Wirkus begins new stories, renews the power

of a ritual that can loop time back and begin the future afresh, yet also represents impotence and servitude toward the system that is the sickness of the present.

In *Never Embrace Burning Statues* the toy soldier slowly burns. It burns in the flames of revolution, thereby also disappearing, losing its form and the history written into it. From this complex perspective, the possibility represented by Wirkus is both filmically realized while simultaneously recalling that it has not been actually realized. In the curatorial notes, Wirkus is described as the "*pars pro toto* of Western culture."[4] Entering into the darkness of Gonâve that is pregnant with meaning, he finds that which turns him into a hero as well as that which incapacitates him. Can history be changed? Is it possible for the year 1932 on Gonâve to take a different course? Is art capable of exceeding the bounds of a perspective limited by parasitic blind spots?

> Gonâve, Gonâve – that impossible alternative [...]
> that unfulfilled alternative. You know what I'm talking about?
> It's like a branch of the evolutionary tree – one that might well
> have proven superior but was nevertheless cut off – and will
> probably never grow back.

– says Wirkus in the film. And yet Gonâve – like Haiti – returns again and again, strengthening culture and art with new visions of alternative possibilities.

1 Included in the collection: Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). *Critical Inquiry* vol. 26, no. 4 (Summer 2000), 821–865.

2 See Leszek Kolankiewicz, "'Jak bez wysiłku kochać się z Murzynem?' Jerzy Grotowski w splątanym gaju narracji haitańskich" ["How to Effortlessly Make Love to the Negro?" Jerzy Grotowski in the Tangled Grove of Haitian Narratives], in: *Nowe historie* [*New Histories*] *02. Wymowa faktów* [*The Sound of Facts*], eds. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek and Dorota Buchwald (Warsaw: The Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, 2011).

3 Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1953).

4 Marta Lisok, *Nie obejmuj płonących posągów* [*Never Embrace Burning Statues*], u-jazdowski.pl, https://u-jazdowski.pl/program/project-room/roza-duda-michal-soja?tid=tekst-kuratorski (accessed March 5, 2020).