Laura Mulvey: Thinking through Film

Disgraced Monuments + 23rd August 2008

+ discussion with directors Laura Mulvey, Mark Lewis and Faysal Abdullah

Chris Marker and Alain Resnais' essay film *Statues Also Die* (1953) infamously opens with the pronouncement: 'When people die, they enter into history; when statues die, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture.' As the camera pans over ruins of classical Western sculptures – draped torsos without heads, faces without bodies, amputated limbs – fragments from a time past are strewn randomly in nature, leaving the viewer to imagine their original installation and purpose. Forty years later, in the former Soviet Union, a similar depository of abandoned sculptures, ravaged by history and thrown up like so much flotsam and jetsam, has been left to pile up in waste sites or stowed away deep in storage facilities. In their remarkably prescient essay film *Disgraced Monuments* (1994), Laura Mulvey and Mark Lewis trace the histories of certain examples of these sculptures: their past moments in the sun, their fall from grace and their ultimate replacement. Unlike the centuries-old sculptures filmed by Marker and Resnais, the objects in Mulvey and Lewis's film are 'young', not worn and aged by time but fresh and relatively new. They are twentieth-century products: icons from a bygone era, relics of a dream for a new egalitarian society – one whose principles promised so much but through misdirection failed after 70 years. The birth and death of these monuments, which were made to honour and memorialise the Russian Revolution and its leaders, marks a history that left much bitterness and a desire to erase the Communist project, coupled with a frenzy to embrace the fantasy of free-market capitalism.

Monuments are designed to commemorate individuals, significant events or concepts. Myriad factors of cultural and historical significance contribute to their subject matter, creation, placement and removal. As Lucia Allais explains: 'monuments serve as a dispersed cultural archive; their preservation involves control of nothing less than the national narrative.' Such is the complicated and multilayered theme of *Disgraced Monuments*. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mulvey and Lewis tracked the fate of these monuments to the Russian Revolution – from large-scale, unique forms intended to commemorate individuals who were influential in the uprising, to the hundreds of thousands of mass-produced busts of Lenin and Stalin created to be presented as awards on workers' holidays.

Mulvey and Lewis visited Leningrad on 7 November 1991: the anniversary of the Communist Revolution of 1917. The new post-Soviet regime was deploying this date to strategically mark the change in the city's name from Leningrad back to St. Petersburg, thereby substituting the significance of the historical marker with a new one. In Russia, the return of the name St. Petersburg after 65 years of being called Leningrad was part of a rapid post-1989 effort to erase the predominance of one historical narrative and reinscribe pre-revolutionary myths of nationhood and sovereignty. In this process history was rewritten, players replaced, educational curricula modified and the names of public places, cities, squares, plazas and streets returned to earlier designations. In tandem with these efforts, contemporary buildings were razed, monuments destroyed and exact replicas from the past rebuilt in attempts to restore a community to the false dictums of 'the way it really was' and 'again will be'. As artist Sharon Hayes reminds us, 'monuments operate materially, narratively, and iteratively. They are a mechanism inside an ongoing power grab.'

As in all narratives there are two key moments for monuments: beginnings (when they are made and installed) and endings (when they are taken down, removed or destroyed). One aspect of this sweeping process is in the treatment of monuments and memorials that dominate public spaces commemorating a former regime: when monuments designed and erected to remind people of a particular history, to reflect and pay respect to that history, are dismantled and removed. They may be quickly toppled in a matter of days following a revolution, or the decision to abolish them may take years, even centuries. In either case, as quickly as monuments are taken away, they are replaced, as if their void or absence might provoke an even more subversive space for undirected contemplation. The replacements reflect the contemporary social concerns of a particular political landscape. We must look for the political unconscious directing these acts, for, as historian Eric Foner suggests, it is just as important to consider the time when a monument is made as to what it is commemorating. *Disgraced Monuments* performs such an act of close reading or viewing.

Nora M. Alter, 'Preserving History: *Disgraced Monuments*' in Oliver Fuke (ed), *The Films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Scripts, Working Documents, Interpretation* (BFI/Bloomsbury, 2023)

Disgraced Monuments
Produced, Written and Directed by:
Laura Mulvey, Mark Lewis
Production Company:
Monumental Pictures
For: Channel Four
Production Co-ordinator (London, Moscow) and translation: Jessica Kaner
Production Co-ordinator (Toronto):
Deanne Judson
Director of Photography:
Thomas H. Turnbull
Camera Assistant: Yuri Mironov
Stills: Stephen Waddell
Edited by: Tom Hayes
Online Operators: Richard McCarthy, Michael Sagadore, Gary Poole
Archive Research: Asaya Abdulina
Original Music by: Karl Jenkins, Michael Ratledge
Sound: Larry Sider
Sound Mix: Marc Benoit
Translation: Suzanne Lydic, Beata Lozinski, Gordon Livermore
Interpreter: Irena Artis
Voice-over: Petra Markham
'The Bronze Horseman' recited by:
Pavel Gatynya
C4 tx 6.6.1994
50 mins
Digital

23rd August 2008
Directors: Laura Mulvey, Mark Lewis, Faysal Abdullah
Production Company:
Mark Lewis Studio Inc.
Producers: Laura Mulvey, Mark Lewis, Faysal Abdullah
UK 2013
22 mins
Digital

Big Screen Classics: Laura Mulvey Selects

Imitation of Life
Mon 1 Dec 20:30; Sat 13 Dec 15:00; Tue 30 Dec 20:40
People on Sunday Menschen am Sonntag
Tue 2 Dec 20:50; Sun 21 Dec 12:20
Morocco
Wed 3 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey); Fri 12 Dec 20:30
Notorious
Thu 4 Dec 14:30; Thu 18 Dec 20:45; Sat 27 Dec 12:20
The Arbor
Fri 5 Dec 20:45; Sun 21 Dec 18:20
Man With a Movie Camera
Chelovek s kino-apparatom **+ (nostalgia)**
Sat 6 Dec 15:30; Mon 15 Dec 20:45
Lives of Performers
Sun 7 Dec 18:30; Fri 19 Dec 18:20
Golden Eighties
Mon 8 Dec 20:50; Wed 17 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey)
Daughters of the Dust
Tue 9 Dec 20:45; Sat 20 Dec 14:30
What Scoundrels Men Are!
Gli uomini, che mascalzoni!
Wed 10 Dec 18:20 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey); Tue 23 Dec 20:30
Under the Skin of the City
Zir-e Pust-e Shahr
Wed 10 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by Laura Mulvey); Tue 23 Dec 18:15
Xala
Thu 11 Dec 18:15; Sat 27 Dec 11:45
Through the Olive Trees
Zir-e darakhtan-e zeyton
Sun 14 Dec 12:30; Mon 22 Dec 18:15
It
Tue 16 Dec 21:00; Sun 28 Dec 12:10
Pierrot le fou
Thu 18 Dec 20:50; Mon 29 Dec 18:00

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Laura Mulvey on '23rd August 2008'

23rd August 2008 consists of two shots. A brief opening shot, intercut with intertitles, of the famous Al-Mutanabbi Street book market in Baghdad is followed by an unbroken 21-minute monologue, shot from a single, still camera position and simply recording the speaker's words without interruption. In it, Faysal Abdullah gradually builds a portrait of his relationship with his younger brother, Kamel, and in the process evokes the lives of Iraqi intellectuals of the left, driven into exile in the early 1980s by Saddam Hussein's regime. Faysal describes Kamel's decision to return to Iraq in 2003, his work for the new Ministry of Culture and his tragic death at the hands of unknown assassins on 23 August 2008. While the film throws light on little-known aspects of Iraq's political history, primarily it is the story of the two brothers, of Faysal's devotion to Kamel and their contrasting attitudes to life and to exile.

Faysal and I had wanted to make a film together for quite some time before the session in the summer of 2013 that produced the final film. Over the years, circumstances changed in Iraq and so did the project. Initially, we had planned to make a filmed interview in which Faysal would give an account of growing up in Baghdad in a working-class family, in the 1960s. The interview project would have been an oral history using Faysal's life, his memories and experiences to evoke an unequivocally secular society, with a longstanding commitment to culture and to a left politics that was strongly influenced by the Iraqi Communist Party. We never managed to get this project off the ground. Then, at the time of the American and British invasion of Iraq in 2003, I realised, bitterly, what Faysal had always known: how completely ignorant most of the world was about the history and culture of this country that had suddenly become the focus of global attention. The invaders easily conjured up and imposed sectarian and tribal stereotypes, which the media then spread into a, by and large, blank public imagination. I wanted to turn to Faysal, not so much, this time, for a personal story, but as a witness to the complexities of Iraqi history, including the importance of the Iraqi left, its persecution and eventual destruction under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. If it were to have a proper impact, this project would have had to be more ambitious and aspired to a wider circulation than the oral history. Once again, the project was unrealised.

When Kamel was assassinated in 2008, the wound left by his death was so great and so disorientating that the film project seemed impossible. But as the tragedy of Iraq continued to accelerate, Faysal and I, once again, had an urgent sense that the lost history of its left should be told but this time with particular reference to Kamel's story. First of all, Kamel himself has a unique and symbolic significance, representing the persistence of progressive hopes as well as tragically embodying the disastrous turn that his country's history had taken. Second, Faysal's personal experiences and, crucially, his intimate knowledge of Iraqi history, especially that of the left, could fill in some of this background and its complex legacy. When Faysal and I finally returned to the idea of the interview, I asked Mark Lewis, with whom I had collaborated on *Disgraced Monuments* and who also knew Faysal well, to work with us.

Mark and I had shot *Disgraced Monuments* on 16mm (the very end of that era) and I had not previously encountered the new digital film experience in which prolonged shooting combined with a clarity of image that equalled celluloid. We were using Mark's digital camera, the Red K4 (operated by Martin Testar). In the process of setting up the interview, Mark and I disagreed on strategy. Mark, always doubtful about over-careful preparation, was in favour of Faysal talking as thoughts led him, with minimal prompting from an interviewer (me). I, always more cautious, favoured a carefully constructed interview. As it turned out, Faysal's ability to recount stories and improvise around his thoughts, uninterrupted, was well served both by the technology and by Mark's less intrusive concept of the interview. Although he ranged over a number of different topics and we shot more material, it was ultimately clear that Faysal's portrait of Kamel, the circumstances of his death and the relationship between the brothers, told in a 21-minute segment, had a narrative and emotional cohesion that would work as an entity on its own. The monologue has its own particular structure, sometimes following different lines of association but always looping back to pick up the account of Kamel's life. Faysal's fluency as a story-teller, his deep involvement with the events he was describing, his emotion and his energy, find a rhythm that accumulates over the extended stretch of time. But there is also something happening on the screen, in the image, that the written script cannot capture: the way that this unbroken 'chunk' of time builds a portrait of the speaker and his relation to words, to a particular language and to gesture. In retrospect, it seems to me that there is an inbuilt informality in this kind of digital recording, as though the medium allows for pauses and finds space for detail. Speech, thought and feeling find their own temporality and their own varying pace.

Laura Mulvey, 'Two Portraits: *23rd August*' in Oliver Fuke (ed), *The Films of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen: Scripts, Working Documents, Interpretation* (BFI/Bloomsbury, 2023)