Bobrek - The Life Through the Dance

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A workers’ district of Bytom, Bobrek with a steelworks and a coal mine for “the better future” under Communism, now terrifies with the media accounts of pathologies and hopelessness. Children continue to play against the backdrops of derelict buildings but gradually become devoid of dreams. The Silesian Theater of Dance in Bytom organized dance workshops devoted to break-dance, hip-hop and funky in the area.

Three boys, the main characters of the story, Andrzej, Daniel and Paweł, decided to change something about the way they lived through dancing. With the group of other dancers they prepared a performance at the local theater. During the premiere night their families and friends entered the theater door for the first time. Will their dreams come true?

This paper reflects on the making of Bobrek dance (2002).
BOBREK - THE LIFE THROUGH THE DANCE

My collaboration with the Silesian Theater of Dance (STD) started at the end of 1990s when the theatre organized creative projects – dance workshops for the disable, elderly as well as those with the mental health issues. The main goal of these projects was to reframe the problems of social exclusion. For me, as a film director, during making of the film, I have witnessed changes in participants’ attitude and their self-esteem through dancing.

Bytom is an industrial city of Upper Silesia in Southern Poland with the population of 200,000 (Silesian agglomeration has more than three millions). Majority of coal mines are closed down now, steel mills are slowly fading away. Bytom’s districts, including Bobrek, grapple with the growing unemployment, poverty and violence. “It used to be a land of work and love. And now it's thieves and fucking jerks who hate one another” – says one of the residents of Bobrek in the sequence filmed in a local bar, where now unemployed miners congregate. Their only source of living – on the top of symbolic welfare benefits – is based on robbing trains carrying the coal and the sale of the scrap. Frequently, the whole families are involved in economic survival. “This place is a shithole and nobody’s gonna change it. Life sucks here. Your own people knock you fucking down” – adds another man in the bar.

In the worst situation are the youth, often witnessing the worsening of socio-economic conditions at home. Kids are left unattended and often turn into alcohol and drugs, and then give up school and end up in conflict with the law.

STD has prepared a social project under title “Closer to Art” directed to the group of youth from Bytom’s Bobrek. The workshops was devoted to street dances – activity connected both with “the life of the street” as well as with the rhythm and movement. The participants had the opportunity to develop their skills and interest in dance, under the guidance of qualified dancers from the Silesian Dance Theater and elsewhere. The project offered regular meetings through a dance group to rehearse for the performance production. Together with a cameraman, I have identified three boys at the workshops and decided to record their dance experience from the first attempts at the workshops to the final performance.
Years ago by the river bank lived beavers. One day fire broke out in the nearby settlement and all the beavers ran away into their burrows. But one of them jumped out onto the bank and pointed at the river. The fire was put out quickly thanks to its water. In memory of the brave beaver the settlement was called Bobrek. People lived there happily ever after (beaver in Polish is bóbr so name Bobrek comes from this word).

The film opens with a narrated fable, a boy seem to barely read; already in the opening sequence through the sound, anxiety is channeled. The introduction transforms mythical space (the archetype of lost paradise) into real “here and now” Bobrek with its issues of violence, hopelessness and desperation. The layer of soundtrack converted to the youth rock song becomes the main music theme:

They’ve been told/ there’s no way out of here./ Better not to dream about it./ There’s no future here/ they’ve understood/ there’s no turning back./ You have to fight for everything./ You have to live this way.

Daniel, Paweł and Andrzej during dance workshops organized by Silesian Theater of Dance

This is a particular moment of the film when voice is passed over to the boys – we are face to face with the material that is both subtle and challenging. The protagonists of the film are three boys – Andrzej, Daniel and Paweł filmed in two separate spaces: the real environment in which they live – home, school, backyard etc. and neutral, shot in the studio where the only eye-catching element of the viewers are their faces. There is a lack of visual distance while the boys narrate in their own language. Daniel, Pawel and Andrzej are between 16 and 18 years old; they are aware of entering socio-economics of adulthood. The message we are left with is the boys want to escape the lives of their parents: working hard, for little money in hazardous for health conditions “I don’t want to toil like she does. It’s a job for a man and it doesn’t pay. If they do pay, they pay dirt-cheap”– says Pawel describing his mother working at the nearby coking plant. He explains that in his family (half-Polish, half-Gypsy) only mother has a regular income. “The world is beautiful when you have money. Then you can have fun or else you hang around the yard and think how to come up with some dough” – Daniel adds. The boys have experience with drugs, substance abuse (in Bobrek you can buy a plastic bag with airblast to stupefy for one penny), alcohol, brawls and petty theft. One day they come across Silesian Theater of Dance’s break dance classes. They take up the challenge; they have nothing to lose after all…
To create this film I had to get intimate with the daily life of residents in Bobrek, enter their spaces. I remember I heard one day: “show others, how we live here and what the future can our children have in this place!” I am a very grateful I could have entered the private spaces. Places like Bobrek are everywhere, this story is universal.

Simultaneously, I have followed the action of Silesian Theater of Dance; recording day by day and month by month the influence of the dance workshops and the protagonists. It is worth noting that initially boys were unable to find themselves among people in wheelchairs, uncomfortable to work together: “first we didn’t like it but after a day or two we got tight with the group. It was fun”. Shared experience of what happens with the boys overtime, how much they seem to have changed, especially how they seem to have mentally matured was a
fascinating add on in the process. Awkwardness, complexes and aggressive attitude seemed to wither over time. They were affirmed – you feel rhythm very well, your body moves fantastic! Their efforts were valued.

Andrzej practicing break dance

It was this long awaited evening... In the lighted foyer appeared a lot of guests and the great bell announced the beginning of the spectacle. We were with the camera behind the scenes, we shot the boys performance, their reactions, the nerves, mobilization. “I felt like an artist. I was tickled pink” – said Daniel after the final night of the performance at the theater.

Among the audience they could see their parents and peers. Many of them crossed the threshold of the theater for the first time in their life...“Dancing was my best choice ‘cause I kept clear of many mean things (...). Good for me and for others maybe. If it wasn’t for the dance, I could be trashing some guy right now” – shared his reflections with honesty Pawel.

„When I heard the clapping I felt tears in my eyes. Everybody must’ve shed a tear or two”- commented Andrzej visibly moved. That evening appeared as a great victory for them.

Another ordinary morning at Bobrek. Unemployed are sitting in front of the staircases, gatherers of scrap and coal return "after work", children are playing at the backyards. In a small, dingy little basement our heroes arranged youth club and began teach their friends how to break dance. They are not uncertain, fearful boys, like one year ago. They transformed, gained new status in the district. And suddenly dance moves goes to the street, its inhabitants begin to swirl. A final scene of the film thus becomes a reversal of its ominous beginning.
This documentary connects the symbolic space (Bobrek – situated on the periphery of a big industrial town in Silesia) with the global power of the arts and social movement. I am glad that my film turned out important for the young people in Bobrek, but also for Silesian Theater of Dance. The subsequent workshops organized by this theater were entitled “Bobrek dance”.

**Awards for the film:**

Grand Prix Documentary on 21. European Association of Regional Television in Grado /Italy/ 2003 for “an alert but often poignant view of life in a small and depressed Polish town”.

Grand Prix on Polish Film Festival of Media in Łódź /Poland/ 2002.