

Medusae Resignified: Narrative Strategies in Dorothy Cross' Work

by

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At the begging I will quote few sentences uttered by one of three narrators in the video work *Medusae* by Dorothy and Tom Cross released in 2003.

The problem with box jellyfish is that they have very complicated eyes, as complicated as our eyes. We wonder then how they're processing the signals from these eyes, without having a brain. They can see clearly, but then we don't know what processing power, how big a computer is back there to handle the image, and what they do with it. We know for example that they appear to see dark pier pilings and avoid them, they swim more or less up to a human and swim around it or swim away because it is too big to eat.

It could be possible to say that the video is an outcome of the artistic research of the acclaimed Irish artist Dorothy Cross and the scientific research of her brother, biologist professor Tom Cross, but more important, the narrative structure of *Medusae*, among others, poses the question of the mere meaning of notions of art and science. The objects of their research and narrative representation are from the one side a life of amateur zoologist Maude Delap who dedicated herself to breeding and researching of jellyfish, and from the other, the most venomous animal on earth, *Chironex fleckeri*, lethal and the fastest swimming jellyfish of northern Australia's coastal waters. In other words, the scientist and the brainless creature whose "eyes are as complicated as ours" become the

protagonists of Crosses' story. These protagonists do not speak; instead they are narrated, or more precisely, narratively constructed by a kind of a documentary discourse. But *Medusae* is not a documentary video.

By the statement published in the catalogue of her retrospective exhibition held in IMMA in 2005, Dorothy Cross determines *Medusae* as a strange hybrid, a short video moving from 1902 to 2002, from memory to the unknown, telling that the work occurs at the point where territories meet like reflective opposites. Besides her fascination by the story on Maude Delap who in 1902 succeeded in breeding jellyfish in bell-jars in her father's, Church of Ireland Minister's house on the Valentia Island, the artist mentions that she heard about funding from an organization in London called SciArt who were looking for artists and scientists to work together.¹ Looking for more informations I visited the web site of the Wellcome Trust, an organization that in 1996 initiated the SciArt programme. I've read there that the SciArt supported experimental projects that involved artists and scientists working collaboratively to explore a scientific subject matter using the arts. SciArt projects aimed to stimulate fresh thinking and debate in both disciplines, and to reach and engage with diverse audiences on the social, ethical and cultural issues that surround contemporary biomedical science. Production Awards were made to projects that aim to make a significant impact on the public's engagement with biomedical science.²

Reading the *Medusae* video in the context of the propositions set by the organization that

¹ Dorothy Cross, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Charta Publication, 2005, p. 88

² <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/Funding/Public-engagement/Past-funding/WTX035067.htm>

made its realization possible, I am interested in the performative of the work, i.e. in the modalities of its making of the "significant impact on the public engagement with biomedical science". What does the *Medusae* do in that sense?

That question leads me to Werner Heisenberg, the scientist, theoretical physicist who made foundational contributions to quantum mechanics and is best known for asserting the uncertainty principle of quantum theory. In the academic year 1955/56 he held so-called Gifford lectures at the Scottish St. Andrews University. In one of those lectures he concluded that in the course of centuries art and science shape a human language by which we can speak about the most remote parts of reality; intelligible systems of notions as well as different artistic styles are somewhat only a different words or the groups of the words in that language.³

That what emerges from the narrative text of the *Medusae* video which involves several intertwined semiotic systems (visual, verbal, musical) and consists of three seemingly different levels of fabulation, is the topic that could, in Heisenberg words, be termed as "the most remote parts of reality". And the performative of *Medusae* manifests itself in the very procedure of deconstruction of the coherent language that constructs our idea of the reality. In doing it, *Medusae* operates with the figure of uncertainty. Its language unceasingly slides between the dry discourse of documentary and the highly aestheticized underwater shots that produce visual images of the exquisite beauty. Jellyfish, the brainless creature whose origin reaches up to the most remote past thus becomes the

³ Lecture entitled "A relation of the quantum theory towards the other areas" . Quoted according to the Croatian translation published in Werner Heisenberg, *Fizika i filozofija*, Kruzak, Zagreb, 1997, p. 86

spectacular event in the "age of reason", in the "society of spectacle" in which the art has been deprived of its prerogative of beauty. But the narrative procedure of *Medusae* is not aiming to create a beautiful work of art. Instead, a beauty is acknowledged through the focalization. According to Mieke Bal whose terminology I am borrowing here, in the narrative text focalization is the relation between "who perceives", and what is perceived. That relation is the result of a choice that has been made from among various "points of view" from which the elements can be presented. Furthermore, the subject of focalization, the focalizer is the point from which the elements are viewed. That point can lie with a character (i.e., an element of the fabula) or outside it. As a special kind of focalization Bal specifies a memory, for a memory is an "act of vision" of the past, but, as an act, situated in the present of the memory.⁴

That special kind of focalization, a memory as the act of vision of the past situated in the present of the memory, has been applied in the narrative of Maude Delap's life. In the process, a series of heteroclitic focalizers that are placed outside the character have been engaged. Those focalizers set in motion a metonymical chain that challenges not only the idea of someone's biography, but moreover the idea of historical reality. The fabula in the story on Maude Delap is composed by many embedded texts mutually connected by the notion of jellyfish, or medusa. This Latin name of the species rhizomatically leads to the one of the most influential myths in the European cultural history, the Greek myth where Medusa was a gorgon, a chthonic female monster. Gazing directly upon her would turn onlookers to stone. She was beheaded by the hero Perseus, who slew Medusa by

⁴ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2009

looking at her harmless reflection in his mirrored shield instead of directly at her. That mythical story, among others, emphasizes a difference between a living body and the image of that body, between corporeality and its reflection, where the word that stands for the concept of reflection signifies both the optical illusion and the mental activity.

Despite the fact that the Greek myth is not even mentioned, or better to say, pronounced by the voices of the three narrators, it exists on the level of connotation. As such it connects all the protagonists of the different texts embedded into the fabulation of Maude Delap's life. After the voice of narrator said that in 1902 Maude Delap succeeded in breeding the jellyfish species *Cyanea lamarki*, camera focuses on the drawings of a jellyfish from the Ernst Haeckel's book *Art Forms of Nature*. The voice informs us that Ernst Haeckel, who was known as Darwin of Germany, lived in a house called Villa Medusa. He named a jellyfish after his first love who died - *Desmonema Annasethe*. The frame in which we see extraordinary drawings from Haeckel's famous book published between 1899 and 1904, establishes not only a relation between the concepts of art and the natural sciences, but also points to the procedure of gendering - in natural sciences as well as in mythology, and consequently in the arts. Furthermore, the procedure of aestheticization is stressed by the embedded text uttered by the voice of the narrator that informs us about father and son Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka who lived in the German city Dresden and pioneered in modelling extremely fragile jellyfish and marine creatures in glass. On the level of the visible, video take shows their fascinating glass sculptures placed in the glass cases of Dublin's Natural History Museum. In the very similar glass case we see the turtle that Maud Delap sent live on the train to Dublin where the animal

was put to death and placed in the cabinet. That moment in the narrative text of the *Medusae* video points to the relation between a science and the process of mortification. Paradoxically, mortification in the name of exploring the life.

The procedure of introducing of Haeckel and Blasckas in the story on Maude Delap, besides the fact that they were her contemporaries, exists here also in the function of focalization. And that what has been put in the focus is the late 19th century, a period that generated the idea of the modern science. One of those sciences is also the social psychology. Gustav le Bon considered to be the founder of that scientific discipline, notes the following in 1879: "In the most intelligent races, as among the Parisians, there are a large number of women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed male brains. This inferiority is so obvious that no one can contest it for a moment; only its degree is worthy of discussion... Without doubt there exists some distinguished women, very superior to the average man, but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity... consequently, we may neglect them entirely".⁵

This "scientific conclusion" written when Maude Delap was in the age of 13, and which was also valid as a public opinion in 1902 when she succeed in breeding jellyfish, discursively produced her existence as a monstrosity. Monstrosity of the similar range as the one from the Greek mythology denoted by the Latin word for jellyfish. But we do not become petrified by the close up of the direct gaze by which Maude Delap addresses us from her photograph appearing in Dorothy Cross' film.

⁵ Gustave Le Bon, *Recherches anatomiques et mathematiques sur les lois des variations du volume du cerveau et sur leurs relations avec l'intelligence*, quoted from Robyn Gardner, *The Dark Italics*, in the catalogue *Rosmarie Trockel* (ed. Gregory Burke), City Gallery Wellington, 1993, p. 39

The motif of the gaze that saturate all the layers of *Medusae* video is the agent that sets in motion the process of deconstruction of the notions of nature and culture, and discursive practices as well. That motif is incorporated in the mere camera movement. Furthermore, it connects extratextual lethal gaze from the Greek mythology, with the intratextual lethal *Chironex fleckeri* - brainless "body without organs" whose eyes are as complicated as ours, and finally, the concept of observation as the fundamental principle of scientific research.

There is another one key motif that inscribes an invisible subtext in the story about Maude Delap. It is a motif of the journey. The journey is signified by the frame that exist at the beginning of the *Medusae* video, the one taken from the boat approaching to Valentia Island where Maude Delap lived and worked all her life. The journey is also acknowledged by the narrator's voice informing us about two trips to Australia aiming to find and collect *Chironex fleckeri*, the animal who killed more people than sharks and crocodiles together, to study its swimming technique. It is important to notice that in the narrative structure of *Medusae*, first person narrative appears only in two situations. In the first person singular when the voice of narrator reads Maude Delap's *Notes on the rearing of the Chrysaora isoceles in the aquarium*, and in the first person plural when the voice of narrator, who can be identified as the artist, Dorothy Cross, talks about her crew's journeys in Australia. Maude Delap, as an unmarried, 19th century woman wasn't allowed to leave her parents' home and travel. Darwin, on the contrary, was. Moreover, he traveled almost five years on the famous British brig-sloop *Beagle* which was on the

expedition to chart the coastline of the South America. While the *Beagle* crew surveyed and charted coasts, Darwin was, among others, researching marine invertebrates. On the same journey Darwin visited Australia. Needless to say, in the 19th century when Darwin was concerned with the origin of species and Delap with breeding of jellyfish, both Ireland and Australia were parts of the British Empire. That unspoken term of imperialism, or colonialism, is subtly connoted by the inscription of the British - Irish relation as an embedded text in the fabula of *Medusae*. Quote: " In 1895 a group of British scientists visited the island. Maude fell in love with one of them. He did not fall in love with her. They visited the great Skellig rock. Maude sent a box of wild violets from Valentia island to him, every year on his birthday for the rest of his life". The uncertainty as a kind of ositinato figure in the narrative text of *Medusae* simultaneously gives and refuses permission to read a jellyfish here as a metaphor of all kinds of cultural colonialisms that operate with the basic term of the primitive. Is a jellyfish the primitive being?

For closer description of that being I'll borrow Deleuzian syntagm that is used almost as a jingle today - a body without organs. Doing it I want to remind on the "evolution" of the term throughout 19th and 20th century. Deleuze took it as a kind of a ready-made: from Karl Marx and Antonin Artaud. Marx comprehended a nature as the human body without organs, and Artaud used the expression in his radio-play *To Have Done with a Judgment of God* that has been broadcasted in 1947. In their seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate the process of becoming, which includes becoming-animal. They introduce a distinction between the concepts of production and

becoming. Becoming would thus be something quite different from the evolution process, a kind of involution, where the involution is not regression. Becoming implies multiplicity. In contrast to evolution, in the process of becoming there are no filiation relations. According to them all becomings are molecular because becoming is neither imitation nor identification with something or someone, nor is it a proportionality of a form.⁶ There is a reality of becoming-animal, Deleuze and Guattari write, even though one does not in reality become animal. They point out the need to explain the fact that children, and even many adults, do it to a lesser or greater degree, and in so doing bear witness to an inhuman connivance with the animal, rather than an Oedipal symbolic community.⁷ Becoming animal has nothing to do with bestialism, and becoming-imperceptible would be the immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula.⁸ My reason for mentioning it here is the claim that *movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible: it is by nature imperceptible*. Perception can grasp movement only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of form. Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception.⁹ And the threshold of perception is exactly that we are faced to while watching the *Medusae* video that, besides the life of Maude Delap, explores the swimming technique of a jellyfish.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (translated by Brian Massumi), Continuum, London, New York, 2004, p. 300

⁷ *ibid.* p. 302

⁸ *ibid.* p. 308

⁹ *ibid.* p. 309