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BOBREK – LIFE THROUGH DANCE¹

Abstract: The workers' district of Bytom, Bobrek, with its steelworks and a coal mine for 'the better future' under Communism, has now become the terrifying subject of media accounts of pathologies and hopelessness. Children continue to play against the backdrop of the derelict buildings, but they gradually abandon their dreams. The Silesian Dance Theatre in Bytom organized dance workshops devoted to break-dance, hip-hop and funk in the area. Three boys, the main characters of the story, Andrzej, Daniel and Paweł, decided to create something to portray the way they live through dancing. With a group of other dancers they prepared a performance at the local theatre. During the premiere night their families and friends entered the theatre for the first time. Will their dream come true? This paper reflects on the making of the film *Bobrek dance* (2002)².

Keywords: dance, break dance, social engagement, postindustrial area.

My collaboration with the Silesian Dance Theatre (SDT) started at the end of the 1990s when the theatre organized some creative projects – dance workshops for the disabled, the elderly, and those with mental health issues. The main goal of these projects was to reframe the problems of social exclusion. As a film director, during the making of the film, I witnessed the changes in the participants' attitude and their self-esteem through dancing.

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² Awards for the film:

- Grand Prix Documentary at the 21st CIRCOM (International Cooperative for Research and Action in the Field of Communication) Regional Annual Conference in Grado (Italy), in 2003 for "an alert but often poignant view of life in a small and depressed Polish town".
- Grand Prix at the Polish Film Festival of the Media in Łódź (Poland), 2002.

Bytom is an industrial city in the Upper Silesia in Southern Poland with a population of 200,000 (the Silesian agglomeration has more than three million). The majority of the coal mines have now been closed down and the steel mills are slowly fading away. Bytom's districts, including Bobrek, grapple with growing unemployment, poverty and violence. "It used to be a land of work and love. And now it's thieves and f***ing jerks who hate one another" – says one of the residents of Bobrek in the sequence filmed in a local bar, where unemployed miners now congregate. Their only source of maintenance – besides the meager welfare benefits – is robbing the trains carrying the coal and the sale of scrap metal. Frequently, whole families are involved in this forage for survival.

"This place is a shithole and nobody's gonna change it. Life sucks here. Your own people will f***ing knock you down" – adds another man in the bar. It is the young people who are in the worst situation, often witnessing the worsening of the socio-economic conditions at their homes. Kids are left unattended and often turn to alcohol and drugs, and then give up school and end up in conflict with the law.



Bobrek – the workers' district of Bytom

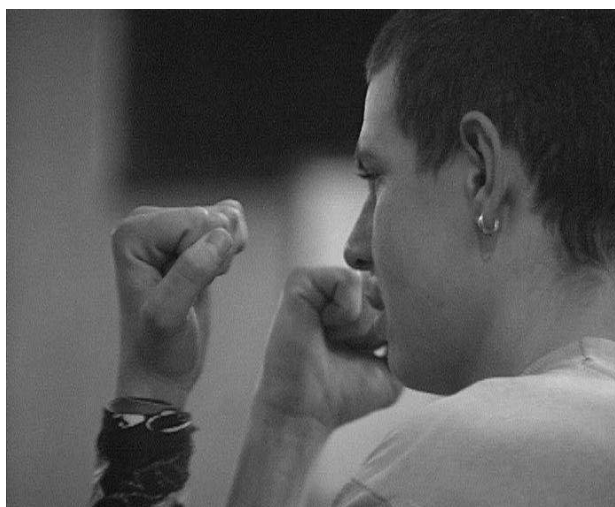
STD prepared a social project entitled *Closer to Art*, which was directed at a group of young people from Bobrek. The workshop was devoted to street dance – an activity relating to the life on the street and involving rhythm and movement. The participants had the opportunity to develop their skills and interest in dance, under the guidance of the qualified dancers from the Silesian Dance Theatre and with some other affiliations. The project involved regular meetings of the dance group for rehearsals for the production of the performance. Together with a cameraman, I focused on three boys at the workshops and decided to record their dance experience from their first attempts at the workshops to the final performance.

“Many years ago, there were some beavers living on the river bank. One day a fire broke out at the nearby settlement and all the beavers ran away and hid in 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” (the Polish word for beaver is *bóbr*, and the name Bobrek is claimed to derive from this word). The film opens with this narrated story, which a boy seems barely able to read; anxiety is channeled, through the sound, already in the opening sequence. The introduction transforms a mythical space (the archetype of the lost paradise) into the real Bobrek of today with its issues of violence, hopelessness and desperation. The soundtrack now features a rock song which becomes the film’s main musical 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”.

This is the particular moment in the film when the voice is given to the boys – we are confronted with the material that is both subtle and challenging. The protagonists of the film – Andrzej, Daniel and Paweł are filmed in two separate spaces: the actual environment in which they live – their homes, school, backyard etc., and the neutral studio where the only element catching the eye of the viewers are their faces. There is a lack of visual distance while the boys narrate in their own language. Daniel, Paweł and Andrzej are between 16 and 18 years old; they are aware of entering the socio-economic pressures of adulthood. The message we are left with is that the boys want to escape the lives of their parents; working hard for little money in the conditions hazardous for their health: “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 a pittance”– says Paweł, describing his mother who works at the nearby coking plant. He explains that in his family (half-Polish, half-Gypsy) only his mother has a regular income.



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



Daniel during the first workshop

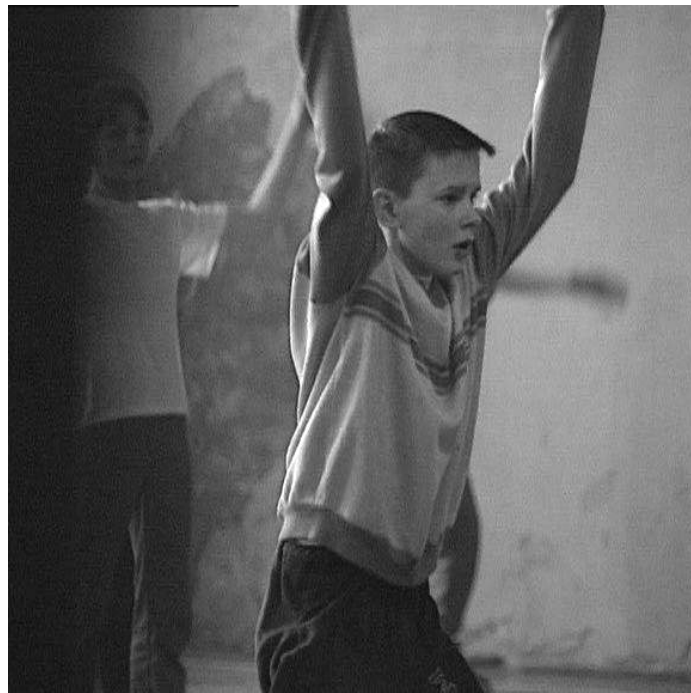
“The world is beautiful when you have money. Then you can have fun; otherwise you hang around the yard and only think about organizing some dough” – Daniel adds. The boys have experience with drugs, substance abuse (in Bobrek you can buy a plastic bag with airblast to inhale and stupefy for just a zloty), alcohol, brawls and petty theft. One day they come across the breakdance classes conducted by the Silesian Dance Theatre. They take up the challenge; after all, they have nothing to lose.

To create this film I had to familiarize myself with the daily life of the residents of Bobrek, to enter their spaces. I remember I heard one day: “show others how we live here and what future our children can have in this place!” I am very grateful I was able to enter that private space. But places like Bobrek can be found everywhere; this story is universal.



Andrzej and his mother in Bobrek

At the same time, I followed the activities of the Silesian Dance Theatre; recording day by day and month by month the influence of the dance workshops on the protagonists. It is worth noting that initially the boys were unable to relate to the people in wheelchairs, uncomfortable about the prospect of working with them: “at first we didn’t like it, but after a day or two we bonded with the group. It was fun”. The shared experience, which changed the boys over time, and made them more mentally mature was fascinating to observe in the process. Their awkwardness, complexes and aggressive attitudes seemed to disappear over time. They were affirmed – told they felt the rhythm very well, that their bodies moved in a fantastic way. Their efforts were appreciated.



Andrzej practicing break dance

It was a long awaited evening... The brightly lit foyer filled with guests, and the great bell announced the beginning of the spectacle. We were behind the scenes with our camera, and we shot the boys’ performance, their reactions, their stage fright, their mobilization. “I felt like an artist. I was so happy” – said Daniel after the final night of the performance at the theatre.

Among the audience they could see their parents and their peers. Many of them entered a theatre for the first time in their lives. Paweł shared with us his honest reflection: “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 dancing, I could be trashing some guy right now”. “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 was their great victory.

Another ordinary morning at Bobrek; the unemployed are sitting in front of their buildings, the collectors of scrap and coal return home after “work”, children are playing in the backyards. In a small, dingy little basement our heroes arrange a youth club to teach their friends how to perform break dance. They are not the uncertain, fearful boys of the year before. They have changed, gained a new status in the district. And suddenly dance moves into the street and its inhabitants begin to swirl. The final scene of the film thus becomes a reversal of its ominous beginning.



Final scene – life through dance

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 a social movement. I am glad that my film turned out to be important for the young people in Bobrek, but also for the Silesian Dance Theatre. The subsequent workshops organized by this theatre were entitled “Bobrek dance”.

BOBREK – ŻYCIE POPRZEZ TANIEC (streszczenie)

Robotnicza dzielnica Bytomia – Bobrek, z pobliską hutą i kopalnią była za komuny przykładem pracy „o lepsze jutro”; dziś straszy patologiami i beznadzieją. Klimat ten szczególnie mocno odczuwają dzieci. Bawiąc się przed odrapanymi familokami, obserwując codzienne, trudne życie swoich rodzin stopniowo pozbywają się marzeń. Stają się zakompleksione i agresywne. Już nawet nie próbują walczyć o siebie. Z myślą o dzieciach z Bytomia-Bobrka Śląski Teatr Tańca (ŚTT) zorganizował warsztaty taneczne. Był to taniec ulicy: *break-dance*, *hip-hop*, *funky*. Trójka bohaterów filmu – Andrzej, Daniel i Paweł postanowiła poprzez taniec zmienić coś w swoim życiu. Razem z grupą innych tancerzy przygotowali profesjonalny spektakl w tutejszym teatrze. Tego wieczoru po raz pierwszy w życiu progi te przekraczają także ich rodziny i koledzy z podwórka. Czy marzenia chłopców się spełnią? Tekst jest refleksją na temat pracy nad filmem *Bobrek dance* (2002).

Słowa kluczowe: taniec, break dance, inicjatywa społeczna, obszary przemysłowe.