

The Distant Beast

By Maija Timonen

At first glance, Samuel Stevens's three films *Zubr*, *Jarmark Europa* and *Esperi* have two things in common: firstly, they all deal with language, and secondly, they were shot on a trip to Poland. *Zubr* depicts a nature reserve that falls on the border between Poland and Belarus. It ties together information and personal stories about reserve by using the 'zubr' (the name for wisent or bison in many east European languages) as a guiding figure. *Jarmark Europa* shows Vietnamese stallholders at one of the largest outdoor markets in Europe, situated in Warsaw. *Esperi* is filmed at an Esperanto club in Bialystok.

On closer consideration, it is also apparent that these films foreground language as their subject matter in order to expose how language can be used to decipher complex social formations. The fact that all three films are primarily shot in one country (parts of *Zubr* are also filmed in Belarus) encourages thoughts not only about that specific location, but also about its 'country-ness' and about where the idea of a nation lies in contemporary Europe. Stevens's films comprise a subtle aesthetic of belonging, and verbal language is simply one channel for reflections on inclusion or lack thereof. As an artist travelling to a foreign country, his position within these social determinations becomes inevitably central to the films.

In *Zubr*, two types of text are presented: subtitles and text screens recount a story, but each adopt a different register. The subtitles narrate in the first person, while the text screens convey background historical research. A discrepancy between these two modes (the former, a subjective viewpoint; the latter, the construction of objectivity) is a consistent feature, and both are engaged in a deceptive struggle for domination. One seems to be working from a position of mute disadvantage: the subtitles act as the narrators 'voice' but are not accompanied by audible speech, and are therefore not backed up by the material/sensory dimension that would lend the subjective voice validity against officially accepted truths. Reminiscent of subtitles in a foreign language film, this 'translation' is without the 'original' that should go with it - that is to say, the original spoken language that any subtitles are merely interpreting.

Benedict Anderson wrote about nation states as imagined communities, ones whose inception and imagery were tied to the rise of vernacular languages facilitated by advancements in printing technologies¹. The 19th Nineteenth-century European nationalist imaginary was constructed around rendering in writing what previously only existed in speech. The constructed primacy of the written over the spoken that followed the inception of industrial-scale printing has also trickled down to the voiceless subtitles of *Zubr*. Writing takes over and the missing 'original language' seems to ever so subtly pose questions about the formalised guises of national identity.

Although appearing to counter the ‘text screens’ of historical facts, there is then something officially sanctioned about the subtitles too. The relationship between the subjective viewpoint represented by them, and the assumed historical objectivity represented by the text screens, is more complex than merely one of opposing positions. Rather, they join in alluding to the constructed nature of an ‘official line’, and perhaps of nationality as one manifestation of it.

With their missing material reference point of speech, the subtitles also formally resemble Anderson’s description of nationalist imagery as having the character of a replica without an original.² He conjures this idea through discussing national monuments and a kind of contentless seriality that they exemplify. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is one example of a transferable and reproducible form that points to a material origin missing in action. They can be found in countries around the world. They always pertain to speak to the experience of war specific to whichever country they are situated in, despite their ubiquitous generality. They follow this same formal logic in the way they put forward the singularity of the soldier as meaningful, though nothing is known of him, he has no identity and he could belong anywhere. There is something of the figure of the zubr, and the film’s exploration of the multiple objects it provides a name and an image for, that is reminiscent of this seriality. As an emblem of strength and resilience in true national way, Zubr is the name of a Polish brand of beer. But the term, like the forest in which the animal ‘zubr’ is found (and the animal itself) transcends borders:

it was also the name of a Belarusian youth opposition group that dissolved its own finite form, eventually giving up its name in order to join forces with the broader opposition struggle in the country.

The stories recounted by the voiceless person who narrates the subtitles, further evoke the shifts and internal contradictions of nationality as a form of belonging, using language as a key into these. Panning away from the specificities of the film's location on the border of Poland and Belarus, the narrator describes an encounter with a Basque man on a train in Spain, who refers to Euskara as 'his' language, and who then when quizzed on the matter, confesses to not being able to speak it.

If *Zubr* raises thoughts about national identity as an artefact – in the literal sense of a manmade object – then *Esperi* folds this very question of human product back into language. Stevens interviews the chairwoman at the Esperanto Society Headquarters (located in the hometown of Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof, its inventor). She attempts to explain the ideals of universal communication behind the language, speaking in Esperanto without subtitles as if to illustrate how easily it can be understood. Aside from the sense of something constantly slipping through the gaps of comprehension, the viewer is presented with the mounting feeling that the speaker is constrained by the language she is speaking, indeed perhaps because of its simplicity. And a break does occur: the speaker meets the limits of the ideal of internationalism and is forced to revert back to her native Polish. This might also provide an allegory for

the persistence or even a now historical resurgence of the nation as a form of political organisation, as indicated by the 'new' nation states formed in the wake of the fall on the Soviet Union.³

The setting of *Esperi* encapsulates the contradictions inherent to all forms of collectivity expressed as a 'belonging-to': it happens at the premises of what could be thought of as club for a universal language.

In *Jarmark Europa*, the filmmaker becomes the one excluded from the 'club' - the social grouping that both stems from and informs a sense of identity. Vietnamese market traders in Warsaw are filmed as they go about their business and chat to each other.

Playfully disparaging comments emanate from the mouths of the documented subjects who appear to use their shared language as a shield. The travelling artist is simultaneously expelled and spoken into the picture. On-screen, images also follow the air of indecision regarding the role of the artist as observer: they are sparse and stylistically representative of a certain aesthetic of artist documentary. And though this adherence to a specific 'style' communicates that they are a product of a self-conscious and deliberate aesthetic approach, the image also seems to serve the purpose of writing the author out, of muffling the authorial voice.

The three films are about borders. The market traders of *Jarmark Europa* are immigrants who, having crossed borders, demarcate the boundaries of their community that

has been constructed within another. In *Esperi*, it is the dream of transcending borders and language barriers (and the persistence or dissolution of this dream) that provides the subject matter. In *Zubr*, it is revealed that the border between Poland and Belarus, where the film was shot, is known as the ‘lace curtain’ (a play on ‘the iron curtain’ that previously existed in its place). This boundary separating EU from the east is full of holes. Policing the perforated line and the difficulty that this endeavour presents, again introduces the reflexive artist. One of the stories told in *Zubr* is recounted by the forest ranger: an artist was given permission to film in the protected primeval part of the forest on the condition he would act as a border guard, reporting any illegal immigrant he sees in the forest attempting to cross over from Belarus to Poland. The position of visual power that the artist assumes (and subsequently the power over his subjects that the artist possesses) resonates with this story. This works both in relation to the general noun ‘the artist’, and to the specific artist Samuel Stevens who makes the video.

Most of *Zubr* is shot on 16mm film. This choice of medium is aesthetically specific and has the effect of ossifying its subjects and the surrounding terrain. Although approached in a documentary vein, the images seem trapped within the boundaries of some past or present no-time of the flickering film and its grainy beauty. It would be easy to critique medium specificity as fetishistic or exemplary of a non-specific nostalgia for a certain ‘look’. But its use in *Zubr* is more meaningful. It confines the landscape and people depicted behind the screen of obsolescence, thus

making material the barriers being recounted - social, geographical and political. Such materiality carries over to the film's epilogue, shot this time with a handheld video camera. The scene shows a wisent in the forest, caught by the camera through coincidence and good fortune. This concluding digital image gives a glimpse of the materiality of the 'original' that persistently eludes capture throughout most of the film. The film in its entirety, a manmade artefact, finds its 'origin' in the digital artefact – the unintended distortions introduced by available technology. The pixelated face-off with the distant wisent, coupled with the heavy breathing of the cameraman, return the film briefly to the wild and to a more direct relation between the artist and his subject.

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1991.

2. Benedict Anderson, 'Replica, Aura and Late Nationalist Imaginings' in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, Verso, London and New York, 1998, pp 48

3. This question is present in Zubr too, where there exists a tension (though not a contradiction) between unified Europe with Poland as its representative, and Belarus as a post-soviet nation state.