

A Brief History of Communism – *Bartosz Konopka's "Rabbit á la Berlin"*

As one Polish film reviewer wrote: "It's not boring, there's no martyrdom – it's a crosswise look that explains more."^[1] In *Rabbit á la Berlin* (*Królik po berlińsku*, 2009) Bartosz Konopka and Piotr Rosołowski tell the story of the Berlin Wall from its construction in 1961 to its demolition in 1989. The story is presented from an unusual perspective – that of the wild rabbits inhabiting the zone in the middle of the wall separating East and West Berlin.

The idea for the film began in film school – the documentary film director Marcel Łoziński told his students about projects that he had never realized. When the Berlin Wall was being torn down, everyone's attention was focused on people, the cameras were directed up at them. At the same time, taking place below was another, equally interesting story – the story of the animals. Konopka recalls that in the image of thousands of rabbits closed off in the meadow inside the Berlin wall, he saw something surreal.

Bartosz Konopka, the film's director, and Piotr Rosołowski, the screenwriter, say that what they find attractive in a movie is a surprising idea, an unusual perspective from which to tell a well-known story.^[2] This is particularly important in the case of documentaries, which depict a fragment of reality and aim to make some kind of general conclusions. Such a search for an unusual perspective, which the director calls "the alien's perspective",^[3] was already visible in Konopka and Rosołowski's debut documentary film – *Ballad of a Goat* (*Ballada o kozie*, 2004).

The film was inspired by an experiment conducted in the Polish provinces. The local Social Welfare Centre gave goats to the poor inhabitants of a village who once worked on a local former state collective farm. *Ballad of a Goat* is an observational documentary. The filmmakers look at four families who were each given a goat. They show how a seemingly absurd idea can change people's lives. The filmmakers focus on concrete reality, but what they create is a universal story about people struggling with adversity, about human dignity and hope. The goat brings the filmmakers and viewers into the world of the film's characters. It is through the animal's eyes that we see the life

[1] Material included with DVD version of *Rabbit á la Berlin*.

[2] *Króliki patrzą na ludzi zza berlińskiego muru. Rozmowa z Bartkiem Konopką*, "Gazeta Wyborcza" 2009, no. 263, p. 14. [08.11.2009].

[3] J. Kniec, *Króliki doświadczalne reżimu*, "Czas Kultury" 2009, no. 4, p. 80.



Fot. Manfred Hamm

of the village residents. In many scenes, this “goat’s perspective” is emphasized by the camera, how the scene is framed, the camera filming at the level of the animal’s eye. This device with much greater effect – is used in *Rabbit à la Berlin*.

Initially, the filmmakers wanted to use only archival materials about the Berlin rabbits. They also searched for original shots from the perspective of a frog, which would appear as images viewed from the “rabbit’s perspective.” There were too few of these, so they decided on a mix of German archival materials with portions of film from Scotland and Australia depicting wild rabbits. To get the effect of looking from the perspective of the rabbit, they also re-frame archival

footage. Often, significant portions of the image were cut, and are outside the upper edge of the frame (for example, the heads of people building the wall, the heads of soldiers). Specific means of cropping mimic the effect of looking up from below, from the height of a rabbit's eyes. In the film, there are also characteristic montage transitions. Very often, one shot shows a close up of the rabbits looking or listening. In the next shot, we see the source of the sound, what the animals are supposedly watching. All of these means not only help to harmoniously combine different film materials (archival material about the Berlin Wall and films about the life of wild rabbits). They also subjectivize the narrative.

The filmmakers use known archival materials in an interesting way by placing them in new, surprising contexts. For example, shots of rabbits watching or looking are shown in combination with archival footage of the leaders of various countries. The filmmakers frame and enlarge sections of shots, allowing viewers to focus their attention on things they would otherwise not have noticed. Similarly, the camera often zooms in to direct the viewer's attention to barely visible details (for example, focusing not on the figure of the U.S. President John F. Kennedy, but on a rabbit sitting next to an anti-tank barrier that was accidentally photographed in the foreground). Alongside the grand history of humanity, the small history of rabbits is playing out.

Rabbit á la Berlin is not the only Polish film to show that archival materials in documentary films are currently undergoing a transformation in their use. Their goal is usually to bring viewers closer to the events of the past, appealing to their empathy, but also to create an attractive, impressive film. In Bartosz Konopka's film, archival materials that have been repeatedly used in the past are reprocessed in an original way. He manages to avoid using them in a stereotypical way, which over time leads to their trivialization. The filmmakers sought to refresh the way we talk about history, forcing those viewing the historical documentary out of their usual habits in terms of reception.

What function does the rabbit's perspective perform in the film? It helps viewers to look at the history of the Berlin Wall through the eyes a stranger, an outsider who is not involved directly in the action, although the results of these actions affect his life. Rabbits look at the actions of people from the construction of the wall up to its destruction, trying – within their means as animals – to somehow understand and interpret the world of humans. Looking at what people do through a rabbit's eyes, allows one to see how strange and bizarre the situation is, and thus highlight the absurdities of the Communist system. The film does not name the historical figures shown. In the archival material, we can see Qaddafi, Fidel Castro, Nikita Khrushchev and Kennedy, who are referred to as “guests from around the world who want to see the rabbit meadow”; Erich Honecker, the leader of the GDR, is called the “host of the rabbit meadow.” In this

way, the rabbit perspective provides the film with the qualities of a “naïve tale.”

In *Rabbit à la Berlin*, animals are anthropomorphized – given human emotions, behaviour, and responses. The film uses a convention taken from animal fables in which people are shown in the form of animals to illustrate a general truth. In order to interpret the meaning of the story, you need to move from a literal meaning to a metaphorical one. It is worth noting that the animal fable in Polish literature has a long and rich tradition. From the sixteenth century, Polish writers often alluded to the fables of Aesop and Phaedrus, and in later times, also to those of La Fontaine. The animal fable became a very popular literary genre during the Enlightenment. The works of the most outstanding Polish writer of fables, Ignacy Krasicki, despite their universal character, read as allusions to contemporary events – such as Poland’s loss of independence. During the Enlightenment, a popular subgenre of the fable was the political fable. The characters in them appeared in the form of personified animals, while the stories referred to specific, contemporary political events. Both during the period of the partitions, as well as later, animal costumery allowed writers to present content which due to censorship could not be expressed outright.

The creators of *Rabbit à la Berlin* make reference to a famous Polish documentary film from 1986 – Andrzej Czarnecki’s *Rat-catcher* (*Szczurołap*). The main character is a man who works as a rat exterminator, and who demonstrates his work methods and talks about them in an off-camera monologue. The viewer watches as the man lulls the animals, feeds them, wins their trust, and then mercilessly kills them. The film opens with a prologue showing a scientific experiment: Two rats were thrown into an aquarium filled with water. One of them drowned after 15 minutes. The other was given a wooden board for a short time, allowing him to temporarily get out of the water. Later, the animal often swam to the place where it was given the board, and drowned after 15 hours. The experiment proved that rats are intelligent animals, and that giving them hope of survival increases their will to fight. The initial cruel scene in the laboratory humanizes the animals in the eyes of the viewer, revealing characteristics and behaviors in them that resemble those of people, showing that they think and feel like humans do. In the 1980s, the film was read as a metaphor for the contemporary social and political situation of Poland. In the images of these rats, people saw a picture of a society that seduces them with promises, and then subjects them to repression. The rat-catcher wore large, distinctive sunglasses that resembled the glasses worn by General Wojciech Jaruzelski’s, Poland’s leader during martial law. The metaphor in the movie *Rat-catcher* is much more versatile, referring not only to Polish society in the 1980s, but to any society living under a totalitarian system, to the relationship between society and authority, and to the methods of governance in



dictatorships. Andrzej Czarnecki's film shows that in a documentary, animals can talk about people, about history, just as they do in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. For reasons of censorship, Andrzej Czarnecki was forced to use Aesopian Language, in which certain content is not expressed explicitly, but implicitly, through allusion, through which the author uses metaphor and parable to create very dark and frightening images. In their film, Konopka and Rosołowski build a more obvious and legible metaphor filled with a grotesque form of irony.

Rabbit à la Berlin makes reference to animal fables, using the conventions of educational nature films. Through off-screen narration, the viewer learns the Latin name of the wild rabbit, and basic information about its environment, food, lifestyle and reproduction habits. In the Polish language version of the film, this information is read by Krystyna Czubówna – a very popular narrator of nature movies.

In the film *Rabbit à la Berlin*, this commentary, which seems on the surface to be typical of the kind used in educational films about nature, is in actuality very ironic and continually reveals its own ambiguity. For example:

The rabbits finally understood that they had been closed in for their own good ... Over the following years, they regularly sowed grass for the rabbits, giving all of them equal access to it. Their basic needs were satisfied. Each rabbit family occupied a small, but safe burrow with the entrance hidden in the shadow of antitank barrier. A complex of identical burrows stretched along the entire length of the wall, and they no longer had to fight for better territories. The life of the rabbits between the walls was

Fot. Anna Wydra

nearly ideal. ... Locked inside for their own safety [the rabbits] lived in such fear, like no other.

The words of the commentator relate to the lives of the Berlin rabbits as if they were the same as the lives of the people whom the wall – “the anti-fascist barrier” – separated from the Western world. In the words of the narrator, there are allusions to the realities of life in socialist countries (housing conditions, the lack of basic civil liberties, repression, and terror), as well as echoes of propaganda from that time (slogans about universal equality, building a communist paradise on earth).

In showing the life of the Berlin rabbits, the filmmakers manage to capture certain regularities, such as closure, the animals only experiencing the restrictions on their freedom as something alarming at the beginning. Soon, the rabbits begin to feel a false sense of security. The animals do not have to fight for survival, as they would under natural conditions. Their natural instincts disappear. They begin to exhibit a laziness that in time turns into apathy and passivity. Some rabbits, called in the film “individuals acting against their herd-animal nature” dig holes under the wall to escape to the western side, eating food left behind by tourists. With time, the wall becomes higher and increasingly well-secured, and the guards start killing the rabbits. The demolition of the wall brings freedom to the animals, but it also has negative effects. A number of dangers appear: the rabbits must now fight for survival – find food and avoid predators. The problems they face in adjusting to their new living conditions primarily concern the older individuals. The narrator says: “Many rabbits longed for their former meadow”.

It is easy to notice that the story of animals told in *Rabbit á la Berlin* is parallel to the story of people. By combining these analogies, it is possible to build a metaphor. For both rabbits and humans, a promised paradise becomes a prison. The filmmakers also show certain social mechanisms: the resistance of a few individuals, which the authorities suppress through repression and terror, the “escape from freedom” typical of totalitarian societies, conformity, adaptation, the acceptance of a lack of freedom as the price for relative stability, and finally, the consequences of years of enslavement that become visible after gaining freedom, and the fear of what capitalism will bring. What Germans refer to as *Ostalgie*, or nostalgia for the GDR, is a broader phenomenon which affects almost all countries of the Eastern Bloc (one can speak of Yugo-nostalgia or Soc-nostalgia). The creators of *Rabbit á la Berlin* not only tell the story of the Germans, of East Germans separated from the western world, the story of the Berlin Wall, but also the story of Eastern European people living behind the Iron Curtain.

Bartosz Konopka calls his film a “nature film about communism,” in which “we put a magnifying glass to the laboratory animals that we were in the Polish People’s Republic, the GDR, and Czecho-

slovakia.”[4] The reviewer Tadeusz Sobolewski says that the film is “a short history of communism presented as an experiment on rabbits.”[5] It is necessary to note that in Polish there is an idiomatic phrase “experimental rabbit” [the equivalent of ‘guinea pig’ in English]. It means a man, on whom experiments are carried out, and also someone who first tries the effects of something on himself. Communism therefore turns out in Konopka’s film to be a strange experiment, incompatible with nature, on the inhabitants of the socialist countries – guinea pigs on which the assumptions of communists are tested. The filmmakers begin with facts, a concrete situation; however, what they create is a universal metaphor – the story of society in totalitarian states.

The success of the film *Rabbit á la Berlin* was certainly largely determined by the originality of its idea, the unusual perspective from which the authors look at historical events. Telling the tragic history of the Berlin Wall with humor and irony. *Rabbit á la Berlin* can also be read as a film that plays a game with the conventions of the historical documentary. As a complementary element to the off-screen narration in the film, there are also “talking heads”, an element typical of documentary films. The experts who speak are not historians, politicians, or former members of the opposition in Germany, but guards who tell how they watched the rabbits as they worked, how they caught them and held races between them; they are also the artists who painted the rabbits; a biologist, a hunter, and a cook who prepared various dishes out of rabbit meat.

The construction and demolition of the Berlin Wall – as well as other important historical events – can be presented in a documentary film in several different ways, including:

1. using the formula of a film celebrating an anniversary, which focuses primarily on the event itself, the historical facts,
2. through the biography of famous people involved in grand politics, which forms a grand story,
3. from the perspective of average citizens and their everyday life.

Konopka calls his film “a historical film, not about heroes, but about the man in the street, ordinary people who worry about their own backyard and who seek normalcy in an abnormal world.” *Rabbit á la Berlin* therefore takes the third of these approaches to talking about history, but it does so in a perverse, ironic way. The tragic story of the Berlin Wall – a symbol of the division of Europe, a symbol of the Cold War – is viewed by the authors and the audience through the eye of a rabbit.

[4] *Królik po berlińsku. Film przyrodniczy o socjalizmie. Wywiad z Bartkiem Konopką*, “Suplement” 2010, no. 1, <http://szarynotes.blogspot.com/2010/04/wywiad-z-bartkiem-konopka-i-weronika.html> [accessed September 11, 2012].

[5] T. Sobolewski, *Wielkie oczy królika*, “Gazeta Wyborcza” 2009, no. 283, p. 17. [03.12.2009].