

The University of Massachusetts Lowell
Department of Art & Design

Repetition, Silence, and the New: Yuliya Lanina's Gefilte Fish



Yuliya Lanina, film still, *Gefilte Fish*, 2021.

Jennifer Friedlander
Edgar E. and Elizabeth S. Pankey Professor
Department of Media Studies
Pomona College

Yuliya Lanina and Jennifer Friedlander met in Vienna, Austria while both were Fulbright Austria Scholars. Yuliya was working on Gefilte Fish at an MQ 21 international artist residency at the Museums Quartier hosted by Tricky Women/Tricky Realities Festival while Jennifer was working on a book project, “Powers of Pleasure,” which focuses on repetition and jouissance, as a Fulbright-Freud Visiting Scholar at the Sigmund Freud Museum and visiting professor at the Institut für Theater-, Film- und Medienwissenschaft at Universität Wien. Jennifer was the first person to see the full draft of the animation and what follows is her response.

If trauma asserts itself through the obstruction of language, are there aesthetic forms within which trauma may be expressed? Yuliya Lanina's *Gefilte Fish* offers an original and compelling twist to this enduring question, one which not only redefines the contours of the debate, but also points to art's transformational potential. In particular, Lanina explores what happens when the constitutive impossibility of representing trauma (trauma as that about which "nothing can be said") is redoubled by the social prohibition against speaking of trauma (trauma as that about which "nothing should be said"). Silence, in *Gefilte Fish*, operates as a potent and poignant condensation of both the constitutive and contingent gap that trauma occupies in relation to language. Specifically, Lanina demonstrates the psychic stakes of silence as it manifests the symbolic absence which trauma marks and repeats.

Gefilte Fish evocatively conjures the harrowing dimensions and enduring force of two traumatic events: the slaughter of a Ukrainian village by Nazis and local police during WWII, which claimed the lives of most of Lanina's father's family; and the artist's personal trauma, almost half a century later, of being repeatedly raped by her father's younger brother, Abraham (a little boy at the time of the genocidal attack on his community). Abraham, who survived unthinkable violence as a child, grows up to be a highly respected doctor and synagogue member, who commits his own ghastly acts of violence against his niece, Lanina, throughout the year she lived with him and his family in the US. *Gefilte Fish* avoids any facile explanations concerning the transmission of intergenerational trauma and the turn of a survivor to a perpetrator. Instead, it probes a more uncomfortable terrain surrounding complexities of silence. Silence, which played a vital role in the survival of Jewish families during WWII ("never speak badly about family" becomes her family's mantra) takes a sinister turn when it is later imposed on Lanina by her parents as an injunction against speaking about the rape.

Gefilte Fish's mode of address refuses the viewer a neutral position from which to adjudicate against silence when it comes to speaking about trauma. For example, in the aftermath of the rape, Lanina becomes unable to eat, a symptom her father macabrely identifies as a traumatic repetition: "You're like a prisoner of Auschwitz, all skin and bones, all you can see is the eyes," my father chuckles." But when he presses her on how she could refuse to eat her favorite dish, gefilte fish, lovingly and laboriously prepared by her dying mother ("Eat!! What's wrong with you?"), Lanina's response shifts among different registers of silence. She initially appeals to an epistemological gap ("I don't know") before invoking the injunction not to speak ("I mean I do know but I can't tell you"). She ultimately attributes her silence to her parents' (and our?) perceived unwillingness to hear: "I mean I could tell but do you really want to know?" As this question reverberates, we are prompted to consider whether we do indeed "really want to know." Lanina as narrator jumps in before the question can be properly contemplated: "Well if you want to know, my uncle...Abraham... he made me..." The use of the "my" before "Uncle Abraham" pinpoints us, the viewers, as the addressee of her question (such an attribution would not be used in addressing her parents). Just as she begins to tell us, she is abruptly interrupted: "Silence! say my parents." The sleight of hand in positioning us as her interlocutor heightens the stakes of how we react to her revelation remaining unsaid: curiosity? frustration? anger? perhaps, relief?

Lanina ultimately breaks the silence—and to transformative effect. She does this not by straightforwardly ending the cycle of repetition, but rather by unleashing repetition's potential to inaugurate the new. Here, I suggest, we can consider Gefilte Fish in terms of Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic insight that repetition not only binds us to the past but can also alter the present. Repetition of that which cannot be symbolically integrated operates as an incessant irritant to all attempts at symbolic closure, thus throwing the established representational order into crisis. In this sense, repetition as a gap in language—rendered as a disruptive silence—can reshape established parameters of what can be said.

The resounding silence at the core of the piece concerns the massacre in Chodnov, her father's childhood village. As she tells us, not only did her father "never talk...about what happened in Chudnov. He kept SILENT," but also "the whole country kept silent. No mention of Ukrainian Jews killed in the Holocaust." This defining event, which has been represented most saliently through its symbolic absence, repeats and insinuates itself via the silence it continually imposes.

Lanina makes manifest the silence, brings into view the contours which absence circumscribes and the realities it engenders and forecloses. She accomplishes this primarily at the level of form. First, by highlighting the double (and excessive) constraint on representing trauma (as both impossible and prohibited), she, as Žižek and Joan Copjec contend, introduces negation into the symbolic field, which unsettles its authority to deem what is possible.

Second, Lanina repeats the visual language employed by noted artists who visually documented their experiences of being in Holocaust concentration camps. She cites the sharp, fierce, and forceful lines of artists she references, most closely Zinovi Tolkachev, Bedřich Fritta, and David Friedmann. But she repeats their form within the context of the new, specifically in terms of recent animation technology, which gives them fresh life and new potential in the present. Her work powerfully brings together the indexical with the mediated. Here we encounter poignant resonance with Michèle Cournoyer's animation, *The Hat*, a meditation on memory, repetition, and sexual abuse. Cournoyer, who employs a similar technique to Lanina, explains how embodiment operates within mediation: "With the pen, I made my drawings suffer, with the character, I was breaking my pens. When there was violence, I was very hard with my brushes, I was wearing them out" (Richards, 156).

In *Gefillte Fish*, as Lanina ultimately reveals the unsaid, the representational system of the piece is transformed in a different way. The stark lines become smooth; Lanina begins to render herself softer, rounder, more capacious. Her new form is suggestive of the possibilities opened up for the subject when she, in psychoanalytic terms, “traverses of the fantasy” of symbolic wholeness. As Molly Anne Rothenberg contends, the ability to inhabit the failure of the symbolic to confer our reality, opens up the possibility of bringing forth a “neosubject”—a subject formed by her “emancipation from the given” (Rothenberg 182). Lanina’s final rendering indicates that survival might not necessarily require avoiding past horror, but rather entail repeating what past suffering necessarily excludes. Such a risk, as Lanina undertakes, may not only impede the oppressive symbolic strictures from taking grip, but also unlock a potential space of freedom for the subject as well.

Works Cited

Richards, Ruth. “Nothing But Paper and Ink”: Metamorphosis, Memory, and Trauma in *The Hat*. In *Animation and Memory*, M. van Gageldonk et al. (eds.) Palgrave Animation. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34888-5_8

Rothenberg, Molly Anne. *The Excessive Subject: a New Theory of Social Change*. Cambridge; Malden, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2010.

Yuliyana Lanina is a Russian-born interdisciplinary artist whose work exists at the intersection of visual art, performance and technological innovation, exploring social issues like trauma, sexuality, loss, and motherhood. Lanina has exhibited and performed extensively both nationally and internationally, including SXSW Interactive (TX), Seoul Art Museum (Korea), SIGGRAPH Asia (Japan), 798 Beijing Biennial (China), Cleveland Institute of Art (OH), Museum Ludwig (Germany), Creative Tech Week (NYC), Teatro Santa Ana (Mexico), Blanton Museum of Art (TX), and Moscow Museum of Modern Art (Russia). Lanina's honors include Fulbright (Vienna, Austria, 2021), Headlands Art Center (CA, 2013), Yaddo (NY, 2020 2020), The Puffin Foundation (NJ, 2019) and Honorable citation from New York State Assembly (NYC, 2015). She is an Assistant Professor of Practice at the Department of Arts and Entertainment Technologies at The University of Texas at Austin.

<http://www.yuliyalanina.com>



Yuliyana Lanina, film still, *Gefilte Fish*, 2021.

Jennifer Friedlander is the Edgar E. and Elizabeth S. Pankey Professor of Media Studies at Pomona College in Claremont, California. She is the author of *Moving Pictures: Where the Police, the Press, and the Art Image Meet* (Sheffield Hallam University Press, 1998); *Feminine Look: Sexuation, Spectatorship, and Subversion* (State University of New York Press, 2008); and *Real Deceptions: The Contemporary Reinvention of Realism* (Oxford University Press, 2017). Her work has appeared in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*; *CiNéMAS: Journal of Film Studies*; *Subjectivity*; *(Re)-turn: A Journal of Lacanian Studies*; *Journal for Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*; *Subjectivity*; and *International Journal of Žižek Studies* and in several edited volumes. She is a founding and central committee member of LACK, an organization devoted to the promotion and development of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. She was the 2021 Fulbright-Freud Visiting Scholar at the Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna.

