Penny Siopis

Penny Siopis was born in 1953 in Vryburg, South Africa, to a Greek, South African, and British family. She currently lives in Cape Town. Known primarily as a painter, her work has also included short films utilizing found footage since 1997.

My Lovely Day (1997), is a film in which Siopis combines spliced sequences of silent 8mm home movies that her mother shot in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa with visual text (appearing as subtitles) and a sound track superimposing her mother's voice and traditional Greek music, in order to tell a story of displacement and migration. She writes:

The text I use in the final work is drafted from various sources uncovered in my historical research of particular events, which strike me as vivid and resonant and speak beyond themselves. The text mimics the form but not the function of the subtitles we often find in foreign films. It does not actually translate foreign language; but the idea of translation itself interests me and relates to the doubleness I mentioned earlier. While the form of the text signifies 'foreignness' in the image, what is crucial for me is how the text translates into a voice in the head, the consciousness of the viewer.

In Obscure White Messenger (2010) and The Master is Drowning (2012), Siopis uses anonymous home movies she found in charity shops or flea markets. In the latter, she extends her use of found film beyond home movies to historical documentary, combining private and public film sequences to create a story that is paradoxically both fictive and 'real'. Both films treat the assassination attempts of South African Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd, architect of apartheid. One attempt was by David Beresford Pratt which he miraculously survived despite being shot twice in the face at point blank range, and the other that killed him in 1966 by Dimitrios Tsafendas.Communion (2011) tells the story of an Irish nun, Sister Aidan, who was murdered by an angry crowd in the Eastern Cape during the 1952 Defiance Campaign in South Africa. The campaign was a protest against apartheid laws. Many of the people in the crowd knew and loved Sister Aidan, but she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the film the murdered nun narrates her own death, as if from the grave.

Penny Siopis's film practice, both in its narratives and in the way she deals with text, seems to exhume an impossible speech, or a discourse that was never held, animating unexpected characters pertaining to the history of apartheid, thus defeating this system's binary nature.