



Marko Ubovic, *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (2017), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

HIDDEN AGENDAS, HIDDEN GEMS

Experiments in Cinema 13.6

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Marko Ubovic's *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (7 minutes, 2017, Serbia) consists of just two shots. One shows a scruffy young man tenderly holding a lamb, a very white lamb, in his arms. An extended low register moan escapes from the creature's mouth. It is a dreadful sound. The youth's expression is mournful, but his cradling the lamb is protective, motherly. A quick google search reveals that the youth is the filmmaker himself. His eyes are closed. The image remains, fixed, the lamb occasionally emitting its heart-piercing cry, Marko occasionally opening his eyes. The two are on screen for a long period,

unbearably long, so the viewer has time to contemplate the image, to realize its religious reference, to rehearse the title of the film, and to associate title and image with his own memories. In July 2016 I was at the Montana State Fair in Bozeman. Into a small arena children ushered hogs, turkeys, steer, and yes lambs that they had personally raised, the youngest child barely past infancy, the oldest well into her teens. Groups guided their steer or hogs or lambs in circles and figure eights for view by the enthusiastic audience . . . and professional judges. Some children brought in rabbits, chickens, or turkeys, all lovingly cared for and primped

to look their best, each competing for a championship rating. In most pairings one sensed a magnetic connection between the child and his or her charge. The next day the children brought their animals out once again, and a cowboy-hatted young man sitting high above them chanted the wonderful stammering song of the cattle auctioneer, and sold off the livestock one by one to local restaurants, meatpackers, and occasionally other farmers. The majority went from fair to abattoir.

Although we know that the white lamb's disturbing cry is a consequence of readily available high-speed cinematography, its emotional effect is the anguish of imminent demise, the fear of the finality of the Grim Reaper. The title of the film substantiates this reaction, adopting the unforgettable line from Psalms 23 repurposed by Alfred Lord Tennyson for his poem about the slaughter of a British cavalry troupe during the Crimean War: *Half a league, Half a league, Half a league onward, All in the valley of death Rode the six hundred.*

At last the boy/lamb image is replaced by a slow zoom into a photograph, once again a long stare at a single image that triggers the viewer's memory. It is an icon of photographic history, the controversial 1855 photograph taken by Roger Fenton during that same Crimean War, an image of a track bisecting low hills. The site echoes the valley memorialized by Tennyson, onto which Russian infantry showered ordinance

when British or allied cavalry attempted to pass. The photograph shows hundreds of cannonballs in a ditch at the edge of the road. A related image is considered (e.g. by Susan Sontag) to be the first example of photographic fakery. In this second photograph—not included in the film—cannonballs, no longer confined to the ditch, are randomly scattered across the road surface. Did Fenton commission assistants or soldiers to move dozens of cannonballs from ditch onto road, to provide harder evidence of the horrors of the Crimean War? Interfering with a scene for better effect has long been considered an unforgivable practice in photographic reportage: the photo-journalist must capture the scene exactly as found. Filmmaker Errol Morris recently undertook extensive research on Fenton's two photographs, even visiting and rephotographing the site a century and a half after the original images were taken. Morris demonstrates that the photograph that includes cannonballs on the road surface was taken two hours after that with cannonballs only in the ditch, and therefore that Fenton or others interfered with the scene between the two shots. And yet a mystery still remains. Was it deliberately manipulated for dramatic effect? As Morris insists, the intentions and motivations of Fenton remain lost to the past. Similarly the intentions of artist Marko Ubovic are open and unresolvable. But it is exactly this lack of closure that lends the film its expressive power.

Experiments in Cinema is a five day artists' moving image festival held every spring in Albuquerque New Mexico. Under the direction of founder Bryan Konefsky, 2018 is its 13th year. Tattooed, bejeweled, his triangular face framed by drooping locks and tiny rose-rimmed spectacles perched on the end of his nose, Konefsky resembles an affable Djinn from a pre-Disney *1001 Nights*, when it was still a beloved collection of folktales and poetry. The beautiful teenage Scheherazade, narrator of *The Thousand Nights and One Night*, often introduces Djinn in her