

Human marionettes: From announced death to silent acceptance of a world that is dying

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The painter Paul Gauguin in his well-known work *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* converses with the perpetual issue of the human existence which relates to life and death. In this work, the baby to the right, the aged figure to the left and the standing figure in the centre of the composition form the way from life to death. The central figure, in particular, raises her arms to cut fruit in such a way that creates the impression that she tries to draw elements of life, to taste life, to remain, that is, in this bright period which is between the dark mystery of birth and death. The figures in this composition, both the leading and the minor ones, seem to experience every minute of life, from beginning to end without worrying about its secret meaning while standing before us in a position of an initiation ceremony, if it were, which states perhaps the acceptance of reality. Gauguin in this way projects the harmonious relationship that has the primitive or any other man with his beginning and end which follows the round shape of deterioration and rebirth.

Let's see now the modern artist, the artist of the twentieth and twenty first century and let's see his view on the same subject: a film maker and a writer, Ingmar Bergman and Nancy Huston and the man-marionette in between.

In Bergman's film *From the Life of the Marionettes* (filmed in 1979) everything starts off with a murder: Peter Engerman, a young businessman will strangle Katarina, a prostitute, for unsolved reasons. Mogens Jensen, a psychoanalyst, who has taken on the file of expert report, reveals that in the

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past, Peter had expressed the wish to kill his wife, a wish which at the same time created the fear of realization. The fear is expressed in a letter which Peter never sent to his shrink from whom he was asking for help. In this letter, a situation between dream and hallucination is described.

Initially, the research will lead to no essential conclusion justifying the act of murder. Everything in Peter's life was so well-arranged: his psychoanalyst, in particular, presents him as a lovable, talented young man, coming from a good family and having a successful marriage. But the film maker, with a flashback reveals that not only Peter but four other persons who act in the film, adopt social roles that do not respond to their pursuits and wishes. They act more like marionettes, directed by fear in case their assumed stability should reverse. Peter's mother Cordelia Egermann a renowned actress who revels in her delusion of self-martyrdom after sacrificing her career for her children. This might be the reason she was rather protective with her children, according to the shrink's view. Peter maintains a sick, liberated relationship with his wife Katarina, a woman with a successful career in the fashion field, since, although he talks about a mutual sexual liberation, he, himself recognizes this is a relationship with no feelings. This derives from their conversation which follows Peter's suicide attempt.

However, Katarina, herself, also hides behind a mask of success and emancipation, a mask which is fragile due to her inner insecurity, for wish to remain a child and fear of the death; all this shows her role of being protective towards Peter, a role relative to his mother but extremely weak, since it has to do with her authoritarian and possessive type as well as the fact, as she herself claims, that she never got into other shoes.

But Katarina's partner also, Tim, an insecure, aging homosexual who harbors an unrequited attraction towards the melancholic Peter, is the one who will introduce him Katarina, the prostitute, hoping that she will take him away from his wife and brings him to himself. The fear of deterioration and loneliness is obvious in Tim's words that like in a self-introspection, although he addresses Katarina, he expresses them before a mirror. And when he asks Katarina to recognize him, her negative reaction is rather tragic.

It's also remarkable that Peter's psychoanalyst deals with his client's problem in a rather superficial way, whereas in reality he is interested in having an intercourse with his wife Katarina which reveals how trapped he is in the system and how much he tries to respond to it. The only, perhaps, most real person in this story is Katarina, the prostitute, who appears to have accepted her role and doesn't hide behind a mask of social pretensions.

Concerning Peter, he is both a victim and a victimizer since he cannot get free from his fears and obsessions while at the same time he is obliged to respond properly to his, suggested by his social status, roles as a worker, husband, friend, and son. The resort he takes in alcohol and tranquillizers is for him an illusion of a temporary freedom and self-management which however enforces the guilt of his inability to active by handle his problem and hence the solution to his drama will be given with the violent strangling of the sole irresponsible for his condition person, Katarina, the prostitute, and the final loss of conscience for his actions.

Human marionettes in the hands of fate, weak people who cannot walk out of worn-out relationships as fear for tomorrow keeps them tied up. A theater of shadows in the light of modern cities where everything seems to move in absolute determination. Bergman, certainly, gives the absolute symbolism of the marionette in the scene of fashion models catwalk.

Dolce agonia, Nancy Huston's novel is an answer to Bergman's marionettes where man acts as an autonomous entity as if he defines his own destiny, whereas in reality all is controlled by God's omnipotence. In Huston's novel, God takes the role of a writer and surrenders to the envious delight of an account of twelve friends' destiny met at Shawn Farrel's house for thanksgiving dinner. In a snowy city of New Anglia, the guests talk about existence and love, they confess their expectations and disappointments and taking the occasion, they reveal the implicated intermarriages in their society. However, these people devote their last vigor to life. Sean Farrell, the poet 'with a gift for instilling discomfort', is the host for this unforgettable evening: among his dozen guests are poets and

writers and professors, former lovers, an artist-turned-housepainter, a bread maker, a secretary, and a young woman with an infant and a haunting past. Not all of them know one another when the evening begins, but, as this remarkable novel unfolds, the reader will come to know each of them intimately – to move inside their skins and to live in their thoughts, to share in their past sufferings and to know their hopes; even to catch a glimpse, through the eyes of their ‘creator’, into their futures, to know their fates. God’s words, then, in the foreword of the book, which the writer very cleverly “situates in heaven, are remarkable:

“When I meet with the creators of other universes, I always make an effort to be modest. Rather than boasting about my work, I compliment them on the beauty and complexity of theirs. But privately, I can’t help feeling mine’s superior, for I am the only one to have come up with something as unpredictable as mankind.

What a species! As I watched them living out their destinies upon the Earth, I often get carried away almost to the point of believing in them. Yes, they give me the uncanny impression of being endowed with autonomy, freedom of choice, a will of their own. I know it’s merely an illusion, a preposterous notion. I’m the only one who’s free! Every twist and turn of their fates has been decided on in advance; I alone know where they’re headed and what paths they’ll take to get there; I alone know their secret hopes and fears, their genetic make ups, the innermost workings of their hearts... And yet, and yet... they never cease to amaze me.

Ah, my sweet humans. It’s so tickles me to watch them flail and flounder. Blind, blind... perpetually hoping and groping, striving to believe in my goodness, make sense of their destinies, understand my plans. They simply can’t help hankering after meaning. All I need do is give them a brush with birth or death and they think they’ve caught a whiff of it. Bowled over every time. Shaken to the core”.

God’s presence continuously reminds us that the common destiny is death. Yet people devote to life their last vigour, whereas the reader reads the chronicle of their announced death beforehand: Patricia, Farrel’s ex- lover, will die of cancer, Charles Jackson, a writer and Farrel’s friend, will die in a car accident at an old age, Rachel, Farrel’s ex-lover, at a very old age, Derreck, her husband, earlier than her, from a stray bullet, Hal, a novelist and Farrel’s friend, had a stroke, just a fortnight after thanksgiving dinner, Chloe, his much younger wife, will commit suicide, whereas Hal junior, their son, from Alzheimer at his sixties, Aaron, the baker, will be burnt, Brian, Farrel’s lawyer, had a stroke while his wife Beth, at an old age, Leonid and Katia in an air crash and finally Farrel himself, two years after of cancer.

Like tragic irony in the ancient Greek tragedy, all is known to readers while the heroes of the novel ignore it and make plans for the future. In these plans, fear and insecurity and stress are present but pushed aside by the argente everyday chores. Huston’s marionettes do not feel like marionettes defined by others. On the contrary, they seem to accept their illusionary world because they consider themselves to be the basic managers of their existence, as they put aside the fear of death all the time. The writer, particularly, by transferring her role to God’s first person narration and using her clever, many times bitter, sense of humour, manages to lead the reader smoothly to serious existential issues. And in both cases, however, death and fear of death are the governor of the evolution of facts. Huston refuses to see her heroes trapped in their fears, take on the guilt of giving in their fears unconditionally and go over the limits of death by causing their own death. That is why she brings into play God’s omnipotence which cancels human plans.

On the contrary, Bergman lets his own heroes be seized by intense feelings like despair and fear for certainty of death, which they try to hide behind masks of social roles. Peter, the basic conveyor of this situation, will try to discard the guilt of passive acceptance of reality by murdering Katarina,

the prostitute, who has his wife name, not accidentally, and who plays the most basic role in his closing in. Moreover, she is a woman too, a symbol of the wound that brought him to life, a life which he cannot stand. By killing her he manages to express what suffocates him, to present his real character and handle his existence, to be, in other words, real. That is why Bergman presents in color only the scenes of murder and Peter's confinement in the asylum.

While, respectively, in Huston's novel, God will start his narration with the words:

"Let's have some light, please".

Mebr licht!

Fiat lux!

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