

Painting as an Irrational and Necessary Impulse: - Reflections on the Films of Channa Boon

Things are going badly because sick consciousness has a vested interest right now in not recovering from its sickness.

This is why a tainted society has invented psychiatry to defend itself against the investigations of certain superior intellects whose faculties of divination would be troublesome.

No, van Gogh was not mad, but his paintings were bursts of Greek fire, atomic bombs, whose angle of vision would have been capable of seriously upsetting the spectral conformity of the bourgeoisie.

– Antonin Artaud: Van Gogh, The Man Suicided by Society

Artaud's observation places the artist in the context of a wider society which he or she is affected by and upon which he or she has a profound effect. The artist is needed by society as a kind of exorcist for the elements that rational society would rather not face up to, yet in manifesting these elements the artist is also treated as a kind of deviant, who needs to have their irrational urges exorcised. Maintained in such a suspended schizophrenia illness often results, justifying the notion that the artist is a sick being, tolerated only for their occasional positive contribution to culture. This false premise is needed to further enable rational society to disperse with its irrational core.

Dutch artist Channa Boon's *Sasha* (2011) and *Limpiar el Museo* (*Cleaning the Museum*, 2008) explore through film the complex relationships between painting, the painter, psychiatry, the art institution, and society. All of these elements seen together can be viewed as the mediums through which paintings are made whilst, equally, painting can be seen as a constituent part of society, and not as a mere delinquent outsider.

The half hour long *Sasha* which takes its name from its protagonist - a painter who struggles with the perversity of everyday life, before succumbing to a mental and physical breakdown - portrays a world populated by confusing interactions. In an early scene *Sasha* enters a bakery to be confronted by an assistant who resembles exactly the artist himself:

Sasha (artist): I don't know [expressing indecision at what to buy].

Sasha (baker): I don't know, I don't know, I don't know... For God's sake, nobody knows what they want to know.

Sasha (artist): As if you can know so well what you want! [runs out of shop]

The scene - shot, like the rest of the film in Vilnius, Lithuania - leads onto the video's opening credits, setting the mood of a film sequence inhabited by seemingly autistic relations. From the offset we are introduced to a psychologist at odds with humanity and with his obligation to serve it justly. Psychology, as a profession, is caught between the need to say something useful about the human psyche, and the need to remain scientifically neutral. As a result it appears as absurd as the neuroses it delivers verdicts upon.

Sasha's breakdown - which the psychologist later appears unable to cure - occurs in the street and is cut with shots of a dancer moving spasmodically, echoing the physically disjointed world that the neurotic inhabits. As the dancer writhes and fits, *Sasha* can be seen crawling along the floor like a

dog who has lost the use of its hind legs, before finally collapsing and being carried to his live-in studio.

Subsequent shots of the studio reveal the detritus associated with painting, alongside works made by Channa Boon herself as if they had been made by Sasha. Books, rags, paints and canvases inhabit a world of objects of which the artist, laying ill, with closed eyes on a simple single bed, is just one amongst many. In a cut away to what could be a dream, we see Sasha burying a painting in a forest, as if it were a dead person or pet animal, before stopping the burial process, retrieving the work from its grave and running away with it through fields. The painting, which points always to some higher reality, to 'Art' – the hope of a better world – must always revert to the the sum of its material parts. Art seemingly evades death, but must always succumb to it. Yet the perpetual desire to carry on making art somehow creates a reprieve. It seems that Sasha will not give up, even when so close to physical and mental ruin. The story has a personal significance for Channa Boon, for aide from being a painter herself, she based the character, Sasha, on the tenant who lived in her flat before she did, a Polish painter with a drink problem who committed suicide at home. The film's ending, wherein Sasha is seen walking through fields towards and beyond an expansive green canvas, signals a final freedom for the artist, in that via art we can declare anything to be the case – our freedom, our sanity, etc – thereby momentarily altering reality and escaping the confines of an inhospitable reality. In this way art, as deception, can secure the self against bombardment from a cold objective world. Concrete reality does not alter, but the option, to declare new realities via art, is always there to be re-enacted, thus forming a vital defence of the human subject.

In *Cleaning the Museum* – shot in Paz, Bolivia – we see a cleaning lady, dressed in black rubber boots, blue overalls and a blue headscarf – based on the uniform of a real cleaning lady – seemingly undertaking the impossible task of cleaning the sea, against the backdrop of a mountainous landscape, before scaling a barren black hillside, reduced to all fours by the time night falls. With the occasional presence upon the landscape of rural Christian outdoor shrines it seems that the cleaner is undertaking some kind of penitence. Towards the video's end we see the same cleaning lady in a gallery, picking up what looks like a dark institutional grey paint (but which could equally be mud) from a red bucket with her mop and covering the white walls, in the process obscuring some indecipherable writing, seemingly left over from a previous installation. Again, the artist takes on the weight of society, undertaking repetitive and seemingly pointless tasks so that others do not have to. A sort of spiritual labourer who must engage in transformative processes aimed at gleaning meaning in a meaningless world. The price of which is often incomprehension at the hands of others and, finally, madness. In the video, an effort is made to purge painting, though painting cannot be purged, because it bears the traces of what society would rather hide, and if it were to be made 'clean' or 'rational' it would no longer serve its purpose. The artist, in this case, becomes a scapegoat that is entirely necessary to the functioning of society, and as a result is both loved and reviled. Yet again, their activity must be repeated perpetually, and however pointlessly, for to give up would be to confront the void that rationality, devoid of imagination and passion, would otherwise present

This confrontation between art and the rational – two flip sides that are opposed yet entwined – is approached directly in the closing scene's of *Sasha*. After *Sasha*'s collapse, the film returns to *Sasha*'s studio, with *Sasha* gone. The psychologist lays upon the artist's bed and attempts an analysis of a simple oil painting of a crow that hangs above it. He begins, 'I am looking at the dry surface of a piece of canvas... that was once bare... and then wet... before the substance took its time to dry. Sealing the raw canvas... away from sight. Someone manipulated these chemicals, shaped and formed them... in order that they shall create the image of a bird. And I recognise the image. I see a bird, an encaged bird. But is it a bird really? Is it a bird looking back at me, brimming with fear?'. What follows is a parody of the typical archetypal psychologist's spiel - at points disturbing, at points hilarious. Towards the end the doctor unwittingly diagnoses his own problem:

'Furthermore... if I may take one more step... I would postulate that... that this image that I hold here... depicts our very ancient soul, which is imprisoned by our modernisms and our past, the modernist mind and society. And I see here the fear that has accumulated over the ages, compressed, repressed...'

Yet psychology is precisely one of the modernisms which imprisons, and which in claiming to be rational creates a negative blockage, that impedes creativity by trying to understand it.

As 'Sasha' ends we see the titular character walking through a field towards the aforementioned expansive fence-like green canvas at one end, which the painter subsequently disappears behind. We then cut back to the studio where the doctor, who has been reciting his findings over the phone to Sasha's worried mother, asks her for a date: 'Actually, what are you doing this evening, incidentally?' Thus the impossibility of psychology standing aside from the irrational urges that guide people in general is made clear.

Herein, we see in the work of Channa Boon a confrontation between the apparently sane profession of psychology and the carefree and whimsical undertaking of the painter, who despite his or her marginality, is depended upon by society to provide an escape and to give material for analysis by the auspices of science and rationality. In this sense Artaud's notion of Van Gogh as a man 'suicided by society' holds true. As Artaud explains:

Van Gogh was dispatched from the world first by his brother, when he announced the birth of his nephew, next by Dr. Gatchet, when, instead of recommending rest and solitude, he sent him to paint from nature on a day when he knew quite well that Van Gogh would have done better to go to bed.

We can see in the work of Boon - both in the films she makes and the paintings for which the films are ultimately a reflection - that the painter is just one of many players who engage in the process of painting. As the doctor reflects, what we see when we see a painting is really the material sum of its parts, but more than that we also see the social and psychological interactions for which the painter is a channel. Yet, further to this, the painter is also one mere object among many objects, as if they are moved by their materials and by social forces as much as being able to move these materials and social forces. Such an expansive examination of the process of painting serves to move beyond the simple consideration of paint's material properties and its adequacy to the contemporary age. The persistence of painting goes beyond the glib reason usually given: that people like to own nice things. For, ultimately, Channa Boon points to the immense importance of the painter figure for our understanding of ourselves in an age that cannot eliminate - and, indeed, has need for - the irrational impulse.