

An Essay on Beauty and Madness (Lost, Hidden or Found Again)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

“This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.”

~William Shakespeare, from “King Lear”

Beauty the way it figures in higher forms of art is often opposed to its degraded representations found in the realm of advertising and pornography. In these latter cases, esthetics and virtues are secondary to the “powerful rhetoric” used “to sell soap and insinuate sexual responses” (1). In this essay we will look at artistic beauty and its relationship to madness among the young, the innocent, and the marginalized. We will also explore the theme of stolen, lost or hidden-away beauty with a focus on the mad and the neuro-diverse.

In Children Underground (A), we are introduced to a group of street youth, who have fled their homes, orphanages or mental institutions in post-Ceausescu Bucharest, to live collectively in the Piata Vitoriei subway underground. These ‘strays’ have their youthful innocence stolen from them when they are subjected to living in makeshift shelters, when inhaled substances are substituted for scarce food, and when gang membership seems to lessen ongoing cycles of violence and rape. In this precarious and impoverished world caused in large part by radical Romanian birth policies, the fallout in the form of childhood mental illness and substance abuse manifests itself with a deepening divide separating those who are socially acceptable from those who are lost causes.

Conformity and social molds found in the many forms of popular culture exhibit a rather superficial representation of beauty while leaving the less presentable and the less resilient on the margins. In “1000 Smiles (2003)” by artist Simon Evans, “the many grins alluded to in the title, [are] all cut from magazines and reapplied in a numerically detailed grid.” (2) This “cheeky presentation” (2), shows facial fashion façades from a slightly critical perspective as they border on the realm of shallowness and mere surface reality. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan, when touching upon the “characteristic[s] of industrial man”, alludes to a binary distinction “between business and society, between action and feeling, office and home, between men and women” (3). The same duality can be modelled between the mad and the normal in particular when people in a state deemed “mentally unfit” or “unwell” fail to meet the criteria of social acceptability. In Corpse Bride (B), the young Victor is said to be at odds with other suitors to marry Victoria, when he travels back and forth between the realms of the dead and of the living in his own 2-spirited kind of way. Victoria, who appears suitable to marry Victor on the grounds of compatibility, is deemed to be mad by her parents and forced to wed the mysterious and controlling Lord Barkis, when she claims to also be able to see the once-living corpse bride named Emily. In Vonnegut’s “Hocus Pocus” (4), the central character rudely expresses that his marrying a woman who has a mad person in her lineage is being a part of a “family’s terrifying history” and being exposed to a “danger” potentially transmissible through “spawning” or “reproduction”.

Madness often appears to clash with beauty in a world where health and external

resilience is considered to be more important than inner virtues and depths of character. In Labyrinth (C), young teenager Sarah ventures into a dream world with a massive labyrinth and castle kingdom when she temporarily loses her infant brother Toby as a babysitter and must complete the trials of the Goblin King to reclaim him safely again. While some would argue that Sarah's escape from reality could indicate a bout of youthful madness, the labyrinth and the (psych ward-like) 'oubliette' that temporarily imprisons her, is symbolic of artistic recovery and the restoration of her better self with Jim Henson critters throughout the film turning out to be the familiar objects that have come to life in her youthful imagination.

In The Machinist (D), Trevor Reznik appears to be sinking into a world of delusion and delirium when his severe insomnia worsens, affecting his performance operating machinery at work, his ability to drive safely on the road and his overall physical health. As a viewer, we are compelled to doubt Trevor's version of events and overall perception of reality when he follows the visions of an imaginary man called Ivan driving a red car and when he turns out to be involved in a series of deviant acts including murder while being unable to recover and center himself as everything in his life unravels. While other mad characters like Sarah in Labyrinth, Victor in Corpse Bride and the lost children of Piata Vitoriei subway station have inner beauty hidden away under a veil of apparent madness, Trevor appears to deserve the white cell he is subjected to when his real actions are examined and when superficiality appears to be all that dwells within his shattered and unstable character.

While falsehood is often disguised by a pleasing external image, beauty the way it intersects in the realms of art and madness should be further delved into in order to reveal a hidden inner importance or redemptive quality. Mad subjects, represented widely as agents of dangerousness and self-degradation, can hold truths about social ills and flawed social frameworks. In the case of the stray kids of Bucharest, the hope of the country's future rests in the hands and on the shoulders of a more accepting and rehabilitative world where beauty can be exposed once again after it appears lost through tragedy.

Sources:

Films:

- A. Children Underground (2001). Dir. Edet Belzberg. Childhope International, USA. 104 min.
- B. Corpse Bride (2005). Dir. Tim Burton. Warner Bros. Pictures, USA. 77 min.
- C. Labyrinth (1986). Dir. Jim Henson. TriStar Pictures, USA. 101 min.
- D. The Machinist (2004). Dir. Brad Anderson. Paramount Classics, USA. 102 min.

Books:

- 1. "The Invisible Dragon-Essays on Beauty", Dave Hickey, University of Chicago Press,

Chicago. 2009. p. 57.

2. "Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing", Phaidon Press Inc. NY. 2005. p.98.

3. "The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man", Herbert Marshall McLuhan, The Vanguard Press Inc. NY. 1951. p.157.

4. "Hocus Pocus", Kurt Vonnegut, Berkley Books, NY. 1990. p.48.