

Dealing with Isolation (A Film Essay on Connection and Abstraction)

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In the study of three European films ranging from the mid-nineteen eighties to the early twenty-first century, we will examine how the main characters experiencing periods of isolation cope with barriers of communication and restrictions imposed on them affecting their interactions with allies, close friends and relatives. We will also show how art and abstraction play a role in helping these isolated characters carry on and find continuity in their daily lives.

In Shun Li and the Poet (1), single mother Shun Li, who is originally from Fuzhou, China, is relocated to work in an Osteria (café) off the shores of a small fishing village in Italy. Determined to pay off a debt that would allow her young boy back home to fly to Italy and visit her, she struggles to assimilate herself with the foreign culture, feeling both homesick and estranged in an often xenophobic environment. With the help of an older fisherman called Bepi who shares a passion for poetry with Shun Li, life becomes more bearable in the town of Chioggia. Soon however, as the 'Festival of the Poet' dedicated to Chinese poet Qu Yuan approaches in the calendar year, rumors begin to circulate about the two friends being intimately linked, leading Shun Li to cease communicating with Bepi, for fear of being in debt again and having the reunion date with her son delayed even longer.

In My Life as a Dog (2), young Ingemar is forced to lead a life apart from immediate family and his close canine companion Sickan, when his mother undergoes treatment for severe illness. While living with his uncle in a small rural town in Sweden, Ingemar comes of age, hitting it off with a female classmate called Saga who pretends at a young age to be a boy in order to play soccer for a local league and follow her passion for boxing with the other boys. While having enough social connections in the small town, Ingemar often has recollections and flashbacks about his dog Sickan and his terminally ill mother, not quite understanding at first that he is in fact dealing with grief when he gazes upon the starry night sky thinking of outer space and Sputnik.

In The Lives of Others (3), talented GDR (East German) playwright Georg Dreyman and his intimate partner Christa-Maria Zeland that he originally met through the acting world, are soon under scrutiny by the State Security Ministry, also known as the 'Stasi'. After a covert intrusion in their apartment in East Berlin by the Stasi, the lives of the two lovers and their social connections are cracked down on when a powerful minister decides to launch Operation "Lazlo" to court the attractive Christa and expose Dreyman's (codename "Lazlo") lack of allegiance with the spy state. Soon, Dreyman and a group of subversive writers work away at secretly publishing their experiences and insights within the GDR, while losing some of their closest friends and so-called allies to the powerful rulers and bureaucrats, bent on prolonging their reign of totalitarianism through an elaborate playbook of interrogation and psychological warfare.

While characters in the three films under study are coping with different degrees and types of isolation, they all seek out their own ways to stay connected and centered when the world around them closes in and leaves them feeling stranded. The shared love of poetry, the mysticism of stargazing and the collaborative words of fellow activist writers become essential in the three film narratives to create a path toward reunion, acceptance and liberation.

Film Sources:

1. Shun Li and the Poet (2011). Dir. Andrea Segre. Rai Cinema. Italy. 100 min.
2. My Life as a Dog (1985). Dir. Lasse Hallström. AB Svensk Filmindustri. Sweden. 101 min.
3. The Lives of Others (2006). Dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. Buena Vista International. Germany. 137 min.