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Manchevski's *Shadows*: Sexuality and Melancholy

Introduction

Shadows by Milcho Manchevski (released in 2007) is a film that engages in the impossible task of producing a language of the unutterable: it attempts to mediate irrevocable loss in its immediacy, to narrate of the irremediable absolute absence of the loved one.

In spite of the gloominess of theme, there is certain lightness of narration in the film enabled not only by the sense of humor present in it but also by the playfulness with which the story is told and by the seductive storytelling. It evidently follows the structural laws of tragedy since it is the *systasis ton pragmaton* (the composition of elements) rather than a metaphysical rumination which brings forth the plot of the great themes of life, death and fate and its denouement. The tragic idea of an inherited family guilt, of impossible individuality or rather the impossibility of individual freedom against the dictate of Fate, is at the heart of the story told in *Shadows*. The film's hero, Lazar, is indeed a tragic hero since, he is unaware of his guilt and finds himself at the center of the plot. His mission is – just like any tragic hero's mission – to redeem his family and himself from a transgression by appeasing demons. Lazar's task is to come to a realization – to the moment of an *anagnorisis* (recognition/realization) which is the point of denouement of every tragedy – of his debt to several dead souls.

Just like any hero of a tragedy who usually pays a certain debt to the chthonic gods, Lazar pays a debt to somebody who comes from the afterlife, from the world beyond, from the world of the dead. And also, just like Dionysus, just like Lazarus from the New Testament, Lazar Perkov returns from the land of the dead, only to accomplish what every tragic hero is called upon to accomplish – to undo the tragic fault of his or her parent that he or she has inherited as his/her own. And also, just like any other tragedy, *Shadows* produces the cathartic pleasure of playing out one's most primordial and ever infantile phantasms and fears. Apart from those that define any tragedy, such as the fears of inherited guilt, phantasms of fate and transgression (of the frontier between life and death or between mortal and immortal), a hybrid of deadly fear and intense pleasure derived from the transgressive penetration into the world of afterlife is distinctive in this film.

The erotic relation with someone lost in the absolute sense of the word, with someone who represents an *always already* irretrievable loss, is the source of ultimate pleasure. The irredeemably absent one, the one lost through death, the one who has been annihilated becomes the object of erotic interaction. The irrevocable absence becomes the voluptuous presence of sheer pleasure.



Lazar's relationship with Menka is a love story of an uninterrupted climax of erotic desire. That painful absence of a distinct life, a life that is namable and shaped by history, is made present through desire, through yearning – through an insatiable longing. It is an absence that receives volume, form and, finally, body through a loving yearning, thanks to an infinity of desire, i.e., to the infinity of life.

According to Jean Pierre Vernant (1990), the fact that in Greek Antiquity the word *pothos* referred to an erotic yearning as well as to the state and to the ritual of mourning speaks of the psychological-cultural similarity of the two phenomena. The same parallel is still valid in our age of (post)modernity: it is the longing for the impossible loved one, the desire for the always already lost *objet petit which* establishes this equation. A loving yearning is nothing but a nostalgic longing for the impossible Other, for the loved one *always already* evading in-her/his-Real. The loved one engulfed by death, lost in the absolute sense is loved in the absolute, in the most radical sense.

Mourning, Desiring and the Object

Shadows is a film which inspires re-investigation of the idea of mourning as a desiring stance. Freud defines mourning as a state of cathexis to the lost object of love preserved as an image which is a constitutive element of one's own psychic contents and composition. Still, according to Freud, mourning is a state of intense loving experience whose defining purpose is to serve as the passage to severing the cathectic links with the absent loved one. The intense ceaseless mourning, one which does not result (in a period of time which is considered normal or healthy) in the liberating effect of hypercathexis, according to Freud, is a pathological state of melancholy. This position is maintained by



Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia* first published in 1917; in his later work titled *Ego and Id* from 1923 he argues that also after the normal period of mourning is over there must remain some links to the lost object of love since this is indispensable for maintaining the psyche's constitution. Thus the desiring aspect of mourning is there only to cease to be. It is there only to become an integral part of the psychological mechanism of transition toward liberation from the cathexis to the lost

loved one. The pathological variation of mourning called melancholy is an erotic (narcissistic) state of preserving the loving relationship through continuous commemoration of the absent object of love. It is not only the abnormally long duration but also, and even more so, the fact that it is a form of narcissism which makes melancholy a pathology. So it is precisely its erotic component which remains a constant and, through that, degenerates toward melancholy. The invariably narcissistic libidinal investment of mourning becomes a defining characteristic of the erotic subject the melancholic person is.

Mourning, both in its "pathological" (melancholic) as well as in its "healthy" variant of the necessary psychic work of detachment from the grieved object of love, is an erotic phenomenon. It is all about attachment to or "passionate detachment" from the image of the impossible loved one.

In *Shadows*, apart from the fervent sexual love for Menka, Lazar, who comes from the world of the living — albeit defiled by transgression into the world of the dead — displays warm thankful lovingness toward a couple of other inhabitants of the underworld. That bitter taste of an eerie intimacy with the dead, with people who hold the status of dead — which is indeed both a cultural and an ontological status to be attained, as Vernant explains (1990) — brings forth the exquisite feeling of perversion created by transgressive pleasure. It is precisely the desiring penetration into the inaccessible world of the dead which brings about a certain dark sensuousness colored with the fear that comes from the violation of the inviolable boundary

between the two worlds. This sensation is effectuated through the psychological state of the main character depicted in the film, whose subjective perspective is the stance from which the story of the film is told; it is also effectuated through the structure of the narrative and through the cinematographic esthetics expressed both visually and acoustically (musically).



The effect of pleasure that comes from the act of transgression is saturated by a sense of defilement derived from intimacy with the ritualistic culture of death (of burial and commemoration) and its imagery. That which is normally superstitiously avoided – as prescribed by the death culture – by those who are not in a state of mourning, in *Shadows* is something with which the viewer becomes familiarized. Looking at a corpse prepared for burial, looking at a corpse subject to the violent ritual of preparation for burial, engaging in familiarity with the souls/memory of the “unclean dead” such as the ones who have suffered *mors repentina*, i.e. the ones who had committed suicide or children (Aries 1977), implies contact with the “culture of the polluted” (Parker 1983). The latter consists to a considerable extent in precisely burial and mourning customs. In *Shadows*, the literality and physicality of death in its aspect of the abject, of the foul and defiling, and the intimacy with death’s defiling aspect becomes an integral part of the culture of the living. In Western civilization, the latter is normally kept clean from the physical presence of death through precisely delineating the world of the dead via ritualistically structured practices of burial, mourning, and commemoration (Aries 1977). In the film, this line of division between the two cultures (the one of life and the one of death) is constantly blurred and subverted.

The line of division between the two worlds is most dramatically destabilized by the erotic relationship between the two main characters belonging to the different domains of life and afterlife respectively. There is a certain dimension of abject/ion –in the sense of Kristevan abject (1982) – nesting in the sexual desire; the fact that one of the lovers is a dead person inhabiting the world of the living – indistinguishable from them – is the source of an experience of the abject. Inside the feeling of



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Sometimes the dead
speak louder
than the living



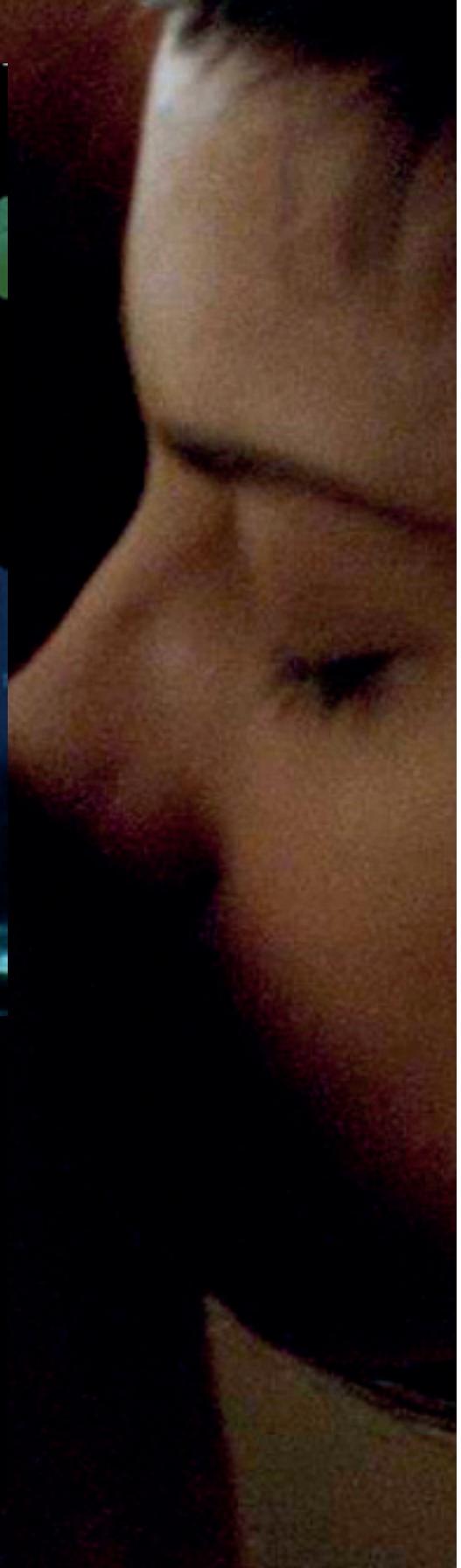
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attraction, within the sensation of sexual desire, repulsion settles. As soon as the materiality of death becomes present – as soon as it becomes clear that the body to which the hero makes love has the appearance of the corpse bearing its death marks – sexual pleasure begins to mix with the abject. Kristeva's concept of the abject elaborated in *Powers of Horror* (1982) is about the horror or the disgust toward that which resides at the borders of a structure, of a certain distinct, circumscribed, unequivocally namable something. The repulsion provoking blurring of borders is even more intensive when it is a boundary between two elements of a fundamental binary – such as life and death – that has been destabilized. And it is this strong experience of the abject mixed with an intense feeling of sensual pleasure which marks the erotic relationship in the film.

Impossibility, that defining characteristic of every erotic relationship, is intensified by the fact that the desired one is not only the mourned one but also the one who brings about a sensation of repulsion. The latter implies the contradicting desire to negate the abject lover, to render her or him absent for a second time, to annihilate her/him also as an image present in the psyche of the mourner. The hero is presented with this necessity in its utmost clarity at the end of the film, when parting from the beloved one standing next to an open grave filled with the materiality of death – the skeletons of the dead.

Mournful impossibility envelops the sexual desire which is at the center of the film's plot. Melancholy is the substance of a relationship of love which will leave an ineffaceable mark on Lazar's life, which will become one of the narratives that define him.



Tragic Debt as the Source of Political Responsibility

The fate of Oedipus depends on his interpretation of a cryptic message by the old man Tiresias that should lead him to a realization of his guilt, of his debt and redemption. So does Lazar seek for an interpretation of the words of an old woman addressed to him as a message to be deciphered in order to arrive at a grand illumination; the search for a translation of those enigmatic few words in an archaic dialect that cannot be understood by anyone except experts (linguists) becomes the hero's quest in the film. It is also the meaning of the tragic plot, the truth that the hero is meant to grasp, to come to a realization of, and it is the reason for which it all happens. "Return what's not yours" is the meaning of the enigmatic enunciation in an extinct dialect repeatedly addressed to Lazar by the outlandish old woman. The expert who interprets the meaning of those words is somebody from the world beyond, similar to the wise ("expert") Tiresias in *Oedipus the King* who has transgressed the boundaries of the world of mortals more than once.

In order to come to a realization about the meaning of the old woman's enigmatic message, Lazar needs to arrive at a prior illumination: He is not responsible only for his own actions but also for those committed by his ancestors. Lazar needs to undo a wrong done to the dead by his mother, and when embracing this task he also embraces the truth of the impossibility of an absolutely individual – both moral and political – responsibility. The latter is the moment of *anagnorisis* – of a realization of the reason and the meaning of the tragic plot – in the film which enables the hero to undo the tragic mistake. He needs to realize the truth buried in the words "Return what's not yours."

This message addressed to Lazar as the grand riddle he is destined to resolve refers to a historic debt toward the dead, toward memory, toward the mourned ones. The debt consists in the necessity of a retribution related to a violation of a status of dead, mourned and preserved in memory. The latter is provided by a proper burial and a gravestone on which the name of the deceased is written. Customs of mourning and commemoration are possible if there is a grave to visit and attend to. Lazar's task is to provide a grave (a repeated burial) for the dead that have been deprived of it (by his ancestor).

Lazar needs to realize that the possibility of a cynical stance toward the dead body, toward the bones and the grave, as the "merely material" is impossible. In fact the metaphysical and political injustice consists in precisely reducing the physical trace of the dead to "merely material." The bones of the dead that are destined for scientific research have been subject to a political sacrilege. It is indeed a political one since it is the cultural and political outsiders' graves that have been violated. Those bones are not merely bones (i.e., merely objects) since it is only the bones of those buried at the margins of the graveyard that have been turned into "merely" that. It is the outsiders' bones that have been turned into objects of the indifferent, rational glance.



Indeed it is a symbolic violation and a violation of the Symbolic. Consequently, it inevitably contains a political meaning. Lazar is called upon to reconstitute the bones' status of object of ritual reverence, of cultural meaning – of mourning and of commemoration. Violence, in this case, seems to consist in the depriving of symbolization, in the gesture of the reducing of a certain reality to “merely the Real.” Moreover there seems to be a position in the movie according to which the reduction of the singular instances *par excellence* – or rather instantiations – of the Real, such as the dead body, to the Real in its aspect of absurdity is also already an act of violence. The reduction to “merely the Real,” or to a “merely material reality devoid of meaning,” the reduction to an object is an act of political meaning in itself calling for political action. Lazar's reburial of the bones is a political act and a political statement.

Symbolization is the source of the political: Logos is the condition of Polis (Vernant 1982, 50). Depriving a body, regardless of whether it is alive or dead, of symbolization, of its translation into a meaning is an act of deprivation of any political power, of

any political position, of any political status whatsoever. It is the production of bare life (Agamben 1998) and – of bare death. And this is the perpetuated act of violence that Lazar is called upon to undo, the tragic mistake he is called upon to correct – the reduction of dead bodies to objects (to scientific/rational gaze). Before realizing his task of undoing this wrong, he perpetuates this violation unknowingly – and this is his tragic fault. He does not know that it was his mother who violated the graves. In fact, he does not know that there has been any violation of any graves that he or a member of his family may be implicated in. And still, from a point of view of tragedy this is his fault, his (tragic) mistake. The mistake that introduces tragic demise, the *hamartema* committed by the tragic hero is always already committed unknowingly and unintentionally (Aristotle 1453a 5-10). The latter does not make it less a mistake, it only makes it tragic. As Vernant points out, the truth revealed in each tragedy is the double sense of Heraclites' sentence “ethos anthropō daīmon” (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988, 37) which can be translated in the following two ways simultaneously “character is man's destiny” and “destiny is man's character.” In other words, character is how we act in the face of a challenge brought about by destiny, and this is what makes character our destiny as well as what transforms destiny into our character. Lazar's task is to realize his complicity with his mother's wrongdoing in relation to the souls of the dead whose graves she had violated. His complicity consists





of his choice to silently embrace all the values his mother acts in accordance with and advocates. His complicity consists of his choosing not to act against the world his mother Vera Perkova stands for. This complicity implicates Lazar into his mother's debt toward the several dead whose bones Vera Perkova has objectified depriving them of their status of a "buried body." The latter is a functional, meaningful component of burial culture. Moreover the buried body, subjected to observance of funerary and commemoration rites, is part of the Culture. It is not the mute, absurd Real – the bones are not merely bones, merely ("dead") objects. Rather, they are the remains of the deceased that command respect in their function of re-presenting the absent leaving body. Left on the vast plane of the Real, reduced to bones with no relation to the souls that used to inhabit them, the remains of these people have no longer a cultural meaning: they are not part of culture, not part of the human World anymore. Both the remains and the memory of these peoples are banished from our world.

Another aspect of the political meaning of Lazar's tragic debt is the fact that it has been inherited. The grain of political significance lies in the inescapable possibility of such inheritance. It lies in the necessity of the inherited guilt. The tragic debt is necessarily passed on to the unaware descendent. It is passed on unavoidably precisely because they are unaware. Naïveté does not exist naively: there is no innocence prior to any questioning, to any critique, to any resistance. Resistance is simultaneous with the entering into/birth inside of language. Revolt is even prior to it: it is contemporaneous with the conatus of self-preservation.

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