Denise Oleksijczuk’s film Role is a remake of the last scenes in Robert Bresson’s 1967 film Mouchette. In Role, the artist herself is cast as Mouchette (the teenage protagonist of Bresson’s film) in order to carry out the character’s suicide in the final act. But unlike the original, which ends after Mouchette rolls into the river with a splash and a loud thud, the remake allows the camera to zoom in on the snail’s place facing watching a small wounded rabbit flip violently on the ground.

What replaces this hunting scene in Oleksijczuk’s remake, however, is not only the snail but a picnic held on the banks of the river, including a clock tower set to one o’clock, and (here it is) a long picnic table around which the cast had gathered for lunch to the end of the documentary. Oleksijczuk’s remake therefore, deviates from the film with more than just an alternative ending. It also integrates the flow of its narrative by offering a simultaneous look behind the scenes. But even if you had never seen Kotulla’s documentary, your confrontation with a large video screen in the ArtSpoke’s small space would have prompted you to notice that the film was attempting to bear its own mechanism before you Submitting to the humming sound of the projector might have even set your mind adrift. Rather than becoming present and alert to the intricacies of this fantastic remake of a film (that was itself a visual remake of a text), you might have found yourself thinking that Roland Barthes, first declared the death of the author in a 1967 issue of Auge, “right around the time Bresson’s Mouchette was released. You may even have recalled that salon line where he compares the structure of a text to “a stocking that has run,” which made you wonder who might have taken the place of the author who slipped through the threads 45 years ago. That’s when you exclaimed the reader, of course!

What I find most interesting about Role is not so much its investigation into the nature of authorship – themes of which are apparent in the very act of remaking a film, changing the ending, opening up the story to extra-narrative events and sweetening the viewers’ attention from the image to the frame, from the film’s glorification to its own inner periphrastic surroundings – but rather the transformation of the artist herself into an omniscient reader. What we have here is no longer an attempt to exploit the author (we have all attended the funeral), but to return it through the back door in the guise of a reader.

The reader who has possessed our artist is naturally most visible in Oleksijczuk’s portrayal of the young Mouchette. Watching her walk through the cobble-stoned streets, we cannot help imagining the artist sitting in front of a monitor, watching Bresson’s Mouchette, taking notes, reading, writing, and becoming so engrossed in the film as a viewer, an obsessive reader, that she walks straight into the film and begins to walk in the role of the young Mouchette herself beside a little dog in her path. As in though flow has actualized the private affair of reading, and has encouraged us to perform our own by following her leads and sources. In fact, the whole intrigue of Oleksijczuk’s remake is entirely bound up with our knowledge of her references, which we as have seen are multi-layered and intertextual.

And what should we make of this double apparition in the film? Oleksijczuk’s version is not difficult to imagine the “death of the author” thesis emerging as an antagonistic response to the monologic form of address typical of the propaganda media of radio and television that had dominated the first half of the 20th century. The warm reception of the “birth of the reader” that followed was sanctified by the mid-1990s with the emergence and popularization of the internet, which countered the monologic flow with a dialogue return. The artistic response in the past decade has surfaced in the pervasive parallel practices of “postproduction” artists, who inhabit the space opened up by their own disappearance which their bemused audience, discussions and participants are left to activate, and that of “post-productive” artists, who interrogate, restage and exhibit available cultural products. These two practices seem to be dialectically connected to, and buttressed by, the consolidation of the status of the omnivorous reader in whose name the artist can continue to work a while longer. After all, what is the avant-garde “but the progressive, emancipated form of past culture.”

Notes
1 Quotation marks are used throughout to designate “Mouchette” in Oleksijczuk’s Role.
2 Bresson’s Mouchette was based on George Bernanos’ Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette (Paris: Plon, 1937).
4 Both terms have been popularized by Nicolas Bourriaud in Postproduction (New York: Lucy lippard, 2002).
6 Sara Mameni is an artist living in Vancouver. She is currently completing her MA thesis in Art History at the University of British Columbia.

SARA MANENI ON DENISE OLEKSIZCUK

Denise Oleksijczuk, Role, 2008 (installation view). Photo: Blake Campbell

THE READER IN ROLE

Denise Oleksijczuk

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