



THE READER IN ROLE

SARA MAMENI ON DENISE OLEKSIIJCZUK

Denise Oleksijczuk, *Role*, 2008 (installation view)
photo: Blaine Campbell

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 carry on across the surface of the water, and to witness an adult “Mouchette”¹ dragging herself out of the river. Once on the shore, this gasping “Mouchette” stops to watch (perhaps with an inward smile) a snail sliding along on the grass.

The presence of this snail at the end of *Role*, directly contrasts with a hunting scene that precedes Mouchette’s suicide in the original film. Bresson’s hunting scene showed men with shotguns target a couple of rabbits darting through the woods. The rabbit hunt thus anticipated and set the tone for the tragic ending that was to unfold, zooming in on Mouchette’s placid face 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, edited in such a way as to intersperse with “Mouchette’s” several attempts to roll into the river to meet her end. At times, “Mouchette” seems to be looking over at the picnickers who remain oblivious to her presence. But the sharp contrast between the two leisurely activities of hunting and picnicking does not conceal their structural similarities and interpretive function within each film. Just as Bresson’s hunting sequence stands in for the emotional turmoil of the reticent girl, thus making the invisible visible, likewise Oleksijczuk’s picnic attempts to expose the often hidden operations of filmmaking.

Here is how: If you have ever watched *Mouchette* on DVD released by the Criterion Collection, you may have noticed a 30-minute feature titled *Au Hasard Bresson* on the main menu. Had you clicked on it, you would have found that it was a 1966 documentary made by the German film critic Theodor Kotulla shot on the set of *Mouchette*, exploring

Bresson’s film making process. This documentary includes several elements that show up in Oleksijczuk’s *Role*, 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 towards the end of the documentary. Oleksijczuk’s remake therefore, deviates from the film with more than just an alternative ending; it also interrupts 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 and noisy projector in Artspeak’s small space would have prompted you to notice that the film was attempting to bare 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 fictional remake of a film (that was itself a visual remake of a text),² you might have found yourself thinking that Roland Barthes first declared the the death of the author in a 1967 issue of *Aspen*,³ right around the time Bresson’s *Mouchette* was released. You may even have recalled that visceral 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 41 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 – traces of which are apparent in the very act of remaking a film, changing the ending, opening up the story to extra-narrative events and averting the viewers’ attention from the image to its frame, from the film’s illusionism to their own corporeal surroundings – but rather the transformation of the artist herself into an omniscient reader. What we have here is no longer an attempt to expel 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, rewinding, watching again, pausing, taking notes again, 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. It is as though *Role* 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 as we have seen are multi-layered and intertextual.

And what should we make of this double apparition in Oleksijczuk’s remake? It 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 dialogic return. The artistic response in the past decade has surfaced in the pervasive parallel practices of “relational” artists, who fetishize the space opened up by their own disappearance which their bemused audience, discussants and participants are left to activate, and that of “post production” artists, who interrogate, reinterpret and exhibit available cultural products.⁴ These two practices seem to be ideologically 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.”⁵

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).
- 3 Roland Barthes “The Death of the Author” *Aspen* 5+6 (1967). The French version was published a year later in *Mantéia* 5 (1968).
- 4 Both terms have been popularized by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), and *Postproduction* (New York: Lucas Sternberg, 2005).
- 5 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975): 20.

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