

Lowering Human Hubris into the Sublime

Rich Murphy

Massachusetts College of Art and Design, USA

Using films by Patricia Rozema and Ingmar Bergman, “Lowering Human Hubris into the Sublime” reminds the reader that the particular in our lives is where the sublime performs. While we multitask and take for granted the world around us that supports our mythic assumptions, the particular objects and lives are actively present. In the two movies, the particular functions as a source of the sublime reminder and source of metaphor for stability and atrophy in everyday living. In one film an artist focuses the ordinary objects in everyday life while being disregarded by artists involved in the abstract. In the second film the particular behind the scenes works quietly to dismantle cultural beliefs for the people living the soon to be dated beliefs where opportunities for more inclusive community reside.

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Introduction: Two Films

Two older films that I watched lately have me thinking about what we are missing in not considering nature in our day-to-day thinking, our own nature and the environment, including outer space. We seem lodged in the technological realm where concepts in science are used for practical things of comfort whether worth using or not: Think refrigerator, television, air conditioners. The marriage of capitalism’s free enterprise and science has adopted the notion “if you can, you must.” The bubble of technological comfort keeps us taking for granted the details in our lives. I am aware that others may have interpreted each movie differently. I have been attempting to consider in my life and in films, the details, the particular behind the distraction, spectacle, or otherwise focused attention. Something beyond consciousness, perhaps evolution, lurks, prods behind our intentions. This is true especially if one considers contemporary neurology and physics, the working of our nervous system and its interface with quantum mechanics and evolution.

In the first film “I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing” (1987) by Patricia Rozema, a female character points out, reminds us, that we are not so special in nature that we are another species merely. The second film by Ingmar Berman “The Touch” (1971) grants humans a bit more by showing our behavior. However, our significance seems to be from an unconscious mechanism that eats idols like insects from the inside perhaps in hopes of taking on the power of the idol in the short term and simply to tear it down for replacement in the long term. The concept in the film seems closely aligned with Rene Girard’s mimetic desire and scapegoat mechanism.

Rich Murphy is a poet, writer, and guest lecturer at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. He is the author of 20 collections of poetry and a collection of essays *Prophetic Vision Now* published by Common Ground Research Network. He has been teaching for 40 years.

Mermaids Questioning Art

When watching the first movie “I’ve Heard the Mermaids Singing” each of the two main women characters, Polly and Gabrielle, questions herself whether she is making art. Each found their efforts unsatisfactory in the eyes of people each considered an expert. One of the women, Polly, a quirky and clumsy woman, took photos of life around her on her way to and from temporary secretary jobs. Her photos often sent her dreaming and not aware of the world around her, and the dreaming sometimes got her into trouble as did her photo-taking of some people. The photos were her art, and she was satisfied with them and her life as a whole. She didn’t have ambition in her personal life, her work life, or her artistic endeavors. She considers herself “a spinster of something,” “an unsuccessful career woman.”

We know all this because Polly is the narrator of a film within the film that I was watching. She stole the camera she is using from Gabrielle’s art gallery after throwing away her camera in a moment of disappointment. She expresses to the audience in her film that she knows the audience isn’t interested in her feelings but her story. Though she is unaware the comment is of course untrue. It is in art the experience of being alive that defines the sublime.

The woman for whom she recently obtained a job was her opposite. Gabrielle, older, owned an art gallery purchased for her by her father. She was of means and also a failing artist looking to “paint one beautiful painting” in her lifetime though we can see that she wishes for more than that with her art and with her business and her life. She was desperate and tried to return to night school for painting, hoping to be acknowledged as being talented, at least. However, the art instructor suggested that her art was too simplistic without merit and didn’t accept her into the class, sending Gabrielle into a funk.

Polly’s mousey way inspires Gabrielle to keep Polly on permanently as her part-time assistant. Gabrielle admires her lack of ambition and contentment with her life and doesn’t know that Polly takes photos. When Polly sends her work to Gabrielle under a pseudonym, Gabrielle calls it “trite made flesh.” The judgement hurts Polly, but she stays quiet, and returns home to burn her photos and throw out her camera. Polly’s ineptitude at so many aspects of life contrasts with Gabrielle so much that Gabrielle admires her low expectations of her life. The audience doesn’t know whether Gabrielle is patronizing Polly or envying her. Polly continues at the job though hurt.

Gabrielle has a woman lover, Mary, who she has been recently attempting to leave. However, Mary loves her (as does Polly who sees her as a mentor) and convinces Gabrielle to remain a partner. We find out later that Mary is an artist with talent for the abstract and her work is mistaken for Gabrielle’s. It seems to matter little to Mary. A confrontation occurs when Gabrielle finds out that Polly is the one who shared Mary’s work with Carl, a dealer and reviewer, who raved about it. During the confrontation, Polly throws hot tea in the face of Gabrielle and returns home where she is expecting to be arrested and is planning on moving leaving all her earthly goods behind. The goods don’t matter.

Polly’s World

Mary and Gabrielle come to Polly’s apartment after the event, and Polly apologizes for the tea thrown in Gabrielle’s face. Gabrielle remarks that the burn will heal, and she also apologizes to Polly for thinking less of her. Mary, the artist that Gabrielle is not, finds a photo by Polly in the kitchen and expresses interest in it, suggesting

that it is art enough. With that, Polly then invites them into her world of the particular and ordinary: “Come here, I’ll show you some more.” She opens the door to her apartment that should be a city scene, and instead we see trees that make up a forest, bathed in autumn light, suggesting that the city is immaterial. She is showing them an ordinary, a particular world, hers. With the golden trees one could conclude that Polly believes people are as special as, on a par with trees in the forest on a planet and trees are as special as humans. Her world is one of seeing *Homo sapiens* as special only as another species that sometimes dreams of being a superwoman but actually another tree in the forest on a planet.

In this way, her art reminds me of William Carlos Williams’ “no ideas but in things” from his poem “Paterson.” (Paterson) Williams’ almost literal “Red Wheelbarrow” poem, seen as democratic, rests on, stresses the particular:

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens (*Spring and All*)

Pauline’s insistence that the ordinary world of her surroundings is as valuable as nature in golden light. When she opens the door to her world to Gabrielle and Mary a cityscape, by not appearing, is the equivalent of fall trees and putting the human condition in its place as another species in nature, lowering the hubris into our species to see the nature of our reality locally.

Attention Getters and Behind the Scenes

The movie “The Touch,” picks up where “I Heard the Mermaids Singing” leaves off for me. Karin is an ordinary housewife with two children, a doctor husband, and a very comfortable lifestyle. David, a Jewish German refugee living in the USA and now a visiting archeologist in Sweden, falls in love at first sight with Karin and tells her. At first sight is important here because it suggests instinct and ignorance of the love object. As a Jewish refugee, is he reacting to his family situation and attempting to assimilate with the blue-eyed, blonde-haired Karin, or is there an unconscious, instinct-driven attempt to bring the two cultures together through mating? I think along these lines because of the wooden Madonna statue tombed in the dark for 500 years and upon exposure to the sun larvae become insects that eat away at the statue, presumably until it is no more. The struggle is between instinct and reason, between something within some traditional cultures perhaps, falling in love and second thought that brings in duty, “the right thing.”

At one point, David meets Karin at the church and a conversation ensues. David asks of the particular statue,

“- Have you heard about the Madonna?
- No.

Something peculiar’s happened,

something no one can explain.

Before she was walled up, she was
the home of some insect not known today.

The larvae have been sleeping inside there
in the darkness for 500 years.

And now they've awakened.

And they're eating the image away
from within.

Here on the child.

Oh, a whole nest of them hibernating.

They're not sure whether she can be saved.

Actually, they're beautiful.

At any rate,
as beautiful as the image itself." (Sublikescripts)

The two break up and return to their homes and responsibilities, but sometime later David returns to Karin insisting that he can't live without her and that she loves him. For me, he returns with his body and behavior having greater understanding, an unconscious awakening of sorts as an archeologist has happened, as the insects after 500 years. For me, he is, through his actions, attempting to show the correlation of the insects to the human cultural situation. The eating away of the icon that was in the dark for 500 years is similar to the barriers between the Swedish woman and the Jewish man. Karin struggles between the duty as mother and wife Karin and her new love of David. David's struggle of duty is his housebound sister.

Each knows the other's duty. In a larger sense, the struggle is of two cultures attempting to bridge the divide. That would explain his repeatedly calling Karin a liar at the end of the movie. The pulls of attraction coming from instinct and the pulls of duty are tremendous. This movie reminds one of Polly's view of the world. We are a species on a planet with more instinctual ability than we know or care to inspect. Both films seem to suggest keeping your instincts about you and allow your life room to grow and blossom through them like any other living thing. Instinct is the pulse of unconscious needs as falling in love is, as acknowledging our relationships with other species though we claim it is higher.

Naked Existing

In his essay, "The Museum. School of Disconcertment. Otherness and Varnish" philosopher Peter Sloterdijk reminds us that with a "small interruption in the brain activity" we can lose our intensions and plans. He goes on to say that we end up with "the naked reality of existing" when our "daily track slackens." He draws on Camus to name the existence:

Albert Camus described states like this to illustrate his ethics of the absurd. In contrast to Heidegger, who described existence as being held out into the nothingness, Camus explained the absurd scent of existence as coming from the shocking experience of being immersed in triviality. (Sloterdijk)

Sloterdijk's and Camus' perspective of the seemingly trivial and the absurd help explain the two films. Polly's world in art and in her life is particular, trivial, and absurd, defying all reason by an enlightened zeitgeist, but real enough to impress Mary. Gabrielle's instinct suggested to her that Polly's way of life was foreign and worth investigating when she invites Polly to stay on at the job permanently. The door opening to Polly's world is the sublime of the ordinary, of the particular and trivial that actually runs the show of purpose and drive of the hustling masses. Bringing the hustling masses to that understanding of their lives as made of what they ignore as trivia and just may be trivial might frighten each, but it is their sublime, their foreign, their absurd, our limited understanding of neurology and physics in evolution of life on the planet.

In "The Touch" the exposure of the insects that has David's rapt attention is similar to the trivial and absurd because they are eating an icon from the inside out much the way the faithful do inside religions and ideologies over time. In fact, the eating of the host on Sunday parallels as does the drifting of believers who are embedded in a secular society or when relying on the literal interpretations of texts. I think David, a holocaust survivor, may see things more clearly in his behavior: that the icon and the insects are beautiful in their roles in the absurd trivia of everyday life. I like to think that David, who like Karin has duties to family, calls Karin a liar because she is refusing to understand their role as insects eating away at icons, the icon of their time, refusing to indulge her instincts via her romantic involvement with him. They may just be the Romeo and Juliet of their time, a Jew and a blonde, blue-eyed Christian.

The assumptions brought to engagement with the objects in the world around the characters in both films are not consciously considered and the dynamics of living on a planet are forgotten. The mythic world the characters imposed upon relationships takes over where instinct and atrophy make rules of their own. As the backgrounds threaten to disrupt and foreground in each film, the characters, the audience, and reader startle into remembrance of the dynamic processes. Those processes include where they plant each foot, whether in Polly's world of particulars or David's discovery of insects eating a statue of the Madonna from the inside out. The audiences are left with the sublime moment in each film.

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