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Perfectionism, Therapy and the Everyday: on Cavell on Makavejev[1]

Abstract: A substantial strand in the interpretations of the films of Dušan Makavejev foregrounds the juxtaposition between ordinary life and public perfectionist strivings, and argues that the director takes the side of the former against the latter. A reference to Stanley Cavell, the philosopher to whom we owe some canonical interpretations of Makavejev, appears to be crucial in those readings. However, both Cavell's and Makavejev's views on the matters of the everyday are far more complex than the prevailing dichotomous readings suggest. It is my view that the critics who came after Cavell significantly diluted the complexity of his arguments on the everyday, which are not limited only to his writings on Makavejev, but also include his interpretations of Emerson and Wittgenstein. Hence I argue that the more nuanced reading of Cavell's work – and not just his dwellings on Makavejev – paves the way for the more salient interpretations of the former's work.

Keywords: Dušan Makavejev, Stanley Cavell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, everyday, privacy, domesticity, nationalism

Introduction

It has become commonplace in Makavejev studies[2] to see his movies as glorification of the ordinary and the everyday. The attention he pays to the seemingly insignificant, quotidian details of the lives of ordinary people seems to support this claim. Lorraine Mortimer especially insists on this view, basing her interpretation on the work of Stanley Cavell[3] and the authors that he considers seminal for understating the

[1] The title "On Cavell on Makavejev" is a reference to Cavell's article "On Makavejev on Bergman," *Critical Inquiry* 6, 2 (1979): 305–30.

[2] The famous Yugoslav director Dušan Makavejev is known for his work in the period from the early 1970's to the early 1990's. For a good introduction, see Lorraine Mortimer, *Terror and Joy: The Films of Dušan Makavejev* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[3] Stanley Cavell is an American philosopher known primarily for his work on Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ralph Waldo Emerson, but also for his philosophy of film and literature. For a good introduction, see Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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importance of the ordinary, primarily Wittgenstein and Heidegger.[4] That standpoint, however, has its detractors. For example, Sezgin Boynik criticizes it as 'humanist', and deems its proponents, from Cavell to Mortimer, guilty of depoliticizing Makavejev and the "Black Wave"[5] in general: "they are reproducing the most conservative and regressive thoughts on society and politics if not handled with caution and reserve"[6].

It is my belief, however, that Cavell's conceptualization of the ordinary/everyday is far more complex than suggested both by his supporters and detractors. Using Makavejev's *Love Affair, or the Case of the Missing Switchboard Operator* (1967)[7] as my central showcase, and tangentially relying on other Makavejev's films, I will shed more light on a Cavellian point which I see as pertinent with regard to the filmmaker. This point is the perfectionist and therapeutic role of philosophy, but also of art-as-philosophy: starting from what I see as a bizarre lack of critical appreciation for the figure of the sexologist, Dr. Aleksandar Kostić, I redeem his importance for Makavejev's vision, and show that it is crucial for a perfectionist reading of his film.

Clutching for the Everyday

Mortimer's chapter on *Love Affair* opens with a story written by a student in her class about a visit he had from the Jehovah's Witnesses. Although the narrator first tells us that he is afraid of the visitors and does not even want to let them in, he nevertheless engages in conversation, telling them that he is already quite happy and does not need their version of the salvation:

> No matter how much I argued that I was happy, no matter how hard I tried to explain Taoism and that I liked rainy days just as much as sunny ones and could not, therefore, be happy in their Heaven, where it was "always a sunny day", my assailants, as I now viewed them, kept trying to save me. I eventually told them that I would probably not have time to read their magazine, but bought it anyway. They left happy, if not a little puzzled and promised to return.

[4] Mortimer, *Terror and Joy*, 104.

[5] "Black Wave" is a genre of Yugoslavian cinema from the late 1960's and early 1970's recognized by its naturalism and/or bleakness. The most important directors, beside Dušan Makavejev, who are usually considered to have contributed to the genre are Žika Pavlović, Saša Petrović and Želimir Žilnik. Some theorists, however, question the alleged homogeneity of the genre, and point to both artistic and ideological differences among the authors that are usually lumped together. See Nebojša Jovanović, "Breaking the Wave: A commentary on 'Black Wave polemics: Rhetoric as Aesthetic' by Greg de Cuir Jr.," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 2, 2 (2011), 161–71.

[6] Sezgin Boynik, "On Makavejev, On Ideology: The Concrete and the Abstract in the Readings of Dušan Makavejev's films," in *Surfing the Black – Yugoslav Black Wave Cinema and its Transgressive Moments*, ed. Gal Kirn and Dubravka Sekulić (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie, 2012), 106–70.

[7] For an overview of the film's plot, see Mortimer, *Terror and Joy*, 96–98.

> Next time I am visited I will be prepared. Armed with eggs, flour, sugar and berries, I will show them how to make strudel.[8]

The strudel – an obvious nod to the one that Izabela makes in the movie – is contrasted with the picture of the afterlife, and the story serves as an epigraph of a sort for the whole chapter (titled "Eggs, Flour, Sugar, Berries, and a Little Dose of Modesty"). Playing on its underlying juxtaposition between the importance of the ordinary as opposed to the eternal, Mortimer uses the anecdote to highlight the strength of the everyday to sustain the 'attack' of the religious and the metaphysical.

However, the story is more contradictory than it might seem at first: the stubborn refusal of the main protagonist to take his interlocutors seriously, as well as his defensiveness and hostility, point to a discrepancy between his words and his deeds. His lesson in pie-making is particularly problematic and a more theologically educated interlocutor might respond by paraphrasing Kierkegaard's argument from *Repetition*: But of course, I know how joyful it might be both to make and to eat pie. I do not deny simple pleasures, but see them as necessarily repetitive and quickly exhausted, in the long run leading to boredom and disappointment. Any attempt to get the same exhilaration by intentionally repeating the experience which brought it about is doomed to failure. It is only with the gift of God's grace that this repetitiveness may gain sense and our world gain value.[9]

But in order to receive this gift, we must first be prepared to let go of our world. If we try to hold on to it too hard, it might escape us. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who according to Cavell offers us an Anthropodicy instead of a Theodicy,[10] called that "clutching": "I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition."[11] Mortimer's student, thus, had been "clutching" too hard at his unreformed everyday routines, not noticing that the presumed authenticity of his own quotidian experience, which he is clutching at, has slipped through his fingers. For, what he sees as his genuine everyday is a routine seen in a movie, and, even more ironically, his seemingly secular version of everyday is already articulated with the reference to the religious-transcendent (Taoism as a trendy New Age formula as opposed to the not-so-cool Judeo-Christian tradition).

While "clutching" to the everyday/ordinary, Mortimer neglects that the ordinary is itself in need of redemption, although, and this is the crucial point, not by a higher power, but by the ordinary itself. This is the real challenge of post-metaphysical, or as Cavell calls it, Emersonian perfectionism. Since Mortimer misses this strong perfectionist strand in both Cavell and Makavejev, her Makavejev frequently comes off as conservative. She aptly notes that, according to the filmmaker, "the nature of the

[8] Ibid, 95.

[9] Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[10] Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 26.

[11] Ralp Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 344.

movies has more to do with our desires, with their ability to connect us with our unreal selves"[12], but makes little use of this insight. Trying to affirm the everyday against the metaphysical, the rational, the utopian, and the ideological, she often ends up defending the status quo, which is a problem any defense of the ordinary will encounter if not handled with care – a danger Cavell is very well aware of.

Pointing to our capacity to be attracted to things, to desire, Cavell sees in it the way out of the uncanniness of the ordinary, out of the clutching, which is bound to leave us disappointed.[13] However, in order to allow ourselves to be attracted, to desire again, we must surpass our fixated desires, let them be "rotated around the axis of our real need"[14], or, in another Wittgensteinian phrase, to free ourselves from the pictures that hold us captive[15]. It is here that Cavell sees the necessity of Wittgensteinian practice of philosophy as therapy, as well as its relatedness to psychoanalysis as a therapy. Work of philosophy seen this way is always a work of mourning, or, as Cavell would have it, of accepting our poverty as an integral part of ourselves.

However, as Cavell notes, the practices which help us mourn our losses, and leave us free to desire – philosophy, psychoanalysis and art of a certain kind – risk themselves being ridiculed by what is considered to be proper or hard science. They are too easily and too often mocked as charlatanry, or even as dabbling in magical thinking, since their methods so obviously differ from synthetic thinking (which is seen by Emerson as itself a kind of clutching – an attempt to grasp reality with our concepts). In order to deal with the uncanniness of the ordinary, they must take part of the uncanny: "Freud and his predecessors in hypnotism and animal magnetism, looking as it were for the gravity in human constellations, are felt to be dealing in occult or magical properties. And in a sense that is true, too – so long as society remains a field of occult forces."[16]

Makavejev's films are rife with such therapeutic figures who, while bent on freeing people from their illusions, risk being seen as comical or illusionists themselves. From Rocco, the hypnotist in *Man Is Not A Bird* (1965), to Alexander Lowen, Reichian psychotherapist, and Wilhelm Reich himself in *W.R.: The Mysteries of Organism* (1971), to Otto Muehl who had a cameo in *Sweet Movie* (1974). Significance of all these figures for Makavejev's vision has been well recognized in the literature. And yet, two figures are tellingly absent from the critical accounts appraising this Makavejevian lineage: sexologist Dr. Aleksandar Kostić, and criminologist Dr. Živojin Aleksić, who both appear in *Love Affair* as themselves. In this paper I will focus on the importance of Kostić as a therapeutic figure, leaving the analysis of Aleksić's role in the film (which should also not be dismissed) for another time.

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[12] Mortimer, *Terror and Joy*, 120.

[13] Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 86.

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 47.

[15] Ibid, 48.

[16] Cavell, "On Makavejev on Bergman," 329.

Dr. Kostić and the Challenge of Domesticity

To be more precise, it is not simply that the critics leave Kostić and Aleksić out of the Roko-Reich-Muehl lineage, but more often than not they dismiss them as its very negation. Exemplarily, Daniel J. Goulding disparages Kostić's contributions (along with Aleksić's), as just "a reductionist attempt to explain away the complexities, irrationalities and mysteries of life – which ironically may reveal themselves most fully in such seemingly random intimate trivialities and 'senseless' moments as those depicted in the film."[17]

The crucial step in such a downplaying of Kostić's importance is to reduce his appearances to the first one. In the pre-credit sequence, the sexologist talks about the history of sexuality, especially about the ritual celebrations of sexual organs, like those in ancient Syria: "Like the carrying of a 38-foot phallus, gold plated, and accompanied by music, and pretty girls. And no one ever protested. Not even those girls who were following such an enormous phallus." The exposé on the mass public worship of the giant phalluses and their social importance, resonates throughout the film: the poster depicting Mao Tze Tung surrounded by pretty girls, the gigantic tubes of toothpaste on the parade float, etc. It is no wonder, then, that this resonance inspires the conclusion along these lines: the authoritarian ideologies are basically the continuation of the historical fetishism, the totalitarian dictators are the contemporary embodiments of the phallus, dic*k*tators, as it were. The most explicit illustration of this equation is, of course, the famous montage of the plastic dildo and Stalin in *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971).

And yet, it is by rule neglected that Kostić appears two more times in the film, each time addressing sexuality from a different angle. Whereas history frames the first address, in the second one he talks about sexuality in terms of biology, and in the final one in terms of art. Kostić's second appearance in the film makes the clearest reference to the difference between the actual and the eventual every day. After showing Izabela breaking eggs to make the blueberry pie, *Love Affairs* cuts to Dr. Kostić talks about the importance of the egg in terms of biology of sexuality. I see that as another sign that the potential for transfiguration of the everyday is present but not recognized, that the eventual is being sacrificed to the actual. This sheds a different light on the scene of pie making which is praised by Mortimer as the "elevation of the simple, the everyday, and the feminine"[18]; along that affirmative reading, we should note a less optimistic one, the one of failure of its promise of the eventual everyday: in the next scene, Dr. Kostić reminds us that egg is "the most perfect sex cell", containing the germs of all future organs, and notes that, if we knew this, we would not think that chickens lay eggs "so that we could scramble them for breakfast". Izabela also makes egg-like soap bubbles, in a scene which, just like the pie making scene, presents an aestheticization of everyday domestic chores, but this time with an obvious difference

[17] Daniel J. Goulding, *Five Filmmakers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 224.

[18] Mortimer, *Terror and Joy*, 109.

– the aestheticization does not work. Izabela seems positively disenchanted, as if she sees that the possibility of transfiguration is just a foolish hope, a soap bubble. It is precisely then that she delivers to us the 'man not being made of wood' speech, as if she has lost hope in the transfiguration of the everyday. Once more we are faced with the impossibility of willful repetition, a repetition in the sense of "iteration or replication or imitation by repetition, of counting as recounting, of calling by recalling" which is to be transfigured. It is this 'actual everyday' which is, according to Cavell, recognized by Wittgenstein to be:

> as pervasive a scene of illusion and trance as Plato or Rousseau or Marx or Thoreau had found. … [Wittgenstein's] philosophy of the (eventual) everyday is the proposal of a practice that takes on, takes upon itself , precisely (I do not say exclusively) that scene of illusion and of loss; approaches it, or let me say reproaches it, intimately enough to turn it, or deliver it; as if the actual is the womb, contains the terms, of the eventual.[19]

This picture of the actual as the womb cannot escape anyone who has seen *Love Affair*, for Izabela's womb will be dissected at the pathologist's table and the three month embryo will be found inside it. This I take as a sign that the eventual everyday – the new man – has been killed off before it was even born, significantly, by killing the new woman, the modern woman. In short, the transformative potentials of the everyday have not been recognized.

Kostić's final last address is as crucially important as it is unfairly ignored. Forty-five minutes into the film, the scene of Izabela and Ahmed sitting naked on her bed cuts to Kostić, who dwells on the intricate relationship between sexuality and different art forms:

> We have an excellent painting, which might be called purest pornography, representing all forms of the sexual act! It is a painting of our famous artist Đorđe Andrejević Kun, showing the sexual act of the parents – without shame – in the kitchen, all while the children are playing and dinner is being cooked as a regular part of everyday life. It emphasizes not so much the desire to show the sexual act itself, but that everything takes place in this setting.

Far from the unimaginative, reductionist scientism which is by rule assigned to Kostić, the address actually tackles several of Makavejev's trademark topics, like the relation between art and pornography, a pressing issue in his own aesthetics. Also, the sexologist neither attempts to explain away the intricacies and mysteries of life, nor shies away from 'random intimate trivialities' of the quotidian. He also does not shy away from referring to art in order to better explain the issues he finds important:

[19] Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 46.

indeed, his address about the painting is longer than the previous one, about biology. However, Kostić's shift from history to biology to arts should not surprise us, for the interdisciplinary, multifaceted perspective was integral to sexology that thrived in the socialist Yugoslavia.

Most pertinent for my analysis is Kostić's evocation of marriage as the linchpin between love, sexuality, domesticity, and the quotidian. A reference to Cavell's dwellings on marriage trouble illuminates this particular address by Kostić in a pregnant way:

> The joining of the sexual and the social is called marriage. Something evidently internal to the task of marriage causes trouble in paradise – as if marriage, which was to be a ratification, is itself in need of ratification. So marriage has its disappointment – call this its impotence to domesticate sexuality without discouraging it, or its stupidity in the face of the riddle of intimacy, which repels where it attracts, or in the face of the puzzle of ecstasy, which is violent while it is tender, as if the leopard should lie down with the lamb.[20]

Kun's graphic is strange and provocative for depicting the sexuality of the married couple as coexistent with their everyday domesticity (with "random trivialities" of home life, which also include parenthood), or, in Cavell's terms, the painting reveals how domesticity might look like if the "disappointment of marriage" – its "impotence to domesticate sexuality without discouraging it" and "its stupidity in the face of the riddle of intimacy" – are somehow overcome. But what happens if they are not? "The disappointment seeks revenge, a revenge, as it were, for having made one discover one's incompleteness, one's transience, one's homelessness."[21]

Love Affair offers us another picture of domesticity: the older, plump woman who replies to Uncle Tradesmen's sexual innuendo by saying "My fluffing up days are gone". Here, Mortimer's reading diverges from Robin Wood's:

> When Wood describes the scene, his "should be" gets in the way of his appreciating what is. The grandmother is a "grotesquely fat middle-aged woman, a kind of archetypal mother figure", a "grotesque extension of the domestic slavery in which Izabela begins to feel herself trapped". But in Makavejev's relative utopia, it would not be self-evident that things associated with women, domestic labor, or tradition should be devalued or escaped from. Contradiction, ambivalent feelings and some kind of accommodation to the loss of youth are part of everyone's experience. And we might better get by in this world if we can laugh at some of what life serves us.[22]

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[20] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remariage* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 31.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Mortimer, *Terror and Joy*, 122.

What Mortimer does not consider is that the traditional solution to the problem of marriage might not be open to Izabela. In other words, she overlooks that the previously successful ways of "accommodating to the loss of youth" have gone down together with the crosses in Vertov's *Enthusiasm* (1931) – the film that Izabela and Ahmed watch on their first date – and that today, marriage, "which was to be a ratification, is itself in need of ratification". Furthermore, even if it is true that things associated with women, domestic labor, or tradition should not be devalued or escaped from, Mortimer avoids a quite obvious objection that what should be escaped from, or, rather, transformed, is the nexus of these three: women traditionally condemned to domestic labor.

Izabela clearly recognizes "the stupidity of marriage", and its potential to kill what it is supposed to protect: erotic attraction, and the separateness and freedom of its members. She also clearly recognizes the oppressive side of domesticity, its inherent inequality, and its being the stronghold of the "divine right of kings" in an otherwise modernizing society. What Izabela fails to do, however, is come up with a different answer to this problem than simply saying "No" to domesticity as such.

I find two Cavell's passages to be pertinent here. First, the one in which he deals with Leo McCarey's *The Awful Truth* (1937):

> "The trouble with most marriages," Jerry announces in the second sequence of the film, preparing his sentences about faith, "is that people are always imagining things." It turns out that what is wrong is not with imagination as such but with the way most people use their imaginations, running it mechanically along ruts of suspicion. This causes, at best, farce, the negation of faith.[23]

The other quotation also deals with remarriage comedies, but in a roundabout way also brings us back to Makavejev. It is comment on a section from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, called *Three Metamorphoses*. The metamorphoses in question are ones of spirit, and Nietzsche names them, respectively, camel ("strong weight-bearing spirit in which dwells respect and awe: its strength longs for the heavy, for the heaviest"), lion ("to create freedom for itself and a sacred No even to duty"), and child ("innocence and forgetfulness, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes"). Cavell notes: "Camels of heavy marriages we know; and lions who can disdain them. A comic No to marriage is farce. I am taking our films to be proposing a comic Yes."[24]

We should note the context in which this same passage from Zarathustra appears in Cavell's famous article on Makavejev: it is embedded in a discussion of Otto Muehl's commune in *The Sweet Movie*. According to Cavell, the commune shows us the way to bear with horrible truths about our society: "Beyond the images of the

[23] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 260.

[24] Ibid, 262.

commune, the emotion in the film as a whole, in its horrors, in its longing, in its laughter, is to have us become less proud of saying No in order to let the intelligence of the body perform No-in preparation, of course, of finding something, that is, creating something, to which Yes can be said and be done."[25] It is one of Makavejev points in *Love Affair* to make us less proud of just saying No – to the world, to home, to marriage and domesticity seen as preparedness to live with separate others, to accept responsibility for our choices – but not by accepting the world as it is, but by looking for something "to which Yes can be said and be done".

A necessary step in this process will be the one of Wittgensteinian therapy, of freeing ourselves from the pictures that hold us captive. In this case, of marriage and domesticity as slavery, as male domination, as the dominion of Suleiman the Great – the picture, we should be reminded, Izabela herself invites by giving Ahmed a nickname "Suleiman the Great" as a part of erotic play. It is this picture that scares her, and it is this picture that both she and Ahmed feel captivated by, their captivity reflecting the captivity of wider society.

Rather than accepting tradition, together with its 'domestic slavery' and traditional gender roles, Izabela should rather accept her own homelessness, her own poverty, as a part of the modern situation. It is only then, that she might find a new home for herself. Only when she frees herself of this picture of traditional domesticity, will she be able to imagine a different domesticity to be possible. For instance the one Cavell recognizes in remarriage comedies, about which he says:

> In this genre of movie if anyone is seen to cook it is the man, never the woman (or never without him); that, uniquely in this genre of comedy, so far as I know, the happiness of marriage is dissociated from any a priori concept of what constitutes domesticity (you might also call marriage in these films the taking of mutual pleasure without a concept – whether two people are married does not necessarily depend on what age they are, or what gender, or whether legally). Marriage here is being presented as an estate meant not as a distraction from the pain of constructing happiness from a helpless, absent world, but as the scene in which the chance for happiness is shown as the mutual acknowledgment of separateness, in which the prospect is not for the passing of years (until death parts us) but for the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday until our true minds become unreadable to one another.[26]

[25] Cavell, "On Makavejev on Bergman," 317.

[26] Stanley Cavell, *In Quest for the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 178.

Conclusion

In discussing the ending of *WR*, Cavell stresses the importance of 'talking heads' for Makavejev's vision.[27] A talking head – a head severed from the body – is an avatar of this therapeutic practice, a possibility of talking authoritatively in a post-metaphysical world. This possibility is, of course, always limited and conditioned, that is why these heads are heads of bodies, and not of some disembodied intelligences. Also, that is why they are severed: in taking up this task they have to severe themselves from the unreflective reality of the body. Without them, however, we are lost, condemned to the pictures 'that hold us captive', and to repeating words without ever fully understanding them and consequently winding up in disaster.

It is exactly the importance of these 'talking heads' that is missed when the film is described as a 'statue', or even as a "moving body"[28]. No wonder then that readings which see it this way tend to minimize, or even completely reject the importance of whatever the therapeutic figure of Dr. Kostić has to say. However, without him as the 'talking head', what we are left with is 'a scene of illusion and trance and artificiality':

> In the culture depicted in [Wittgenstein's] *Investigations* we are all teachers and all students – talkers, hearers, overhearers, hearsayers, believers, explainers; we learn and teach incessantly indiscriminately; we are all elders and all children, wanting a hearing, for our injustices, for our justices. Now imagine a world in which the voices of the interlocutors of the *Investigations* continue on, but in which there is no Wittgensteinian voice as their other. It is a world in which our danger to one another grows faster than our help for one another.[29]

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[27] Cavell, "On Makavejev on Bergman," 330.

[28] Mortimer, *Terror and Joy*, 108.

[29] Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 75.

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