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The Everyday of Age

Drawing my Grandmother's Portrait

I called this paper today "The Everyday of Age – Drawing my Grandmother's Portrait", because my first thought when seeing Suzan Noesen's "Livre d'Heures", as I believe many can relate too, was a thought to my own grandmother. The details of her face, the wisdom in her wrinkles, the small gestures in her daily life, the naïve position she takes towards our so-called "New Age", the way she cuts her bread or pours her water … All these everyday gestures, I see her perform today, transport me straight away back to the way she cut my apples when I was a child. At the end of the film, I believe we are left with the insight that painting a grandmother's portrait is also painting a portrait of yourself in the discourse of times - past and present - and in the lineage of who we become as women in youth and in age. I would like to focus on these aspects here today.

The film opens, for me, with a search for identity following a girl dressed in white erring through the woods. These images are accompanied by troubled, dissonant voices marking the search for clarity of thought sought in the encounter with nature. Then, we cut to the first image of "Bomi"'s hands holding her crutches moving slowly forward with cautious steps. The colours from the first images of the girl in the woods are marked by flowery yellows and fresh greens, which then switch to dark browns and earthy greens in the kitchen; the bright daylight becomes the interior shadows of the house; the dynamics of a free mobility and discovery oppose the slowness of age. Before moving into the first part, this visual introduction into the film's universe establishes the

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dichotomy of youth and age together with a young woman's search for "something" -

maybe for identity.

In the first part entitled "Les motifs", "Livre d'Heures" sets out for a cinematic

portrait. We encounter "Bomi" as a set of hands and daily gestures: nurturing the fire of

the stove, pushing the curtains, folding her kitchen towels, peeling potatoes, turning the

pages of her newspaper or handling the remote control of the TV. Her face is not

revealed in the beginning to the audience. However, another face appears: a face on a

canvas outlined in bold black brush strokes and white eyes. Then, we cut to a medium

shot of the grandmother sitting at her kitchen table; she is out of focus and becomes

patches of colourful pixels still at a remove from the audience. What strikes me here is

how Suzan Noesen is looking for an encounter between art and cinema, asking how do I

paint someone's portrait on canvas and in film. The bold strokes of black and white

oppose the reproduced reality of the cinematic image. A real or true image then seems

to emerge in the play between these two media. But whose portrait are we really

seeing? After the first dialogue between the two women, the faces on the canvas have

multiplied. We encounter an identity that is both multi-layered and somehow split... and

seems to refer back to the artist herself.

The grandmother's character, composed of close-ups on hands and gestures

mentioned before, creates a cinematic portrait that focuses on the basic mechanics of

life complicated by the hurdles of age and the tremor of her hands. It seems that her

identity narrows down to the essentials of life. She establishes a perception of age that

strips life of artifice; nothing is performative, but rather always practical.

For the first dialogue, the character of the young female artist, played by the

director herself, comes into play and the grandmother's face is revealed. The

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confrontation of these two characters happens through repeated dialogues in the kitchen over the course of the film. In these instants, the rupture between the two generations becomes apparent. The artist does not just sit at the table with her grandmother, but faces her principles of life - practicality, simplicity, tradition - in this cinematic portrait. Here, their different perceptions on the world become palpable. Visually the patterns worn by the artist clash with the patterns of the house: leopard prints against colourful flowers and checkered tablecloths. "Bomi" does not understand the artist's visual theories. She says: "Dovunner verstin ech neischt." Suzan does not understand the importance of flowers on the grave for Pentecost. She says: "Musst daat lo direkt sinn." However, they also find moments of connections: The grandmother's love for gardening resembles the artist's passion for painting.

Visually, the two worlds of these women meet later within the colours of the grandmother's home and the painting of Suzan, as later in the section "Office du temps" the montage edits together the white stains of paint she rolls on the floor to the white, cracked façade of the house straight back to the grandmother's flowers. As the film revealed before, the passion for art of Suzan is similar to the grandmother's love for gardening. In this particular moment, their two worlds meet harmoniously on the level of the visual – the colour landscapes painted by the camera. Furthermore, the artist's gestures are observed with the same closeness and put against the images of the grandmother from before…

In this intergenerational dance of perspectives and principles, I wonder further what does it mean to age in this film? Particularly for women? In her recent book "Ontology of the Accident", the philosopher Catherine Malabou re-discovers ageing in a similar light in the autobiographical short text *The Lover* of Marguerite Duras, written

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when Duras was 70 years old, where she (Duras) calls herself an "aged girl". Departing

from the common understanding of age as a gradual evolution, a "becoming", Malabou

discovers something else in Duras' self-image… She discovers how aging so often

happens despite of ourselves and can appear like an "pure event", an accident, not

gradually, but "instantaneously". For Malabou, we age "by accident".

In Suzan Noesen's film "Livre d'heure", the dialogues reveal this approach to age

towards the grandmother. Bomi here is not just an elderly lady representative of her

age, (so predominant in contemporary films), but a true character, an "aged girl". The

film reminds me of Margeret Tait's film "A Portrait of Ga" from 1952, where she tries to

record her mother's personality in the peculiar ways with which she unfolds her candy.

Here, the meeting between the artist and her grandmother is as much a meeting

between two generations as it is the meeting of two girls: one has aged, the other might

be in the moment of doing so. This is what I believe the mysterious girl and her bicycle

stands for in this surreal twilight space that complements the reality of the staged

everyday interactions… She is the little girl that persists across generations and ages, she

is the little girl that we were as a child when our grandmothers helped us cutting an

apple.

Maybe, it is by engaging with this girl and her grandmother that the artist of this

film finds a stability in her identity when, contrary to the girl erring through the woods,

in the end, she drives with purpose to put the flowers on the graves as her grandmother

asked her to. Maybe, we can even say that it establishes that identity in the end is

always shared rather than individual, shared between women, families and generations.

This is the strength of "Livre d'Heures": defying the ageist perspective of contemporary

Western societies, often so detrimental to women in particular, interested only in the

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preservation of plastic youthfulness. Here, age is a given; fundamentally tied to the

wonders of life itself.

Laura Lux is a PhD student in the German department at King's College London, where

she is studying the visualisation of technology in the early political filmmaking of Harun

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