

Daniela (rachel) VÁVROVÁ

rachel@reflectangulo.net

<http://rachel.reflectangulo.net>

Matr.Nr.: a 0105710

Stud.Zhl.: A 307 (Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie)

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Mag. Drehli (Andreas) Robnik

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Ambiguity of Existence

Wanda. Film by Barbara Loden. 1970. 102 minutes. Shot on 16mm film and blown up to 35 mm. Cinematography and montage: Nicholas T. Proferes. In the title roles: Michael Higgins as Mr. Dennis and Barbara Loden as Wanda Goranski. Production: Harry Shuster and the Foundation for Filmmakers. New York. Winner of the International Critics' Prize in 1970, Venice Film Festival.

How to express something that is deeply and to a large extent even unconsciously felt? How to express the poetics of human life and not to destroy its freedom by external judgements? How to perceive and express people's social realities and struggles within them, their anxieties and longings, and their personal life stories and individual creativities? In his book *Art and Imagination* Roger Scruton writes about 'expressiveness' as an impact, as a complex network of public feelings and thoughts, where the recognition of expressiveness belongs in part to the "knowledge by acquaintance". It cannot therefore be fully replaced by any description in a unitary way (Scruton 1974: 213-217). Following Merleau-Ponty's philosophical perspective about expression of a lived-body, Vivian Sobchack writes in her book *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* that "the lived-body is not merely an object in the world, the flesh of its flesh; the body is also a subject in the world. It is both agent and agency of an engagement with the world that is lived in its *subjective* modality as *perception* and in its objective modality as *expression*, both modes constituting the *unity* of meaningful experience" (1992: 40, italics in original).

Barbara Loden's unconventional filming style offers a unique experience, a disillusioned fable about a woman, about a female body living its existential ambiguity, about her search for authenticity in an inauthentic world. Her femininity is continuously nailed by the tough realities of the world that is ruled by men and society that is predominantly patriarchal. It seems, however, that a part of this same masculine domain attracts her as if she would need it in order to find her own existential security. The path towards it is not easy. First of all it is hard to find the path and then, maybe even harder, to follow it. Moreover, it is not just any man but a man who would be strong and sensitive enough to deal with her internal struggles and liberate her in all her femaleness. The film *Wanda* is a result of one of the most critical film productions regarding 'American dream' and 'femme fatale'. Everyone can surely recognize many details which free the story from

obstinate patterns of the classical American, particularly Hollywood, film production. *Wanda* is much more mature than one can explicitly see on the screen. It penetrates deep under the skin. It poses severe existential questions and touches upon a deep ontological realm of human life. So much so that some could find it unbearable and would like to stop the film and never return back to see the end. Film-analytic Chuck Kleinhans wrote that the film “portrays Wanda’s total passivity in the face of life, her lack of freedom, indeed the meaninglessness of the concept of ‘freedom’ for her, and in this it is one of the most depressing and nihilistic films I have ever seen ... [it] is not a bad film, but it is a severely limited one. This is why, when I came out of the screening, I was angry with it” (1974). Bérénice Reynaud, a female film-critic, had an opposite view when she wrote that “Loden’s new style of filmmaking had taken her into the opaque, ambiguous territory of unspoken repression that has so often defined the condition of women – a territory only glanced at occasionally, *from the outside*, by generous male writers ... Wanda’s historical importance lies precisely at this junction: Loden wanted to suggest, *from the vantage point of her own experience*, what it meant to be a damaged, alienated woman – not to fashion a ‘new woman’ or a ‘positive heroine’” (2004: 230-231, italics in original). In general, there is not much written about Loden’s film. Reynaud’s article is a luminous exception. Nowadays one does not find a similar film production. It belongs to the era of the independent filmmaking, of ‘direct cinema’, and the time when the New Hollywood production made its imprint in the film history (end of 1960s until the beginning of 1980s). But *Wanda* does not belong to commercial industrial production. Its independence can not only be seen in the low-budget production and a small team involved in its realization, but also in its pragmatic motivation. Wanda’s personal story depicted in the film brings us into ongoing existential questioning and searching for a true liberation. Therefore, Wanda is not a passive body, ‘a zombie’ walking the streets. In her own way she fights for understanding of her own role among other human beings. She is not an emancipated woman, but someone who should be understood and cared of. She is not an object of visual pleasure. She radiates a combination of ‘active passivity’ – apparent indifference towards the outside world – and ‘passive activity’ – her internal struggle to free herself – without being a tough female hero, as men would imagine her to be, seeking her own liberation. This twofold passivity is well captured already by a ‘passive’ filmic approach of the filmmakers. Generally, the filmic art as any “artistic activity must always be turned into passivity, find itself in this passivity, and be thwarted anew” (Rancière 2006: 119). Did Loden thought of a similar approach while

shooting and directing *Wanda's* story with Nicholas Proferes? It is quite obvious that camera itself cannot be passive. Moreover, while being in the hands of a cameraperson it gains and projects his or her point of view. 16mm camera, in the technical progress of the time, was mobile and interactive. In the hands of Proferes and supported by Loden's instructions, the camera was put into a distance while the sequences were carefully framed in order to create the feeling of Wanda's direct internal confrontation between being-of-the-world and being-in-the-world. As the market gained power over human values (regardless of freedom being on the top of the list of American constitution), one does not wonder about the fact that the film was better received in Europe than in the United States of America. In its anti *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) approach it fights against the middle class inauthentic life style and perception of the world and shows in a very peculiar way that life is very real, complex and never fully understood. As "[t]o be born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world. The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. But this analysis is still abstract, for we exist in both ways *at once*. There is, therefore, never determinism and never absolute choice ... We are involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle" (Merleau-Ponty 1998 [1962]: 453-4; cited in Sobchack 1992: xix).

Wanderer's Filmic Narrative

A road movie, into which *Wanda* could be placed, is from the perspective of present times nothing special. However, in the 1960s and 1970s it was still not so common that a woman, after abandoning her family, would be on the road, alone and without money. The theme of money is present throughout the story. On the one hand, it represents wealth, good life and power. On the other hand, however, it represents the misery of human existence whenever the latter becomes ruled by it. It became quite a common knowledge that psychoanalysis, and Freud in particular, equated money with excrement, with faeces. It is said that stingy people have problems with defecation as they want to hold everything within and for themselves. I would say that money in this film shows both the aspirations towards a better life and the dark side and entire misery of the socio-political system and those on power. This kind of existential ambiguity is all the time perpetuated in the film. It is not nihilism that is exposed in the story. It is a reflection of

American society revealed through existential ambiguity of a human being. Both Wanda Goranski and Mr. Dennis, whom she meets on the road, mirror the world around them. By rejecting inauthentic possibilities they revolt against the standards and tendencies produced by American society. It is not fame and wealth which attract them, but to find their path and stay on it. It seems that Mr. Dennis, a thief and a robber, has found his path and he offers it to Wanda. While enjoying the sunset on a field, Mr. Dennis explicitly says to Wanda that if you do not want anything, you will have nothing. If you have nothing, you are nothing ... even not a citizen of USA.¹ Wanda, on the other hand, does not think in these terms. For her Mr. Dennis' path is only one of the possibilities (and not very conventional one), of which she does not have many. At the same time, she becomes attached to him. Her existential ambiguity is several times explicitly shown. For example, in the scene where she learns that she will be Mr. Dennis' companion in the bank robbery she throws up. The question here is not so much about what is good or bad or what is proper or improper (this would be the attitude of an inauthentic, bourgeois, Hollywood perspective) but rather a question of her existence and pertaining struggle between being and becoming, between security and freedom. Her "nausea" reveals her existential anxiety and ambiguity we all are sometimes experiencing.² There is freedom which frightens and it is easier to run from it into the safety of roles and realities that are defined by society. To be free is to be thrown into existence with no rules to define you, and no definition of the reality into which you are thrown, either. To accept this freedom would mean to live authentically. In the most common interactions of daily life we all face the challenge between authentic choice and temptation of comfortable inauthenticity. It is here that Wanda decides for the former option.

"The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals" (Bordwell 1986: 18). How close is Loden's story to this description of the Hollywood film? First of all, her struggle is existential and her goal is

¹ My free translation from DVD I have (a copy of the film from 3 Sat channel, synchronized in German language).

² State of Nausea: alienation or disengagement. See more in Sartre, Jean-Paul (1964) [1938]. *Nausea*. New York: New Directions. Or the following web side
> <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/david.cox101/writing/sartre-nausea.html> <

therefore not clearly defined. She struggles within herself and with the outside world, but her questions are not answered. She leaves the viewer with a good feeling that a human being was not born to live alone and that being with one another makes sense. The gender difference touches upon ontological dimension of human being. The similarities between the main characters are mirrored in their doings and sayings, in their mutual respect and directness. We do not deal here with a classical heterosexual romance, but with a relationship in which each of two participants expresses the need for the other in his or her particular way. Emotions, as one is used to see or hear them, are rarely expressed. The viewer cannot expect to be explicitly told about their feelings, but they become revealed through a few dialogues, through seemingly silent actions, or in the scenes without any excessive aggression. It is only after Mr. Dennis' death that Wanda screams and runs through the forest. By losing Mr. Dennis Wanda loses her new found path. Wanda's liberation began with Mr. Dennis. He showed her that she is needed, that she can be useful (which was not the case with her previous husband and their children). It was he who offered her a hand to pull her out of existential ambiguity and for a short period of time Wanda began to feel that she exists. Their doings were oriented towards life and not towards death. He was proud and happy after she helped him in struggle with the director of the bank (and he told her that explicitly, when she came and asked him for the keys of their stolen car). Her encounter with a policeman when she got lost in a town, while following Mr. Dennis and director of the bank on their way to rob a national bank, proved her momentary firmness in her liberation. However, with Mr. Dennis' death her temporary, seemingly unambiguous existence also ends. She sinks into apathy where even existential ambiguity becomes covered with a heavy load of emptiness produced by his death. She stumbles to saloon/brothel, accompanied by the sound of a fiddle – a mixture of Scottish and American country music. A cheerful sound is attached to her emptiness. We do not see “[t]he goal oriented hero, the appeal to principles of unity and realism, the functions of temporal and spatial coherence, the centrality of the invisible observer, the arbitrariness of closure” (Bordwell 1986: 32). In the last scene of the film Wanda sits silently among the men: smoking, eating, and drinking. It seems as if we returned to the beginning of the film. There is, however, one important difference. There was hope at the beginning: hope for her and us as viewers. Now, regardless of the fiddle and its joyful sound, we join and are overpowered by her emptiness. Knowing when the film was made I asked myself where is America today? And where – or what – are today's human values?

Visible and invisible messages

What are the visions of the film and what does it want to convey is left for a further discussion. It offers us an allusion, 'a thwarted fable', as Jacques Rancière writes in his book about the *Film Fables* (2006). It shows anomaly of a woman's existence among the men. It deals with ambiguity of both filmic and life experiences. It erases the codes of general beauty and formal imagination. It creates alternatives, reconstructs expectations and reflects upon someone's life. Regarding men and women it shows us difference in sameness and sameness in difference. "The moral of the cinema is, much like its fables, thwarted" (Rancière 2006: 186). The heroes are dead and the wrong men/women stay. "A 'wrong man', for Hitchcock, is someone mistakenly thought to be guilty; for Dostoevsky, conversely, it is someone who struggles in vain to pass for guilty" (ibid.). Who or where is then Wanda with her existential struggle, while at the same time destroying the haunting will of spectators for any solution? Is she guilty of not staying where she was, of trying to get out of her existential ambiguity? I would say no. I felt that I understood her. I believe in her regardless of emptiness into which she was suddenly thrown. I believe in her struggle with society at large just as I believe that the filmic codes serve not only to break down the already set up filming patterns but also to reconstruct the social institutions and their cranky function. While the success may not be immediately visible, the hope nevertheless exists.

Proferes' direct, participatory, distanced, aesthetical and observational style leaves time and space for spectators. Through the montage he makes the invisible visible. "As a modality of embodied (and, thus, expressed) perception, vision – whether human or cinematic – is constituted as the dialectic between the visible and the invisible, between the seen and the seeing, between embodiment in its objective and subjective expression. Existential vision is, in this sense, always an activity of re-viewing and re-vision (precisely the activity that defines and occupies the film)" (Sobchack 1992: 294). The message seems to be dubious until we understand that our perception too is paradoxical. "The perceived thing itself is paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it ... there is a paradox of immanence and transcendence in perception. Immanence, because the perceived object cannot be foreign to him who perceives; transcendence, because it always contains something more than what is actually given" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 16; cited in Sobchack ibid.). Wanda's story is a story of all of us.

The question is: do we want to perceive it as such or we deny its existence in us? In the latter case there will be no re-viewing, no re-vision, no reflection, and no transcendence. But isn't a blind eye just another form of inauthenticity? Loden's existential filming approach made its point in the history of film productions. She died of cancer at the age of 48, ten years after *Wanda* was released.

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