

***A fantastic woman* (dir. Sebastián Lelio, 2017) – the sublime and the body¹**

Agnieszka Piotrowska

A Fantastic Woman, is an extraordinary film that won an Oscar in 2018 for the Best Foreign Film. It has been described by *The Guardian* as the ‘sublime study of love, loss and the trans-experience.’¹ In this review I want to note the focus on the body throughout the film, which then moves to the sublimation of the main character’s anxiety and her sense of a profound loss after her lover dies. In the scene, which takes place towards the end of the film, the transgender woman Marina visits her elderly music teacher, clearly after a period of absence. He asks her why she has visited him. By this point the narrative of the film has taken the viewer through a range of emotions: from Marina losing her partner, through the humiliations and physical violence she has had to endure at the hands of her late lover’s family and, finally, the moments of magical realism that help her come to terms with her loss. The everyday in this film is a site of mundane and ugly prejudice and small mindedness, which is not conducive to any moments of the sublime. But then the sublime does happen. The film is relentless in its painful representation of the discrimination and humiliation Marina suffers until we come to the scene of her visit to the elderly music teacher. The scene is shot in a traditional way consisting of a static camera shots, reverse shot, wide shots and mid shots. The camera emphasizes the *ordinariness* of the conversation. It could be a standard television drama. Its simple conversation is a crucial part of it precisely because out of this ordinary encounter something special emerges.



Daniela Vega in *A Fantastic Woman* (2017). dir. Sebastián Lelio

The teacher, who, in the structure of the scene occupies a position of Marina’s father but also that of a psychoanalyst, tells her that she looks ‘terrible’ (and repeats it in case she missed it) and then interrogates her further: ‘Did you come here to work on your

¹ Acknowledgement: Some of the material in this essay will be used in my chapter in entitled *The Sublime and Feminine Jouissance* in the forthcoming collection *The Sublime in Everyday life* to be published by Routledge in 2021.

technique or hide from the world?’ Marina hesitates and says ‘both’. The music teacher is unimpressed but affectionate. He tells her off kindly. He reminds her he is her mentor and her professor – for classical music. She adds as if this had been a conversation they had had before: ‘...and you are not a psychologist and you are not my father’. And he nods. As noted in fact in part he is both. She muses – why did she come at all? ‘To sing, I hope’ says the music teacher. But Marina does not agree yet – ‘or maybe to look for some love’ she says. There is a simple warmth in this exchange, a dialogue which presents a deep connection that might be similar to love between a father and a daughter.

Again, referring to previous conversation or conversations, she says she doesn’t want to talk about Saint Francis, but her teacher insists. In this crucial moment, he reminds her that Saint Francis did not pray for gifts to God, asking for things for himself. Instead, he asked ‘make me an instrument of your love, make me a channel of your peace’. This is where the secret message of the film is revealed, this is where the sublime can come, when you shift your attitude to giving instead of taking. The idea here is to sublimate her suffering, and her love for her deceased partner, into something artistically beautiful, sublime, that can be shared with others. Here the sublime is akin to getting close to the love of God, something that in Christian tradition might be called a state of Grace.

In the next shot Marina goes up to the old man and puts her arms around him as he is sitting down by his piano. There is a moment of stillness and then the old teacher says: ‘Sing a little for me’. The following scene is a simple wide shot which features the music teacher by his grand piano and Marina. He begins. It is an 18th century aria which Marina sings in her angelic mezzo soprano a song about a spurned wife *Sposa Son Disprezzata* “A shadow has never been as tall and wide as this tree’s shadow. Thank you for sheltering me.” As soon as Marina starts singing, the film cuts to a tracking shot of her walking against a strong wind. It seems that all the debris in the world is blown against her but somehow she is not falling. The shot becomes unrealistic and very beautiful with her leaning against the wind but not falling. This is crucial. This song creates a paradigmatic transition to a different mode in the narrative of the film in which the sublime is possible. Throughout the tracking shot the aria sung by Marina is heard creating, as Amy Herzog (2009) would say, a ‘musical moment’ in which the music takes over and becomes a crucial moment in the film.

Until that moment one of the most important of the many themes that this film touches upon is the body. The difficulties that Marina has with her deceased partner’s family are to do with her own body: the body which is perceived as that of being male despite her desire and presumably some efforts to make it more feminine. Marina, played by a real-life transgender woman Daniela Vega, does not completely succeed in ‘passing’ for a woman. In truth, she appears less convincing than many others seen on the streets of London but also in cinema, including for example, a male actor Eddie Redmayne playing a transgender artist Einar Wegener in the movie *The Danish Girl* (2015). In real life he is a man but somehow his transformation from female to male appears very successful. Marina, on the other hand, is ‘read’ as a trans woman straight away which causes issues on every level: when the police ask about her name there is an immediate air of suspicion, before even any discussion about her ID takes place. Later in the film, she walks into the male changing room with no difficulties, displaying her tiny breasts, or

rather perhaps a suggestion of a breast, like in an adolescent girl. Marina is tall, her body is slim but has a heavy frame, her face is quite square, and somehow not feminine, although why that is, is hard to define. There are of course very many biological women who look quite masculine, but Marina's body becomes a crucial point in her life and the storyworld of the film: this body of hers is forever the object of examination, both her own and those by others – until, eventually, in the moment of total sublimation, this problematic body does not matter anymore. The sublime happens and wipes out the problem of/with the body. The issue of her gender is not really discussed with anybody – it seems that she wants to define herself as a woman, not as a non-binary person. She appears obsessed with it, examining herself in mirrors, choosing the most feminine dresses, and make up. We do not learn why she embarked on this journey and where she is prepared to take it.

The film's construction and its narration are mostly realistic, except for the moments of the magic realism in which curious things to do with her pain happen. Marina's pain is overwhelming and real. Indeed, the film is very much about the pain of mourning but without being allowed to do so openly and using the accepted rituals: she is the hated and shamed outsider precisely because she took a decision to change her body – presumably many years ago, in order to have a different gender identity. Not only does the film not give us a back story regarding this decision, but we do not we know anything about her lover's desire and his decision to live with Marina, the decision which clearly is perceived as very different from his previous life. The film does not tell us about any of that, it just focuses on bodies and their desires, on their fragility and their importance despite our continuous drive to disregard their ephemeral nature. The director of the film makes sure we understand that Orlando and Marina had a passionate intimate life; when we meet them at the beginning of the film, it is her birthday and he is planning to take her on an expensive holiday to one of the seven wonders of the world to Iguazú Falls. Importantly, however, their life together is not exactly secret but it is on the peripheries of society: both the restaurant they have their celebration at and the club where she performs popular songs are placed in subterranean spaces, under the surface of the city, on the borderlines of the acceptable.

Bodies and language

A relationship between bodily experience, bodily desire, both hidden and conscious, and the speech was of course crucial at the outset of psychoanalysis. A hysteric through her body gave an expression to her repressed bodily longings which often made her sick until the analysis allowed for the speech to transform the bodily secret into an open conversations. In *Autobiographics in Freud and Derrida* (1990) Jane Marie Todd makes this connection between a bodily symptom and an autobiographical statement: 'The hysterical body is a text, in fact, an autobiographical text. Every symptom tells a story about the patient's life, or rather several stories' (Todd 1990: 5). Todd further points out that the work of a psychoanalyst is really that of a 'translator', a translator of symptoms:

It is the task of the psychoanalyst to work with the patient, to collaborate on a *translation* of this secret and motivated language of the body into the conventional language of the words. (ibid.: 5, my emphasis).

Freud calls this collaboration, this task of translation, ‘an analysis’. Todd further glosses that ‘analysis’ is the name given to ‘an autobiographical practice whose principal purpose is neither to testify nor to confess (one’s sins or one’s devotion), though both modes may be part of an analysis. The work of analysis is autobiographics as *cure*’ (ibid.: 5-6).

One could take issue with the above – or many issues – one of these being Freud’s at times patriarchal attitude to females which I have discussed elsewhere (Piotrowska 2019). I am putting a marker here but bracketing the discussion in order to focus on another question: is translating one’s experience into words always therapeutic? It is interesting to note that the moment of ‘translation’ from bodily experience to language which, psychoanalysts believe, has both a curative effect, could in addition have other effects if that ‘translation’ enters a public space: psychoanalysis names (artistic) sublimation as a way of channelling (indeed translating) one’s frustrated sexual energy into a creative activity.

Lacan famously took away the ‘frustrated’ element and suggested that there is enjoyment (*jouissance*) in talking and writing which is equal to sexual satisfaction. A sublimation of desire can be sexually pleasing, he thought. In the introduction to her recent book on sex, Alenka Zupancic argues: ‘The point that Lacanian psychoanalysis makes, however, is more paradoxical: the activity is different, yet the satisfaction in talking is itself “sexual”’ (2017: 1), meaning further that it needs not have roots in its ‘sexual origin’, that is to say the talking itself can be a sublimation without the content being in any way sexual. This is crucial to note as it connects directly to my discussion of sublimation and the sublime: to put it bluntly, sublimation is not the repression of sexual desire, it is at times its fulfilment, just as successful as an actual physical encounter. Zupancic says further that it is narrating the experience that makes it special and not the other way around: ‘The satisfaction in talking contains a key to sexual satisfaction (and not the other way around)’ (ibid.: 1).

Freud and those who followed certainly wanted to relieve the symptoms of their suffering patients, but the main objective of psychoanalysis has been for more than a century the project of gaining knowledge: both in terms of self-knowledge on the part of the patient/analysand but also the knowledge which can then be shared with others *through language* in order to advance our collective knowledge – or non-knowledge – of who we are, as humanity or perhaps as merely Western civilisation. Psychoanalysis in its clinical psychotherapeutic guises has often had a normative aspirations: that is to say to make the patient fit into society and culture more easily. But that was emphatically not Lacan’s idea, not at the moment of enunciation and even less so towards the end of his life. The ‘not giving up’ on one’s desire’ can be a controversial proposition: what if the desire is not ethical? For that reason, , Alain Badiou, for example, attempted to present a reformulation of the idea to make the ‘desire’ somehow always ethical – but the category is troublesome and slippery and needs further interrogations. Zupancic and other members of the Slovenian school of psychoanalysis and philosophy have emphasised the profound links between psychoanalysis and philosophy, the inherent contradictions notwithstanding (ibid.: 2). Lacan of course by pronouncing that ‘the unconscious has a structure of language’ did in some way inadvertently confuse the issue as the phrase was promoted by structuralist thinkers (including structuralist film theorists), who focused on languages as a system of signs, ignoring the body and its experience.

The interesting thing about the film I am discussing here is that the whole notion of the bodily suffering and bodily satisfaction becomes erased by the moment of musical sublimation which in the film functions as an extension of the quasi psychotherapeutic session between the teacher and Marina. The teacher interprets Marina's pain but offers a non psychoanalytical solution, or so one could suggest. The moment where her elderly music teacher tells Marina about St Francis, about his prayer not to receive things from God but to be given an enlightenment as to how to share the divine love becomes the crucial turning point of the film. One could venture that, psychoanalytically, the teacher encourages her to be faithful to her musical desire, to sublimate her pain in order to be able to move away from the depression the profound melancholia she is descending into. The narrative continues with many humiliations still to come, but it is clear that Marina will find her way to the sublime through her art, through her music.

In the very final scene of the film we see Marina on her way to a concert. She changes in a simple black trouser outfit, with her hair tied back, looking beautiful and androgynous, the embodiment of the non-binary beauty. This is the first and only time in the film that we see her wearing trousers.

She comes out onto the stage where her music teacher is already seated by the piano and begins to sing another 18th century aria. She sings so beautifully that her singing indeed transcends the discussion of her body, and her sexuality, the discussion, which is present throughout the film. The moment is sublime because we understand that the prejudicial and discriminatory audience listening to her performance is transported out of their ugliness, that Marina indeed has found or re-found the sublime instrument of the divine love and is bringing it to the everyday of the urban life, and that it will be taking place through a sublime *jouissance* of a pain translated into a public beauty through her singing. It is in that moment that the issues with her body – such as they were – cease to exist, cease to matter because the only thing that matters is her singing and her letting herself be the sublime instrument of love.

This is indeed the moment which makes the film's final message an almost poetic manifesto of the power of transformation through an artistic expression, when the sublime becomes Grace, whether one is religious or not. This is the moment when the trauma of Marina's life finds its therapeutic moment of peace. The translation of her desire into art and that of audience's unexpected appreciation of her work is presented as one of the ways out of the every day prejudice and hardship – not just for Marina but for all of us.

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Agnieszka Piotrowska is an award winning filmmaker and a theorist. She is the Head of School, Film, Media and Performing Arts, and a Professor of Film and Cultural Studies at the University for the Creative Arts, UK. She is a Visiting Professor at Gdansk University, Poland. She is best known for her acclaimed documentary *Married to the Eiffel Tower* (2009) screened globally in 60 countries. She has worked extensively in Zimbabwe producing films in creative partnerships with artists there. Piotrowska has written extensively on psychoanalysis and cinema and is the author of the monographs *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film* (2014) *Black and White: cinema, politics and the arts in Zimbabwe* (2017) and *The Nasty Woman and neo femme fatale in contemporary cinema* (2019). She has edited 3 books on psychoanalysis and cinema. Her latest book is *Creative Practice Research* (EUP, 2020). She is a founding scholar at the British Psychoanalytic Council. She is also film editor at *Free Associations*.
