

An essay on *Natan* - a short film Being human: character in narrative film

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While watching a film we like to cheer for the protagonist, wanting the best for his character and wanting him or her to achieve specific goals.

Linda Segar^[1]

Reading and sauntering and lounging and dozing which I call thinking is my supreme happiness.

David Hume^[2]

We shall not play charlatan and we will declare frankly that nothing is clear in this world. Only fools and charlatans know and understand everything.

Anton Chekov^[3]

Most screenwriting manuals define *character* in terms of the classical Hollywood model^[4] where the plot is driven by the goal-oriented actions of a clearly defined protagonist. The desire of the protagonist (lit. "the one who struggles") provides an essential focus for the audience who are drawn into the story by the broad brush strokes of sympathetic character traits, psychological motivation and the energetic engagement with the problem at hand: the drama and conflict arise from obstacles to this desire and the chain of character-driven causality offers a clear line for the audience to follow. The assumption being that we are drawn to fast-paced action and like to identify with strong, active characters who have talent or skill or sheer dogged determination to overcome all obstacles and have good reason to: we understand that something important is at stake. The revelation of character, their true motives and secret impulses is itself often central to the emotional catharsis of crisis and climax. In this narrative world of clarity and action there is less room for chance or coincidence, ambiguity or uncertainty: characters lacking motivation and direction risk losing their audience.

The European art film offers a contrast to this overtly psychological model with its meta-narrative of life as more contingent and incoherent: characters are less clearly defined and goal-driven, events are more loosely linked and endings remain open: characters often act because they *have* to, not because they *want* to. The short film is a genre that can easily sustain a more existential and elliptical style but a story like *Natan* where the central character is weak or indecisive creates a challenge to both writer and audience. The solution here is to switch the narrative initiative onto another character who moves the story forward while providing an illuminating counterpoint to the real subject of concern, the inarticulate mystery of Natan himself. In the process we are forced to reflect on the work ethic, friendship, happiness and the psychology of being human: what is it to know another human being and why do we need or what should we do with this knowledge? As an audience used to a more active central character we are disoriented but forced to confront our own feelings of incompetence and hopelessness in the face of an aggressive world full of more talented, powerful people than ourselves. Like many art films, *Natan* is as interested in exploring feelings, attitudes, assumptions, ideas about life - as in telling a story. In one sense however, the film is entirely conventional: we are presented with a protagonist who does not seem to have a clear goal, whose character and motivation are vague; we're never quite sure who he is, what he is going to do next: but this very characterisation is the source of narrative suspense and surprise. In the end Natan has to take the initiative, act creatively and make a decision under pressure that is both surprising and satisfying. In other words this is a familiar story about a character who is always running away but who one day decides to stay and see things through.

Beneath the documentary stylistics of jump cuts and hand-held camera the plot is actually quite simple. Viggo, a busy kebab shop owner takes pity on Natan, a lonely, temporary employee and tries to help him purchase a dog to brighten his life, finally losing patience and driving off in his big car having failed to make real human contact with Natan - unlike the dog's owner, the lady who now invites Natan into her house. Then too there is a clear thematic conflict between the instrumental, goal-driven character of Viggo and the stubborn, inarticulacy of Natan: between *having* and *being*. This obvious clash at the centre of the film gives the film both a satisfying metaphorical resonance (about how we live in an all-consuming market culture) and makes the conventional assumption about the

representation of human beings as goal-oriented, psychologically defined characters, itself the subject of reflection. This clarity of forward movement and conflict however conceals the real complexity of meaning that lies in the interplay of looks and glances between the three characters: we are involved in what they might be thinking or feeling, refracted through our own ambiguous feelings for Natan. This is an achievement to which all good films aspire: lacking the authorial voice and inner life of literary fiction, film aims to make a virtue of its relative objectivity by *hinting* at the inner world through ellipsis, suggestion, imagery, actions and reactions. The audience has to fill in the gaps and is drawn into the story.

Natan however is a difficult figure for the audience to identify with in the traditional sense: he is physically unattractive with a wandering, nervous eye, a high scarred forehead and weak mouth: unable to finish sentences or communicate, his almost autistic behaviour suggests someone educationally backward or disabled. Yet despite the apparent usurpation of his life and the film's narrative by Viggo, this physical quality along with a certain stubborn integrity gives him a presence at once vulnerable and unpredictable: despite making snap decisions, barking into his mobile and organizing the lesser mortals around him, Viggo is a secondary figure; a catalyst, an antagonist. Natan is the still centre of the film around which our thoughts flow but it is an aspect of the film's achievement that we sense Viggo is himself on a journey.

While Viggo is a familiar type - a successful, pushy businessman, he also has a human side and an emotional life that suggests a more rounded character. [5] His encounter with Natan clearly gives him pause for thought about his hectic lifestyle and awakens a compassion for someone less fortunate than himself. His own physicality, overweight, shortness of breath, sweating, snacking - suggests someone who might benefit from slowing down. Taking Natan to the dog lady is actually a break from all the problems of running a business. He has the opportunity but not enough time to think about his own life: he clearly wants to help Natan but in the end his impatience, his need to control and lack of real empathy make Natan's decision to stay with the woman perplexing and unsatisfying for Viggo. There's not enough time for him to reflect on what he might have gained or learned from their relationship, and you suspect he assumes it's all been one way: that finally trying to help those who won't help themselves is a waste of time: time that could be turned into money. If this were a feature film you could imagine other possibilities for Viggo. As it is, you can't help worrying that by the end of the film he is heading for a heart attack.

The woman called Sabina has what Viggo lacks - spiritual qualities of patience and empathy. She treats Natan with respect and speaks to him in a way that evokes his trust. He is a fellow human to be listened to and taken care of, to be allowed to discover his own way rather than to conform to someone else's fantasy of what he needs. You feel that she is not in a hurry to know or control this person who is a mystery to her. In the language of fairy tales Natan is the naïve simpleton who has instinctively found his way to a better place, to where the wise woman/mother figure is waiting for him in a house on the edge of the woods. Here he will receive the nurturing he needs because she recognizes that like a child brought up by animals, he has never learned to speak the language of men. Indeed his nervous animal qualities of grunts and running and hiding and being hunted down, apparently unable to defend himself, disturb the ironically superior spectator with memories of their own fragile animal nature. Though it is Viggo with his money, power, magic chariot and speaking device who brings Natan to the house and is a reminder that we all have to live in and negotiate with the material world, it is Sabine who is able to take Natan to a higher level: in psychological language she gives him the space to be one with the dog, the symbolic inversion of his divine self (god).

In this sense the film has the Chekovian qualities of a fragmentary Biblical narrative involving moments of grace and sudden transformation: a reminder of a more reticent approach to character than you find in mainstream narrative. Chekov's stories are often about characters whose motives are unclear and whose defining secrets are never revealed. For Sartre too, character was an idea imposed on human beings that could never match the complexity and changeability of people as they really are: life is elusive. The point about human nature is that it does not have a goal: living is enough reason in itself whereas everything in capitalism must have a point and purpose. Viggo embodies this restless drive to know, to accumulate, to transform; the perpetual motion and the rampant assertion of individual will so important to modern society: an energy and manic affirmation of the self that pushes the weak and unqualified to the margins while defending itself against failure and death. There is a touching and revealing moment on the bench after Viggo has pursued Natan from the kebab shop where this energy seems to drain away. Natan holds the half-eaten sandwich thrust into his hand as a crude offering of charity, looking feelingly at Viggo who seems to lose momentum, as if momentarily questioning what all this activity is about. He stares into the void and the void stares back. For Chekov idleness was the only form of happiness; for the hyperactive not doing anything can be disturbing, even traumatic, an encounter with the essential emptiness of being.

Natan you suspect is more sensitive to the fragility and contingency of life: like Lear he has learned to "see feelingly":

to perceive another human accurately we must *feel* and as the new testament parable suggests the rich are often insulated from feeling by an excess of property - what are twenty shops for? The cult of the will obscures our complex *interdependency*, our need to acknowledge human frailty and failure. Sabina represents the idea that life is about taking care of each other: happiness is found in being the reason for the happiness of another. The political form of this ethic in the West is socialism^[6] and in this capacity for fellow feeling *morality* is grounded. ^[7] *Natan* is a film that artfully explores this complex interdependence and realisation of our common humanity.

¹ Linda Segar, *The Art of Adaptation*. New York. Henry Holt, 1992

² *Letters of Hume, vol 2*

³ Quoted in Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekov*. London. Granta Books, 2003

⁴ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. London. Routledge, 1988

⁵ Forster, EM. *Aspects of the Novel*. London. Penguin, 1963

⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. London. Penguin Classics, 1986

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* London. Penguin, 2004