

The return of the repressed

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An idea for a film comes first out of the mind like a very fine piece of thread. One thinks and perhaps it becomes a piece of string.

Federico Fellini

An uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now thought imaginary.

Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*
(2003), p. 150

That terrible thing which is in every photograph: the return of the dead.

Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*
(1984), p. 9

The narrative of *Kitchen Sink* is simple: a woman discovers a thread that turns into an umbilical cord. She pulls on the cord and is shocked to discover a strange foetal creature emerging from her kitchen sink; then with a mixture of fear and disgust puts it in a bag as if it were some kind of abortion. Later, unable to dismiss the memory of what has happened she retrieves the bag and empties it into a running bath where the tiny creature grows into a hairy man. In her bedroom she lays the apparently dead or comatose man on her bed, shaves and caresses him, sleeps with him through the night but the next morning he is again rejected; sealed inside a plastic bag and left in the hall. For the first time however he has begun to breathe and struggle into life; the woman frightened but determined, takes an open razor and slashes the bag, apparently intending to harm the man who breaks free and wrestles the razor from her hand. She retreats to the kitchen where the man creature approaches her and in his turn caresses the

woman. She responds at first tentatively then with real loving passion until she finds a thread on the man's neck. Her passion interrupted by her curiosity, she pulls the thread: the man screams as she continues to pull. The film ends abruptly on black as sound effects take us back down into the void from where it all began.

What is going on here? We are clearly in the realm of the surreal and the fantastic: babies do not emerge from kitchen sinks nor grow into instant adults by immersion in water. A normal woman confronted with such disturbing marvels would react quite differently: yet we know it cannot just be her subjective imaginings because when she leaves the kitchen to answer the door we are shown something in the drainage pipe that is objectively real and *moving*; we are gripped by the uncertainty of what is real and what is imagined and drawn into a strange world that feels too real to be simply allegorical or poetic.

Nor is this a retelling of a literary fairy tale or classic myth: though there are thematic traces of Beauty and the Beast, Cupid and Psyche, Orpheus and Euridyce – hairy men, curious women, the power of love, the presence of death – there is also something more primitive and atavistic at stake; an unsettling ambiguity of meaning refracted through a fractured narrative and expressionist imaginary.

The everyday world is a suburban kitchen but in reality this is the world of the *uncanny*: a crisis of the natural; something foreign in ourselves and our home; the psychic underworld of wishful fantasies and fears and a nagging, constant uncertainty of what is being experienced and who is doing the experiencing; a shifting hesitation between the psychological and the supernatural shaded by Gothic motifs of doubling and the return of the dead. The film style contributes to the uncanny effect through its use of slow tracking shots, low and high angles, black and white photography, deep shadows, eerie sound design (including the rumble of appropriately gothic thunder) and an

elliptical narrative that keeps us trapped in the claustrophobic domestic world of kitchen, bedroom and bathroom: a safe familiar world now invaded by an alien presence.

And at the centre is the Woman; disgusted, determined, impulsive but never overwhelmed by the occult events; always acting as if they are natural: her belief making us believers. And there is the Man, erupting from an alchemical bath of mud (blood), dragged through the house (home), laid out on the bed, cleaned and dressed like a corpse (but unlike a corpse he bleeds), the woman sitting patiently by his side then lasciviously leaning in close to his face, breathing over his closed eyes and mouth. Film can do this: depict the fantastic as natural and reveal for an audience the Mystery that is the everyday.

The boundaries of this mysterious world are however marked by three intrusions that also double as framing devices for the fantastic kernel of the story and offer a possible explanation for the real reality of a woman who is mad, depressed or traumatised. At the door of her house a young girl asks her if she would like to buy a "mystery" envelope to which the woman declines. Ironically of course she is already colluding in her own mystery and framed in the darkness of the doorway the woman seems from the perspective of the outside world, nervous and withdrawn into a world of her own. Later when she is running the bath into which she has dropped the foetus creature the telephone rings and she tells a friend or family member that she is "fine" suggesting that she has not been well. And after she dresses the newly shaved man we realise we are seeing a mirror image of her looking at herself (and us); a moment of self-consciousness for the woman (and the viewer) that hints at the double (fantasy) life she (and the audience) are leading and knows she is leading but she can't stop. She can't stop herself pulling on the threads and drawing up images from the dark past; or she can't stop herself falling into the vortex of

madness. (Nor can we resist the lure of following unravelling mysterious plot threads). These moments combined with the razor, the suitcase of male clothing and especially the photograph (itself a ghostly presence from the past) of the woman with two men, one of whom is prominent in the foreground - are the only clues to her *backstory*, her life before new life appeared from the kitchen sink. The photo is especially resonant: the structural still centre of the story and the existential core of reality around which the fantasy revolves.

In narrative terms we are given no other information about who she is or why she might be hallucinating or why she has conjured up this experience from her unconscious. Is she in mourning? Has she lost her man and the possibility of making a life and a baby with that man? Has he returned to haunt her in a disturbing distortion of what might have been? Or has she been abandoned and now her desperate longing for love has set the film and her fantasy in motion? The film asks questions to which there are no definitive answers. The root meaning of "mystery" comes from the same root as myth: derived from the Greek verb "musteion": to close the eyes or mouth. (Karen Armstrong 1999, p. 244). Both words like film itself and our sense of the uncanny are rooted in an experience of darkness and silence.

In other words, rather than narrative answers we have narrative enigma: a dreamlike tale of primal desire and dislocation creating a palpable sense of growing unease. In a state between sleeping and waking a secret encounter is taking place; a woman discovers a foetus that she turns into a man and brings him to life. She dresses him; rejects him; attacks him; loves him; unravels him. Adam now springs from the touch of Eve and Pygmalion is a woman who sculpts a less than perfect man to love. A personal myth of the creative process linked to gothic fantasies of power and domination, primitive fears of sex and death, danger and doubling: two threads that produce two

births and two deaths; two slow tracks into the silent woman's back: the other side which cannot be seen but is always there, always present, waiting its turn to unravel everything; the compulsion to repeat keeps Death at bay but he is always waiting to return. Our lives are strange and uncanny always shadowed by the ghostly double of our final disappearance. The fantastic is in a very real sense our reality: without the imaginative faculty there is no life as we know it: yet we pull on the fantastic thread at our peril.

References

- Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God*, London: Vintage, 1999.
Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. London: Fontana, 1984.
Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.