

## **WE THE UNDEAD: *NADJA***

In the sky of the cinema people learn what they might have been and discover what belongs to them apart from their single lives. Its essential subject – in our century of disappearances – is the soul, to which it offers a global refuge. This, I believe, is the key to its longing and its appeal.

John Berger - *Keeping a Rendezvous*

Michael Almayreda's brilliant black and white film *Nadja* opens with a montage which overlays various images of contemporary Manhattan at night seen from a moving car as we hear the music of the Verve and hear the voice of Nadja: "Night. Nights without sleep. Long nights in which the brain lights up like a big city". The dense black and white montage eloquently suggests surrealist films such as *Entre'acte* by Rene Clair and *Return to Reason* by Man Ray. Part of this sequence is shot with 35mm film and part with a pixel camera, which is a video camera that records on audio-cassette tapes: the image, as one would expect, is diagrammatic in that one can easily see the individual pixels that make up an image. This montage, which we might call an overture, explicitly states the themes: Night as a psychological state, the mysteries of nature and its relation to cities and the multiple realities of consciousness and their relation to external reality. We cut from this very poetic effect to flat conventional matching close-ups inside a bar in New York City. Mirroring the shift in montage Nadja's talk goes from

overly poetic reverie to banal bar talk. The man listening to her smokes a cigarette and nods mindlessly to whatever Nadja is saying. In the next moment, as they fuck in a car, Nadja bites his neck. With the pixilated camera we see her lap up the blood with her tongue. She then receives what will later be described as a “psychic fax”, shot with a pixilated camera, in which she “sees” her father killed by a wooden stake through the heart. The rest of the film borrows liberally from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and from Andre Breton’s *Nadja*, using these works to describe the doubts about identity and the uncertain connections between life and death. The film seeks not to resolve such complexities but to articulate them so they make some sense of the present.

Breton’s *Nadja* was published in 1928. In it an unnamed narrator – presumably Breton himself – in the midst of walks in Paris by night finds a beautiful woman who may or may not be real – who may or may not “scorn reason and law alike”. The book is punctuated by photographs of fellow surrealists and everyday postcard subjects that take on a “surrealist” element because of their context in the narrative. *Nadja* is perhaps the most successful of the novels of this type – including Soupault’s *Last Nights of Paris* and George Bataille’s *The Eye*. The novel essentially charts the

fluctuations in temperament and identity of the various characters in the book including the narrator himself. The novel's theme is laid out in the first sentence: "Who am I?" This is a question that is then not answered for 160 pages for Breton is interested in breaking the conventions of singular identities presiding over linear narratives. The fluid transformative and creative aspect of identity is examined in prose that mimics those states of consciousness that he is describing. It was felt by the surrealists generally, and by Breton with indignation in various manifestos, that reason was an enemy to be brought down. It was perceived that the results of the "triumph of reason" were massive wars that killed millions, industrial slavery and repressed and unhappy "sleepwalkers" – city dwellers - out of touch even with their own needs and desires. Whatever one thinks of Surrealism as a method it is difficult to disagree with the prognosis of its reason for being. A way had to be found to undermine this base "rationalism" and discover – or re-discover (as "primitives" were presumed to have never lost touch with their holistic relation to nature) their true "self". Was such an enterprise possible? Dada had made a try at it but its antagonisms were seen as random and scattered. A more programmatic "scientific" approach was necessary. Various means were found that might achieve this end: Automatic writing, automatic drawing, shooting film with a blindfold,

walking without direction, speaking without knowing what you are saying, taking drugs, alcohol, etc. - anything that might undermine reason. All of this was done with the utmost seriousness.

From the point of view of Breton *Nadja* is the woman who rebels against reason “naturally” – that is - she is working class and her animus is seen as an instinctual loathing for the constricting mores of a society that is built on fear and repression. Her very freedom calls into question the principles of the society that she inhabits. Yet in Breton’s book the realities of France in the late twenties socially or personally are not in any sense explored or even mentioned. Breton is not interested in the paradox that his plan of attack against reason is in itself rational – something to which he remains stunningly oblivious. He is also not interested in his own slumming and seduction of working class women and its effects on them in “real life”. The girl who was the model for *Nadja* apparently fell in love with Breton and when her demands became “bourgeoise” she was summarily dismissed as the mascot of the surrealists. She was sent to a hospital to recover – as often happened to “hysterical” women who did not have a family to protect them. The novel in effect both romanticizes *Nadja* as a symbol of “uninhibited carnal pleasure without guilt” and keeps her at a distance as a symbol of the

“fatal woman” – the syphilitic prostitute who haunts the streets of Paris. In short Nadja is both goddess and whore – the conventions of the traditional novel are not so far removed after all! The narrative dislocations are simply window dressing - “avant-garde” enough to create titters among the respectable classes. Almereyda’s *Nadja* combines the myth of Dracula, which is about a fiend that lives indefinitely by taking people’s blood – and thereby their souls – with Nadja, the myth of the femme-fatale that lives indefinitely in the city taking men’s hearts – and thereby their souls.

In a Manhattan bar Nadja meets Lucy – the doomed heroine of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* - and have a heart to heart. That these two heroines would meet is a brilliant Godardian conceit that immediately addresses the problem of class that Breton ignored. In Almayereda’s film Nadja is a European aristocrat and Lucy is a working class American. Nadja is explaining that she is troubled by a meeting that will soon take place with her estranged brother who hates her. Lucy replies that she had a young brother that killed himself and that he was too young to have done it, as kids don’t know anything. Nadja disagrees believing that young people know “everything” – but that they cannot defend themselves from what they know. Using new age argot she explains to Lucy that she has “buried her primary pain which is

poisoning the water supply. You must dare to dredge up the primary pain. It frees you. For myself I'm not afraid of anything. Life is full of pain but the only pain I feel is the pain of fleeting joy." Lucy replies that she doesn't know what that is. Nadja poses theatrically in front of a jukebox with spinning cd's as we hear her voice over: "I meet someone I love. I feel so much joy, then I know what's in front of me – I can't breathe – the pain of fleeting joy," We dissolve to black. This extraordinary scene states the theme of the film, which is the nature of identity. Nadja turns the phrase "blood relation" into a literal animal sense of identity in which the "self" is to be found not in the brain or the soul but in the blood.

Von Helsing who is Dracula's nemesis in Stoker's book is the classical scholar/scientist who believes in reason – here he is played by Peter Fonda with sardonic enthusiasm. He explains the realities of Dracula to Jim – Lucy's boyfriend and Jonathan Harker in Stoker's book. In Jim's Manhattan apartment Von Helsing tells Jim that Dracula has been on earth for thousands of years turning people unto the "undead" – crazed zombies who walk the earth. At that point the film switches to 16mm found footage of various urban capitals with anonymous people walking the streets. The use of documentary footage to "prove" Von Helsing's remark about the living

dead is both comical and poignant – since in fact much of the footage is dated and many of the people in the film are probably dead – but which ones? The question of identity also arises – who are these people? Is it “us”? – if so what does that mean exactly?

In Lucy’s apartment Nadja takes Lucy’s blood, not from her neck but from between her legs. We see them kiss and lap up Lucy’s menstrual blood through the pixel camera. Von Helsing helpfully explains about the blood: “Life and death, the moon the tides, the eternal flow. Women understand that kind of stuff it’s in their blood. Once a month their bodies let them know Nature is one continuous disaster.” At one point Nadja digs into her own wrist letting the blood flow into her brother’s mouth to feed him. At another point Nadja says” I am not sick. I am not bleeding all over myself. I am healthy!” Nadja treats blood as a delicacy to savor, yet she speaks about the superiority of plants to humans because the plant is complete, giving back everything it takes, whereas “it’s hard to look at a medical book without feeling disgust for the whole human race – our bodies are so complicated and ugly.” This ambivalence about blood and the body is part of a larger question about man’s relationship to Nature and that is the central theme of romantic art.

For the romantics there was nature as God, as a life force, always on the point of climax in the form of rain, wind, lightning, storms. As depicted in classical art this aspect of nature is harmoniously designed so the relationship of part to whole is balanced. But for the Romantics nature has another side: It is a death force indifferent before the ruins of civilization or mankind. This Nature is always damp, dark and in a state of decomposition. The slime of putrefaction and of fertility co-exist without logic, since we must die as part of nature's "plan" it remains powerful and unfathomable. A romantic poet like Blake accepted these great contradictions as essential to the balance between "heaven and hell" – in short necessary to mankind's sound mental and spiritual health.

Nadja and Renfield – Dracula's zombified assistant in Stoker's book - goes to the city morgue to see the remains of her father – impaled by Von Helsing. The mortuary night clerk, brilliantly played by David Lynch, is an autistic sleepwalker who is half dead already. In a sense he is the gatekeeper to death, the man who ferries people across the river, the silent stranger at the end of the train platform. His performance is both troubling and comical

– exactly as his films. Nadja has no problems getting past Lynch and goes into the morgue.

Back in Jim's apartment Von Helsing confesses that he loved Jim's mother and is in fact his real father. He then gives Jim an awkward fatherly embrace, then stops to kill a harmless pet tarantula, explaining: "why it's the deadly Rumanian Actillo – his mouth is like a tiny poisoned guillotine"!

Peter Fonda shows an incredibly developed sense of humor in playing the hapless "rational" man – a tweed suited book lover who uses a bicycle to get around Manhattan - in the face of the unknown.

Nadja and Renfield finds her brother Edgar sick in bed being nursed by Cassandra, a nurse that Edgar has fallen in love with. Nadja points to a large urn containing her father's ashes and asks – with aristocratic ceremoniousness: "Can I...put them down?" Cassandra replies with a flat American matter-of-fact-ness "Sure put-em' down!" One of the great pleasures of *Nadja* is watching the different acting styles which Almayreda has chosen to play off against each other. Jean Renoir was a master of this sort of orchestration, but he used it to different ends. For Renoir the differences in acting styles was a means to speak about identity not as a

social construction – as we see in Neo-Realism – or as an ensemble of homogeneous stereotypes – as we see in Hollywood films – but as a way to observe people’s social, hereditary and race differences in action. For Renoir this was pleasure. In *Nadja* the various acting styles show a Metropolis in which people may all speak English, with varying degrees of success, but are not close to understanding one another at even a basic level. Edgar tells Nadja in Rumanian that if he could he would impale her with a stake. Nadja translates this to mean he wants another cigarette. Edgar wants to kill Nadja because of the incestuous hold that Nadja has over him which must end with marriage or death – and in fact ends with both.

Edgar receives a “psychic fax” telling him that Nadja is returning to Romania and has taken Cassandra with her. Edgar decides to return to Rumania and kill Nadja. In the only shot in the film reminiscent of Tod Browning’s *Dracula* we see Nadja’s castle through streams of emblematic fog. Inside the castle the interior design resembles a Manhattan loft – the incongruities multiply as Nadja uses transfusion equipment to exchange blood with Cassandra – literally escaping into her body – by transfusing her blood (soul) into her body. Von Hesling breaks into the castle and he and Edgar put a stake into Nadja’s heart. Cassandra awakens after the

transfusion and kisses Edgar but from the look on her face it is obviously Nadja. She has transferred her “self” to Cassandra through the transfusion and now Nadja’s blood is flowing in Cassandra’s body. At that moment the image switches to negative, creating a beautiful sense of fusion, as if there had been a silent implosion as they say happens just before an atomic blast.

From a sign etched in granite reading “Administration of Justice” atop a classical building the camera pans down to a marriage ceremony between Cassandra (now Nadja) and her brother Edgar. He marries Nadja – his sister – bringing the familial relationships full circle. Nadja in voice-over: “They didn’t know it was me”. We then see a montage which returns us to the overlay of images at the beginning of the film as we see alternating close-ups of Cassandra and Nadja floating in water. In this liquid state Nadja looks up at the clouds which we see reflected in the water. We hear Nadja/Cassandra in voice-over: “I have walked behind the sky. We are all animals but there is a better way to live. Sometimes at night I hear a voice in my head. Is that you Nadja? Is it true that the beyond – that everything beyond is here in this life? I can’t hear you. Who’s there? Is it me? Is it myself?” Nadja’s doubts about her identity, due to the transfusion have caused her to ask questions about the exact nature of the location of the self.

Nadja/Cassandra is both inside and outside of death at the same time. She is now conscious of these two moments as one moment. Her uncertainty regarding her identity is part of that discovery: that she is neither alive or dead but “undead”. Much like contemporary thought experiments in physics Nadja can no longer locate “life” or “death” but only the interference between them as the ripple effects they produce interpenetrate. Nadja understands her condition in a way her father, or her brother could not or would not (because of the cycles of blood that a Von Hesling spoke of?) yet she questions the necessity for this. (“Is it true that everything beyond is here in this life?”) That is why it is only at the end that Nadja becomes truly alive. She is vulnerable. She doesn’t know who she is. Then she is human. Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* ends in a very similar fashion, with the main character floating in a small boat on his back looking up at the sky a few moments before he dies. In Nadja this death is also a rebirth. It is here that we see the vast gulf that separates Nadja’s self awareness from Breton’s shallow adolescent wanderings where misogyny and romance mix uneasily. The “search” in his *Nadja* was a masturbatory projection in which he would play every part – there is really only Breton. Even “real” women must learn to become projections of male fantasy for Breton, or they are disposed of for at that point they make demands and the dreams is shattered. It’s all

about this dream and the dream is all about power. In Almereyda's film Nadja finds her own way to survive, but she does not find her own voice. He can't give her that because he's a man – he can only go so far. She sucks the blood. She takes the souls of the “living-dead”. She lives. The death and re-birth of Nadja/Cassandra occurring while she floats in water creates an aura that is essentially religious. This occurs because water has no boundaries that we can see with any clarity – it is both a substance that we see into and it is a mirror in which we can see the sky. Nadja accedes to the doubts about her own identity as endemic to the condition of being human in a way that Breton could never do. The effect of floating on one's back looking up at the sky is to lose oneself in something that is larger and greater than the self which Nadja divests herself of in the final moments of the film. She crosses many boundaries at that point – age old certainties about “life” and “death” as separate domains – the romanticism of *Dracula* and *Nadja* - and she becomes a woman. The inevitable question arises: now where does she go from there?

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