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INTERVENTION (MEDIATION) FOR THE SOUL: THE FILMS OF LIOR SHAMRIZ



By Monica Delgado

A punk performer indifferently rejected by the Berlin visual arts circuit; an immigrant film student who we get to know through her developing cinematic universe; a person who doubts her own existence as a character. Uneasy men and women, living in transit in a place they don't want to live. Storytelling guided by a voice, maybe a conscience or just a new type of omniscient narrator in a postmodern cinematic physiognomy.

Describing the universe of Lior Shamriz is a complex task. Unclassifiable in itself, the work of this Israeli-born, Berlin-based filmmaker has a vitality and creativity that has referents in cinema, but also in literature, painting, and overall in the mixtures that this burlesque genre offers. Nothing is serious, nothing is indispensable and nothing is definitive in these stories that travel from Berlin to Tel Aviv, where queer and cosmopolitan paradigms (a saturated, necessary but unavoidable cosmopolitanism) come first.

Shamriz, born in 1978, writes, produces and directs his own films, often collaborating throughout a decade, with an assortment of his own fetish actors. Far from being afraid of working with professional actors, he establishes a familiar relation by including friends who have studied with him or met through Berlin's cultural and student life. Also evident is the cartography that Shamriz establishes in each one of his films, not just tracing a map that goes from Berlin to Tel Aviv (a very recurrent theme) but also laying out a geographic affinity with human moods or historical debts (the aftermath of World War Two).

Shamriz deals with an imaginary world based in narrative deconstruction, in the deformation and experimentation of the figure, in the image that overflows its materiality to break down, revive and divide itself. Shamriz's *misé en scene* feeds off the digital and its possibilities, in the capacity of editing to shape the filmed material, in the score that is established with images coming from any part of the screen, in the diegetic music that appears to give place to the musical genre in unexpected moments or in the exaggerated escape of any classification. In that sense, in each one of his works, Shamriz has accomplished the status of a magician, a maker of surprises.

But what makes Lior Shamriz such a special filmmaker? Let's revise some elements that makes Shamriz' cinema a strange experience in contemporary filmmaking.



1. Baroque storytelling or *Horror Vacui*

“Nature abhors a vacuum”

In Shamriz's cinema, the fear of vacuum is a necessity. There's fear of the naked shot, of idle time, even of silence. It's not about filling the screen with the absurd, of just the formal search. His characters refuse to be alone, they seek their complement or their disparity and for that, the filmmaker gives his films different languages in the same shot: the fixated or oscillating camera, the mosaic or daring editing, intertitles to emphasize character ideas, or just a *cybernetic* voice (a sort of sexless, robotic voice) to give life to a wandering, acute and paranoid state of mind.

In Shamriz's films the image is not completed by itself. The filmmaker takes possession of diverse narrative games typical of video clip aesthetics, the immediacy of televised news, the home movie camera, playful editing, etc. to make clear that his characters live in an oversaturated environment, an environment of visual contamination or where the act of seeing "through something" is a need or vital desire, the mediation (internet, technology) as an important way of communication.

In **Japan, Japan** (Germany, 2007) or in **A Low Life Mythology** (Germany, 2012), the characters are usually described in its nature of twenty-first century beings and from a paradigmatic figure: Sitting in front of a laptop or computer, sending emails, watching porn films or editing a video. That's how Shamriz usually represents his protagonists (and shows them to the spectator, of course), as much for the notion of new (symbolic) cyborgs or the complementary existence of the multimedia man, as also for the emotional dependence to that technology. The camera shot over the lead character's shoulder, that allows us to see what he's seeing, as well as the reverse shot of that same shot, are the two ways which Shamriz uses to trace the subjectivity of his characters, in this act in front of the screen. In **A Low Life Mythology**, two lovers project their love affair through images on their computers, through their short college films that translate the notion of reality, prolonging fictional universes that are juxtaposed. We don't know what we see, whether it's the work of the two video artists in dialogue or the new signification of that romance in a mosaic of oneiric possibilities.

That's how the fear of vacuum, in its need of disconcerting with camera movements or the use of sound (like in his short film **Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded** (2007) or in **The Magic Desk** (2008)), unfolds its resources towards unreality, creating an atmosphere of disconnection or parallel worlds in some cases, but making it clear that those characters are beings that exist in the mediation: without a webcam or a cybernetic voice, they are nonexistent.



2. The Inner Voice or the Cybernetic Narrator

In **The Runaway Troupe of the Cartesian Theater** (Germany/China, 2013), one of his more recurrent resources is exposed, the introspective and reflexive voice, with an androgynous and cybernetic texture, born from a comprehension of the so-called "Cartesian theater" like the title of this short work openly announces. Shamriz returns once more to emphatic narration, like in **Beyond Love and Companionship** (Germany, 2012) or **Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded** (but under another modality of this kind of mediated voice) which will complement that what the images already describe, but not with the will of dialogue between seeing and saying, but reaffirming his proposal, reminding us of the American philosopher Daniel Dennett, of the escape of a fluid conscience: the brain in essence as a computer, and explaining a different idea or graphic of the self.

In **The Runaway Troupe of the Cartesian Theater**, there is a "self", the voice of a filmmaker that just arrived to a town in China, invited by a local university for an exhibition of German art and cinema, an excuse to attend the imaginary encounter with a lover, about which we know nothing. The idea of disappearance of the lover arises and becomes the spleen of the observant eyes. Chinese streets, students, models, technology, watched by a fearful *flaneur*, overwhelmed by uncertainty, a man who sometimes forgets how he has got to the hotel or why he is in this particular place. The handheld camera hunts for the passers-by, the routine of a city, while it verbalizes almost literally what we see and where there's even space for an Antonioni quote. A simple mechanical reproduction? Shamriz frees the voice from what we see, and therefore it becomes a material being. It is as if that space of the Cartesian theater where all mental happenings occur fled, in retaliation for being experimented upon and analyzed, to the search of the body (like in the final shot, of contemplation and re-encounter).



3. Power relations and Queer World

“There are no different cultures, only different classes”

Saturn Returns

According to astrologists, Saturn returns to its translation axis every 29 years, in an initial position at its orbit. In the eponymous film, that phenomenon is used as a metaphor to identify a period of change in a youngster’s life, to a period of maturity and responsibility. It is said that the return of Saturn was elemental in the mood of people like Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and even Kurt Cobain. Part of this feeling is what Shamriz reflects in this, his finest film: a story of non-requited love between a German woman from a countercultural background and an Israeli Jewish measured and politically correct woman.

Thinking about Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s spirit is inevitable while watching **Saturn Returns** (Germany, 2010). His influence is perceived in the scenes of Berlin underground and both post-punk characters, in a pull and push exercise of power, domination and abandonment. Shamriz shows the inversion process, a vampiric process between the two girls, one absorbed by the other, until one converts the tougher into something new, a death of what she used to be. This break from happiness and freedom towards a philosophy of life less tumultuous but fake and inoculated results in the triumph of the less hostile but increasingly manipulative character. It’s a fascinating move, because it portrays a frustrated peripheral love, but also because it subverts the aesthetics of an underground film towards a melodrama in the style of Douglas Sirk.

Another fundamental topic in Shamriz’s cinema is precisely the way of dissociating love or friendship stories from peripheral or queer sexualities, as a way of resistance. In **Saturn Returns**, Lucy (Chloe Griffin) is an American immigrant who lives in Berlin, in a countercultural context (pop and revival), living day by day with her gay best friend, Derek (Josué Bogle). When Galia (Tal Meiri), an Israeli student appears, both of her lives changes drastically, turning her into the planet they both feared. In **Beyond Love and Companionship**, there is a discovery of lesbian love from the admiration and friendship between an older woman and a young girl, while in **Japan, Japan**, the gay lead character finds lonely satisfaction in imagining a future visit to the oriental country, through anime, pornography, sushi and Japanese music.

In **A Low Life Mythology** there’s also a way of making these romantic relationships more complex, turning them into episodes of cerebral rematch, since Mana Avaris’s character responds to her lover Asten Büchner with a series of short films. The male character does the same, but Shamriz gives him the benefit of finishing the story of questions and answers with a short film that works as a fable, whose argument is centered in the animalistic side that precisely the cameras don’t show sometimes. To wrap up this story, Shamriz makes up a writer, from who he adapts a story for the film, and whose pseudonym, Pierre Menard, not only reminds us of Borges, but also his labyrinthine narrative construction. Because of that, the denomination of “intellectual burlesque” that Shamriz uses for his films is marked with a prominent style in this 2012 film, which extends to a whole treatise through a six year long career, a treatise about human relationships mediated by technology, machines and their new mechanism of feelings.

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