

## Roskva Koritzinsky

### MY FIRST MASTERPIECE

Roskva Koritzinsky is a Norwegian writer and critic. She debuted in 2013 with the short story collection *Her inne et sted* (In here somewhere). Her third book, *Jeg har ennå ikke sett verden* (I haven't seen the world yet) was shortlisted for the Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 2018. Koritzinsky both writes about, and is one of the interview subjects in, Javier Izquierdo's film *Crimes of the Future*.

In the essay *Human Personality* from 1943, the French philosopher Simone Weil writes:

“When science, art, literature, and philosophy are simply the manifestations of personality they are on a level where glorious and dazzling achievements are possible [...] But above this level, far above, separated by an abyss, is the level where the highest things are achieved [...] [The artist's] personality has vanished. Truth and beauty dwell on this level of the impersonal and anonymous. This is the realm of the sacred.”

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This summer I met the Ecuadorian filmmaker Javier Izquierdo on a park bench in Oslo. *Crimes of the Future* was underway, which revisits Henning Carlsen's film adaptation of Hamsun's *Sult* (Eng. *Hunger*) made in 1966. As a writer living in Oslo, invited to write about the film, Izquierdo asked me to participate in it too, 129 years after Hamsun's alter ego walked the streets starving.

Izquierdo's filmography is characterized by a fascination with the myth of the artist. Underpinned by three lines of enquiry – geographical place, the Zeitgeist and the individual creator – his work necessarily poses questions about the interrelations between them.

In his documentary, *Augusto San Miguel is dead* (2003), Izquierdo set out to uncover traces of Ecuador's first filmmaker, an artist who later sank into oblivion and along with him a large part of the story of Ecuador as a filmmaking nation.

*Barajas* (2017) is a video collage of found footage of the four great Latin American writers who died in a plane crash in 1983 on their way to a writers' conference in Bogotá. The title of the film is the airport in Madrid, located close to the spot where the crash took place.

But the film that best encapsulates Izquierdo's interests is the carefully-made mockumentary *A Secret in the Box* (2016) about the fictive author Marcelo Chiriboga. A literary genius and part of the Latin American literary boom (alongside the better-known Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez), he was later forgotten, not to say *surpressed*. The author's books are exploited, with more or less justification, as tools in the struggle for Ecuador's future. His figure diminishes in tandem with Ecuador – a country which in this fictional universe is made to suffer an even harsher fate than it did in reality – until the day when both the country and the author are wiped off the map. The film consists of clips extracted from a TV interview, said to be the only one the author ever gave, and conversations with family, old friends, publishers and fans. It paints a humorous, albeit disturbing, picture of how the heroes of yesterday can become the ghosts or scapegoats of tomorrow. In this way, it explores the interactions between art and politics, strategy and coincidence, myth-making and history-writing, the little life and the grand narrative.

Izquierdo seems to be more curious about the stories and imaginations that we – the readers, spectators, members of society – create about a person when confronted with his/her artwork, than the artist's actual biography.

Reading between the lines, the artist's (and the artwork's!) fragile, paper-thin quality is indicated; she/he becomes a projection and so *no one*. Even the existence of her/his oeuvre is undermined. Subject to a process of continuous negotiation, their status is destabilized. Changing notions about the kind of tasks that constitute the artist's metier mean that what is declared an eternal truth at one moment is pushed out into the cold the next. Names that seemed carved in stone vanish from one day to another – not only the name but the stone too.

As I write these lines, it is now August. I have recently seen rough footage of *Crimes of the Future*. In a few weeks it will be finished, but by then this text will have been in print for some time. Javier and I are, in other words, each sitting in our own place on the planet trying to articulate the content and meanings that run through the film, what it might become and how it might be read. This is a pertinent undertaking considering that Izquierdo's special interest is in the uncertain and unfinished quality of the work of art.

Even the title, *Crimes of the Future*, is a small *kôan* in its own right. It is taken from one of the protagonist's articles-to-come, but neither the film nor the novel tell us what crimes it refers to.

This is one of several gaps in *Hunger*. Others are the name Ylajali, or the sentence that the protagonist repeats in an attempt to attract her attention: "You have lost the book, Miss! You've lost the book!" We are compelled to fill in the gaps, to enter unknown territory and attempt to tie up loose ends, but we remain unsure as to what kind of intelligence to apply.

What does that scene mean? asks Izquierdo. I don't know, I reply.

And I still do not know. Perhaps there is no logical, or for that matter medical or psychological, explanation. That does not mean that the question should not be asked. Perhaps it reveals a great deal about itself, a kind of flickering lamp, blinking alone in obscurity.

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As we know, Knut Hamsun was preoccupied with what he called "the unconscious life of the soul"; a state of mind that only sensitive, responsive and troubled people experience, and which most people would call madness. He himself called this "far from abnormal [...], neither dream nor reality; it is a moment imbued with an unconscious sensation of affinity with nature."

A moment of revelation, we might say. Or oneness of being. At all events, it reeks of the spirit and the eternal.

The film director Anja Breien, a member of the *Hunger* crew in 1966, and who also appears in Izquierdo's film, describes how seeing the film again brought new insights. "I was surprised to see how Per Oscarsson played the main character as being on the threshold of madness," she says. Here she touches on something interesting: what happens to a novel consisting of one long internal monologue when it is portrayed on film? What do the director's filmic choices tell us about the interpretation of the material, and what does this reveal about the mood and concerns of an era – its view of humanity, art and the world?

There is one scene in particular that I have to single out. The protagonist's article has been accepted. He is ecstatic, and enthusiastically scribbles a message to posterity:

"Here I wrote my first masterpiece."

This scene is not in the novel. True, the protagonist has heard a comment by the editor of the newspaper publishing the article – "*written with talent.*" He is "foolish with joy." He raves through the streets at night repeating: "Written with talent, in other words, a little masterpiece, a stroke of genius!"

There is a clear difference between repeating something to oneself and committing it to paper. The difference is small but significant. By choosing to write down the phrase – words uttered alone, at night – "foolish joy" becomes a written message. With this act, the protagonist of *Hunger* makes an almost imperceptible move away from collectivity, falling further out of step with the norm. Further away from the usual: self-absorbed, would-be author, Instagrammer or supermarket cashier. A little less like 'one of us.'

This is not to say that self-absorption and its cousins should be passed over. In *Crimes of the Future*, the psychologist Finn Skårderud describes Hamsun's alter ego as an image of the modern human condition: the neuroticism, the self-discipline, the quest for meaning and self-realization, the longing for love, the grandiose self-image.

This makes me think of Simone Weil again. Ironically, the French thinker – she was schooled and well read in so many fields that it would be silly to reel them off here – died of hunger at the age of 34. At least so the *myth* says.

An important theme in Weil's work was how human beings fulfill their mission on earth (and become one with God) by adopting a kind of total silence or concentration, a condition that one does not seek but receives. In this state it is possible to make contact with the so-called 'impersonal.' The impersonal, as I understand the concept, is closely related to what Buddhism calls the Buddha-nature or non-self: a state in which the ego – with all its longings, aversions, preferences, uncertainties, ruthlessness and pleasures – ceases to be, whereby the subject comes into contact with ... well, with what exactly? With the force that created the universe, the lifespring, the falling away of all illusion. Or in Hamsun's words: an "unconscious sensation of affinity with nature."

One of Weil's arguments is that we cannot know what is good or true without first having experienced this state. In other words, we cannot discover what is good or true by thinking (or shaming ourselves into knowing); we will always be coloured by the ego, rather than God or nature. In other words, we cannot escape from ourselves, our bodies, our humanity. It is a state that we may experience but cannot consciously seek.

Writing is one of several activities that can open the doors on the experience of transcendence. At the same time, the writer is often vain, preoccupied with self-presentation and feedback, or her/his knowledge of the world, with others and her/himself. And so the fate of the writer is, as a rule, to remain trapped in the ego – whether covertly or not.

Either he mumbles to himself at night, or writes on a wall.

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Writers, psychologists, historians, critics, reader – no-one owns *Hunger*. The dialogues in *Crimes of the Future* delineate the protagonist, but he constantly defies all attempts at definition. He is both mad and brilliant, an artist and a mediocre impostor, a victim and a self-harmer, a man of integrity and a liar, a representative of the zeitgeist and a human being.

And *Hunger*? It is about physical hunger, existential hunger, the longing for confirmation, the longing for God. It is about poverty, megalomania. It is a portrait of a time and a portrait of a city, a novel about an artist and about an epicrisis.

And perhaps too, it is about the pain of experiencing a moment of affinity with all that lives, only to meet one's own reflection in a window pane a second later.



*Crimes of the Future*: A film about a film about a book about a city. Film stills

The section on Simone Weil is based on the foreword by Sian Miles pp. 1-67 and the text *Human Personality* pp. 69-80, from *Simone Weil – An anthology*, Penguin Classics 2009.