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Preliminary Notes for a Theory of the Young Man. On Bart Groenendaal's *The Young Man as a Movie Star (Paranoia, Opulence, Perversion, Competition)*, 2022.

By Persis Bekkering

Listen: The Young-Girl is obviously not a gendered concept.
Tiqqun, Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl

Preliminaries

What is a man? What does a man want?

He says, 'Fuck it. Maybe I wanna die. Who cares, right? When there's a magnificent new creation being released.'

He says, 'You're not some kind of housewife, are you?'

He cuts himself. He points a gun. He cries and vomits. He limps. Maybe he dies.

In Bart Groenendaal's four-screen video installation *The Young Man as a Movie Star*, budding masculinity is explored through four narratives, staging the young man in its various roles as son, lover, collaborator, and failed revolutionary. These roles are studied, as much as they are constituted, through and by the medium of film itself. Each episode takes its imagery from a different film director, four alleged male geniuses of the history of cinema: Hitchcock, Spielberg, Von Trier and Godard. Men whose self-understanding and gender constructions will have to be understood, in their turn, situated in their respective eras, chained to a timeline of dialectic change. Inhabiting borrowed and broken languages, Groenendaal tells intersubjective stories of manhood, unveiling collective myths. The luster of individual genius is obfuscated along the way, as if it necessarily follows in the wake of the deconstruction of masculinity, as if the two are interconnected, the singular and the generic. This interests me.

More than a study of the claustrophobic confines of gender performance, Groenendaal's work bears the quality of performativity itself. In the spatial set-up, a playful instability is introduced. The films are screened in synchronicity, as organized cacophony, shattering the possibility for a defining take on the topic. Within the claustrophobic confines of a beach house, the performance of masculinity becomes leaky. Words, expressions spill out in space, penetrating the cinematic universe of the other films. My own body keeps casting a shadow over the screens, imposing its presence as not-one by stealing the light from the protagonists, creating a lack, piercing a hole in the narrative. We are not just onlookers. We are the image, and we are its negative.

To make a study of the young man as a male artist today takes courage. In the background, in the shadow – let's call it culture - other collective narratives resonate. The work of feminist giants (De Beauvoir Butler Federici Lorde), deconstructing gender as performance, as class. But also the bad rap of masculinity today, its fashionable pairing with epithets like 'toxic'. Can we put these pairings on hold, executing a pause, a bracketing of these resonances? Can we look at the work as an autonomous universe, leaving the murmurs outside? Art makes holes, fractures what was once one big, dominating screen. From the cracks, different, diverging theories of the young man escape. I propose four of them, but they might be three. They are not full-fledged; they are preliminary notes or sketches. I want them to be leaky. They will have holes.

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1. The Young Man as Roleplay

Does masculinity exist, and if so, is it located somewhere? Is it more than a masquerade? Is masculinity ontologically anchored in a body, or are we all ultimately female, as Andrea Long Chu provocatively puts it in *Females?* ('I define as female any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another. ... To be female is to let someone else do your desiring for you, at your own expense.')

All genders are a form of roleplaying. In psychoanalytic theory, it is femininity that has been described as masquerade, followed from woman's anxiety of lacking the phallus. This lack must be covered up. One thinks of the feminine sartorial symbols to understand what is meant by this: make-up, nail polish, accessories, clutches, pearls. She needs props to become a woman, she needs play to be legibly feminine. Yet her artificiality is not threatening her, according to Lacan. She wears them fully aware of the excess of her artifice, she does not need to naturalize it, to suspend our disbelief. For the male, on the other side, anxiety is not merely a garment, and it is here where sexual difference is located. 'For Lacan, sexual difference is not organized around the penis and vagina, but the *gendering of anxiety*', writes Lauren Berlant. The very logic of the modern patriarchal order, they explain, that authorizes the penis to be recognized as the Law (capital L), sentences men in the same sweep to experience anxieties of inadequacy and dramas of failure. Berlant writes: 'Masculinity in particular involves creating the kind of mirage of identity an imposter or impersonator enacts.'

In other words, in contrast to woman, the young cis man doesn't know how to enjoy his cosplay; he fears the démasqué. *The Young Man as a Movie Star* provides us with ample clues for such a statement, most clearly in *Paranoia*, which is Godard's clenched-fist-infused world. Masculinity here is expressing itself at its most aggressive, as if the boy has something to prove. He needs to prove his dominance over his mistress, who behaves a little too effortlessly around him, a bit too amused by this young man's antics. Moreover, he needs to state his dominance over her husband, 'the perfect man' in the young man's words, who's not here, but who might be spying. Therefore, he needs a prop, a prosthesis. Something that sticks out even further. Yes, he needs a gun. With a gun, he ups the ante of the game he doesn't know he's playing. His lover feigns fear, in a loving gesture of letting him believe his own play. For her, play is what gets her off.

In *Perversion*, roleplay is visualized by the chess board. The young man plays alone, a shadow game with the ghost of his deceased father. As in all four films, an older man is absent, perhaps an indication of the missing link between the model, the original image, and the one who merely plays; the Name of the Father and the game of the son. The young man plays against his own grief, his own memory. There is no antagonist to keep the game going, no one to validate his existence as player. It is a lonely game, or so he thinks. Behind him stands his mother, who has another game for him in mind.

2. The Young Man as Author

'Author' here being something like style; a transindividuating force drawing from collective practice.

Hitchcock: the young man who comes to the rescue, but always ends up becoming a pawn in Her plot.

Spielberg: the rascal of the picaresque, who always ends up becoming a pawn in His plot. In other words, giving up his role of the timeless troublemaker to the efficiency of narrative.

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Von Trier: the young man as leading supporting role. Woman is the epicentre, is black hole; the young man is the pawn, whose anxiety is put in the center of the narrative, because a hole cannot take that space. In other words, the voice of the pawn.

Godard: maybe the most unapologetically male-centered of 'em all. The jazziness of being a young man. The vertigo of freedom, the lure of the barricades, the jouissance of deconstruction, breaking the One of the original into shatters, piercing holes and calling it art.

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3. The Young Man as a Theory of Woman

Of course, *The Young Man as a Movie Star* has as much to say about womanhood as about manhood, or maybe more, and that is not because the woman seems the more powerful. It is not because she is winning that she comes into focus. Her victory, if we can even read the stories as such, is not feminism, because that framing still maintains the reason of existence of a battlefield. The master's tools etcetera.

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Maybe it has to do with her being older, but in all four films I see her end up performing the role of the mother. The woman nurtures, she nourishes, she lulls. The woman is the one who rinses the man's self-inflicted wounds with water. She completes what he can't complete. The explosion of the bomb, the choreography, the grief. This is a genre, too. It is a script, the way the young man can never exist without woman's labor, yet there is something about her that doesn't end there. She escapes.

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4. The Young Man as Genre

A genre is the form the conventions of a narrative take, but it is also a feeling. "Genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art." Again, Berlant. The videos allude to such genres, they play a game with our affective expectations. We know so much more than what the screen reveals. Culture hums along in the shadow, weaving structures of feeling. The young man as action hero. The young man as troubled, angsty son. The young man as vulnerable, self-doubting artist. The young man as hot lover.

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If anything, the white young cis man is a library of genres. Familiar scenarios grow from his body like twigs of written scripts, but he doesn't know it yet. Once he knows, once he recognizes the script, he would need to escape them. A familiar script is a prison. He wants freedom, he wants to create himself. Therefore, he needs to destroy. In all four films, the young man is destructive. He tries to accelerate the arrival of his own rebirth, like capitalism accelerating toward its own sublation.

He says, 'Fuck it. Maybe I wanna die.'

For some reason, however, he keeps looking for maternal embrace. There is always the woman to hold him through his anguish. I wonder if this is the embrace of or the attachment to genre, too. Of wanting and not wanting to break free.

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I don't mean this in a sad way. Genre is repeatability. And repeating means the possibility of working through. The loop of the artwork, then, becomes therapeutic. Through the rehearsal of genre, a restructuring of roles becomes possible. A magnificent new creation.

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