

La Trobe University

Dr Natalie Pirotta

Re-making Anna Karenina: death, desire and Prussian Blue

Abstract:

In this presentation I will be discussing a series of creative works I have made around the theme death and desire. Remixing film-stills from the dance scene in Joe Wright's 2012 film *Anna Karenina*, the paintings explore the dance as metaphor for the loss of the self during the moment of desire. The paper explores what Barthes has called 'the third meaning'; T.S. Eliot's 'still-point' in time, where the essence of meaning can be found, meaning that is both emotionally powerful but difficult to name. Framing studio practice as occurring in Winnicott's potential space, the paper seeks to draw together the web of enchantments behind the creative act.

Biographical note:

Dr Natalie Pirotta is an artist and an Honorary Research Fellow with the School of Humanities and Social Science, La Trobe University. She co-edited 'Death and the Maiden', a special edition of the journal *Writing from Below* (2014). The paintings discussed in this paper were exhibited at 69 Smith Street Gallery in October 2015. Natalie has exhibited regularly in artist run galleries around Melbourne. Her PhD investigated the creative practice of the nineteenth century Australian landscape painter W.C. Piguenit.

Keywords:

Anna Karenina – *Death and the Maiden* – D.W. Winnicott – dance



Figure 1, Film Still from Joe Wright's *Anna Karenina* (2012)

Anna Karenina, Tolstoy's heroine in the novel of the same name, is described by Kitty as 'enchanted' as she moves through the ballroom: '...enchanted in her simple black dress...enchanted her curly hair in disarray, enchanting the graceful, light movements of her small feet and hands, enchanting that beautiful face in its animation' (Tolstoy 2003: 255). Kitty tries to read the face of the man she is in love with, Vronsky, however his facial expression as lost, she felt there was something 'demonic' in Anna's enchantment of Vronsky.

This paper is about of layers of enchantment, not all of them demonic but all of them entwined. To be enchanted is to be as if under a spell, entranced, or fascinated. One can be bewitched, as Kitty believes Vronsky to be, entirely under Anna's spell and lacking any free will. Or one may be fascinated by a sound, image, or story, wanting to hear it again and again. As an artist I feel constantly under one enchantment or another. An object, a song, a phrase, a lyric, a piece of music, the flutter of a sheet on a clothes line, can lead me to slip slightly out of sync with my surroundings, to feel unearthed, to be in what Donald Winnicott has called potential space; an in-between space, or transitional area between the self and the external world (1971), the place where creativity occurs, where something found becomes something made. The artist's studio is a physical manifestation of transitional space – a space where the artist can play, can bring objects found in the outside world.

In this paper I will attempt to set out the objects and ideas that contributed to my enchantment with ballroom scene in Joe Wright's 2012 film *Anna Karenina* and painting series I made in response. I was transfixed when I first saw it in the cinema, the ultimate 'potential space', sitting in the dark, nothing to distract from the sound and movement, easy for someone with porous defences to experience transference, to move into transitional space, to feel the dance as if one is part of it. There is no doubt that the environment contributed to my response. I felt lightheaded and a tightness in the guts, as if I was on a rollercoaster. The mesmerizing effect of the musical refrain of the waltz, the colour of the costumes, and the choreographed steps was electric. Anna and Vronsky, a black dress and a white suit, performing smooth revolutions around the dance floor, their arms forming elaborate arabesques to the beautiful music

of Dario Marinelli. The other dances turn to stone, as if time as stopped, yet they come alive as Vronsky and Anna glide past. For a moment time does stop, the other dancers recede into darkness, and Anna and Vronsky are alone on the dance floor. The music slows as they carefully trace the hand gestures of the dance in the air, and then picks up its pace, they are back in the swirl of the ball, the music becoming increasingly frenetic as the couple dance in a world of their own, Anna's hair spilling across her face as her hair pins lose control of her black tresses.



Figure 2, Natalie Pirotta, *Dance with Me*, 2014 (Reprinted with permission from Juliane Roemhild)

When I returned home I watched and re-watched the dance sequence on youtube, pausing the video to take still shots of the couple mid-dance. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOwsZ6bDqJU>.) I studied the film stills as if they may contain the answer, though I was not sure what my question was. Roland Barthes suggests that a film still ‘throws off the constraint of [filmic] time’ and enables us to focus on the essence of the meaning (1993: 332), even though he acknowledges that this ‘third’ meaning to a text is obtuse (Attridge 2010). Barthes wrestles with a paradox, much as I do in this paper, he wants to communicate the feeling yet acknowledges that it is impossible. Barthes ‘obtuse’ meaning is what gives a creative work its power to move us –Derek Attridge refers to this as its ‘nameless grace...the work’s animating power’ (2010: 84). The ‘nameless grace’ is a beautiful term for the emotional charge of an object that propels us into transitional space (See Pigum 2012).



Figure 3, Natalie Pirotta, *Death and the Maiden II*, 2014. (Reprinted with permission from Sue Martin).

In the paintings I have focused on what T.S. Eliot has described as the ‘still-point of the turning world’, a series of moments where Anna and Vronsky appear to be precariously relying on the centrifugal force of their rotations to hold them in place – at any moment they could go flying across the room. It is the place, to continue quoting from Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*, ‘where pasts and future are gathered...Neither movement from nor towards. Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only dance’.

The space created by the dance is outside the normal passage of time and space, just like the ‘potential space’ experienced in the artist’s studio. The repetitive movement of the dance takes the dancers to a space outside of everyday day life, one described by Paul Valery as ‘strangely unstable and strangely regulated, strangely spontaneous, but at the same time strangely contrived’ (Valery 1976: 70). Within this space there is no time, or rather time ceases: there is only the flow of the dance to the rhythm of the music. Valery describes this as a ‘dwelling place where certain muscular themes follow one another in an order which creates a special kind of time that is absolutely its own’ (71). Just as time and place seem to cease, so does the individual self — the boundaries between the self and other blur — ‘there is only the dance’.

The dance is a compelling and dangerous spectacle. Anna and Vronsky dance as if ‘frantic mad’, like Shakespearean lovers ‘past cure... now reason past care, frantic mad with ever more unrest’. As the music becomes ever more discordant they seem to dance faster and faster, seem to be unhinged, sweat glistening on their faces, Anna’s hair falling over her face, oblivious to the furious frowns of the disapproving onlookers. The sexual energy produced by the dance is consuming the dancers; for Anna and Vronsky to so wantonly display their forbidden desires is to invite their social annihilation, but they are now ‘past care’.



Figure 4, Natalie Pirotta, *Death and the Maiden VIII*, 2014

The idea of Death is ever-present in my mind as I watch Anna dance. Having read Tolstoy's novel I know where Anna's illicit desire for Vronsky will lead, and Wright provides a foretaste of what is to come in the closing moments of this scene as Anna sees herself reflected in the mirror – the ballroom behind her slowly morphs into a steam train chugging through the snow — as if Anna can see her own fate in the glassy surface. Keira Knightly's Anna is gaunt and cadaverous, in her black ball gown she swirls around the dance floor with febrile intensity evoking the Dance of Death from the 15th and 16th Centuries in Eastern Europe.



Figure 5 *Bernt Notke, the Lubeck Dance of Death*, ca. 1463. From Elina Gertsman, 2010. *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages: Image, Text Performance*, Brepols Publishers, Belgium.

Jonathon Dollimore's book *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, which has been one of the potential objects in my studio for over fifteen years, has influenced

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my thinking on this topic. He states that one of the reasons why the object we desire most is the most likely to endanger us is that ‘in eroticism we ...desire to lose ourselves without reservation’ (254). Desire can be the source of pain, yet it ‘holds out the promise of the pleasurable death of the self’ (xxii). As I worked on the paintings I realized that what I was painting was a variation of the Death and the Maiden trope. The ‘nameless grace’, the third meaning that underlay the enchantment of the film stills was this moment, this still-point, ‘where past and future are gathered’, this moment in-between life and death. It was not merely that Keira Knightly looked like a skeleton, it is more to do with the dance as symbol of life and desire.



Figure 6, Natalie Pirotta, *Death and the Maiden IV*, 2014. (Reprinted with permission from Michael Clarke).

Dollimore writes that the ‘connections between death and desire is a commonplace’, so commonplace that we rarely stop to think about it, or rather we choose to avoid thinking about it’ (1998: xii). It is a rather ambiguous connection – desire is the crux of being alive, isn’t it? Dollimore suggests that the connection is about mutability, he writes ‘the sense that all being is governed by a ceaseless process of change inseparable from an inconsolable sense of loss somehow always in excess of the loss of anything in particular’ (xiii). There is nothing more mutable, more transient, than a single moment in a dance, and the dance is movement, which as T.S. Eliot states, is desire itself. The still point in the dance, the ‘centrepiece of the moving world’, is therefore the very stuff of life – as if we have captured the dancers swirling on the very threshold, the liminal space between life and death.



Figure 7, Hans Baldung, Death and the Woman, c 15018, panel. Kunstmuseum Basel.

The middle ages used graphic images of death with nubile young maidens to press the point that there is no escaping death. The sight of the rotting corpse was the spectacle to ‘mediate ...fundamental knowledge about the nature of ...existence’. (Koerner 1985: 53). It also illustrated the link between sexual desire and death. In this 16th century woodcut by Hans Bulding, Death and the Woman, Death is about to attack a woman, to bite her face, causing her sheet to drop and her nakedness to be exposed. Koerner comments that depicting the moment before the action ‘the painting situates us at the moment when Eros and Thanatos merge: sexuality, expressed in the concealing/revealing of the flesh and in the gesture of the corpse..., becomes identical with death, expressed in the meaning of the bite’ (78).



Figure 8, Natalie Pirotta Death and the Maiden V: Just because you feel it doesn't mean it's there, 2014. (Reprinted with permission from Michael Clarke)

The cause of the enchantment I felt, the ‘nameless grace’ that has compelled me to paint me this series, lies in this moment of desire unfolding, an embrace that offers to potential of ‘mystical dissolution’. The moment when the couple dancing are at their most vulnerable, literally reliant on the Other to maintain their momentum, is the also the most entrancing moment. Dollimore, writing about the ideas of George Bataille states ‘every horror conceals the possibility of enticement’, and the ‘frantic mad’ dance of Anna and Vronsky is both seductive and frightening, romantic and tragic. Bataille’s description of looking down from a great height resonated with the pain in my gut that I experienced watching this scene. Bataille writes ‘the view may cause us to step back, but the image of the possible fall, which is connected with it, may also suggest that we jump, in spite or because of the death we will find there...what is certain is that the lure of the void of ruination does not in any way correspond to a diminished vitality’ (in Dollimore 1998: 253).



Figure 10 Natalie Pirotta, *Death and the Maiden II*, 2014. (Reprinted with permission from Marie Pirotta)

Before I close I just want to make a comment about the use of colour in my paintings. In the book Vronsky is wearing white and Anna is wearing black, which is a reversal of the tradition of the bad man wearing black and good woman in white (Mandelker 1990). In the novel, Anna’s black dress is described by Kitty ‘only the frame and all that was seen was she’ (Tolstoy 2003: 85). When I began these paintings I began with painting the dress, however I saw her dress as Prussian Blue, Prussian Blue and deep Indigo, intensified with Paynes Grey and Olive Green. Since I read this book as a teenager, I had always associated Anna with Prussian Blue silk. I have since searched for a reference to Prussian Blue in the novel and haven’t been able to find one. Perhaps it is a simple word association – Prussian/Russian. Although Black and White more starkly points to good vs bad, death vs life, I felt I had to stick with Prussian Blue. It is not at all clear to me that Vronsky is the cad and Anna the innocent, or that Anna is the seducer and Vronsky the victim. Perhaps Blue is an expression of this ambiguity.

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