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The Cinematic Aesthetic of Thea St.Omer

When I was invited to write this essay, I welcomed the opportunity to celebrate Thea's life and creative contributions as a filmmaker. Admittedly, I was also overwhelmed. Like many of you, I knew Thea, and for those of us who had the pleasure of knowing her, it was clear that she was so much more than a filmmaker. She was a multidisciplinary artist and activist who deployed a diversity of media to illuminate and explore humanity while interrogating how that manifests in society, public and private. As a filmmaker, Thea employed strikingly different approaches in her work, ultimately creating a visual composite of our world comprising varying emotions including joy, sorrow, contemplation, triumph and tragedy. By watching her films, we learn more about the world we live in, about Thea and about ourselves.

However, when it came time to actually write about Thea's films, I asked myself how would I paint a literary portrait of this beautiful soul and the work she produced, given the diversity of her subject matter, visual aesthetic and execution? The possible approaches I could take were as diverse as the films I was reviewing. Despite the variations, there was a common thread that Thea had woven throughout her work and that unifying aspect painted a portrait of an artist as well as provided a glimpse into what Thea found important. For those of us who were a part of Thea's world, we found a diverse, colorful (in all of its interpretations), complex and always inviting environment, whose unifying element, like in her films, was our humanity.

"Humanity" is a deceptively simple term used to describe a complicated concept. Defining humanity and, unfortunately, determining who meets the standards to have their humanity acknowledged, depends on the lens through which they are being viewed. A humanitarian by design, Thea made cinematic work that is an artistic reflection of the humanity and our humanness under a variety of conditions and emotions.

However, within the embrace of the humanity portrayed in her films is hope. Even in deeply emotional and violent scenes, Thea's work still compels you to hope, to search for an opportunity to believe that it will get better. The beauty of her films is her ability to evoke that kind emotional investment in the characters and their stories, to the point where you find yourself willing the film to ultimately allow for positivity to prevail. However, Thea was a realist. In as much as we all love the romance of a happily-ever-after at the end of our stories, in Thea's films, as in life, despite our hope, prayers and pleading, we don't always get what we want or expect. But I find that we always get what we need.

The films that I reviewed were: *En Los Ojos/In The Eyes*, *DIScerning disABIL-ITY*, *A Truth about Tupac*, *Nigger*, *a Touch of Tutelage*, *Love in an Elevator* and *Vodka in a Glass*. For purposes of this exploration of Thea's work, I will share with you the various ways in which she interrogates the topic of humanity in her films.

En Los Ojos/In The Eyes (2004) inverts the saying, "You can't see the forest for the trees," through visual mediation on New York City. The film, shot in black and white and diminishing distractions, challenges the viewer to do what we often find difficult when we are in New York City (or any other metropolis), which is to actually see the people around us. I mean really see them, moving beyond the markers of identity that we employ as a means of distinguishing one person from another, but actually see the person we are looking at.

Thea invites you into the preverbal forest through the sights and sounds of city, and what may feel like the opening of a gritty urban tale quickly transforms itself into an intimate exploration of the biodiversity within. As viewers, we are confronted by city residents from a cross-section of society, staring directly at us for much longer than most people would consider appropriate, and this pushes us right to the edge where you begin to feel uncomfortable. At that point the camera switches its focus to the next person, and the process begins again. However, there are other times where she challenges us to hold fast, despite our physical reaction, and continue to look at these people up close, at a distance, and shot from various angles. Many of them remain stoic in their expressions, while others offer us their classic tough city exterior. In between the two, a sprinkling of joyous, open and curious faces.

The film does not have any dialogue, but it is not silent. New York creates the soundtrack, a brilliant move because it causes the viewer to focus on the filmmaker's intent, which is to remind us of our humanity. As the film progresses,

you will begin to really look at the people featured, and then it happens. You see them as individuals, their face, clothing, complexion, hairstyle, posture, gender, age, culture, faith, or in other words their individuality, the things that distinguish us as humans. While I am not quite convinced that this work is a film as opposed to a performance art, what I do know is *En Los Ojos/In the Eyes* reduces urbanity to its foundation and encourages us to see the forest and the trees, if only for a moment.

Where *En Los Ojos/In the Eyes* (2004) approaches humanity by diminishing group identity and highlighting people's individuality, *DIScerning disABILITY* (2010) does the opposite, featuring individuals responding to a single question about a group identity. This film illustrates the complicated nature of humanity through disability. Despite public perception, a general consensus does not exist about what it means to be "disabled" or if that is even the best or most appropriate word to use. Thea interrogates disability identity politics from a variety of perspectives given by people with disabilities, as well as others without them who are still part of the community. Despite the fact that many people were labeled as disabled for centuries, no matter how they may have self-identified, had their humanity questioned, suffered abuse or been ignored, some members of community have themselves engaged in the politics of exclusion. One of the challenges in the discourse around disability that the film addresses is the very reluctance or refusal by some in the disability community to recognize and acknowledge those with hidden disabilities or mental illness.

Thea's film asks one question, "What is disability?" Every response is different and most people reply with hesitancy, initially offering their opinion about how they felt about the question itself before even attempting to answer the question. The responses range from academic to profound, with one woman who uses an assisted communication device remarking, "Beats me—I know no other life." The power of her statement reveals that the conversation about disability is often about how other people see them and not how they see themselves. Thea's film provides a platform for us to learn more about how members of this community see themselves. Or, as another participant says, "I am autistic, but I am an individual who has the same hopes, dreams, and goals as the next person."

Perhaps the only pure truth expressed in the film is, "Disability is a shifting concept depending on the context." That's what makes Thea's film so refreshing; she doesn't attempt to answer her own question. What she does do is expose how complicated the question really is.

Thea's exploration of identity politics intensifies in two other films, *A Truth About Tupac* and *Nigger*. Similar to her documentary about disability, *A Truth About Tupac* (2011) features a cross-section of people responding to a single question. However, unlike *DIScerning disABILITY*, we witness Thea struggling with the question based on the response from the first-person interviews. The question was, "Who was Tupac?" One woman responds by repeating the question while her body language and facial expressions seems to suggest that she believes that Thea's query may be more complicated than the filmmaker realizes:

"Who was Tupac, ooohhh... Who was Tupac? Well, he was a... Well he WAS a hip hop artist and now I would say he IS a hip hop icon rap artist in that sense who was killed in Vegas."

Thea follows by asking, "Should I say who is he, or who was he? I never know how to phrase it."

Thea's struggle speaks to the root of the issue. In her films she and the participants search for truth or at least try to determine who the real Tupac is or, as the first respondent alluded to, which Tupac is real. Tupac the man, rapper and thug, or Tupac the genius, prophet and icon. Through the reflections of people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, we discover that Tupac's identity and his impact on society is an area of contention. Thea's skill at getting people to respond from an emotional level results in a deeper understanding of Tupac Shakur's impact and his legacy, irrespective of whether you agreed with the man that he was, the myth about him and his life, or the legend that he is still alive.

What Thea's film also does is remind us about Tupac's humanity. He no longer is an angry, violent Black rapper and emerges as a complicated man with remarkable insight into his own life and the world around him. As one respondent reflected, "Tupac was basically calling things as they were... As the world doesn't want to know truth, doesn't want to see truth or receive it, but he was speaking it."

"Nigger" is a word that, depending on one's culture, context or community, when invoked, can recognize someone's humanity or confirm their inhumanity irrespective of whether you are the one using it or having it used on you. Unlike some of her respondents, who refuse to say "the 'n' word," Thea makes the bold choice to speak it, write it and say it. She approaches the film and the word directly and thoughtfully, grounding it in history, language and society.

In *Nigger* (2011), the respondents are as demographically diverse as their responses. Thea challenges her subjects and the audience to examine their own views and relationship to the word and the potential implications by using or hearing it. Thea's ability to capture people's feeling about the word is also illustrated in their physical reactions and micro-expressions as they respond. Thea's film leaves the choice up to us about whether it is a word synonymous with violence or love, pride or oppression, but there is no doubt that this film will prompt you to think more deeply about *Nigger*, the word and the film.

Thea's other films explore the power of attraction and relationships. Thea introduces us to these couples at various stages in their romantic evolution. The documentary *Love in an Elevator* intertwines love, humanity and dignity, as does the narrative short *Vodka in a Glass*; however it is debatable as to whether love is even at play in *A Touch of Tutelage*.

A Touch of Tutelage (2001) carries the tagline, "One student. One professor. The desk between them," suggesting an attraction and the possibility of a relationship beyond the student and professor dynamic. Most of the film takes place in Professor Wong's office where he is having a final meeting with one of his graduate students, Lilly, who has finished her degree and is preparing to return to London. These are the only certainties in film, leaving everything else up to the imagination—ours, Lilly's and Professor Wong's.

Thea explores humanity in this film through her characters, especially Professor Wong, who holds the power in this relationship by virtue of his position and gender. However it is the sense of underlying tension that he experiences that makes him so human. You will have to determine for yourself whether that tension is sexually based or anxiety, but Thea makes it clear that Lilly is the inspiration for those feelings. His underlying vulnerability and perceived uncertainty in how to respond to this student invites us in to see him as a flawed man, a human, as opposed to a stereotypical data and results-driven professor, lacking or incapable of certain types of emotion.

Thea's storytelling technique and cinematic approach results in a rapport and friendliness that seemingly never violates the distance established by the desk and infuses it with suggestive banter, rife with simmering sexual tension and innuendos. Without giving too much away, one of the character's feelings transform into fantasies—or are they memories?

Love in an Elevator (2002) is the most touching film of this collection. She has invited us to witness the story of enduring love between Joseph Francis Viola and Jean Lillian Schwartz during the final years of their life together in a nursing home. They have been in love for over forty years and although this is a second marriage for both, Joe is very clear about his devotion: “Out of all the women in my life, she is the best and I was married three times. I’ve had a Italian wife a Mexican wife and a Jewish wife!”

We learn the most about their relationship through Joe. This is due in large part to Jean’s declining health. The film expresses their quiet intimacy through Joe’s support of Jean, taking care of her needs, doing activities together and telling her how much he loves her. Thea has beautifully captured the dignity of life and portrays the vibrancy of the people in living in the nursing home. Unlike many stories about this environment, the world we are invited to enter centers the residents and not the caregivers. She introduces us to the rhythm of life there and finds the humanity in the senior population by showing them engaging in daily life as everyone else. Thea shows the seniors as they sing, laugh, play Bingo. In barely fifteen minutes, she has managed to cultivate an emotional investment in their story and in Jean’s health, proclaiming their humanity and touching ours.

Vodka in a Glass (2012) begins with the text, “Life is deceptively pure, clear and simple like vodka in a glass,” foreshadowing the complicated and tragic lives of the characters in this film set in Syracuse, New York. We begin with Roger Etherwaite mourning the loss of his wife, Tammy, who, we learn very early in the film, has taken her own life. Troubled by her death, Tammy’s twin brother hires a private investigator to uncover the truth. We also meet a mysterious woman who seeks comfort at Tammy’s graveside. Her presence and behavior suggests that we are witnessing something deeper than paying respects to a friend.

Thea has masterfully crafted a story that leads us to believe that we are watching a film about mourning and the process of healing and reentering life. Roger’s motivation to start living life again is inspired by a woman he sees at the local laundromat. Clearly captivated by her, he is soon at the salon, literally and figuratively shedding the weight of his grief. The film has you rooting for Roger as he gets his act together and makes the bold step to approach the woman he saw that day. You cannot help hoping that things will work out and that his brother-in-law will manage his own grief and end his efforts to prove Roger had something to do with the death of his sister. The build-up leaves you wondering who is right. If only it were that straight forward.

Things take a dramatic turn when Roger decides to get more serious about this woman. Just when you think we are moving directly into a sunny and lovely happy ending, Thea abruptly switches the trajectory, sending the viewer careening toward a collision with the dark side of humanity. We become witnesses to people expressing their base emotions. What happens in this film is unexpected. Just as with *Love in an Elevator*, the story stays with you long after the credits roll, but for completely different reasons. This film is Thea's most powerful piece of cinematic storytelling in the collection.

This project to commemorate and make available her film is a wonderful testament to Thea St.Omer's creativity and artistry and to the love and devotion of those closest to her. I am honored to be a part of this celebration of a talented artist and to recognize and salute one of our brightest stars in our creative universe.



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