

THE CTP FACULTY AND GRADUATE FORUM ON CULTURE AND THE ARTS

March 5, 2005

Gayle Burns

Risky Relating, Stories and Transformation: Humour in the Work of the Actor, Robin Williams

Introduction

Shortly after being invited to speak today, while I was reviewing Robin Williams' films and seriously considering *Moscow on the Hudson* and *One Hour Photo*, but musing about where to begin, and how to speak about them, serendipitously, Ofra Eshel's article came through the mail slot. As I read 'From the "Green Woman" to "Scheherazade"', the films continued to reverberate and I began a dialogue, an exchange, both with and between the films and the ideas in the paper.

Three themes emerged from those reflections: risk in human relating, the significance of stories and transformation.

I will be with those themes momentarily, but first I'd like to turn to Robin Williams, the actor whose work in humour is the focus.

Actors

In a 2002 CBC interview with Michael Enright, Susan Sontag, the American writer, noted that the role of actor is a model for what we do as human beings: that is, pretend or actually experience what is expressed, try to be better, be a different person, be what the situation calls for.

So the actor can be said to engage us in our own humanness as he embraces his own.

Sontag also proposed, that in her view, the work actors do to transform themselves, to become other people, mirrors what immigrants, what new arrivals, do in transforming themselves.

One could say that Robin Williams' transformation is doubled in that both Vladimir and Sy are newcomers, immigrants, the former to another country's culture, and the latter to another 'country' in his mind.

So, the risks in relating to oneself, the stories one must have to tell oneself and the transformation required to assume being the character are inherent in the work Robin Williams brings to each film.

Robin Williams

I specifically chose Robin Williams in these film examples of light and dark humour, because, I believe, he illustrates the breadth and depth of experiences of self that potentially reside in every person.

And he does so subtly and with gusto, integrity and excellence.

On Jan. 16, 2005 Robin Williams received a Golden Globe from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. He was given the Cecil B. DeMille Award, for lifetime-achievement.

Here in some clips from his various movies are some of the characters Williams has portrayed.

In each of the roles he assumes, Williams offers a glimpse of how he draws upon the wide range of qualities within himself to express the humanness of a given character; how he accesses many facets of himself in giving expression to the voices and narratives that shape the lives of his characters, effectively dramatizing the way in which a person exists, loves, hates, creates, and justifies the world and their unique passage through it.

In Robin Williams' portrayals, what it means to be human lives itself out before our eyes. As Mike Nichols noted in presenting him with the award, with Robin Williams, we are with a 'rare friend'.

Overarching Ideas

A friend reminded me recently that, "You can't cure human nature". Allowing that thought to seep through the pores, calms the inner demands momentarily, quiets the internal discord and reveals a surface, a firmer base, a breathing space, much like the one Sontag refers to in a 2003 essay: "If the goal is having some space in which to live one's own life, then it is desirable that the account of specific injustices, dissolve into a more general understanding that human beings everywhere do terrible things to one another" (p. 115). And as we see in these two films: *Moscow on the Hudson* and *One Hour Photo*, the account of injustices holds whether they are societal or in an individual family.

We are invited to be with human nature and its expression in culture and the arts this evening. So, I'll hold my friend's reminder lightly as we explore the films, holding open a space in which to be with the admirable and the unsavoury elements of being human that the actor, Robin Williams, expresses through the characters he inhabits.

I invite us not only to consider these characters, but also to entertain the possibility of dialogue between Vladimir and Sy, the people portrayed by Williams, and the people in Eshel's paper, who she, (Jothan and Ben), Donald Winnicott (the man/girl), and Emmanuel

Ghent (the cold woman and the surgeon) were engaged with in a psychotherapy relationship.

Now what's a paper from a respected journal doing interfering in our fun and pleasure on a night like this, an evening on film? A good question, but I was forced to admit, in effect, reminded, through chance experience of a journal's timely arrival that "why not!", since each enriches and illuminates the other.

This being a night on ideas, I will stay with the ideas evoked by the films. We can explore the storylines, the specifics of the humour in the films during the general discussion after dinner.

But before going to the themes emerging from the films and the paper, I would like to visit some overarching ideas that I think are worth entertaining because I see them as inherent in the themes. The sources I'll draw from for these broader ideas are recent fiction by Christopher Bollas, essays by Susan Sontag and the latest novel by William Nicholson.

However, there is a caveat with regard to the use of certain words tonight, words like 'transformation'. As the irritated psychotherapist in Bollas's novella, *The Dark at the End of the Tunnel*, observed, "... some people are word-groupies, hanging out with famous minds and great ideas like idolizing empty-headed kids following some rock group hither and yon" (p. 118). Further, Bollas's psychotherapist would agree with Eshel (p. 528) "...you had to earn the right to use them (certain words). ...If you were to use a word like 'lifegiver' or 'a new beginning' ['transcendence'], you had to have been through some kind of experience, some sort of transforming sequence of mental events that gave you the right of use." (p. 119)

The first area I'd like us to consider is photographs, the looking and being looked at, pictures in our hand or in our mind. Both films illuminate the significance of images whether photographs, or the mental pictures we create.

Sontag (2003) in her series of essays on the representation of atrocity in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* writes:

"Photographs tend to transform" (p. 76). We witness how the daily life and activities of Vladimir's grandfather and mother in one film and the Yorkin family in the other are transformed from the realm of the mundane to the sacred, the cherished, the exceptional, and the comforting.

So too, Sontag continues, "Photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality" (p. 81).

It is not surprising then, that in *One Hour Photo*, the friendly exchange with Neena and Jake at the Savmart photo counter assumes other meanings as the camera pans Sy's apartment from the bureau with a few framed photos to the wall of Yorkin family pictures.

"Even in the era of cyber models," Sontag contends, "what the mind feels like is still, as the ancients imagined it, an inner space – like a theatre – in which we picture, and it is these pictures that allow us to remember. ...This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering" (p. 89). Recall the image of family life in Moscow Vladimir conjures up, remembers, as he reads the letter from his sister, Sasha, and later, as he staggers home after a night of drinking and dancing with the New York Russian community.

Sontag joins us in "attempting to understand what feels wrong, or empty, or idiotically triumphant in contemporary... culture" (p. 110).

There are twenty years between the making of *Moscow on the Hudson* and *One Hour Photo*. The culture portrayed in 1984 feels benignly, colourfully, human as Vladimir stumbles through his immigrating process. In stark contrast is the culture's bleak sterility exemplified in the physical and emotional world of Sy and in the Yorkins' relationship, relieved momentarily by Sy's imagination, brief connection with his long frozen feelings, the engagement between he and Jake and Jake with his mother.

Sontag acknowledges "One can feel obliged to look at photographs that record great cruelties and crimes" (p. 95), including film scenes like the one in which Sy terrorizes Will and his girlfriend, Maya. She goes further in expecting that "one should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them (these images), [and to think] about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show" (p. 95). In a similar vein one could say that a psychotherapist expects to feel obliged to think about what it means to the client and to the therapist to look at 'the picture' the client brings of who he or she is and as he is being with it, to think about how that is assimilated (and lived through), by both.

It is here I feel Sontag meets Eshel (2004) who describes "a becoming and knowing through experience" (p. 531) in the therapeutic relationship.

Sontag notes that, "it is passivity that dulls feeling. The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anaesthesia, - witness Sy's robotic, cipher existence, and Manny Ghent's experience of the surgeon and the cold woman, respectively, (those states) are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration" (p. 102)

– the woman's weeping, the surgeon's grimness and as brilliantly illustrated, the blood gushing from Sy's eyes. In each situation it is in engagement with another, in experience with the other, that the person comes into their feelings.

Bollas too in his novella enters these murky waters, the grey areas left over from black and white, where the Other resides.

The second overarching idea, the Other, is found in each of these writings along with various meanings.

As Bollas's (2004) psychotherapist contemplates the meaning of life, he reflects on the world's socio-political climate and thinks, "we know nothing of our enemies, they know nothing of us, there is no wish to hang out together." ...[And after further musings, concludes], "objects become others, if we hang out with them" (p. 61). In *Moscow on the Hudson* Vladimir metamorphoses; he morphs, from 'enemy defector' to 'loyal friend' as he and Lionel hang out together.

But one has to have the capacity to 'hang out' in order to do so. Sy doesn't yet have that ability to be anywhere near his unbearable, traumatic early family experience, to hang out with what he disowns in himself. It is when the detective invites Sy to tell him about what impelled him to act against Will and Maya that Sy has the opportunity to begin to tell his story. The detective is the only father figure in *One Hour Photo*; fathers abound in *Moscow on the Hudson*.

We meet the Other as well, in Nicholson's (2005) novel, **The Society of Others**: The cello player in conversation with the young man asserts, "You and I, we are explorers. When I listen to you, I enter a new country where things are done in new ways. That is exciting. Why would I wish to take you prisoner and drag you back to my country and force you to live as I do?"

"We can't both be right!" says the youth.

"Of course we can! But you chose to see one thing, and I another. We're both right. We invent nothing. We select. We each make our own world, out of the common store that is reality" (p. 192).

This exchange between the cellist and the youth, I believe, echoes Vladimir's struggle: does he have to become American? Can he acknowledge, as reminded by Lucia, that he is Russian, claim his foundational roots, his otherness, as he relates to others, the Americans? Does he have to abdicate who he is?

Conversely, can Sy be with, own and claim the 'Your Kin' in himself and relate to the Yorkin family without them having to be his kin? Can they co-exist?

In contrast to Bollas and Nicholson who regard the Other as having inherent subjectivity, for Sontag "... the Other...is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees" (p. 72).

This is Bollas's psychotherapist's 'object'; it is 'the girl' who is the man experienced by Winnicott; the surgeon's exploited friend; and Sy's state regarding Will, the transgressor.

In a conversation he has with the director, we learn from Robin Williams that the other actors on set were disgusted, grossed out and frightened by Sy; they referred to him as Mr. Blank. As we watch Sy in the hotel with the knife, he is the Other in Sontag's sense, "as someone to be seen"; the tension and suspense build – what will Sy do? But equally there is concern for him that he not go too far that, also in Sontag's sense, he become someone like us who also sees.

Bollas's (2004) psychotherapist's reflections on life in contemporary culture are especially apt for Sy during and after berating Will and Maya: "We are incarcerated in an inversion where good has become evil and evil has become good: we have not just moved into a different system of values, we have moved into other characters, doppelgangers that are our former opposites. ...We have become what we were not, and because what we were not was based on what we rejected – and now I would say rejected in ourselves – we are now what we never wanted to know, and so we have no knowledge of what we are" (p. 115).

Themes

There are three themes in Eshel's paper that evoke the films: first, the risk in human relating, then, the significance of stories, and third, transformation.

Risk in Human Relating

Risk in human relating is like being on the threshold between the known and the unknown.

It is unthinkable to Vladimir to defect; his buddy, Anatoly, is vociferous about it – for him. Anatoly is the Other who gives voice to Vladimir's strongest longings, the greatest fears. As Ghent (Eshel, 2004, p. 546) demonstrated in covering the woman's lap and legs with the Scottish throw: the psychotherapist too may find himself expressing the responsive care for the needs the person does not yet know.

Human relating risks gain and loss. In *Moscow on the Hudson* both gain and loss are illuminated in the cinematic use of mirrors and in Vladimir's facial expressiveness in the scene at Bloomingdale's.

[Vladimir experiences being welcomed in America then watches his 'saxophone' and Russian friends on the bus disappear, his face a contortion of grief pushing through the joy.]

Vladimir risks loving Lucia and developing a friendship with Lionel, risks playing the saxophone with accomplished jazz musicians and going it alone.

In *One Hour Photo* the risk in human relating is influencing and being influenced. What may follow is connection with the other and with one's self. What may ensue is being on someone's mind, being in someone's mind as illustrated in the scene where Sy is on Jake's mind as his mother is tucking him in for the night.

[Jake tells Neena that Sy is sad, lonely and not liked. Together they send him good thoughts and we see Sy in his kitchen receiving them.]

Sy's thin thread of connection with another human being is with Jake, then later with the detective as he shares his story.

Sy's fragility is evident in the film's last scene as he lines up the photographs of furniture and other hotel room objects in an effort to reclaim or retain some order in the chaos in which he lives, effectively abrogating as he justifies, the trauma that he has unleashed on others, but dare not recognize as originating in himself and in his own history. The closing image in the film, a photo of Sy with the Yorkin family, is a bitter, ironical statement: That only in his mind will he be Uncle Sy.

Then, Eshel (2004) gives us an example from life of the "intrinsic necessity of risking unpredictable, vulnerable [and mad] states incurred by the therapist, when surrendering to whatever this might mean in the therapist creates 'something new'" (p. 545). She cites Ghent who recounts that the woman does not know she is cold until he, sensing the chill in his office that is more than the weather, covers her lap and legs with a throw. She sobs revealing for the first time her inner distress. Like Vladimir, she is there because she chooses to be, then finds herself at a turning point.

Eshel reports that she doesn't take, doesn't accept, "Zilch", from Ben. She continues to invite engagement. She risks expressing concern, a caring that eventually reaches Ben, is absorbed by him, yet Ben continues to be free to decide how to engage what she offers. One could say that in the films there are echoes of this level of risk for Anatoly in Moscow with Vladimir and for Jake in the park with Sy.

Eshel reminds us "It is always risky to stir up deep, threatening levels of one's inner world" (p. 541) and to risk the "mad states" (p. 545) as Winnicott (Eshel, 2004) experienced with a man whose mother treated him for many years in early life as if he were a girl. Winnicott asserts, "It is I who see the girl and hear a girl talking, when actually there is a man on my couch. The mad person is myself" (p.544).

Emmanuel Ghent (Eshel, 2004), too, reports responding with, "Does she have a gun?" (p. 547) when the young surgeon, who is usually oblivious to others' feelings, casually relates that a woman he had financially exploited has called out of the blue and arranged for them to meet. The surgeon's initial response is, "I always thought therapists were weird, but aren't you overstepping it a bit" (p. 547)? Viewed through the lens of irony, one could say the line blurs between fiction and the real, between the fiction of *One Hour Photo*'s black humour when Sy exclaims, "What's wrong with these people (the Yorkins)?" and the exchange between the 'surgeon' and Ghent. Is it real? Could this actually happen? Is it happening?

Jothan (Eshel, 2004) risks "Scheherazade", risks the continuity of connection with another, as he struggles to become. It is only later that Eshel recognizes that 'becoming' with her. Ben's connection with Eshel ebbs and flows like the tide; a significant time in his first year of life becomes a touchstone for engaging himself and allowing Eshel to engage him. Eshel recounts living in the client's world, listening, hearing, sensing. Ghent too senses the devastation wrought by trauma, as do Jake and the detective in *One Hour Photo*.

The Significance of Stories

It is evident in both the films and in the paper that stories sustain and guide, provide access to self and the other, and give meaning. As Eshel (2004) describes in her work with Jothan, stories make a space to meet, create a comfortable distance, at times, a "relating without relationship", at other times, an expression from within, either the present or the past, and provide a vehicle to receive a response (p.535).

Each film is inherently a story; then, the Williams' character in each film, Vladimir and Sy, reveals the stories out of which he lives.

Vladimir's stories are lived out with others and altered; he allows himself to be influenced by his encounters and relationships.

Vladimir in Moscow proclaims, "This is the only way I can live, with limitations and restrictions", which is not unlike Jothan, who experiences Eshel's (2004) efforts to acknowledge him, as intrusive and an immobilizing catastrophe. Eshel and Jothan's relationship echoes Vladimir's response to his Moscow friend, Anatoly, when he talks about defecting: fear of being imprisoned for uttering such blasphemy and of leaving a self and a life that is known; moving into the forbidden, dangerous unknown.

At the symbolic level, Vladimir has security at the cost of state invasiveness: He is too fearful to defect; if he plays his saxophone he will always have work. Once in America, Vladimir has freedom without security. America is freedom: freedom of speech, action, choice, opportunity for both work and friends, and for pleasures he pursues: the saxophone and Lucia.

In the scene that begins in the jazz club and ends in the early hours on the street, Vladimir lives a story that he is a great saxophone player but when it collapses he reveals another story [the saddest thing in the world is life], then another [he loves his misery, cherishes being miserable]. These stories he shares with Lionel who in turn shares his own.

As psychotherapists can we receive the story? Can we acknowledge the story without judgement as Eshel (2004) does when she recognizes that Jothan's stories are his primary and often only way of relating? As Lionel notes, this isn't easy to be with someone just as they are.

In *One Hour Photo* Sy's stories are lived out solely within his mind; they are not shared, expressed. Sy lives in his major story as we see in the scenes where he sits in his car in reverie exploring the Yorkin's house: as he moves from one room to another, he is a member of the Yorkin family; he is Uncle Sy. Sy's story is inadvertently influenced by his encounters with others.

Transformation

The "quality of transcendent experience" is an inevitable source of strength and a focus in the work of Eshel, Ghent, and Winnicott. The same could be said for Robin Williams in both films.

In *Moscow on the Hudson* we see Vladimir's personal wealth within his flexible, ebullient character in the midst of the letdown of the reality of American life. The wellspring within, that he has to draw upon when resilience is called for, sustains him as he experiences the inevitable disappointments, loneliness, frustrations and setbacks.

The scene in the cafe after being mugged, one could say, reveals a transformation: we witness Vladimir integrating life's flaws along with the freedoms. As Bollas's (2004) psychotherapist might observe: Vladimir transcends the inevitable call to favourable extremes of perfection by descending into the reality of his daily life. This episode portrays his outrage at being mugged and his wallet stolen being tempered in the encounter with the ex-patriot Russian who counters his idealized recollections of Moscow with the realities.

In this scene I found myself recalling Eshel's (2004) description of her experience of Jothan in their exchange over 'Livingstone' (p. 537) and with Ben in their exchange with his mother's letter. In both instances there is an internal 'translation' that Jothan and Ben engage not unlike the 'translation' that Vladimir expresses with Serge, the Russian ex-patriot and Orlando as he absorbs, assimilates, makes sense for himself what is occurring for him as he takes in the meaning of the other Russian's words.

On the other hand, in *One Hour Photo*, as the director, Mark Romanek notes, Sy is being "kicked out of heaven" when he's fired. His robotic demeanour melts; like Nicholson's (2005) young narrator, Sy initiates an escape "from the prison of detachment", by receiving and engaging what Jake has to offer in his birthday camera photos.

Like Vladimir as he stands on the street corner outside Bloomingdales watching his 'saxophone' disappear, Sy, too, as he sits on the floor of the photo mart, looks at his own lost childhood through Jake's photographs. Sy, as did Vladimir, allows a connection with himself that we see reflected in his face, which becomes a contortion of grief pushing through the joy and laughter.

In this scene Sy is transformed as his feelings pour forth. He's crumpled on the floor crying with grief and joy as he recognizes the images of a world he knew at one time, a world in early life, a world Jake captures with the birthday camera Sy's given him.

There is in this scene not only a connection with Vladimir's experience in *Moscow on the Hudson*, but also a connection with Eshel (2004) who emphasizes "the essential risk taken by the psychotherapist while enabling the becoming of something fundamentally new" (p. 547); the psychotherapist risks "difficult emotional moments and vulnerability with the client (p. 547)... to forge a real, living and experiential new-now that has not yet existed... making long-lacking and longed-for experiences liveable in the present.... It is the psychotherapist's willingness and ability to risk experiencing them, to hold, process, and

contain them, that mitigates the dread to repeat and the catastrophic element of change, enables a breakthrough, a real transformation, a new beginning, and a lifegiver. (p. 541)

No longer the passive observer, Sy is galvanized to action when, as he watches the family have dinner and perceives Neena is not confronting Will about the affair, he sets out to restore the family he allows himself to know. Although at this time Sy can only live out the role of the perpetrator and repeat, without a new beginning.

Conclusion

In *One Hour Photo*, the Other in Sontag's sense, predominates: Sy owns the Yorkins; he appropriates their person, possesses them as family through the capacity of the photographs and of his own internal images to objectify. As his story unfolds his own existence as object begins to shift into being seen.

In contrast, in *Moscow on the Hudson*, the Other is a subject in Bollas (2004) and Nicholson's (2005) meaning: Vladimir as the newcomer, the Other, embraces, is incorporated into American life through his own sense of agency; and he creatively engages Lionel, Lucia, Orlando, and Serge, the Russian ex-pat, all of whom have had their own immigrant experience.

Yet, Ivanov and Sy are the same person: Robin Williams.
Now that's risky relating and transformation!

References

- Bollas, C. (2004). *The Dark at the End of the Tunnel*. London: Free Association Books.
- Eshel, O. (2004). From the "Green Woman" to "Scheherazade". *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 40:527-556.
- Nicholson, W. (2005). *The Society of Others*. New York: Doubleday.
- Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

