

**FILM**

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# THEO,

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## A NEED TO GET MONEY FAST

Reviewed by  
Paula Soares

### THEO

by Rati Oneli

USA / Georgia, 2010, 30 min

**Screenplay, director:** Rati Oneli

**Producer:** Jacob Gali, Rati Oneli

**Cinematography:** David Barkan

**Editing:** Ramiro Suarez

**Music:** Edward Grieg

Cast: Thomas Andre, Jacob Gali

**Producing company:** Liber8Films



\_ Zygmunt Bauman, *Society under Siege*, 2010

*The new speed renders the action momentary and thus virtually unpreventable, but also potentially unpunishable.*

I recall *THEO*<sup>1</sup> presented at the Avanca Film Festival 2011, a film<sup>2</sup> directed and written by Rati Oneli<sup>3</sup>, a native of Georgia<sup>4</sup> residing in New York for the last 12 years.

*Theo* interested me because of the way it embodies Zygmunt Bauman's<sup>5</sup> concept of liquid times and how such concept is expressed in the film structure in a very intense way. In the film, everything makes sense, preventing the viewer from moving away from the images that flow in each shot. In parallel, the film includes cinematographical and geographical references as well as an attempt to freeze time between past and present without future, where fast-moving images make time swallow space.

The Director confesses: *I feel instinctively close to the world of vision of the Polish philosopher, even though I didn't explicitly cite or reference him in Theo*<sup>6</sup>.

The first version of *Theo*, as work-in-progress, started in 2008, in New York. *It was not a finished film. After that, due to personal and technical reasons, it took several more years to shoot additional scenes and produce final cut. Editing was the main impediment*

*to finishing the film*<sup>8</sup>, refers Oneli. *Theo* will be finished in mid-December 2010.

The film's official website refers: *Through the prism of dream and reminiscence, Theo depicts several days of an aimless young man's life with fluid imagery and nontraditional narrative illuminating the emotional and transitional human condition. It's a story of a modern human, caught in the "relentless-right-now", lost in the powerful vortex of life, unable to find a way out or define himself, and unwilling to change.*

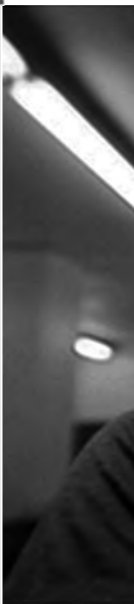
This confirms, once again, the aesthetics of the film through the terminology used (*fluid imagery, nontraditional narrative, a story of a modern human*) and through the image of an individual unable to find or look for a way out in his life: *It's very easy to be sucked into mechanical, spiritualless life and never come out of there. Basically, one can get lost without even ever finding or defining yourself*<sup>8</sup>.

*Theo* expresses the notion of fluidity, "liquidity" of contemporary times in the sense of human and territorial precariousness. There is a void experienced by a character named Theo, who lives "nowhere", in no particular space, for whom time never stops. Someone who lives suspended in a spatial void, like the refugees referred to by Zygmunt in *Society under Siege*. *Those who are catapulted into a nowhere, into a "non-place"* (Bauman 2010: 138). This "non-place" referred to by Marc Augé<sup>9</sup>, is masterfully mirrored in New York's everyday landscape. A floating foucaultian place generator of no-way-out anguish. Where one floats... one loses the notion of space, place and even location, which, in *Theo*, gains the form of a gesture, the pickpocket. The gesture acquires the thickness of time - the moment. The instant replaces the place.

Reality felt in modernity lives, now, a new experience, that of globalization. *On the map of the modern world there was a profusion of blank spots bearing "ubi leones" tags, "here there be lions"* (Bauman 2010: 135). Such places are in extinction. The world filled up with people without references, finding them in instant behaviours. *The manifestation of the new existential condition took them by surprise*, writes Bauman. The world and the human experience liquidified and the notions of outside and inside are confused. *We are all "inside" with nothing left outside* (Bauman 2010: 136).

*Theo* is confined to a time closure, a scenario that has been manifested and developed in contemporary cinema associated with "aesthetics of flux", a concept first referred to by Stephane Bouquet<sup>10</sup> in an article in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, in 2002. An idea reiterated by Jean Marc Lalanne in a later edition of the same journal, entitled "C'est quoi ce plan?": *the shot is a stretched, continuous flux, a flow of images where all classical instruments are submerged held by the very definition of mise-en-scène: the frame as picture composition, the cut as agent of meaning, the editing as a rhetorical system, the ellipsis as a condition of narrative*<sup>11</sup>.

Most contemporary cinema, like *Theo*, transmits this idea of fluidity that arises in the construction of film shots, in the relationship



between the camera and body of characters and how they "manage" the shot. Time becomes continuous and space flows, liquidifies... "Liquidity" that, according to Bauman, characterizes the culture of the present, giving it a liquid cartography experimented by the actual individual.

*We live in fascinating but also very confusing environment. In earlier times, despite obvious hardships and lack of modern luxuries, it was easier and more straightforward to live one's life. You were born and for the most part would have a set idea of what your life would be like. Life was more homogeneous in a way. Our age has become infinitely more complex and uncertain*<sup>12</sup>, states Rati Oneli, referring to the way Bauman recalled his childhood experience in terms of physical space, summarizing it as follows: how far is it from here to there (Bauman 2000: 110)?

In the past, there was a more palpable awareness of space as its physicality was lived simultaneously with time. When one walked from one place to another, one would know how long it would take, making time and space less abstract. Human beings had a more precise notion of the space-time element, which allowed them to have a more predictable image of their own lives.

Oneli's expression "*life was more homogeneous in a way*" also reveals the notion of time fragmentation, a mannerism already experimented in modernity, a phenomenon that is distinctively explained by Jonathan Crary, in his book<sup>13</sup> about changes in the perception of modernity. In this book, the author tells us about the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a period that witnessed profound social, urban, economic and political transformations, which affected individual perception. Industrialization forced the reorganization of feeling and seeing, establishing a change in the relationship between the individual and the perception of space and time.

Modernity promoted a breach of attention, a new logic. A logic characterised by an internal movement formed by accelerated fluxes. Bauman writes: *The history of time began with modernity* (Bauman 2000: 110). The author recalls cars that were faster than people and horses, causing a change in the concept of distance - more distance, less time. Time started to overlap space.

Bauman tells us that, since modernity, the relationship between space and time became a changeable process, which is still valid as I write this article. INTERNET and WEB languages affirm the virtual world as a new reality. The transformation of perception witnessed during modernity was continuously renewed with new experiences with space and time where, at times, the former seems to cease to exist.

Speed is now instantaneity. A notion that is integrated in our daily lives influencing our way of thinking and building images, including cinematographical images.

In film, this change manifests itself in the construction of the shot, in the relationship between the camera and the body where the character (willingly or not) is transformed into a living body in an energy flow. The sound, silence, bodies and the camera become objects of quick sensations that merge with our own body, that of the

viewer. Space is built in liquid time under the constant movement of film narrative. The border between fiction and documentary is also diluted.

There is a new attitude in the act of shooting, as in Rati Oneli's work.

Flux cinema is concerned with the fluidity of time and space present in the construction of narratives that are "self-organized", expressed in the form of sensations. The camera is able to create temporal experiences different from those that we were used to. The viewer of flux cinema, as it happened to me when I first saw *Theo*, "dives" in the film in a different way. Our brain experiences a new perception. Shots emerge in a fluid movement managed by time that uniquely aestheticized itself into a notion of space that flies over reality.

*Theo* tells a life story that takes place in a city that is immediately identified by its iconic features. I call your attention to the last shot when the escalator brings a can of Coke to the viewer along with a McDonald's logo, in a different shot.



Space lost physicality.

*Theo* is a film where past and present merge with poetry. Ilya Prigogine writes: *We don't know better than Agostinho what time "is", but it is with Aristotle's full definition that we can, nowadays, relate the laws of movement. The intrinsic measure of movement imposes the perspective of before and after. The movement "invented" by Galileo and his successors articulated the instant with eternity. In each instant, the dynamic system was defined by a status that held the truth of its past and future.*



In fact, *Theo* is a consistent and coherent example of flux cinema.



*The movement as we know it today extends the instant and is articulated with the future* (Prigogine 1990: 230). The past exists simultaneously with the present. Time is reduced to the eminence of the future. We live in time, as Gilles Deleuze<sup>14</sup> would say.

In *Theo*, dialogues are circumscribed. Conversations replace amplified sounds/noises of the real in a sound-emotional hyper-reality. The camera is aggressive, getting “violently” close to the actors, chasing them in space, not allowing the construction of poses or the production of gestures. The staging of gesture only occurs in the scenes with the pickpocket(s).

*Theo* is structured in the concept of velocity, which is also expressed in the idea that Theo needs to get money quickly, leading him to become a professional pickpocket. Theo learns this “art” with the help of an older friend, in reference to the film *Pickpocket*, by Frenchman Robert Bresson, shot in 1959. An unforgettable film characterised by the choreography of gestures. Everything is gesture, body and objects. The shots are minimal and the camera is narrative, but essentialist. Bresson constructs his films without artefacts, *executing film images, cinematographic shots and self-materialised sequences, “pure”, natural and without artefacts*<sup>15</sup>. In turn, *Theo* integrates this reference revisiting modern cinema and as a compliment to modernity that, in this case, serves as a bridge to supermodernity, the contemporaneity that is materialised in flux cinema.

I conclude this article recalling some of Director Rati Oneli’s words:

*Theo is a work of fiction. There are some factual references, for example to the life of the older pickpocket/nurse (Lakoba) and the pickpocketing lifestyle, however I was not interested in reproducing the reality around me but rather my subjective relationship with it. I’m both Theo (title character) and Lakoba (older pickpocket), combining both “rational” and “irrational”. I put them in quotations because, I think, these concepts only make sense within a certain, narrow framework. Theo’s character is truly free in his ignorance and naiveté; I think these two qualities are necessary to attain some kind of degree of personal freedom in today’s world. Nothing “rational” makes sense anymore. I believe there is some kind of center of objectivity that we all gravitate toward, but the real direction and location of this center is hidden from us. Hence, for me, personal experience and very importantly my own process of building references to that “objective center” is more important. I think Theo’s life instinctively revolves around that. Lakoba, is only beginning to understand this through his intellect only late in his life when a sudden, chance meeting forces him to think and remember, which in turn creates confusion in his world as to what is reality and what is product of his imagination. Intellect has limits*<sup>16</sup>.

## References

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Theo* was screened at: ACE Film Festival (New York), International Music and Film Festival (Riga), Avanca Film Festival (Portugal) and the Art House Festival (Georgia - Batumi).

<sup>2</sup> Cast:

Theo - Thomas Andren  
 Lakoba - Jacob Gali  
 Iris - Leah Rudick  
 Miranda - Ana Parsons  
 Narrator - Gennadi Vengerov  
 Editor: Ramiro Suarez  
 Director of Photography: David Barkan  
 Producer: Jacobi Gali  
 Associate Producer: Launa Lee Eddy  
 Associate Producer: Manuchar Mamukishvili  
 Art Director: Yejin Yoo  
 Sound Design: Wade Vantrease  
 Assistant Director: Justin Lange  
 HD / 1:1:78 / 30 min / Colour, B & W  
 Language: English  
 Gali / Oneli Film, Liber8Films

<sup>3</sup> Autobiographical Note written by the Director.

*I’m a filmmaker based in New York City. I was born in Tbilisi, Georgia and attended the Tbilisi Institute of Asian and African studies at the former USSR Academy of Sciences; and also studied International Relations (Middle East) at Columbia University in*

*New York. I didn’t attend a professional film school and worked at different jobs before turning to film as the only solution to the looming internal crisis I experienced in that period. I didn’t have access to the film industry connections or professional network and learned filmmaking from watching works by great masters of cinema.*

<sup>4</sup> The Caucasus Republic located on the border between Europe and Asia.

<sup>5</sup> Born in Poland in 1925.

<sup>6</sup> Oneli, Rati, e-mail message, July 25th, 2010, 20:21:30 WEST.

<sup>7</sup> *ibidem*

<sup>8</sup> Oneli, Rati, “A filmmaker grows in Russia”, *What Would Toto Watch?* in <http://whatwouldtotowatch.com/2008/07/26>.

<sup>9</sup> Augé, Marc (1994) *Não lugares: introdução a uma antropologia da sobremodernidade*. Bertrand Editora.

<sup>10</sup> “Plan contre flux”. In Cahiers du Cinéma, No. 566, March 2002.

<sup>11</sup> In Cahiers du Cinéma, No. 569, June, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Oneli, Rati, “A filmmaker grows in Russia”, *What Would Toto Watch?* in <http://whatwouldtotowatch.com/2008/07/26>.

<sup>13</sup> Crary, Jonathan (1999) *Suspensions of Perception Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<sup>14</sup> inDeleuze, Gilles (2004) *A Imagem-Movimento: Cinema 1*. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim.

<sup>15</sup> Soares, Paula (2010) “O Cinema de João César Monteiro: tempo e o espaço no plano fílmico” (tese de doutoramento). Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humana da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal, p.30.

<sup>16</sup> Oneli, Rati, e-mail message, July, 25, 2010, 20:21:30 WEST.



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Paula Soares was born in Oporto in 1964. She obtained her PhD in Communication Sciences/Cinema at the New University of Lisbon. She is a university teacher at University of Minho