

# Marissa Viani Serrano

## Lunaticus

by Frank Motz

lūnāticus m (f: lūnātica, n: lūnāticum)

- of, or living on, the moon

- epileptic, lunatic, moonstruck, crazy

“And I felt the heavens come to earth and swallow me up.”<sup>1</sup>

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Every pilgrimage destination has its rites of the Virgin Mary, whether Altötting, Fátima, Maria Laach or Częstochowa. In Međugorje in Herzegovina, a woman circumscribes a statue of the Madonna on her knees, and the calf of a statue of Christ is unceasingly caressed, causing the bronze to shine brightly. In Lourdes – where the Madonna appeared several times to the later canonised French nun Bernadette Soubirous as a young girl in 1858 – the mass is shown on huge screens like at a pop concert. It includes live close-ups from the congregation and is garnered with thematically appropriate excerpts from Hollywood movies. In contrast, Levoča in Slovakia shows itself largely free of this kind of media fireworks, although, according to the artists Johanna and Helmut Kandl, it is the Woodstock of Madonna pilgrimage places: “Everything was calm here. On the day of the Visitation, July 2, the people gather on a mountain, everyone brings something to eat, they are clothed differently, from the traditional short skirts to hot pants and T-shirts printed with ‘Sex Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll’. Priests are standing about on the field ready to take confession, holding umbrellas to protect them from the sun, and the people all kneel down – a huge tableau vivant.” On Whitsunday, near the miraculous image of the Madonna in Loreto, a crowd of handicapped people line the Piazza at Café Bramante, often accompanied by Maltese sisters in uniforms showing off their figures. As 50 sport cars come into view, “tutti Fiat”, the sisters gather around them and pose for photographs as though they were at a motor show. Then Bishop Giovanni arrives and blesses the cars. In a northern suburb of Mexico City – the home town of the artist whose work is the point of departure for this text – a man slides along on his knees carrying a large Madonna statue in his arms. Young men on bikes with images of the Madonna tied to their backs ride to the most important holy site in Mexico, the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Mount Tepeyac; the world’s largest pilgrimage destination with 25 million pilgrims a year. The architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez also built the Aztec stadium 39 km away. Once it was filled with an audience of 100,000 four times in a row by Michael Jackson, but it is also used for mass religious events.

For the Werkleitz Festival in Halle, Marissa Viani Serrano’s work *Lunaticus* will undoubtedly transmute yet another place of bodily and mental recreation into a

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Sofja Wassiljewna Kowalewskaja, *Jugenderinnerungen*. Bremen 2010, p. 107. (Translation SB)

temporary pilgrim place, albeit for much fewer visitors. Her apparition of the Madonna will be projected at regular intervals onto the 160 m<sup>2</sup> surface of water in the “Frauenhalle”, the ladies’ hall, at the city baths during normal operating hours. The apparition corresponds in a subtle and multifaceted manner to this historically and architecturally significant exhibition site. Built in Art Nouveau style between 1912 and 1914 based on plans by the town planner Wilhelm Jost, the heritage building with its gallery-like cloisters and richly decorated tiles and ceramics is almost completely intact. Serrano relates the terms “Mother of God” and “Virgin Mary” and feminine symbolism of the divine to ideas of desire, love, calm and light, heaven and the beyond, family and innocence, but also suffering, tears, water and motion. In the city baths the visitor submerges themselves literally into this “sacralised” zone of feeling, into a motif that tries to speak to our common experiential horizon. This rupture of the quotidian and the mutuality of public space are the decisive criteria for the presentation of the work, whose core element is found in an increasingly dusky and finally completely darkened part of the bath. Here the visitor is confronted with the large scale video installation – an audiovisual composition, in which Serrano deploys the technical and formal means of digital video and experimental film to take the notion of the “holy malady” (morbus sacer = Epilepsie) as point of departure in order to circumscribe a personal vision of the relation between humanity and divinity, and make this vision subjectively tangible to the viewer as a way of accessing the sacred.

Epilepsy is literally unpredictable and yet the paradigmatic sickness associated with prediction and the visionary. In the course of its history it has been accorded different names.<sup>2</sup> Follow the extant literature back to Babylon and ancient Egypt and consider more recent scientific insights and you will find that the mystery-shrouded phenomenon seems to be as old as life itself. The symptoms of its crisis express themselves generally in uncontrollable convulsions and cramps, hypersensitivity of the nervous system as well as altered perception of reality in the form of a sudden transport of bliss, which usually heralds a serious oncoming attack. These attacks are often felt or at least after the fact interpreted by the sufferer as well as witnesses as a mystical experience, as both a divine blessing and demonic curse, independently of whether the causes are assigned to neurological / psychical disturbances or to spiritual processes. As in some forms of mental illness and trance states deliberately induced by ritual or substances like opium and mescaline, the sufferers believe they have had the happy fortune of grasping the deeper meaning of existence and are at the same time desperately abandoned to the apparent revelation and the God experience. In chapter five of the second part of *The Idiot* Dostoyevsky, himself an epileptic, speaks of the “lightening-like flash of higher feeling of self and self-consciousness and consequently of a higher ‘being’ ... an unprecedented feeling of plenitude, of equilibrium, of reconciliation and enthusiasm, a prayer-like submersion in the highest synthesis of life”. It’s no coincidence that poets since antiquity have preferred to represent and interpret the essence of human

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. <http://www.epilepsiemuseum.de/alt/english.htm>

The different descriptions allow us to deduce the respective causes attributed to epilepsy in different periods, e.g. “moon sickness”, induced by moon phases, or “demonic sickness” by evil spirits. At the same time they betray something about the person attributing the name, e.g. the inventor of “Zuchtrute Christi”, i.e. Christ’s cane, must have believed in Christ and his power to punish.

existence in the guises of madness, its highest and most terrible possibilities, its greatness and its abasement (think of Cervante's *Don Quixote*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and Shakespeare's *Lear*). Epileptics appear in paintings by Raphael and Rubens, and everywhere the "wisdom of the fool" becomes aphoristic, as Karl Jaspers points out in his philosophically and psychologically seminal *General Psychopathology* (1913). The list of epileptics that came to be idolised is indeed long: Aristotle und Pythagoras, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Lenin, the student revolt leader from 1968 Rudi Dutschke, St. Paul und Pope Pius IX., Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Van Gogh, Nobel, Edison, Newton, Flaubert, Beethoven, Handel, Tchaikovsky and the list goes on.

*Lunaticus* is an audiovisual and theatrical simulation of a sort of heightened, if you like, more intense form of human existence, an "attack", an edge situation. The stylised montage of processed images and sounds draws on a mixture of appropriated and original material. Excerpts from Serrano's own life, religious images, landscape shots, impressions from Mexico and France (Bourges) – where *Lunaticus* was produced in the context of the EMARE MEX stipend – are partly modified in colour and texture and combined with abstract light and colour compositions, creating an independent digital image universe of the poetry of life and art. Spiritual search, reflections on time, life and death are inherent to all her work, whether fictional, documentary or experimental film and short film. Art is for Serrano a means of manifesting the invisible, the metaphysical. Her video creations exploit all the possibilities of the free manipulation of time and space to conjure a "life without rules" and, as in *Lunaticus*, to capture the moment in which the audience can feel itself, as the artist says, "absorbed by heaven": An apparition.

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