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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The principal purpose of p.o.v. is to provide a framework for collaborative publication for those of us who study and teach film at the Department of Information and Media Studies at the University of Aarhus. We will also invite contributions from colleagues in other departments and at other universities. Our emphasis is on collaborative projects, enabling us to combine our efforts, each bringing his or her own point of view to bear on a given film or genre or theoretical problem. Consequently, the reader will find in each issue a variety of approaches to the film or question at hand – approaches which complete rather than compete with one another.

Every March issue of p.o.v. is devoted to the short fiction film.

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Hyperbole and Fear: The Politics in *Bowling for Columbine*

Nancy Graham Holm

In May 2002, *Bowling for Columbine* was the first documentary film to be accepted into the Cannes Film Festival in forty-six years. After the screening, it received a fifteen-minute standing ovation, overwhelming a bewildered and embarrassed Michael Moore, the film's producer. In February 2003, the Writers Guild of America nominated *Bowling for Columbine* for Best Original Screenplay, the first time in WGA history that a documentary was nominated in this category. In March 2003, *Bowling for Columbine* won an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature and Moore made Hollywood history with his acceptance speech that boldly scolded the President of the United States of America. On top of it all, *Bowling for Columbine* is one of the most popular documentaries in history, a sensational box office hit that is making Michael Moore a rich man from his anti-establishment critique, an irony that escapes no one.

The unusual and rather unmarketable title of the film is from a bowling class at Denver's Columbine High School that serves as a sports and physical education course. On the morning of April 20, 1999, Eric Harris (17) and Dylan Klebold (18) went to their bowling class as usual and bowled with their classmates. Several hours later they were dead after firing 900 bullets, killing 12 students, one teacher and wounding 21 others in the school cafeteria. The two boys had been victims of bullying and this was their revenge. Moore chose this title to emphasize the banality of the crime. An earlier survey of high school students in America revealed that 59% said they could get a handgun,

if they wanted one. Why do Americans shoot each other? Moore's answer: "because it's so easy to get a gun!"

Bowling for Columbine is making film history and not because it is a good documentary. Were it to be submitted as a *hovedopgave* [main assignment] at The Danish School of Journalism, for example, it would probably get an "8" [C] or maybe a generous "9" [B-], if its producers performed well at the examination. As a piece of picture-sound storytelling, it is primitive and unevenly crafted with more than a few technical problems, not the least of which is exceptionally poor audio in several key interviews. The film's meandering length suggests that Moore is not familiar with the concept of "killing your darlings" since he seems to have included just about everybody he talked to as research. Yet in spite of this, the documentary is shallow and unsatisfying journalism because it asks questions it never really answers. So why is it so popular and widely celebrated by even those who know better? The answer, of course, is politics.

Michael Moore has become the mouthpiece for the millions of Americans who hate the status quo, George W. Bush, and the National Rifle Association, the gun lobby with prodigious political influence. These are the same Americans who've made best sellers out of his two books, *Downsize This* and *Stupid White Men*. Moore is intelligent and also brilliantly funny. He looks funny, he walks funny, he dresses funny and he says funny things. Humor is his weapon and he uses it to wake up the alienated and resuscitate a liberal agenda. He is not simply anti-American, however. On the contrary, Moore sees himself as a patriot, – a true patriot – loving America while hating its current politics. "I think I'm the majority of Americans," he told *The Guardian*. "I believe that I'm in the mainstream of America. You're not supposed

to see me, I mean someone like me is not supposed to be on television or making films or writing books. So it's just an odd accident that I escaped and somehow I flew in under the radar and came up on the other side."¹

Downsize This and *Stupid White Men* go to the core of America's "dysfunctional" society by pointing out the obvious: the super rich are getting richer while average ordinary Americans are slipping backwards with life styles that make them nervous, paranoid and angry. In addition, the gap between the planet's have and the have-not nations is growing under the misguided forces of globalization, protected by the most powerful and expensive military force in world history.

In *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore is interested in two questions: Why do Americans love guns and protect the right to own weapons? And why, unlike other nationalities that also own guns but do not shoot each other, do Americans use violence to solve problems? Unfortunately, he is far more lucid and analytical in his books than he is in *Bowling for Columbine* and this is what makes the film disappointing. Moore asks the right questions but to get his answers, you have to look outside his film. Instead of a coherent premise that systematically leads to conclusions, *Bowling for Columbine* is an elaborate collection of impressions that merely hints at the answers.

Americans *are* paranoid, especially since September 11, 2001. Aside from international terrorism, however, they are a nation of frightened citizens who live insecure lives. They live in fear and fear combined with access to guns is a dangerous cocktail. Much of Moore's thesis is available on his web site and comes from Barry Glassner's

¹ www.alternet.org/story

1999 Book, *The Culture of Fear*.² The problem is that Americans are afraid of the wrong things. Americans think crime is up when statistically it is going down. They think that illegal drug use is up when statistically, that too is going down. Even youth homicides – the very subject of *Bowling for Columbine* – have declined by 30 % in recent years. Yet Americans continue to build more jails and hold the world's record for incarcerating its citizens.³

It's a matter of perception. According to Moore and Glassner, Americans live exceedingly stressful lives but not because of crime, a false issue that politicians exploit in order to win votes. The real issues are downward economic mobility, corporate lay-offs, domestic violence and an unfair distribution of national wealth that makes it impossible to live a decent life, especially on the minimum wage. Thirty to forty million working Americans cannot afford health insurance and nose-dive into poverty if they experience catastrophic illness. Nursing home aides are among the lowest wage earners in the American economy, making it a nightmare to submit a loved one to their care. Racism exacerbates their fear because many white Americans do not trust people whose skin comes in various shades of brown. At the top of the pyramid are irresponsible, ratings-crazed media that feed the public sensational crime stories as a magnet to attract an audience. It is well known that most newsrooms in regional TV markets lead their newscasts with a crime story, if they have one. ("If it bleeds, it

² www.bowlingforcolumbine.com

³ Compare statistics for America, South Africa and Cuba, per 100,000 people. America has 732 persons locked up; 403 in South Africa and 297 in Cuba. In the state of California, more tax money is spent on jails than on education. Cf. *Pocket World in Figures* (2003. London: The Economist Publishing Company, 2003).

leads!") It's no wonder that Americans feel vulnerable. Their love of handguns and the right to own weapons, therefore, is merely the symptom of their vulnerability. "Are we a nation of gun nuts or are we just nuts?" Moore asks. It appears that Americans *are* nuts, crazy from stress.

Thus Americans own guns, but unlike their Canadian neighbors who also own guns, they use their guns to shoot one another. "Why do we do this?" Moore asks. "The French don't do it, the Germans don't do it and the Canadians don't do it. They're not any less violent as a people. They're humans, they have the same responses as we have." Statistically, an international comparison of homicide rates among males 15 to 24 years of age is startling. Homicides per 100,000 population puts America at 37.2 where Italy is 4.3, Spain is 1.5, Denmark is 1.3, England/Wales is 0.6 and Japan is 0.5 Moore asks: "Why don't they go for a gun and kill at the rate we do?"⁴

Moore asks this question in *Bowling for Columbine* yet even after 114 minutes, he never quite answers it. He merely hints. Racism and white guilt are hinted at in a rapidly edited segment that tells the history of America through animation. It is also hinted at when Moore takes us to the producer of *Cops*, one of America's most popular TV programs that regularly shows bare-chested black men being wrestled to the ground by white policemen. The conversation between Moore and the producer however, is weak and altogether too subtle. In another segment, Moore asks Canadians about the security of having a national health care service but leaves the point dangling in the air.

⁴ From an interview, Michael Moore Unplugged. AlterNet.org, November 20, 2002. www.aternet.org/story Statistics are from Violence: A Report from the Attorney General's Office of California.

Surprisingly, it is rock star, Marilyn Manson who provides one of the more articulate interviews. Manson raises the issue of consumerism and how America's ultra commercial culture is designed to alleviate guilt, fear and other unpleasant feelings. "*Just buy this and you'll feel better!*" An intelligent insight but after listening, Moore leaves it undeveloped.

The same thing happens with childcare, a vital service for working parents but in America only for those who can afford to pay for it. In one of the most poignant segments of the documentary, this important issue is touched on but never developed. Here Moore introduces us to a welfare mother who, evicted from her home, was forced to live with a relative who owned a handgun. Her son was left virtually unsupervised when she was forced by new welfare-to-work rules to commute 80 miles a day and work 70 hours a week at two different jobs in order to pay her rent and meet her expenses. Her 6 year old son found the gun in the house and took it to school where he shot and killed a first grade classmate, a little girl who was also 6 years old. This is one of the saddest and most sobering moments in the film but its point is far too subtle for those who don't want to see it.

This is what makes *Bowling for Columbine* disappointing and frustrating even at the moments when it makes you laugh. The journalism is shallow because there is virtually no analysis or interpretation. Instead, Moore bounces around like a pinball machine, documenting again and again how much Americans like guns. We hear glib comments from low-lifers who sell stolen guns as easily as used washing machines, bank tellers who give away rifles to new customers and a man who sleeps with a 44 magnum under his pillow. We meet Charlton Heston, famed movie actor and long-time President of the

NRA, who seems naive and uninformed. We hear again and again how easy it is to own a gun, but we never hear about the essential quality-of-life differences between America and other modern industrial nations that offer some measure of security under social democracy. In this way, *Bowling for Columbine* is preaching to the converted and will never convince the conservatives to alter their views.

Moore's second question is critical yet he merely skates over it: Why do Americans accept violence as a way to solve problems? In *Bowling for Columbine*, we're introduced to this concept in a collage of historical segments showing American military intervention, edited ironically to Louie Armstrong singing "What a Wonderful World." Hinted at is America's notion of *exceptionalism*. This deeply seeded but otherwise unconscious attitude comes under the rubric of *manifest destiny* that says: America is *special* and therefore *entitled* to act differently from other nations. It means if America wants to act as the world's Rambo Cop, using violence to solve problems, it is perfectly acceptable. The war in Iraq happened after his film was completed but documents his premise.

Says Moore: "Let's just go for that gun and that's how we're going to resolve our disputes. The guy who's sitting in the Oval Office... he wants to bomb. We don't need any more inspections, let's just bomb them and we'll find out later if they have the weapons. That's the American way. I don't like that."⁵

Evidently, Moore has a lot of company. At a time when America's political Left is ragged and unorganized with a polyglot of inarticulate and reticent Democrats, Moore and his followers are attempt-

⁵ Ibid.

ing to revive a liberal agenda. While some critics call the WMD (weapons of mass destruction) “weapons of mass disappearance,” Moore goes one step further and says they are “weapons of mass distraction.” He thinks Iraq is a way to keep Americans from focusing on the vital domestic issues of their society.

What effect is *Bowling for Columbine* having on American politics? While it’s too soon to say, some things *are* changing. A highlight of the film is when Moore brings two surviving victims of the Columbine High School massacre to K-Mart to ask the store to stop selling bullets. One boy with a movie star face sits in a wheelchair where he will remain for the rest of his life while Moore asks the public relations manager if he can speak to someone higher up on the administrative ladder. This is one of the best fly-on-the-wall segments in the documentary and we rejoice with Moore and the two boys when K-Mart eventually decides to change its policy about selling bullets.

But what else? Will this popular documentary serve as a catalyst to mobilize the alienated non-voter? Can it be instrumental in reviving a weak Democratic party and its progressive wing that for the last twenty-five years have been bogged down in despair? At this point, the popularity of the film is merely an interesting barometer of feelings. It is astonishing that Hollywood’s film establishment awarded such a film with the industry’s highest prize but maybe it was a wake-up call to America’s politicians: “Don’t under-estimate the 50% who didn’t vote in 2000 but will in 2004!” And how to explain the fifteen-minute standing ovation in Cannes? Maybe Europeans are so tired of America’s *exceptionalism*, they just couldn’t stop applauding.

The Camera Is Mightier Than The Gun *Bowling for Columbine*

Louise Kjær Sørensen

Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* is his best film ever. It won the Cannes Jury Prize in May 2002, the César Award for Best Foreign Film, and in March 2003 it achieved the ultimate commercial acknowledgement when it won an Oscar for Best Documentary. It is also the best selling documentary ever, bringing home more than \$50 million. It takes a critical look at a gun-loving, fear-driven American society and at its center is the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado where two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed 12 classmates and one teacher and left a number of others injured before they pulled the trigger on themselves. The title of this hilarious, but also very heartbreaking film, is an allusion to the Columbine shooting. On the morning of the massacre, Ed Harris and Dylan Klebold allegedly spent their last hours at a bowling alley, where they bowled two games before going to school and opening fire at their classmates. People blamed their depravity on everything from violent video games to hard-core, heavy-metal rocker Marilyn Manson who Moore interviews in the film. That morning was also the day the US dropped the highest number of bombs in Kosovo! But Moore poses the question: if people are going to blame violent video games and rock music, why not also blame bowling? Through the film, Moore takes the audience on a journey to find the answer to the question: *why is America such a violent country?*

The film begins with Moore going to a bank and opening an account where you get a complimentary gun of your own choice when you open an account. The next scene is taken from a Chris Rock show, where he introduces an alternative form of gun control. Even though Moore uses humor and irony to make his point, the film still takes up very serious questions of American history. At one point Moore lists US military and covert operations that have installed corrupt leaders around the world, including Augusto Pinochet and the Shah of Iran. In another scene, he escorts two Columbine students who were injured in the shooting to the headquarters of Kmart, whose officials agree to stop selling handgun ammunition in their stores (the 9mm ammunition used by Klebold and Harris was purchased from a Kmart). In another scene Moore shows clips of the shooting from the surveillance cameras at Columbine High while at the same time playing records of the 9-11 calls from inside the school and from the media. Moore's attitude to the subject is at one and the same time surreal, serious, silly, and sad and that mixture is exactly why his message comes across so strongly.

The film features an extensive interview with University of Southern California Professor Barry Glassner, author of *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, who while taking Moore for a walk through South Central in Los Angeles (said to be one of the most violent places in America and certainly not a place for two white men to hang out) tries to come up with an explanation for the excessive violence in America. Glassner makes the point that South Central has been wrongly portrayed in the media as have many other things Americans are afraid of and that the real beneficiaries of this climate of fear are the big corporations selling security devices, guns, and bullets. Glassner also makes another point that is important to

consider when discussing gun control: 85% of all guns in America are purchased in white suburbia! This is only one example among many where Moore is very successful in bringing unknown data out into the open and denying the urban legends that play a major part in creating the climate of fear that is taking over American society.

Even though Moore has an ironic distance to the problem, he still feels that the problem of violence runs deep and is somehow related to the racism that has always permeated American society. When interviewing NRA's president at the time, Charlton Heston (Heston retired from his position after the movie, due to his illness, he has Alzheimer's), Moore asks him if he can come up with an answer as to why the number of handgun killings is so much higher in the US than in other countries in the world. Heston answers that the violent past stems from many things such as ethnicity, unemployment, poverty, and last but certainly not least the fact that the US has a very violent past.

Like so many others, Moore can't explain why the US is much more violent than other countries. However, he gives it a shot and with his film starts a debate that will leave you thinking when the movie is over. Moore doesn't come up with a final answer to the questions he poses, but he gives the viewer the basic tools to draw his or her own conclusions.

Still Moore shows us what he think plays a big part in the high rate of violence, which is the fact that the American people are driven by fear of pretty much everything from killer bees, to razor blades in apples on Halloween, to the fear of 'the black man'. Moore concludes that the part the media and the big corporations play is paramount in the debate. One of his examples is the Lockheed Martin factory in

Littleton that produces rockets. How can children have a normal relationship to gun control when their parents go to work every day and produce weapons of mass destruction? There is so much more to the movie and Moore succeeds in taking the debate a step further than that and the documentary reaches a new all time high of filmmaking. It reminds us that this is a society where more than 11,000 people die every year from gunshot wounds, where the media indulge in images of violence, and play upon the white community's fear of 'the black man'. It is also a society where banks give out handguns when you open an account, where the public lives in constant fear of being robbed and killed, and where poverty is a serious problem 'forgotten' by politicians. Moore takes up serious issues like these with an agenda that permeates his new documentary, but this agenda works because it exposes the double standards that Heston and others have promulgated for years. His intensive use of source music as ironic punctuation is sharp, as is the film's ability to shift gears between humor, pathos, and horror. An example of the contrast between sound and image is the sequence where Moore shows pictures of death, destruction, and world misery while at the same time playing Louis Armstrong's classic *What a Wonderful World*. But Moore goes beyond this classic form of intervention by making a history-of-America-cartoon where his use of irony is his way of starting a debate about a very serious question. The narrator is a bullet that explains why Americans are driven by fear. Moore comes to the conclusion that the reason is that Americans have been scared of everything ever since the first immigrants arrived from Europe. However, he also concludes that this fear is irrational and that the only real threat to Americans is from Americans themselves!

I like this film and the fact that it meant to shake up the conservative American society and make Americans take a critical look at their own country. Moore masters his job with perfection and continuously succeeds in making the audience identify with him. However, I think Moore can also be very manipulative in his presentation of information. Throughout the film, he meticulously develops his point that it is because of Americans' unreasonable fear of irrational things that America is so violent; with that groundwork in place, when Charlton Heston finally gets to make his point he ends up looking like a disturbed old man.

At times I felt the film was unstructured and lacked focus. Most of the questions Moore asks are not answered immediately, and keep the viewer waiting for an answer that comes later in the film. But even though *Bowling for Columbine* seems at times a bit confusing and unstructured, it all comes together in the end. This is a film that is multi-faceted, unnerving, stimulating, likely to provoke anger and sorrow on both sides of the political divide, and above all extremely funny.

***Bowling for Columbine:* "I Want Them to Leave Angry"**

Michael Skovmand

Michael Moore's Oscar-winning documentary *Bowling for Columbine* from 2002 is the biggest-selling documentary in history. In his Internet newsletter (www.michaelmoore.com), Moore tells us that as of August 2003, the film has grossed \$22 million in North America and \$35 million overseas, and has been in theatrical release for an unprecedented ten months. In addition to the Oscar, *Bowling for Columbine* received a special award at the Cannes Film Festival. After its release, the documentary has triggered a furious debate in American media and on the Internet, including a campaign for Michael Moore as President of the United States as well as a campaign to revoke Moore's Oscar. The controversy over the film has focused on what is seen to be a manipulative cutting and pasting of footage as well as a number of factual errors or inaccuracies. In addition to this, the film has raised a whole range of issues concerning the ethics and politics of the Moore-style documentary genre.

Moore, born in 1954 in Flint, Michigan, in the rust belt, to an Irish-Catholic working class family, has a long career in alternative journalism with *The Michigan Voice* and the San Francisco-based magazine *Mother Jones*. His first film, *Roger and Me* from 1989, a film in which he repeatedly tries to get an interview with General Motors chairman Roger Smith to question him about the plant closures in Flint, establishes his associative documentary style and his ambush interview techniques, placing himself in the foreground as the shabby,

overweight, plain-speaking guy with the trademark baseball cap. After the commercial and critical success of *Roger and Me*, Moore tried his hand at feature film political satire with *Canadian Bacon*, starring John Candy. He then moved into television satire with the programmes *TV Nation* (NBC and Fox) and *The Awful Truth* (Channel Four/Bravo). The documentary *The Big One* from 1998 tackles economic inequality in America. His book from 2002, *Stupid White Men*, is, among other things, a violent attack on the Bush administration. With *Bowling for Columbine*, and particularly with his Oscar acceptance speech in which, with the whole world as his audience, he openly denounces President Bush and the war against Iraq, he establishes himself as America's most prominent anti-establishment voice. However, unlike another contemporary high profile political crusader, Ralph Nader, Michael Moore has chosen the heartland of American mass media as his battleground, and the guerilla tactics of satirical collage and mock-naive ambush interviews as his highly personalised mode of intervention.

Bowling for Columbine is a textbook example of this.

The rambling narrative of *Bowling for Columbine* may, at first view, seem incoherent, yet, in keeping with Moore's narrative technique of mixing concrete cases of outrage with more general issues, the film is loosely framed by two linked foci: the general indictment of the National Rifle Association, the number one gun lobbying organisation in America, and the 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, when two teenage boys went on a shooting rampage through the school, killing and wounding dozens of their

schoolmates before turning their guns on themselves. The rest of the almost two-hour-long film connects with these two foci by association.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Moore characterises his approach:

The film took so many twists and turns in terms of what I thought it would be or should be that I finally threw caution to the wind. And it came to be something much greater than whatever I was thinking. See, I didn't go to college – I went for a year and dropped out. So I don't really organise my thoughts: Here's the thesis, here's the outline, here's the structure. What happens when you do that in a documentary is you end up filming to fit the outline, as opposed to letting the film sort of decide what the film should be. Everyone knows there's a gun problem. You don't need to waste two hours of your time and eight dollars of your money being told that. You might connect to it, but when you left the theater, you'd just feel despair. I think despair is paralyzing. I don't want people to leave my movies with despair. I want them to leave angry. (pp. 2-3)

“Letting the film sort of decide” brought about the following series of clustered stories: Opening with a satirical “typical day in America” where gun violence and fear reigns, Moore goes on to a sequence of Michigan-based scenes: a bank where he gets a free gun for opening an account, home movies of himself as a gun-loving youngster and card-carrying member of the NRA – which, apparently, he still is – and a series of interviews related to the Oklahoma City bombing, committed by Michigan-based militiamen. He then moves on to the Columbine setting in Colorado, with a series of interviews with, among others, a Lockheed public relations officer, creating a link between the rocket manufacturer and the Columbine tragedy. We then move into a collage of American military interventions – Iran, Vietnam, Chile, Panama, Iraq – accompanied in counterpoint by Louis Armstrong's “What a Wonderful World”. The next central sequence depicts the high school massacre – including original 911 calls recorded during the shootings –

with interviews with people involved, cutting to the NRA convention, with Charlton Heston, in nearby Denver just ten days after the massacre, and rallies protesting against the NRA. The film then moves on to the more general terrain of depicting the American climate of fear and the general debate over the origins of American violence – including an interview with a very sane Marilyn Manson – one of the bogeymen of American middle-class anxieties. A contrastive analysis sets US violence and gun killings against those of other ‘civilised’ countries, providing the well-known staggering statistical evidence (Canada: 165 gun killings per year, United States 11,127) – followed by South Park’s cartoon version of American history, i.e. the arming and ‘scaring’ of America, including a juxtaposition of the Ku Klux Klan and the NRA. A history of ‘scares’ follows: Y2K, “Africanised” killer bees and so on, and an interview with Barry Glasser, author of *The Culture of Fear*, set in South Central Los Angeles, focusing on the demonisation of black males. The scene then moves to Canada, the American Other, providing ‘Fun Facts’ about the peaceful Canadians who, in spite of the prevalence and accessibility of guns, live with their doors unlocked, in a welfare state with reasonable unemployment benefits and a comprehensive national health care system. The next sequence is yet another indictment of US gun culture, this time embedded in issues of unemployment and forced welfare-to-work programmes, with its focus on the shooting of a six-year-old girl by a six-year-old classmate, near Flint, Michigan.

We then move on to the general issue of the climate of fear of the Bush administration after September 11, with gun sales and burglar alarms skyrocketing, the conclusion (which is really the conclusion of the film as a whole) drawn by Moore being that “A public in fear

should not have a lot of guns lying around". Moore then picks up on the Columbine thread, taking two boys crippled by the Columbine shootings to K-Mart, where the bullets were bought, asking K-Mart to stop selling guns and ammunition – and succeeding. The final sequence of the film is Moore's interview with Charlton Heston in his luxurious Beverly Hills mansion. A feeble and bemused Heston is asked to account for the violence of American society, and is confronted with the picture of the six-year-old dead girl from Michigan. The inconclusive interview ends with an irritated Heston walking away. As the credits roll, we are given a sneering rock version of "What a Wonderful World".

The bowling motif, reiterated throughout the movie, takes its point of departure from the information – later refuted – that on the morning of the Columbine massacre the two boys attended their regular bowling class. Ostensibly, Moore uses the innocuous pastime of bowling as a metaphorical counterpoint to the gruesome high school massacre and, by extension, locates the violence of American gun culture as part and parcel of American middle-class conformism, in Littleton, Colorado and elsewhere.

No doubt, Moore's impassioned indictment of American gun culture in *Bowling for Columbine* has reached and impressed a larger and wider spectrum of audiences in America and abroad than is usual for a documentary of its kind. However, media commentary in America, predictably, has been split largely along the well-known liberal/conservative divide. Daniel Lyons, of the conservative *Forbes Magazine*, has led the way - not in questioning Moore's larger claims about gun violence in America, but in choosing a nit-picking approach

in querying Moore's 'facts'. Apparently, the two shooters skipped their bowling class on the day of the massacre. The Lockheed Martin plant in Littleton makes peaceful space launch vehicles (although, as Lyons forgets to mention, Lockheed Martin as a nationwide company is an arms manufacturer). The bank where, ostensibly, Moore got a gun immediately after opening an account, requires you to have a background check, and normally you would pick up your gun at a gun shop. (However, as the bank manager pointed out in the documentary, the bank itself stores 500 guns for prospective clients.) The independent conservative journalist David T. Hardy, on his website 'Truth About Bowling', amid a host of alternative facts and figures, does make a point worth considering: the film's implicit linking of the Ku Klux Klan and the NRA casts Charlton Heston as a racist by implication. Heston, however, for all his gun-toting rhetoric, has a documented history of civil rights activism, having marched with Martin Luther King in the famous 1963 civil rights demonstration in Washington D.C. Furthermore, he was actively involved in breaking the Hollywood race barrier with *Omega Man* in 1971, co-starring with the black actress Rosalind Cash.

Most mainstream American media are cautiously sympathetic to Moore, if sceptical of his grandstanding. *The US Catholic* places Moore in the grand traditions of Old Testament prophets and American muckrakers, tracing backwards from *Bowling for Columbine* a film history of truth-telling and whistle-blowing that includes *The Insider* (1999), *Silkwood* (1983), *Serpico* (1973), and *On the Waterfront* (1954).

Curiously, the feminist periodical *Off Our Backs* is highly critical of *Bowling*. Moore, Carolyn Gage insists, is 'off target' in his wholesale

criticism of US gun culture, in ignoring the link between gun violence (and violence in general) and male patriarchy.

Dissent, the prominent left-wing journal, has fielded a principled debate on the political propriety of *Bowling for Columbine* and the relevance and efficacy of Moore's documentary interventionism in general. Kevin Mattson (in 'The Perils of Michael Moore') characterises Moore's stance as 'Anti-Politics' – he is cynical and disillusioned about the entire spectrum of American politics, including Democrats and Republicans alike. Moore is the lone fighter with "no political solutions or realistic tactics for long-term change"(p. 79) His "merging of political criticism and entertainment"(p. 75) leaves us with "decontextualised images"(p. 78) of complex issues. Mattson compares Moore unfavourably with Edward R. Murrow, the famous crusading CBS journalist of the 1950s and '60s, who was instrumental in exposing the anti-Communist witch hunt of Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The Summer 2003 issue of *Dissent* brings a number of rebuttals to Mattson's criticism. The American Left, it is argued, "is going to have to get its hands dirty in the world of pop and commercial culture" (p. 108), if it is to have any presence in American politics. This is an echo of media critic Tood Gitlin in the *American Prospect* (February 2003), who deplores "the lack of lefty bigmouths to penetrate the thicket of right-wing commentary on the airwaves".

Bowling for Columbine and its history of reception – which is still ongoing – is a fascinating case of the interfacing of contemporary American media and politics. It illuminates both the perils and the potential of political interventionist strategies in a media-saturated society in which film, network television and the Internet interact.

Moore wants his audience to “leave angry” after having seen *Bowling for Columbine*, and certainly the snowballing effect of *Bowling for Columbine*, catapulted by Moore’s own publicity stunt at the Oscars, and backed up by the film’s sales figures, appears overwhelming. The depth and durability of the anger presumably generated within those millions of viewers, however, is questionable. There is perhaps a point to the criticism levelled against Moore, that in his mind-blowing indictment of the American ‘society of fear’ he enlists himself, however well-intentioned and well-documented *Bowling for Columbine* may be, in that genre of ‘scare panics’ which he himself criticises.

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Ripley as Interstitial Character: White Woman as Monster and Hero in *Alien Resurrection*

Caroline Joan ("Kay") Picart

Abstract

Alien Resurrection (1997) heightens the movements across dark humor and horror, and enables more pronounced and complex conjunctions across the three types of "shadows," particularly in the case of monstrous female characters like Ripley. Thus, like the *Terminator* films, which used a hybrid action-science fiction-horror-comedic format, and a strong female central character, *Alien Resurrection* enables us to glimpse, through a glass darkly, other ways in which the gendered and raced complexities of the Frankenstein cinematic myth may be traced.

Genre Ruptures and Hybridities of Race and Gender: Theoretical Framework¹

In the *Alien* series, it is the body of the archaic mother, rather than the parthenogenetic father, that is the site of desire and revulsion. The films visually emphasize dark, slimy passages and teeth dripping blood, acid and saliva. They rivet our attention by focusing on exploding stomachs and devouring wombs and on the "all-incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed" (Creed 1993, 11). The *Alien* series, like traditional Frankenstein filmic narratives, is about monstrous rebirths; yet the *Alien* films ultimately problematize the Frankensteinian filmic narrative's gendered and racial politics. The strain on the intertwined patriarchal myths of parthenogenesis, and of (imperialist and racist) science as an unambiguous guarantor of progress, is even more obvious in hybrid film versions of the evolving Frankenstein myth. Cinemyths are public

performance spaces within which patriarchal and matriarchal myths compete with each other, and where conservative and progressive ideological forces struggle against each other in working through collective anxieties, traumas or aspirations. One contribution this paper adds to the discussion is that particularly in *Alien Resurrection*, the trauma of racial miscegenation is complexly imbricated in the public visualization of the monstrous, and that an intersectional analysis of not only gender, power and technology, but also race, is instructive in understanding how “shadows” operate in hybrid (science fiction-horror-comedy) film.

This article builds from Janice Rushing and Thomas Frenzt’s concept of “shadows”—points of extreme psychic ambivalence, revelatory of fears regarding technology and gender. In brief, they identify two types of shadows: the first, or “inferior” shadow, is represented by the feminine, women, the body, minorities, and anything that deviates from rational ego consciousness. The second or “technologized” shadow is represented best by Frankenstein’s monster (Rushing and Frenzt 1995; 1989). I have argued in earlier work that a third type of shadow, which is a combination of the two—either a feminine monster, or the feminine configured as monstrous—is the more crucial shadow to track in exploring the tensions of the Frankenstein myth within straight horror film renditions. It is this third shadow that often serves as the scapegoat, whose sacrifice is necessary in order for a conventional closure to occur. The Frankensteinian myth, re-envisaged through film, is a story of masculine self-birthing (parthenogenesis). In

¹ I wish to thank David Frank, Davis Houck, Michelle Commander and Tami Tomasello, who have provided invaluable assistance in getting this article in its current form.

the original *Frankenstein* novel, this self-birthing is construed to be monstrous, and anti-natural. In contrast, many of the classic horror films, despite their heavy-handed emphasis on some sort of moral admonition concerning the possible excesses of science, ambivalently glorify the power of the scientist as magician and God. More contemporary hybrid offshoots, such as *Alien Resurrection*, effectively unleash, at least for a time, the transgressive powers of the parthenogenetic birth's twin myth, the story of Baubo's *ana-suromai* (Baubo's lifting of her skirts to reveal her genitalia and belly as a defiant act celebrating female reproduction and sexual desire).

Both Amy Taubin (1993) and Thomas Vaughn (1995) have demonstrated *Alien*'s affinities with avante-garde film and its liberatory potential as a critique of white, heterosexual, Reaganite "breeder" myths. Taubin's essay was the first to point out the gendered ambiguation in this film (which Vaughn continued), and though she does not develop the argument, she makes the insightful observation that the alien queen "suspiciously" resembles a "favourite scapegoat of the Reagan/Bush era—the black welfare mother, that parasite on the economy whose uncurbed reproductive drive reduced hard-working taxpayers to bankruptcy" (Taubin 1993, 96). It is significant to note that Ripley's survival seems to hinge upon her association with sacrificial black male characters, particularly in *Alien*, *Alien*³ and also in *Alien Resurrection*. Thus, despite *Alien Resurrection*'s comparatively progressive gender politics, it remains rooted within a frame of non-reflexive whiteness. I illustrate this specific point by analyzing the complex and contradictory characterizations of Ripley.

As Donna Haraway points out, if our postmodern way of being in the world is cyborg-ian (i.e., hybrid in multiple ways), then

monstrosity (understood as pluralistic category violation) is a way out of a maze of dualisms that somehow seem inadequate to describe the chiaroscuro of lived (and culturally imagined) existence: “A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end . . . it takes *irony* for granted [*italics mine*]” (Haraway 1991, 180). These ambiguities, with their potential, through bisociation (Koestler, 1949, 1967, 1978) for liberation as well as suppression, are particularly evident in hybrid genres, as I show in *Alien Resurrection*. More particularly, in *Alien Resurrection*, generally summarized, the characterizations of the female, ambiguously sexed and gendered, and inter-species characters (Ripley, Call, the Alien Queen, the Newborn) function to bisociate shadows in provocative and ambivalently hegemonic ways that the narrative does not grant to its white male characters. All of these “mixed” characters are important to characterize in terms of whether they gain or lose power by virtue of being liminal or bisociative characters if they are interpreted as coding for different types of miscegenations. Ultimately, production choices collectively render the hybridities of these characters into an ambivalent mix of conventional and untraditional characteristics. Thus, in the case of Ripley, marks of “difference” difficult to assimilate (slime, blue skin, matted hair, other marks of bestiality) become reduced to style (black fingernails, tight leather accessories). Similarly, animal instinct (often associated with discourses of racial inferiority) becomes coded as collective memory, heightened senses, hyper-enhanced sexuality, and diminished capacity for moral judgment as well. Marks of difference that are admirably fetishized are disturbingly predictable: athletic strength and agility; ruthlessness and

cunning; propensity for violence. Call's "difference" as a robot is overlaid by her white, Audrey Hepburn look. The Alien Queen and the Newborn, despite their acquisition of human-like characteristics, still fulfill the conventional role of the classic horror "Not-I" that has to be staked and killed off ritualistically. Underneath *Alien Resurrection's* horror-science fiction plot is the familiar story of the white man's envy of the "exotic" alien (as seen in all of the interstitial characters I sketched above), and fascination with "mixed" femininity (e.g., the stereotypes of the tragic mulatta or the fatal Jewess instantiated in Call). Despite the prevalence of these conventional elements, the story punishes the white traders and scientists who engage in slave trading and genetic engineering, this points to an ideological struggle at the heart of the narrative. In *Alien Resurrection*, the blurring of shadows in the interstitial characters (characteristic of hybrid genres), and an inversion of the myth of parthenogenesis (anchored by and through appeals to conventional perspectives) enables an ambivalence concerning relationships binding gender, race, science, technology and the trading of commodities. It is this ambivalence that creates new possibilities for exploring the struggle between hegemonic containment and ideological tension.

Ripley as a Mixed Entity

Ripley's status as a multiply liminal or interstitial character is immediately at the forefront of the narrative. Joss Whedon, the scriptwriter, confronted the task of credibly bringing Ripley back to life, after she had voluntarily perished (like the T-800) in a vat of molten metal. His answer to the conundrum was one used by *Jurassic Park* in resurrecting

dinosaurs: cloning from frozen blood samples taken from the pregnant Ripley by her former lover-medic on Fiorina 161 in *Alien*². The use of cloning as a narrative explanatory device also allowed the imaginative screenwriter to forge new possibilities, particularly in terms of Ripley's characterization; it also updated the classic horror version of the Frankensteinian creature from a lumbering patchwork corpse to a more credibly genetically engineered entity (with its echoes of Nazi and U.S. experimentation in this area). The new Ripley was now the 8th attempt at cloning, and her genetic make-up was part-human, part-Alien. Reminiscent of Sarah Connor's remake in *Terminator 2*, the result is an incredibly more powerful and feral Ripley. This reborn Ripley can sense the Aliens' embryos implanted in human bodies through her hyper-enhanced sense of smell. She can hear and understand the Aliens' ultrasonic signals to each other through her hyper-enhanced hearing, and use her acid-blood to sear holes into metal and glass. Yet Whedon also spoke of the more human aspects of Ripley's resurrection as pivotal to the film's plot: "I realized that the emotional arc of the story rides on her feelings as she goes through this resurrection. Her story, for me, is about her accepting her own kind of humanity, on her own terms even if she doesn't necessarily fit the description of 'human.'" (Murdock and Aberly 1997, 6).

One could read racial representation as one of the tension points of the released film, particularly in its opening credits. It begins by

² I draw this argument partially from Sarah Kofman (1988), who states: "In the Eleusinian mysteries, the female sexual organ is exalted as the symbol of fertility and a guarantee of the regeneration and eternal return of all things." Kofman's position, that "Baubo can appear as a female double of Dionysus" effectively locates Baubô and Dionysus as masks for life as eternally self-generating and protean. Yet if I were to carry the implications of her genealogy even further, it appears that Baubo is more than Dionysus' twin. As someone who nurses a goddess of fertility back into health, and as the woman upon whose belly the image of Iaachos-Dionysus (i.e., Dionysus as an infant) is etched, she seems more powerful than he is. See also Picart, 2001.

featuring a strangely warping, porous object that has the color of caucasian skin (which we later find out is the cloned Ripley's skin). As the credits roll, the thing undulates like a strange film, with extreme close ups of strands of dark hair and an eye becoming recognizable, and then wafting out as the material continues undulating. For a while, monstrosity and whiteness become visually conflated, and there is a sense in which the film could potentially unfix commonsensical demarcations of not only gender, sex, human-ness and power, but also racial marking. The opening credits visually sets up a potential reversal, in which it is not "coloredness" that is an instance of a "shadow," but whiteness itself, within the context of an aging colonialist culture in which phenotypic racial "marking" is becoming increasingly problematic. However, this visual thematic eventually becomes subverted as the film continues.

Indeed, there is much in *Alien Resurrection* that binds it to its earlier, and more conservative, predecessors, cast within the Frankensteinian (and parthenogenetic) mythic mold. Wheddon's "final script," which was published on the internet, continues the same dream/nightmare motif that was characteristic of the earlier *Alien* films (Whedon 1999). It features three pages of detailed crosscutting between: 1) nightmarish images of a young girl being attacked by a swarm of monstrous insects (with one of Newt's memorable lines in *Aliens* being uttered in a voiceover: "My mommy said there were no monsters—no real ones—but there are"); 2) Ripley, with dark, Alien eyes, ripping open her own chest; and 3) "real" images of Ripley being operated on by a medical team aboard the U.S.S. Auriga, in order to harvest the Alien Queen that gestates in her chest. The film omits the nightmare, and immediately presents the audience with the spectacle

of a naked young girl, encased like a preserved specimen, in a glass container. Her features dissolve imperceptibly into Ripley's recognizable features, and we realize that the girl, a female Rip van Winkle, has slept her way into maturity in that aqueous artificial womb. Around her, ubiquitous Frankensteinian scientists stare, observing and recording. Among these scientists, two figures stand out. One of them is Dr. Gediman (Brad Dourif), whose character Jeunet describes, much like Colin Clive's Henry Frankenstein in the 1931 *Frankenstein* as: "wildly enthusiastic, gradually going into madness. He has a paternal side with the aliens. Above all he wants to save his experiment. Blinded by his passion, he doesn't see the consequences of it." (Murdock and Aberly 1997, 11). Yet if Gediman may be described as paternal, then his famous "kissing scene against the glass" with one of the Alien warriors he studies and then gasses with liquid nitrogen in order to exert dominance, is both incestuous and bizarre. The other major scientist, who is Gediman's superior, is Dr. Wren. Wren is played by J.E. Freeman who described his character as: "an evil man who is quite mad, with a grand idea and a twisted sense of humor. Mengele with a sense of humor" (Murdock and Aberly, 11).

In the script, Ripley's status as a female monster is revealed early (even her skin is blue and covered with "aspic slime") (Whedon 1997, 1); in this scene, she immediately lashes out and crushes a surgeon's forearm before a rapid cut is signaled in the screenplay. In the film, that revelation is reserved for later. After the Caesarian birth of Ripley's monstrous progeny, we next see her cocooned in translucent plastic; in a series of dissolves, the camera draws closer to the figure curled up like a fetus as she becomes conscious. Like the creature in *Frankenstein Must be Destroyed*, who wakes up to realize he has been

reborn in another's body, Ripley examines her hands, touches her face, feels the birth scar running along her chest; like a Holocaust victim, she finds the number "8" tattooed near the crook of her elbow. Yet more like the Terminator, Ripley remains stoic and unmoved, "her face unreadable" (Whedon 1999, 6). The published script even more blatantly codes her as a conjunction of female monster (third shadow) and wild, hysterical woman who "needs" to be contained (first shadow): "Ripley crouches in the middle of a small, dark chamber. She is wide-eyed, staring straight ahead in a state of near catatonia. Hair tangled and wild. But at least she's not so blue as before, now as slimy" (Whedon 1997, 3). Consistently, the production choices in the transformation from script to film eradicate the less "aesthetically" assimilable marks of difference (slime, blue skin, matted hair) to more palatable stylistic characteristics (black fingernails and tight leather accessories, which we see later.)

When we next view Ripley, she is dressed in a white lab gown, seated upon a table as Gediman examines what remains of her surgical wounds. In the film, her hands are harnessed, and it is with her legs that she grabs Gediman—a gesture both sensual and aggressive—snaps her bonds, and begins to strangle him. Clearly, Ripley's "hybridity" has enhanced her "animal survival instinct" (often associated with racial inferiority, sexual looseness and amorality). Wren, who had walked into the room, and had alternated between not speaking to Ripley (as if she were a lab rat) and speaking to Ripley (albeit in the tone of a father proud of a prodigious child), now sounds the alarm. A guard runs in and blasts Ripley with a shockrifle or "burner," causing her to crumple in a corner. In the script, like the bewildered creature of the Frankenstein narrative, Ripley wearily asks

“Why?”;” however, the film has Ripley strategically quiet, almost as if she were weighing her options for survival.

Thus, the Ripley who emerges in the film is very much like the remade Sarah O’Connor in *Terminator 2* (and to some degree, the Terminatrix in *Terminator 3*); she is ruthless, both as a survivor and a destroyer, and at this point, seems devoid and perhaps even incapable of emotion. Like the Terminator, she has “detailed files” because as an unexpected benefit of her genes mixing with those of the embryonic Alien queen she carried, she retains a genetically inbuilt collective memory. This memory, despite its occasional “cognitive dissonance,” allows her to respond as a fully grown adult with most of her prototype’s original memories. Yet unlike the recreated Sarah or the Terminatrix, but like the mythic Baubo, the resurrected Ripley is not detached from her sexual power as a female—both erotically and reproductively. The competing characterizations of Ripley as resurrected Baubo-figure and miscegenated creature reflect the progressive and conservative ideological strains at the heart of the narrative. Thus, constant sexual innuendos mark her speech, particularly in relation to Johner (Ron Perlman), and she identifies herself as the “mother of the monster” to the terrified, impregnated Purvis (Leland Orser). In the script, reality fades imperceptibly into a dream sequence, in which she surprises Gediman as he observes the Aliens. She flirts with him, and then takes the initiative and seduces him with a kiss. Just when a romantic interlude looks inevitable, an Alien tongue shoots out of her mouth and “buries itself” in his face. Ripley awakens, breathing hard (Whedon 1999). Despite the fact that this section of the scene never made it to the final cut, it is clear that Jeunet made it his prerogative to “[push] Sigourney to be more sexual” (Fanshawe 1997,

11, AMPAS Clipping). It is important to note, however, that Ripley's sexual desirability is also differentially coded; scenes in which she is attractive to heterosexual white men underline her whiteness, and she is shot in high key lighting. Scenes in which she flirts with cross-species and cross-gendered boundaries are often shot in low key lighting, emphasizing her as a literal and metaphorical "creature of darkness."

Yet this Ripley (clone number 8) is sexual not only in relation to male bodies but also in relation to female bodies—and in particular to the extremely attractive Annalee Call (Winona Ryder), who, we later find out, like the Terminators, is an advanced robot created by robots. Ripley's interstitiality in relation to Call therefore is multiply cyborgian: lesbian, maternal, predatorial. Early in the narrative, Call is simply a tough, pretty girl, who is "the very devil with a socket wrench." It is clear that all the men seem to gravitate toward her sexually. General Perez remarks that she "makes an impression;" Elgyn (Michael Wincott), the leader of the smugglers, remarks that he finds Call "extremely fuckable" and that Vriess (Dominique Pinon) "somewhat pines;" and Johner, when he finds out that Call is not human, exclaims with horror that he "almost fucked that thing." Once again, the white men's fascination-repulsion with the "tragic mulatta/Jewess" (a la Helen Hirsch in *Schindler's List*) finds an echo in Call's characterization as human-like robot who cannot help but exude a passive sex magic over others, and yet suffer from self-loathing. Yet other than an asexual protectiveness over Vriess (who is a cripple), Call, like the androids Bishop and Ash in earlier *Alien* films, seems oblivious to the sexual interest in her.

Even Ripley responds to Call's sexual desirability. In the scene in which Call sneaks into Ripley's chamber with a large stiletto in order to assassinate the woman whom she thinks is carrying the monster, Call falters when she glimpses Ripley's scar and realizes that such a murder would be pointless. Cold-blooded as ever, Ripley provocatively asks whether Call intends to kill her, thus turning the tables. When Call offers to euthanize Ripley, Ripley thrusts her own palm into Call's large dagger without flinching, inquiring: "What makes you think I would let you do that?" before she withdraws her hand from the blade. In the script, Ripley then only "touches [Call's] forehead gently, almost sensually" as she speaks of the inevitability of the Aliens' escape and their wholesale destruction of everyone they encounter (Whedon 1997, 34). But the film shows Ripley gripping Call and sensually caressing her face, as she utters the words of impending doom in a husky, seductive voice, as if seeking to hypnotize her prey. With lightning quickness, she then grabs Call's throat, and ironically returns the terrorist's offer with the words: "I can make it stop. . ." The script has her saying this sadly, but the film reconstructs the line to be meant mockingly. The bisociation between Ripley's soothingly uttered offer of salvation and her deadly grasp of the young girl's neck inspires the entire gamut of horror, fear, awe and fascination, and enables us to witness Ripley's dark, predatory humor at work. In addition, the scene is shot in low key lighting, which can be narratively explained because they are in an inner cell that imprisons Ripley. Nevertheless, the use of the lighting emphasizes Call's not only diminutive stature, compared to Ripley, but also her comparative whiteness—and thus her vulnerable femininity (Berenstein 1996; Dyer 1997). This type of visual coding could be read as aligning the audience with the terrified (and

white) Call, as opposed to the cool (and darker) Ripley. Yet the fact that Call, as a terrorist and aspiring hunter turned hunted, had come to kill Ripley, leaves the audience also potentially conflicted regarding whom to side with; this ambivalence seems formally signaled in the noir-like lighting that suffuses Ripley's cell.

Yet Ripley's sexuality seems to cross not only gendered boundaries (through the implied lesbian attraction that seems to draw her to Call) but also species boundaries. When she slips into a lower layer where "a swarm of black, insectile bodies" (Whedon 1997, 102) undulate rhythmically. This engulfment by the aliens again marks her as an interstitial character—not only in terms of species categories, but also implicitly, in racial categorizations of "blackness" and "whiteness". The slimy material and phallic shaped objects envelope her suggestively. When she is first captured by the warrior Aliens, she is borne gently in their arms. The online script makes the erotic coding even more obvious by adding the line: "If she were awake and out of her mind, she could be kissing the beast" (Whedon 1999, 106). Even more blatantly, in the published script, it becomes clear that her cross species grandson (i.e., the hybrid son—though with breasts--born from the human womb of the Alien Queen) has sexual designs on her.

In the film, Ripley leaves the controls of the ship to Johner and Vriess, and descends just in time to save Call from the Newborn, which is, like Ripley earlier, toyingly caressing the terrified android's face. (The visual dynamics of associating female whiteness with sexual desirability and vulnerability, and darkness with sexual predatoriness are again at play in this sequence, with Ripley being an intermediate figure.) Ripley calls softly and yet unmistakably imperiously to the Newborn, as if it were her child, or her lover. He/it approaches her,

and they caress each other as Call stands transfixed by this “grotesque” dalliance. Ripley continues to run her hand along the Newborn’s head, and suddenly presses hard against its teeth, cutting herself. She flicks blood to a small glass window, creating a vacuum that sucks the Newborn out, cutting and filtering its guts out through the tiny opening as it screams in pain and anger. In the released film, Ripley’s ambivalent alliances become clear: she grimaces in sympathy and pity as she, hanging on for her own life, watches her cross species grandson suffer. She whispers, “I’m sorry,” sharing its agony (Whedon 1999, 46).³ Thus, the Ripley who emerges in the final film is like a Christlike (and demonic) figure who is both fully human and fully divine—but in this version, fully human and fully non-human. Nevertheless, despite her numerous enhancements, Ripley is still coded as a human woman—a mother figure, who protects the android Call (a mechanical substitute for Newt in *Aliens*) at all costs.

Conclusions

Like the Terminator films, which used a hybrid action-science fiction-horror-comedic format, and a strong female central character, *Alien Resurrection* enables us to glimpse, through a glass darkly, other ways in which the gendered and raced complexities of the Frankenstein cinematic myth may be traced. Ultimately, none of the white male characters are able to fulfill the ambivalent bisociative functions that the interstitial characters enact. Nevertheless, despite the metaphoric coding of Ripley’s (and Call’s bodies as interstitial, both Sigourney

³ In the online script, the grotesque spectacle of dying by being sucked through a tiny hole was reserved for General Perez, but the film instead substitutes the equally macabre (though darkly humorous) scene of the general being bitten in the back of his head, and then plucking out a piece of his own brain in disbelief.

Weaver and Winona Ryder are white females. Crucially, it is upon white female bodies that this fantasy of multiple liminality is played out. There are no colored female bodies who are even part of the story, much less marked as heroic, and who survive the narrative. Christie (whose name is ambiguously gendered), the African-American sharpshooter-thug turned savior, follows his predecessors in the earlier *Alien* films and dies sacrificially. Ramirez, the other colored character, does not survive and is murdered viciously by the Newborn. There are certain types of liminalities that cannot be assimilated, as evidenced in the *Alien Queen's* and the *Newborn's* conventional slaughter. It is in these senses that *Alien Resurrection* reveals its tensions as a miscegenation fantasy, and shows how ambivalences reveal the struggle between conventional and progressive ideological elements in hybrid cinematic narratives of gender, race, power and technology.

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Anti-film: *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

On the 30th of June 1952 the film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* by Guy Debord premiered in Ciné-Club d'Avant-Gardes at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. The lights in the cinema were switched off and the film began. The screen went white from the light of the projectors and an expressionless voice on the soundtrack announced: "The film by Guy-Ernest Debord, *Howlings in favour of Sade...*" Another voice continued dispassionately, "*Howlings in favour of Sade* is dedicated to Gil J. Wolman". A third voice recited "Article 115. When a person shall have ceased to appear at his place of abode or home address for four years, and about whom there has been no news whatsoever, the interested parties shall be able to petition the lower courts in order that his or her absence be declared". The three voices continued reading different text fragments out loud, one after the other, for a couple of minutes. The screen remained white; there were still no pictures. After a couple of minutes with a white screen, a voice recited: "Just as the film was about to start, Guy-Ernest Debord would climb on stage to say a few words by way of introduction. He'd say simply: 'There's no film. Cinema is dead. There can't be film anymore. If you want, let's have a discussion". Following this the screen went black, and there was no sound for a couple of minutes. Already at this point the audience was getting restless – several had protested loudly, others had left, and only a few minutes passed before the director of the film club, Jean Gauliez, stopped *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*. Indeed, this film by Guy Debord, later leader of the Situationists, was also a

provocation and an anti-film more than a film. There were no pictures in the film – the screen was either white or black. The soundtrack consisted of nothing but voices expressionlessly reciting the fragmentary sentences taken from bodies of laws, novelettes, modernistic literature and newspaper notices. There was neither music nor real sound in the film; only voices cut through the silence. The discontinuous ‘dialogue’ of the voices accompanied the white screen, and when the screen was black there was no sound in the film. The film lasted eighty minutes; the soundtrack lasted twenty. So the film consisted of one hour of blackness and total silence, its final twenty-four minutes taking place in black silence. However, the viewers were not interested in spending this amount of time on the premiere, which ended in chaos and scandal, the film being stopped after less than ten minutes.

This event was paradigmatic for the scepticism of Situationist International toward not just film, but images in general. The Situationists were modern iconoclasts with a prophetic vision of a future communistic society. Therefore, they were revolutionaries in respect to the world at that time, a world they denied. As in *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, the Situationists refused to create images, to produce new representations. The absent pictures in Debord’s film were intended as a critique of the way in which contemporary culture used the image, which according to the Situationists was the most recent alienating technique of capitalism. As Debord wrote in the Situationists’ major theoretical work, *La Société du Spectacle*, from 1967: “Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a *partial* way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world

apart, solely as an object of contemplation. The tendency toward the specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself.”¹ According to the Situationists, after the World Wars the Western world had been transformed into a society of images in which products and images formed a synthesis. Fascism’s aestheticization of politics and staging of the public had prepared the American-inspired consumer society that became a reality in the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War. As an important element of this reconstruction, European society had become colonized by images, so that people were bombarded by images both outside and inside, at work and in their spare time. In the 1950s, the walls of the city and the home became covered with the images of the advertising industry, which colonized their surroundings far more subtly than Fascism’s directly commanding images. In the Situationists’ view, this colonization or bombardment transformed mankind and its experience of time and space. Mankind had previously been an autonomous, contemplative subject, but now it was subjected to the image, which suddenly became autonomous and self-sufficient. Image production occupied the conscious and unconscious processes by means of which the subject sensed, desired and understood the world. At the same time this – the sensual world – had become permeated and transformed by the mass reproduction and spread of the image; so visual experience was no longer a question of creating and discovering new forms, but had to do with an already organized appearance. The subject was therefore

¹ Guy Debord: *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 12.

reduced to a contemplative object, the imagery of the society of spectacle already having been formed and thus not in need of the subject's active efforts to frame and mould. The society of spectacle was a society in which everything, according to Debord, was staged, and in which people therefore merely passively contemplated a world beyond their intervention.

With his notion of the society of spectacle or the spectacular market society, Debord attempted to update Western Marxism, the analyses of which concluded that during the twentieth century capital had subjugated everything. Capital did not just produce commodities, work tools and raw material; it also produced labour. Mankind had thus become totally dependent. According to Debord, the dominance of capital had become complete through the general commodification of fetishes, through the production and consumption of material and symbolic 'commodities' that all had the quality of representations or images. In this process in which society was no longer justified with reference to the hereafter, the opposition between use-value and exchange-value disintegrated; it was no longer possible to distinguish between original and copy, between true and false. According to Debord, this meant that the subversive potential of art had disappeared. Through the spectacle, capitalism and cultural production had formed a false synthesis. Cultural production had become assimilated into the production of commodities, and there was no longer any 'outside'— such as the surrealists' subconscious – from which art could criticize capital. Art was no longer a place beyond the form of the commodity where a certain liberty was accessible.

For Debord there was no longer anything beyond commercial culture's logic of production, which had absorbed all art forms. It was

therefore illusory to expect art to negate the logic of production, art now being merely a reservoir for ideological manoeuvres rather than creative resources. The space from which art had previously mobilized critique had been occupied. It was a serious problem for every artistic practise, even if they saw themselves as anti-artistic and critical, as did the Situationists. But at the same time it was also a possibility, the Situationists being especially well positioned, as it were, to understand the new symbolic terms of production that became a reality after the Second World War in Europe. Debord's and the Situationists' starting point in the tradition of the artistic avant-garde meant that originally they almost intuitively, and later more and more theoretically, understood how art and culture had come to play a key role in the self-symbolization of society. The Situationists nevertheless remained dependent on a metaphysical idea of an absolute reality, and the more they desperately asserted the existence of a more essential reality, the more obvious and visible the vision became, thus becoming trapped among the images of the society of spectacle.

The real strength of the society of spectacle compared to earlier societies was precisely culture and its production and reception of images, for with culture the dominant order could create 'empty' images, that is, images of a subject that did not have any subjectivity other than the images. For Debord the 'solution' to this historical problem of society going into a visual oscillation was to abandon art as a separate sphere for exercising creativity. The Situationists refused the artistic praxis. It was simply impossible to create artworks; only the avant-garde position remained. The avant-garde was the vanguard of humanity, its head, which, because it had wrenched itself free from

figurative idols, had a prophetic vision of the future. The avant-garde was a little, select band that had had a vision of the arrival of the communists. So they had the historical necessity on their side and claimed the nearness of what was to come, which would cancel the past and put an end to pure survival.

Society's recuperation of artistic expressions should be confronted with the avant-garde's appropriation of society's representations. This appropriation, labelled *détournement* by the Situationists, was not intended to innovate the artistic creative process; on the contrary, it was an anti-artistic technique by which to destroy and scandalize not just culture but the entire world. Bourgeois art should therefore not simply be negated as had been done by dada and surrealism earlier; it should be used for concrete propaganda aims. This operation was reserved for a few experts. Debord was not in doubt: the time had come to affirm the historical necessity and abandon the obsolete pseudo-communication of art. According to Debord, only by transcending art in a Hegelian sense could one be faithful to the tradition of artistic revolt. He therefore consistently maintained that art should be negated and realized in revolutionary theory and practise, while at the same time insisting that this transcendence of art could not be delayed to a later time in history, but had to take place here and now. Art could no longer make do with heralding a coming society.

It was of course as an expression of this radical lack of faith in the image that the 'lacking' images in *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* should be understood. For, like other artistic media, film had, according to Debord, been recuperated, neutralized, by the society of spectacle. In fact, film was more than anything else an example of the society of spectacle's ability to make use of potentially revolutionary

media to freeze history and create anti-situations. The technical possibilities of film were used in a contra-revolutionary way to change mankind into a passive object. In spite of the anti-aesthetic entertainment aspect of film, in the course of merely thirty years film had acquired its own value and had become the ideal example of the spectacular. In the dark space of the cinema the viewer was fixed in front of the screen. This voyeuristic fixation was far more effective than the fragmented forms and discontinuous stories of the individual films. The cinema had become, according to Debord, the cathedrals of modernity, reducing mankind to an immobile, isolated viewer. For this reason film should be negated. Debord declared war against film: *Contre le cinéma*, as he entitled a book collection of his film manuscripts. This did not mean, however, that the Situationists merely renounced film as a hopeless and contaminated undertaking. In respect to their theories of false and true images, film should be appropriated and wrenched free from the dominance of the spectacle. It was precisely not film itself that was contra-revolutionary, but rather the way the society of spectacle used film. Another revolutionary film was potentially possible. The reappropriation of film necessarily entailed negating the contemplative aspects of film. *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* was this kind of reappropriation, an anti-film that frustrated the contemplative immersion of the viewer and caused indignation. There was no film, as it were, if by film we mean the presence of pictures. There was nothing but the blackness of the cinema and the white light of the projector. The representations that the projector normally projects were absent and in their place was nothing but the projector itself, 'liberated' from the representations that normally cover up its presence. *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* therefore radically exposed the organization of the

cinema. There were no pictures to contemplate. Debord had cut away the primary characteristic of film, the picture, leaving the viewer with a kind of virtual film that was to continue on the street. Debord temporally occupied the cinema and interrupted the circulation of false images. The black and white screen served as a barricade that prevented the voyeuristic viewer from attaining the spectacular film. The passifying use of film should be stopped in order to make it possible to go from one-way communication to conflict and scandal, to a 'debate', and finally to authentic dialogue. Debord was provocative in the etymological sense of this word: he called forth other voices. Other voices in the individual viewer, voices that the society of spectacle had lulled to sleep. Debord's intention was thus to suspend the normal functioning of film in order to use the suspended film to create critical awareness, a critical awareness that the viewers themselves were to create. Debord himself had left the cinema and was only present as absence in the film's dialogue: "Just as the film was about to start, Guy Ernest Debord would climb on stage". So not only the pictures were absent, Debord was too. Not even the director was present to start the debate. He had become invisible, had retreated from the spectacular light of the cinema. Debord the director went on strike. The film creator did not create a film, but blocked the cinema so that no film was shown at all. With *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* Debord caused a paradoxical appearance/disappearance. The first real sentence in the film was also the legal definition of disappearance: Article 115. It was not just the film that remained virtual, but also Debord the director. Thereby an intact space of potentiality opened up. The absence of a work and an author exposed an opening in the frozen

time of the society of spectacle. It was hoped that in this opening a critical awareness would be created in the viewer.

Debord and the Situationists felt that it was no longer possible to create pictures. The content – love, community, freedom – was lacking. By destroying experience the society of spectacle had destroyed mankind and ravaged everyday life. Insofar as modern life had been exploded into bits and pieces, the image had to be too. Previously such an important ally in the mental revolution, the image was now nothing but a privileged figure for the society of spectacle, a paradigm for reducing mankind to a passive viewer. This was why it was necessary to occupy the cinema and destroy the spectacular images.

Translated by Stacey Cozart

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The Political Philosophy of a Dogville On *Dogville* by Lars von Trier

Per Aage Brandt

A young person escapes from a cruel and unbearable world and finds a new one which, little by little, turns out to be the same. The inhabitants turn out to be equipped with an unbearable potential for deceit, lies, hypocrisy, vindictiveness, cynicism, petty-mindedness and other significant petty things which lead to boundless degradation in the community. Evil is not “caused by society”, but society is caused by human beings, whose contribution includes evil. We are not only to blame for the wretchedness, we are also ethically responsible for it in every detail. As Grace’s gangster father remarks in the final scene of *Dogville*, you disrespect your fellow man if you forgive him for everything, if you fail to hold him responsible and instead ascribe to him the benevolence of good intentions, a benevolence that you are well aware cannot even be attributed to yourself – this is arrogance. It is arrogant to assume that other people are simply unable to behave in a decent manner and, consequently, to not react to their disgusting conduct (you cannot blame a dog for biting). From an ethical point of view, we must let the critical boundary we feel between respectful and degrading behavior be known when we experience its transgression. We show a lack of respect if we put up with other people’s villainy. We have to react to deceit, injustice, exploitation, fraud, and so on. Otherwise we do not truly respect one another.

After the painstaking exposure of one vile act after another in one episode after another in the course of the hour-long demonstration

of the town's behavior towards Grace, the viewer develops an urgent desire to see this bullying and hypocritical town punished, so her sudden transition near the end from being a (seemingly) naïve believer in 'turning the other cheek' or the like to becoming her father's successor in the armed mafia business and wiping out the entire town with the exception of the dog (who after all has a reasonable cause for barking in the last scene) come more or less as a relief. This apocalyptic punishment is really felt to be "well deserved" and you leave the theater wondering what it means for you to actually feel that way. What with all those people dead.

How does the world become a better place to live? By forgiveness and faith in the fundamental kind-heartedness of man despite the vileness? One problem is the following: if one subject – S1 – mistreats another subject – S2 – because of something S2 has done that S1 cannot forgive, and a third party – S3 – cannot make S1 stop, then S3 could very well forgive S1 for his cruelty toward S2, but the world will become a worse place to live since mistreatment is now condoned. What is forgiven is now the mistreatment! Who do we forgive "more" if we do not manage to completely forgive absolutely everyone, or cannot do so without dying as a consequence (e.g. if I forgive my murderer *in actu* instead of defending myself)? The alternative to this religious encouragement of hypocrisy, conspiracy and plain barbarity would be something like a sentiment of justice, the sentiment that justice and respect are interconnected. If you are prevented from expressing this connection socially, i.e. if it is not possible to get people to acknowledge that an injustice, an unethical act, that has been committed is less respectable than an act that in itself can be characterized as ethical, lawful, correct, then you have to express your

disapproval to the responsible party by *holding him* accountable, as we put it... In order to be accountable, he must first be *held* accountable.

Through the main character's physical as well as psychological experiences, *Dogville* illustrates what can be described as a real dilemma: you either tolerate any act against you in the name of kind-heartedness or, as the gangster does, you give people what you think they "deserve", which generally, or ultimately at least, is death. In situations where the juridical system of a society is not working – if, for instance, it has caved in under the pressure of corruption and terror – the dilemma is crystal clear, and people's behavior is generally a mixture of or a compromise between its two sides.

The justice system cannot work properly in a society as isolated from government and communication as Dogville, a remote little town in the Rocky Mountains where everything is easily concealed – not only humans like Grace hiding from people in the big city, but also local crimes of any degree of severity such as slavery and rape – and there is nothing to prevent evil from flourishing when a totally defenseless human being finds herself at the mercy of another. It is Marquis de Sade's character Justine all over again, incident by incident, and, as far as ethics goes, these events are prototypical scenarios which all demonstrate how a person's frailty is not remedied by another person's assistance and support (that would be the schema for good acts) but is instead worsened by the other person's reckless exploitation of the lack of marked boundaries (evil is exploitation and absence of empathy, and often even the exploitation of someone else's empathy). The intellectual eccentric of the town, the budding young writer – who even develops a kind of love for the girl, a love she requites – betrays her, of course, in the most devastating way; he, on

the other hand, finds the inspiration to write a novel about her and especially about himself and is pleased about this! He is the one who ends up making a call to the gangsters, thereby definitively sealing her fate – though, as it turns out, he seals his own as well as that of the town. Maybe, probably, because his betrayal is experienced as particularly hurtful, since it is her love, her very soul, her self, he has trampled on. This ambivalent and opportunistic young man is a pretty pungent depiction of the sentimental intellectual who is ultimately a self-righteous and cynical yes-man who thinks of himself as a hero while acting in the service of community-endorsed cruelty. To achieve justice when up against such inhumanity one must have access to a larger surrounding community, and if such access is contingent on intellectual mediation, the mediator has to be courageous enough to aid those who are relying on him, because otherwise they are helpless.

There is little indication in the movie that such courage, and the strength necessary to stop the escalating cruelty, can be expected to come from up above, in the form of some kind of religio-moral reformation. Dogville is just as pious and Christian as it is callous and cynical. Grace has witnessed the horrors of the big city; now she is first-hand witness to the horrors of small-town life, and she is brought to conclude that her youthful fantasies of moral innocence and generosity are not supported by the reality of the small-scale community. What does the movie have to say on the matter? It appears to me its leading principle is political and baroque: that *seeing* what is going on, experiencing it as visible, i.e. as a piece performed on a stage in the theater that is the world – as in *Life Is a Dream* by Calderón – is an occasion for humans to develop a critical rationality by means of which it becomes possible to narrate events that happen and evaluate

them from the perspective that injustice exists, is done by someone to someone, but also lends itself to critical description and is punishable and correctable. The message is not Grace's revenge in that case, but her retaliation is part of the narrative chain of events, shown in a theatrical form – the theatrical movie. I think *Dogville's* aesthetically powerful, theater-like, and stylized mode of presentation pulls us in that direction, evoking a baroque reflection, this double viewpoint of both identification and distance that constitutes the internal connection between rationality and theatricality. Politics is the immanent employment and advancement of reason rather than the mere implementation of fixed ideas, furtively instigated haphazardness or hierocracy. In this sense, politics is *about* power, to be sure, but politics is manifestly not a concomitant of power.

A Dog Not Yet Buried - Or *Dogville* as a Political Manifesto

Bo Fibiger

At this year's Cannes Film Festival Lars von Trier presented his latest film, *Dogville*, starring Nicole Kidman in the all-embracing lead role. From the outset expectations were high that Lars von Trier would bring the Golden Palm home to Denmark again, but both instructor and producer returned empty-handed. It has since been pointed out that one of the reasons why the film didn't please the international jury could be its obvious criticism of the United States, which especially in the spring of 2003 was vulnerable to criticism due to its self-established role as the world's police officer in Iraq.

The reviewer in the renowned movie magazine *Variety*, Todd McCarthy, expresses the following opinion in his article about *Dogville*:

There is no escaping the fact that the entire point of *Dogville* is that von Trier has judged America, found it wanting and therefore deserving of immediate annihilation. This is, in short, his "J'accuse!" directed toward an entire nation. [...]

The identification with *Dogville* and the United States is total and unambiguous, even without the emphatically vulgar use of pointedly grim and grisly photographs of Depression-era have-nots and crime victims under the end credits, accompanied, as if it were needed, by David Bowie's "Young Americans." Through his contrived tale of one mistreated woman, who is devious herself, von Trier indicts as being unfit to inhabit the earth a country that has surely attracted, and given opportunity to, more people onto its shores than any other in the history of the world. Go figure.

But before we return to this torrent of words let us first consider Lars von Trier's *Dogville* as a film.

In brief, the film is about a woman (Nicole Kidman) who, escaping from a bunch of gangsters, ends up in a small town named Dogville. At first the inhabitants aren't keen to let her hide at their peril, and even though she offers to help them with whatever they might need, they refuse her crudely because 'they don't need anything done at all'.



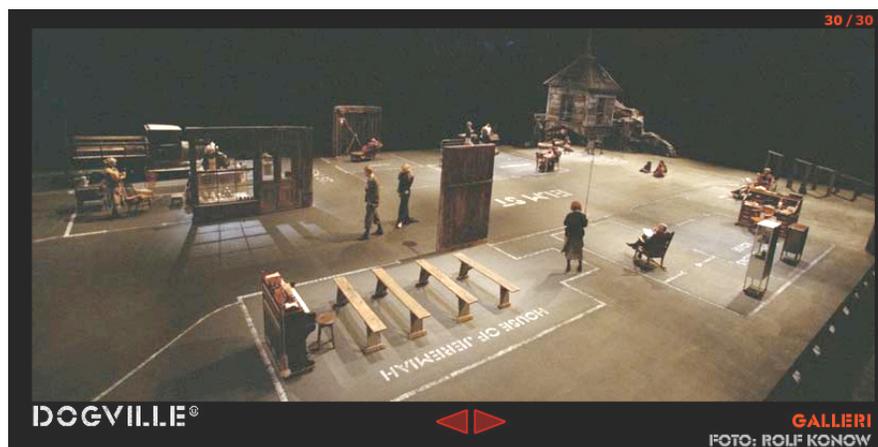
Yet with the help of the budding local writer, Thomas Edison Junior (Paul Bettany), she ends up finding something to do for everyone; and thus having secured her own right to stay she throws herself with great relief upon their insatiable sense of brotherhood. As time goes by she has to commit herself to increasingly difficult tasks such as satisfying the insatiable sexual needs of the male citizens. When one of the inhabitants pretends to help her escape, it is only to retain her in a situation of escalating oppression and abuse – *all*, as they say, *for her own good*.

Throughout the film we are reminded of the pursuers outside, and close to the end they finally arrive in the little town of Dogville. At this point the film suddenly converts its run-away theme into a mental dilemma concerning forgiveness and justice - it is really an escape from

the ethical demand of this dilemma. In the final scene we witness how the notion of justice from the Old Testament – namely, that of *an eye for an eye - a tooth for a tooth* – suddenly takes over, and all the citizens of Dogville are exterminated.

Dogville as a mythical universe

It is however not the plot or story of the film that is the centre of attention, but rather the mythical universe that is being shaped throughout the film by means of carefully utilized effects. The recording of the film in a single studio and the exclusive use of chalk marks to define the simple scenographic setting involve a very particular style of minimalism. This allows us to view the whole society – streets, houses and people – from one central point, and we are able to follow the characters into their private spheres behind their respective circles of chalk.



The minimalist scenography not only puts the acting at the centre of attention, it also offers ample opportunity for the story to travel into the mind of the spectator. Thus we are very much interpreters, and this contributes to giving the statement of the film a more universal

dimension: Dogville is not just a place in the United States, it is also Rønne or Høje Gladsaxe or any other suburban town that we carry around with us in our minds.

The allusion to Bertolt Brecht's famous play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* – wherein the chalk circle frames another dilemma, namely, the ownership of a child – also becomes part of the meanings of the film. Hence, it is possible to draw at least two intertextual parallels: a connection with a story in the Old Testament, where Samuel judges a similar struggle, and another connection with the very theatre of Brecht and the way it disrupts form through the technique of *Verfremdung*.

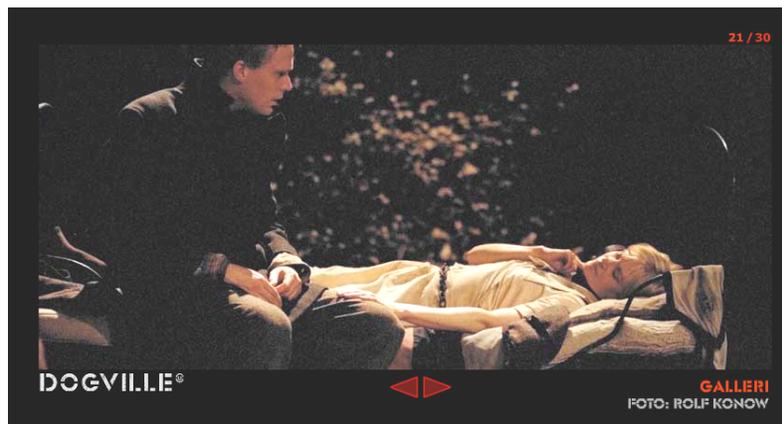
As in the theatre, we find ourselves in a setting where the world outside only comes into existence through the lines spoken on the stage. As spectators we are never allowed to doubt that we are back in 1930s America, with gangsters and the mafia and all the other characteristics that cling to this era. This specific period has developed into a cliché throughout film history – which is why I'd rather consider Dogville as a metonym for a given kind of society characterized by lawlessness than as a realistic depiction of part of the United States.

But the story is not a standard piece of drama for us to watch. As in the theatre, von Trier makes use of another trick, namely, that of staging a narrator. This results in a mix between a dramatic and an epic form with slight didactic overtones. Many reviewers have argued that this specific narrator is really the true main character of the film. John Hurt plays the narrator and everyone recognizes his unique ability to express emotion and distance at one and the same time (cf. the previously mentioned technique of *Verfremdung*).

Furthermore, the cadence of the speaker's voice helps support the slow tempo of the film, giving it a certain character of non-contemporaneity. We find ourselves somewhere beyond time and space, in a kind of "always" and "everywhere" – something which characterises the myth as opposed to the fable.

The ethical demand

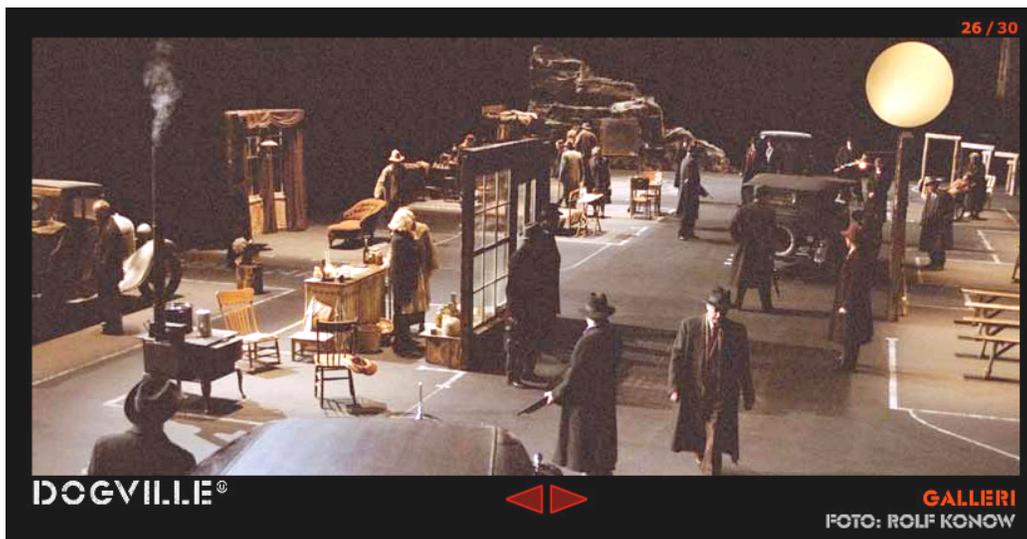
The fundamental myth of the film draws its substance from the Bible. Hence, Grace represents the very meaning of 'grace' as she unconditionally surrenders herself to the unreasonable demands of the Dogville inhabitants. She constitutes the notion of absolute, boundless love, and as many reviewers have already pointed out there are obvious allusions to Jesus, who also – as a result of his unconditional, boundless devotion – ends up being sacrificed on a cross. But even though Grace is shackled to her bed/crucified, this is not where we find the main point of the film – for this lies in the dialectic between the Old and the New Testament.



The ethical demand of The New Testament derives from the famous maxim that *you should turn the other cheek*, whereas the ethical demand of the Old Testament is based on that the maxim of *an eye for*

an eye. Grace is on the run from this dilemma, stretched out between her father's merciless attitudes and her own more humanistic preference for grace and understanding. For a while the dilemma is resolved by her fleeing her father's demands and wholly devoting herself to Dogville. But the way things progress, it soon becomes a true challenge to turn the other cheek, for how far will the humiliation go?

So when the father and his gangster friends appear towards the end of the film, Grace is ready to reconsider her ethical dilemma: do the inhabitants of Dogville deserve any more gifts of grace or should they be eradicated without mercy? Grace chooses the attitude of justice from the Old Testament, and with assistance from her father she mows down all the citizens with machine guns. Even the sins of the father are passed on to the children, and in the terrifying final scene Grace herself kills the children who were once in her care.



It is no coincidence that the city of Dogville has a dog called Moses. Moses is drawn in chalk on the stage floor, but in the very last shot the chalk drawing is 'morphed' into a living dog. It is now the Law of Moses that prevails in what is left of Dogville.

In another perspective the film may be seen as presenting the ethical dilemma of good and evil, and thus the terribly violent scene at the end is meant to call into question the Old Testament. Pursuing this idea one could say that the film really returns to the primary myth of Christianity, namely, the Fall of Man. The Fall of Man has two interpretive outcomes, either “we need to learn to differentiate between good and evil” (the pietistic interpretation) or “we need to know good and evil” (the existential interpretation). The same goes for Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*.

The film as a political manifesto

The reason why the political reaction to the film has been so harsh is not so much because it takes place in a town somewhere “over there”, and it is not at all due to the mythological tenet of the film. Under the credits at the end of the film von Trier implements a series of photographs (cf. the review quoted from *Variety*). These pictures allude to both Jakob Holt’s *American Snapshots* from 1977 and the Bush-era warfare in Iraq. The use of photographs at the very end of a film that so persistently bases its whole assertion of reality on simple chalk lines seems especially significant and importunate.

It seems as if von Trier had a last-minute fear that his audience wouldn’t relate the more existential theme of the film to their own political reality. But in clearly underestimating his spectator I think Trier really undermines the political statement of the film.

With the insertion of the American snapshots the film shifts from being a mythically founded metaphor to an analogy. In a metaphor part of reality is replaced by an image, the coherence between the two remaining implicit; In contrast, in a parable or analogy the same

coherence is somewhat more explicit (Gall Jørgensen 1996, p. 71). Gall defines the metaphor more formally as “a substitution which on the basis of a semantic equivalence replaces one element with another” (Gall Jørgensen 1996, p. 76). Furthermore, he states that the most important quality of a metaphor is that it is productive and that it can uncover new aspects of a well-known phenomenon by describing it in a new light.

Designers of a human-computer interface (HCI) tend to draw on metaphors. In relation to HCI it is common to talk about a *generative utilization of metaphors* (Halskov, 1994), which means that the metaphor is able to pave the way for new dimensions in relation to the reality it depicts. Donald Schön (1979/84, p. 255) also operates with the generative or process-oriented perspective, taking the social sciences as his own specific starting point:

In this second sense, “metaphor” refers both to a certain kind of product - a perspective or frame, a way of looking at things - and to a certain kind of process - a process by which new perspectives in the world come into existence.”

Schön links the use of metaphors with the notion of “problem setting” in the social sciences. Here, in contrast to the fragmentation or division of a given phenomenon, a metaphor can be applied to grasp a particular meaning or function of a phenomenon. Thus, I see a very close connection between Donald Schön’s understanding of the metaphor and my own understanding of *Dogville*.

In the same anthology on metaphors in which I found the article by Schön, Hugh G. Petrie (Petrie 1997/84) discusses the use of metaphors in a didactic context, adding a Piagetan learning perspective to the subject. The notion of accommodative learning implies that it isn’t possible to fit new knowledge into existing cognitive schemas, and

therefore the learning process consists in continually creating new schemas. Similar to accommodative learning, generative metaphors make us look into new angles and dimensions of a given subject.

Taking this further, in my view the form of the analogy generally supports assimilative learning. In assimilative learning new knowledge is put into already familiar schemas (see Illeris 1999, p. 27). Consequently, the crucial breach in von Trier's *Dogville* lies in the transition from metaphor to analogy. The film challenges our political schemas by questioning right and wrong in relation to the choices we – politicians as well as other people – are forced to make. This applies to the way we interact in everyday life, to the treatment of at-risk youth and to immigration policies – some of the areas in which I'm currently engaged as a politician.

The revolutionary aspect of today's politics lies in maintaining an ethical dimension, which prevents us from becoming small spin doctors like Tom Edison in *Dogville*, who is always trying to make everything seem like it is in everyone else's favour, but who at the same time never ceases - the true liberal that he is – to put himself centre stage.

So instead of detaching itself from previous bindings the dog ends up being buried. By underestimating the risk of using analogies in a political statement, von Trier firmly locks the perception of his audience into preconceived stereotypes. The form of the analogy thus seems deeply reactionary!

Translated and edited by Lisbet Fibiger, MA

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The politics of *Election Night (Valgaften)*

Richard Raskin

Election Night (Valgaften)

Denmark, 1998. 35 mm, color, 12 min.

Director and screenwriter: Anders Thomas Jensen

Director of photography: Jens Schlosser

Music: Jeppe Kaas

Cast: Ulrich Thomsen, Jens Jørn Spottag, John Martinus, Ole Thestrup, Farshad Kholgi, Hella Joof

Producer: M & M Productions

Awards: Audience Award - Int. Short Film Festival, Hamburg, 1999; Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Live Action Short Film, 1999

A SUMMARY OF THE FILM¹

We hear a radio announcer mention, between two songs, that there is a half hour left before the polling booths close, and we see the main character – Peter (Ulrich Thomsen) – running into the bar in which the radio was playing. The following conversation ensues:

PETER

(taking off his coat and addressing Carl, already seated at the bar)
Hey. Sorry I'm late. We just sent 2,000 blankets to Albania.²

CARL

(unimpressed)
Why the hell to they need blankets?

PETER

There's a civil war, Carl.

CARL

Exactly. Being armed with a blanket, how cool is that?

PETER

They might be a bit cold, you know.

¹ Tivi Magnusson at M&M Productions kindly authorized my citing the full dialogue of the opening scene, and the use of stills included in this article.

² We find out subsequently – in the second taxi scene – that Peter works for a humanitarian organization based in Frankfurt.

CARL
(to bartender, Willy)
I'll have another. One for Peter too.

PETER
Hang on. Shouldn't we try that new Mexican beer? You know...

CARL
I refuse to drink Mexican beer.

PETER
And what exactly does that mean?

CARL
I'm not drinking fuckin' Mexican beer. (To bartender) Carlsberg.

BARTENDER
(to Peter)
And Dos Equis for you?

CARL
(as Peter nods yes)
Dos Episs? Drink something you can pronounce.

PETER
You're a racist, you know that?

CARL
Get outta here.

PETER
No, you're a racist. You're afraid of anything that's different.

BARTENDER
It's just a beer.

PETER
It's more than that. That's how it starts. That's racism.

CARL
Relax, Peter.

BARTENDER
I prefer Carlsberg too.

PETER
You're a damn racist too. You go along with everyone. Silence gives consent. You should ask half of the bar to beat it and say: "I won't hear that in here."

CARL
We're not racists. Willy here just gave the socialists his vote.

PETER
...I forgot to vote.

CARL
Such an idealist.

PETER
How could I forget? What time is it?

CARL
You're not gonna make it. Sit down.

BARTENDER
There'll be other elections.

PETER
(putting his coat on)
I have to vote.

Peter rushes out, flags a taxi and asks to be driven to the polls. The driver makes vulgar and offensive remarks about Arabs smelling of garlic and Africans who should go back home. When Peter objects to the driver's racist attitudes, the driver insists on his right to his own opinions and Peter demands to be let out of the cab.



On the street again, Peter flags down a second cab, and this time the driver – with strains of Wagnerian music in the background – expresses his admiration for the Third Reich and deplors the corruption of Aryan purity by Africans and Turks. Again Peter is out on the street looking for a cab.

The third driver is of Middle Eastern origins and makes comical mistakes in speaking Danish. When passing a corner shop, he complains that a good kiosk has been replaced by a sushi bar, and goes on about the virtues of kebab, finally complaining the “yellow bastards” who had attacked Pearl Harbor have now killed a good

store. Once again, Peter is gone and a hole in the upholstery where he had been sitting indicates the second-rate character of the taxi he has just abandoned.

Peter runs down the street toward another taxi but decides not to get in when he sees the driver's peaked hat with a Confederate flag at its front.



Instead Peter runs the remaining distance to the polls, through the rain, and finally arrives at the front door of the polling station as a black woman is in the process of closing it. He puts his foot in the door but she won't let him in, saying they have already begun counting the votes. He ignores her repeated requests that he remove his foot and finally tells her: "I'm also voting for the sake of your people, you know?" to which she replies: "Get your fucking foot out, you racist pig." Another man approaches from the street and when the black woman complains that Peter is making racist remarks, the other man asks Peter: "Are you hassling the coons?" and punches him in the face.

The final scene returns us to the bar, as a familiar Danish ballad is played on the radio.

CARL
(noticing Peter's bruised face)
What happened?

PETER
I fell.

CARL
Did you vote?

PETER
Yeah.

CARL
Your Pissos is getting warm.

PETER
(to the bartender)
Give me a cool Carlsberg.

CARL
(to the bartender)
Make it three on me.

The three men say "cheers" to one another and in perfect harmony drink their beers together.

A COMMENTARY ON THE FILM

Though Election Night is designed largely as "an entertainment," playfully taking up its themes and introducing twists and turns more for their comic value than as a serious social commentary, the film is nevertheless a vehicle in which attitudes toward racism and "Danishness" in contemporary Denmark are given a prominent position. And whether or not the screenwriter/director intended for his film to be taken seriously in this regard, it is legitimate to ask exactly what the film implies about the attitudes with which it plays.

Central to an understanding of the film's politics is an awareness of the positive or negative value implicitly attached to the attitudes toward ethnic minorities or toward "Danishness" that are expressed in the film and to the characters embodying those attitudes. Clarifying the

status attributed to these attitudes and characters is a way of sorting out just where the film itself stands with respect to the social issues it takes up.

In some scenes in this film, the status of given attitudes is clear and unmistakable, while in other scenes, the situation is more complex and open to more than one interpretation. Let's begin with the cases in which we are in no doubt whatsoever as to how we are invited to view the attitudes embodied on the screen.

Each of the taxi drivers in *Election Night* is a racist in one way or another, and though we are entertained by the outrageousness of their racist remarks, there is no question in our mind as to the negative status attributed to their attitudes by the filmmaker. This applies to comments about Arabs stinking of garlic, Africans who should go back to where they belong, the virtues of the Third Reich and Aryan purity, the Japanese characterized as "yellow bastards," and the meaning of wearing a Confederate flag on one's cap. And just as each of these embodiments of racism is given a reprehensible status in our eyes, we are invited to applaud Peter's objections to the racist remarks and to view Peter as our own representative within the film – in each of the taxi scenes. In these scenes, there is no mistaking the film's politics on the issue of racism, and the fact that one of the taxi drivers ridiculed by the film is himself a member of an ethnic minority, is comically paradoxical but in no way blurs our perception of the reprehensible nature of his racist remarks.

However, it is far more difficult to understand the politics in play in the three other scenes in *Election Night*: the opening scene in the bar, the scene at the door to the polling station, and the final bar scene. Let's

look at each of them in turn and attempt to clarify just what status Peter is implicitly given by the film.

In the opening scene, Peter can be viewed in two very different ways.

We can see him positively, as a man engaged in humanitarian work (providing blankets to the Albanians), as someone open to what other cultures have to offer (such as Mexican beer), and as a person who is admirably on guard against disparaging remarks about other cultures. If Peter is seen in this light, then his friend Carl is a negative figure, embodying a hostile attitude toward other cultures and the kind of relationship to “Danishness” one might expect of a xenophobe. This is expressed most clearly in his references to Mexican beer as piss. Similarly – again, in this perspective – we are invited to take Peter’s side when he chastises the bartender for not objecting to the racist remarks frequently made by his customers. Viewed in this light, Peter’s characterization of Carl and of the bartender as racists is at least partly justified and Peter is our man in this scene.

But the opening scene can be interpreted in a radically different way as well, with Peter viewed as a smug, self-satisfied, professional humanitarian, eager to prove to others and to himself that he holds the right attitudes, and perfectly prepared to attack as a racist anyone whose utterances can be interpreted as being politically incorrect. Seen in this perspective, Carl and the bartender are easy-going, reasonable people, unashamed of their perfectly legitimate preferences, while Peter is uptight, judgmental, and intolerant in his outlook.

This initial scene is open to both interpretations, though as will soon be shown, the final scene in the bar tips us off as to which of these views is the one that is ultimately endorsed by the film.

The scene at the polling station stands out from the others in that here, it is Peter who is called a racist, while in the opening scene and in the taxi scenes, Peter condemns what he sees as the racism of others. In other words, here at the door to the polling station, the filmmaker turns the tables on Peter and comically gives him a dose of his own medicine.

We are of course initially on Peter's side in his desperate quest to cast a vote. But as his behavior is framed in this scene, we are meant to see him as going too far when he puts his foot in the door and as crossing a delicate line when addressing the black woman (played by Hella Joof). His references to "your people" are perceived by her as offensive, and we are implicitly invited to see Peter as having placed himself in a weak and indefensible position. And although it is a joke that the passerby who punches Peter in the face does so for annoying "the coons," the comedy involved in this scene and the unfairness of the black woman's characterization of Peter as a "racist pig," do not entirely rescue Peter in our eyes. He has lost status and to some degree at least, we are meant to feel that what happens to him in this scene serves him right.

In the final scene, we see a defeated and deflated Peter. His face is bruised and raincoat dirty, he lies twice – both about what had happened to him and about having voted, and the self-assured manner he had in the earlier scenes has now given way to a much weaker self-presentation. And he now performs a symbolic act that snaps the initial scene into its proper perspective: he orders a Carlsberg, instead of drinking the Mexican beer he had asked for at the start. This tells us that he himself has now rejected the position he represented in that

initial scene, and that he now understands that he was in the wrong at that time.

Where does all this leave us? How can we describe the overall politics of the film, with respect to the issues of racism and “Danishness”?

As I have tried to show, the position Peter embodies in the initial bar scene is retrospectively discredited in the final scene when he orders a Carlsberg. Whether or not this discrediting of Peter’s anti-racist stance also casts some doubt retrospectively on his status in the taxi scenes is an open question. Logically speaking, it should, if the film defines his flaring up against racist remarks as smug and self-serving. Furthermore, there is no character in the film who represents an authentic – that is, an *undiscredited* – anti-racist position. But I don’t wish to exaggerate the importance of logic in this connection.

What I do wish to conclude is that this film can appeal both to those who object to racist remarks and to those who are eager to see such objectors roundly put in their place. Both anti-racists and racists, both multi-culturalists and xenophobes, can feel that their position is endorsed by this film. Even in the taxi scenes, where we are unmistakably invited to view the drivers’ racist remarks as reprehensible, some of the humor is at the expense of the only foreigner in the film: the Middle Eastern taxi driver who is ridiculed a) for his manner of speaking (he says things like “In one year I become citizenship” in a naively self-satisfied tone); b) for his rabidly racist (anti-Japanese) outlook; and c) for the shoddy condition of his cab (the glaring hole in the upholstery). Wherever you stand with respect to foreigners and racism, something in the scene will appear to justify your own position.

That *Election Night* is a highly entertaining and well-crafted film is certainly the case; that it is also fundamentally ambiguous with respect to its political meaning is – I believe – equally beyond question.

In making this point, I do not wish to imply that the screenwriter/director intended to bring grist to the mill of xenophobes. What I suspect is that the political implications in play at various moments of the film were overshadowed in the screenwriting process by considerations of the entertainment value or storytelling opportunities inherent in those moments, and that the politics of the resulting film are more an almost haphazard by-product of storytelling choices than a matter of deliberate design.



On unhappy endings, politics and storytelling. An interview with Milcho Manchevski

Richard Raskin

Milcho Manchevski has to date written and directed two feature films: *Before the Rain* (1994), which won thirty awards at international festivals, including Best Film in Venice, Independent Spirit, an Oscar nomination, and a place in The New York Times' book *Best 1,000 Films Ever Made*; and *Dust* (2001), still unreleased. He has also made over fifty short films of various kinds (experimental films, documentaries, music videos, commercials), and has won awards for best experimental film (for "1.72" at the Belgrade Alternative Festival), best MTV and Billboard video (for Arrested Development's "Tennessee," which also made Rolling Stone magazine's list of 100 best videos ever). He is the author of a conceptualist book of fiction, *The Ghost Of My Mother*, and a book of photographs, *Street* (accompanying an exhibition), as well as other fiction and essays published in *New American Writing*, *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Sineast*, etc. Born in Macedonia, he now lives in New York City where he teaches directing at the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU.

I'd like to start by asking about unhappy endings. It may be that my entire approach to this issue is wrong, but what I am most curious about is this: how can it be that a film that ends with the main character dying can leave the viewer feeling satisfied with the ending?

I don't know why and how that happens. But I know that it does happen. And probably it has to do with what we get out of a film as we leave the movie theater. Obviously we don't need the conventional "and they lived happily ever after" as the element that's going to leave us satisfied. I've never really thought about it specifically. It's more of an intuitive or an instinctive thing for me. When I do it, it's because it feels like this is the way a film should end.

In parenthesis, I could tell you for example that when I wrote the outline for *Before the Rain*, Kiril – the young monk – was gunned down at the end of the first act. But somehow as I started writing the script, it just didn't feel right... it's as if he wanted to live so much independently of my desire to kill him, that he just refused to die; so I let him live.



Kiril, played by Grégoire Colin, in *Before the Rain*.

I don't know what it is. To me, it's like when you're listening to Mozart's *Requiem*. It's immensely sad and at the same time it's immensely elating. Perhaps it has to do with the pleasure one gets from a work of art.

If things in a work of art make aesthetic sense, if they click, because of how the work was made, how things flow together, how you sense the person – the artist – coming through, stepping down from the paper or from the screen or from the speaker, then the audience gets pleasure out of the art regardless of the conventional understanding of the “feeling” (tragedy, happy ending) the work itself deals with. That's what makes it satisfying, rather than knowing that somebody lives happily ever after. In the end, we all die anyway. Maybe it's about those moments of happiness and creation in between.

So again: I don't have a really rational explanation of why, but I know that tragic endings do make sense. Which is not to say that I don't enjoy films with happy endings as well. The real question is: what is a happy ending? A film or a story that takes you for a very satisfying aesthetic (and thus emotional) journey is something that has more of a "happy ending" than a film that neatly resolves everything and leaves the main characters married happily ever after, but is aesthetical cowardly and conservative and not terribly creative.

I understand that in your own writing, you deal with this in an intuitive way. But I wonder if there aren't some specific strategies that can help the viewer to accept the sense of loss when the hero dies. For example, at the end of Before the Rain, the very fact that the rain finally falls on Alex somehow frames his death in a kind of metaphor.

If I try to *analyze* the things I've directed – and the fact that I've directed them doesn't necessarily mean that my analyses are right – my guess would be that things that feel essential to a tragic ending are more important than the actual tragic ending itself. Things like self-sacrifice, rebirth, cleansing. So in a way, maybe what's happening in these features is that they're encapsulating the essence of sacrifice and rebirth as part of the same whole. So in that sense, you can say "They lived happily ever after" in a larger perspective.

Another thing I noticed is that when Alex is riding on the bus to his village, and talking with a soldier, the soldier says: "What are you doing here? Don't you realize you can get your head cut off?" And Alex says, "It's high time that happened." This is a kind of foreshadowing or even acceptance on his part of what was to come.

Well, at that point in his life, he is fairly fatalistic. And I think that as a character, Alex has probably always been fatalistic, but at the same time, very active. Fatalistic but positive. However, at this point in his life, he perceives himself as someone who's done something terribly wrong. So he's become more of a tragic fatalist. Of course, he packs it

in with a sense of humor, with a joke, so you are never sure – and I don't think *he's* ever sure – how much of it is a joke and how much of it is fatalistic acceptance of life's tragic unfolding. Perhaps he's hoping that his fatalism and his acceptance of responsibility will fend off tragedy. In the same scene, we see him play with the facts, as in a sick joke. When the soldier asks him about his girlfriend, Alex says "Oh, she died in a taxi," even though we know she's alive. And we realize: oh, that's when they broke up – in a cab. That is also more like the way people really talk. You know, people don't always deliver what the audience needs them to deliver, in order for the story to advance.



Ann and Alex in
Before the Rain,
played by Katrin Cartlidge
and Rade Serbedzija.

You kill off some of your main characters in Dust as well.

Yeah, I am still the same filmmaker with the same take on things as in *Rain*, except *Dust* is more complex, and more playful. It switches gears and mocks genres. Yes, there's quite a bloodbath in the film. But mind you, not even *close* to how many people die in Shakespeare's plays. Not even a fraction. Or in the Bible, for that matter. I found this

interesting thought by Bergman, who says that film is perfectly legitimate way for society to ritualize violence. Mind you – ritualize, not glorify.



Elijah and Luke in *Dust*, played by Joseph Fiennes and David Wenham.

Is it OK if we move into the area of film and politics, and maybe compare Before the Rain to Dust? In Before the Rain, if I'm not mistaken, you do everything you can to show the conflict from both sides, from both points of view.

Actually, to the detriment of the proverbial Macedonian side. If you look at the characters, the more aggressive ones are all Macedonian. As a sign of good will, because *Before the Rain* is not about sides in a war, it's about right and wrong, and love and understanding. And it's about how humans behave. But go on.

Do I remember correctly that there is a point where Alex says "Take sides!"

Ann says "Take sides!", "You have to take sides." And he says, "I don't want to be on any of their sides. They're all idiots."

Now Dust portrays a very different situation, where you have the Turkish invaders opposed by the Macedonian rebels who are defending themselves, defending their own land. And there, there is clearly a taking of sides. Is this what gave rise to misunderstandings about your politics?

All killers in *Dust*, whether Macedonian, Turkish, Greek, Albanian or American are – killers. Not particularly nice people. They are, of course, nuanced characters, since we are not in a Schwarzenegger or Stallone movie. The really good guys are the ones who *give*, and in that respect the proverbial good guys are all women – Neda, Angela, Lilith...



Neda, played by
Nikolina Kujaca
in *Dust*.

The very second question that I was asked at the press conference in Venice when *Dust* opened the Venice Film Festival, was – and this is pretty much a quote: You've made a racist film, because it portrays the Turkish army and Turks in a bad light. This obviously had to do with an attempt [on my part] to keep Turkey from becoming a member of the European Union. End of quote. (*Laughter.*) This is on record from a respected English journalist and reviewer. (What's next – I am going to get the US out of Iraq with my next film?? Then I'll liberate Tibet, and then solve the Palestinian issue.)

So how do you answer something as ridiculous as this? It's obviously an assassination. Do you dignify the concept of someone feeling free to slander you and to project his prejudices upon yourself, by responding to it? What do you say first? Do you debate the fact that both with my actions in my life and in my films, I have shown that I am not a racist? That I deplore racism of *any* sort (and let's not forget – neither the Holocaust nor the atom bomb were invented in the Balkans)? Do I talk about the tolerance-building effect of my films, or about the multi-ethnic make-up of the crew who worked on my films (13 nationalities on *Before the Rain*, more on *Dust*), or about girlfriends and friends of other ethnicities I've had? It's ridiculous. Actually, it's much more than that – it's insulting, manipulative, ill-intentioned, arrogant and – racist.

Do you sue the guy for slander? Do you say: "Hey, it's not even in this film. You're misreading it." Do you say: "Actually, you have a racist past as a member of the Orange militia in Northern Ireland," as that particular critic did?

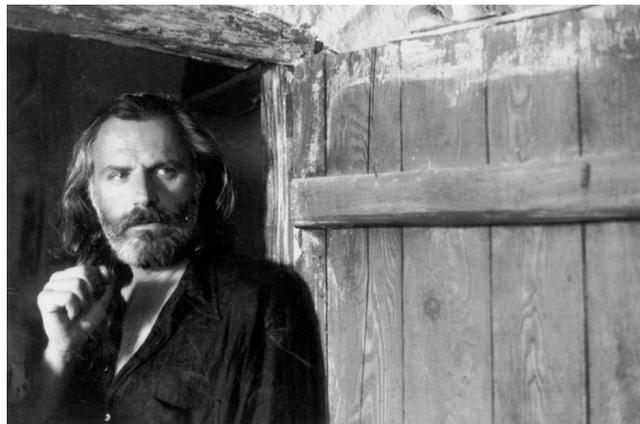
Basically, you're a sitting duck.

And then I heard – I didn't even read it – that there was an article published in Croatia, in a magazine that has distinguished itself as an ultra right-wing nationalist publication, taking me to task for not understanding the plight of the Albanians in Macedonia. I'm sure their reporter who's never been to Macedonia understands it much better from Zagreb. (*Laughter.*)

I can't really speculate as to why industry insiders chose to misrepresent *Dust*. As a matter of fact, a lot of people misrepresented *Before the Rain* as well... but in a different way.

(I have probably repeated literally hundreds of times in interviews that *Before the Rain* is not a documentary about Macedonia. It's not a documentary about what used to be Yugoslavia. And it's not a documentary at all. I wouldn't dare make a film about the wars of ex-Yugoslavia of the 1990s because it's a much more complex situation than what one film can tell you. It should be a documentary; it shouldn't be a piece of fiction, because a piece of fiction is only one person's truth and a documentary could *claim* to be more objective even though they seldom are. And finally because I wasn't even there when the war was getting under way. I thought it was obvious from the film, because it is so highly stylized that I don't think anyone who's watching it while *awake* could see it as a documentary. Just the approach to the form, to the visuals, to the landscapes, to the music, the characters and everything – and finally the structure of the story – show that it's obviously a work of fiction. Still, some people chose to see *Before the Rain* as a "60 Minutes" TV segment, a documentary on the Yugoslavia wars.

But that misrepresentation – even if it could be as damaging – it wasn't as hostile as the misrepresentation or the misreading of *Dust*.)



Alex, played by
Rade Serbedzija
in *Before the Rain*.

With *Dust*, there are a couple of things I could start thinking about out aloud, and I haven't done so in public so far.

Number one: as a filmmaker, you are often put in a position to debate other peoples' perceptions of you, their projections of you and their projections *upon* you. As an object of their analysis, you can never properly discuss their motivation, their prejudice or their misreading of the text. Or their real intentions. Yet, although they are active subjects who shape, reflect or bend the launch or the very public life of a film, they themselves and their motivations are conveniently not part of the debate.

The second thing that I would like to think about out loud is that a filmmaker's or an artist's political views, a filmmaker's or an artist's life, and the works that he or she creates, are three completely separate things. And I subscribe very much to what Kurt Vonnegut said; which is, if you bring your politics into your art, you are bound to make shit. I think daily politics doesn't belong in art. The artist has other, more interesting and stronger points to make than just who's in the White House these four years and will s/he go to war. Such as how absolute power in the hands of people with corrupted spirit can cause thousands of deaths.

As far as *Dust* is concerned, it's a film about Angela and Edge, an old woman and a thief. And about Luke and Elijah, brothers from the American Wild West. And about Neda, who gives birth while dying. It is about small people caught in the big wheels of history, who are big when they love and when they give. It's about the thirst to tell stories. About the question what we leave behind: children, pictures, stories or dust. About responsibility and self-sacrifice. It's not about ethnic conflict. The conflict we see in the film is not really ethnic; it's like all

wars: it's about real estate and it's about political power. As part of the continuously shifting point of view in this film, we see part of the fighting through the eyes of Neda, who has saved Luke. Of course, she is lecturing him from her angle, advocating her take on the fighting and the killing, which doesn't automatically make her right. And Luke's answer is: "Oh, I'm sure you'll be really nice to the Turks if *you* win."

We see the leader of the Macedonian rebels, the Teacher, as a ruthless murderer who kills a scared young soldier by slashing his throat. The Macedonian revolutionaries also shoot wounded soldiers. On the other hand, the Turkish army kills civilians. And they did, historically. It's really hard (not to mention unethical) to make films according to p.c. [politically correct] scenarios of how the world *should* be if you happen to be portraying events that weren't p.c. Most of history was not p.c. At the turn of the 20th century the Ottoman army would go into villages and kill civilians, even pregnant women, would burn young children alive and chop peoples' arms and heads off. That is a documented fact (and, unfortunately, this was not the only army that did this). So I don't see why it constitutes a prejudice on anyone's part if this historical truth is being mentioned or portrayed. Sounds like a chip on someone's shoulder. (Yet, focusing only on painting this or any kind of historical truth alone should not be the sole goal of a good work of art; good art deals with aesthetic interpretation of people's feelings and philosophical concepts.)



The Teacher, played by Vlado Jovanoski in *Dust*.

I am prepared to debate the actions of the Ottoman army in Macedonia at the turn of the 20th century, as well as the actions of various revolutionary and criminal and nationalistic and self-serving gangs. I strongly object to interpreting the portrayal of the Ottoman army in Macedonia as a metaphor for anything but the Ottoman army in Macedonia, as some respected German newspapers did (who claimed that the Ottoman army was a *metaphor* for the Albanians in Macedonia). I think that's in the eye of the beholder, and taking him to the eye doctor would provide for a fascinating look into one's psyche.

May I ask about one thing that's not really political? The Turkish major is the most amazing character...

Precisely! If you were a racist, why would one of your most complex characters in the film, and the most urbane and the most educated, be of the people you are trying to slander?



The Turkish Major
played by Salaetin Bilal in *Dust*.

Exactly! Was he modeled on a particular person?

No, he wasn't, but he was based on research. I started with the concept that the Ottoman officers were some of the best educated people in the Empire. It had been a powerful – in many respects admirable – multi-ethnic empire, at this point nearing its sunset. The Ottoman officers were well-educated and spoke foreign languages. From the research that I did (our core bibliography consisted of 160 books and articles written at the time and about the Wild West and about Macedonia under Ottoman rule), some were trained in Germany and had strong ties with the German military. This particular character, the Major, speaks German, he speaks French, we don't know whether he speaks English or not, but he does tell Luke that he doesn't speak his "barbaric language." He makes a point of that. Because to him, this character is an illiterate punk, a bounty-hunter from this remote corner of the world (America), who's come here to try *to make a living...* by meddling in the local affairs... and all for money.

The Major has a very strong sense of duty. To him, none of this is personal. He does say: "Look, these people are fighting against my

emperor. And I have to protect him. It's my duty to find them and bring them to justice." He is one of the few characters in that place who has a very strong sense of order.

But it's interesting in this context to actually get a little more analytical and look into *what* it is that makes a film reviewer be so obviously biased. Is it something *in the film* that provokes people to project their own prejudices and their own problems upon this film? Or is it something *off-screen*? Is it my attitude to the stale and corrosive film industry? Or does it have to do with the current politics of Macedonia at the time? Does it have something to do with the op-ed pieces that I published just a couple of weeks before the film came out?

What did you say in those pieces?

It was actually one piece, which was written for *The New York Times*, but they didn't publish it. Yet somehow, it made its way to *The Guardian*. When they published it, they changed the title and chopped off the end. And took out some other things. There is a journalist in Slovenia who published a parallel of the original article and the article that came out in *The Guardian*. Then I submitted it to a German newspaper – I think it was the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*. *Pravda* in Russia picked it up, as did the *Standaard* in Belgium. I don't know whether any of these newspapers published it in its original form or whether they changed anything, like *The Guardian*.

The gist of the argument was that NATO had a major (but not sole) responsibility for the spill-over of the Kosovo war into Macedonia, and that they had to act upon it. And that they had to protect the order and sovereignty of Macedonia. As they didn't. And at the time, I was

comparing it to Cambodia or Laos or to Afghanistan, as examples of spill-over and blow-back (this was pre-9/11). A lot of the people who instigated the fighting in Macedonia in 2001, who killed soldiers, policemen and even civilians were armed and trained by NATO for the war in Kosovo.

That's what this article was about. And actually the *Standaard* in Belgium published the article and then published the response by an Albanian. It was signed "an Albanian student." A person I don't know. First of all, it was strange that they would publish such a response because I wasn't taking nationalistic sides. I was taking the side of *rule of law* versus armed intrusion. Also, in terms of media manipulation, I was raising the following issue: accepting that somebody can just pick up arms and kill police because they are allegedly fighting for language rights, is something the West doesn't accept at home, but can accept in the Balkans, because their projection of the Balkans is as an unruly bunch. There was a high-ranking NATO officer saying that every house in Macedonia has a gun. I want him to come and find the gun in my house. See, that's racist. (How would that officer feel if someone said that *every* house in Germany is anti-Semitic.)

So when there's fighting, in their minds it's not because somebody's killing policemen. It's because: "Oh, two ethnic groups are fighting." Wild tribes. But, that was not the case in Macedonia (and I hope it stays that way). As is becoming clear today because some of the people who were supposedly fighting for human rights and language rights two years ago are now on the list of human-traffickers and drug-smugglers, and some are government ministers and parliamentarians.

Let's put it this way: if somebody picked up arms to kill policemen in Miami because the killers claimed that they wanted Spanish to be spoken in the Florida senate, I believe those people would be shot or put in jail. NATO wouldn't come to mediate and take the situation to a point where those very same murderers sit in the parliament two years later, as is the case in Macedonia.

Anyway, what happened in the Belgian *Standaard* was that they took the article as though it advocated one ethnic side when it was actually advocating *the rule of law*. So they published a response by someone signed "an Albanian student," whom I didn't know. And that same person is the vice-president of the Macedonian parliament now, today, as a representative of the political party which came about with the transformation of the Albanian militants. I'd be curious if he were a student at the time, since he seems to be in his late 40s.

So back to the really interesting question: is it something *in the film* that provokes some reviewers, particularly those with a chip on their shoulder? Or is it things *outside the film*? Was it the articles? Was it the war in Macedonia? Was it my earrings? (*Laughter.*) Was it the fact that this film opened the Venice Film Festival? Was it the fact that I pissed off so many people in the industry in the seven years between *Before the Rain* and *Dust*? (I refused to play by the industry rules, to accept unethical standards and the dictatorship of the oxymorons - creative executives - over the artist. The film industry both in Hollywood and in Europe stifles creativity and is an extension of repressive mechanisms. Censorship is so ingrained and often self-inflicted that no one even raises the issue. I felt it was my duty to fight it, and I made a lot of enemies along the way. The industry paid back by

strangling the film in the crib, so the regular viewer never got a chance to see the film.) Was it my unpaid bills to *Screen International*? (*Laughter.*)

I'd be really curious because if it is something in the film itself, as a shrink friend of mine claims, that would be really something. That means there's something in the film – whether it is the characters themselves (none good, none bad, most created from clichés/archetypes that have been inverted) or the actual relationships between the characters (stark), or the way I have treated violence and compassion and sex and self-sacrifice that has triggered such a violent outburst from many film reviewers and not nearly so from the very few regular movie-goers who got to see the film. Or, is it the fact that *Dust* subverts our expectation that a film has to have neat linear structure and – more importantly – simplified and uniform emotional template (a horror is a horror, a comedy a comedy)...? You could argue that it's not pleasant to be at the receiving end of bourgeois anger, or you could compare the level of animosity to the way some other artists have been received for their non-conformist works: *Rules of the Game*, *Cubism*, *The Wild Bunch*, Bunuel, Joyce, Nabokov...

I am interested in Cubist storytelling – when the artist fractures the story and puts it back together in a more complex (and, thus, more interesting) way. More importantly, when the artist keeps shifting the emotional tone of the film, bringing a narrative film closer to the experiences of modern art.

Either way, that's not something for me to judge. At least not at this date. Maybe ten years from now, when I have a perspective to the

film, I'd be able to judge a little more clearly. Maybe I'll see it then and I'll decide that I'd made a bad film -- or maybe not -- yet the value of the film doesn't justify the prejudiced and violent assassination of *Dust* by the industry gate-keepers and political pundits.

Concerning your portrayal of storytelling in Dust, I don't have a specific question. I was just hoping you would tell about your preoccupation with showing the very process of storytelling.

I think it has its roots in two things.

One is my interest in structuralist and conceptualist art. On the surface, the form of *Dust* is not that of a structuralist or conceptualist piece. But, in its own way, it picks up on what these movements were trying to tell us, and builds it into the popular idiom of narrative film. You have to take into consideration the inherent elements (and expectations) typical for film as a story-driven and popular discipline and then incorporate them into the film.

The second thing is that, just like any artist, I'm making autobiographical work. Since I am a storyteller by interest and by profession, I became preoccupied with exploring and *exposing* the process of storytelling, but more importantly, with exploring the thirst to tell and to hear stories. I am not talking only about storytelling in film. I'm talking about writing, oral tradition, teaching, journalism, fairy-tales, myths, legends, telling jokes, bed-time stories, religion, *writing history*... it's actually such a huge part of society. And it's probably more essential than we are aware of or than we would acknowledge. It's one of the main modes for teaching and learning

from each other how to behave, what life and society are about. Storytelling is the nervous system of society.

As I was making films, I became more and more interested in the essence of what it is that a viewer wants from storytelling. I realized we look at stories, but don't see the storytelling. Even when it's to the detriment of the listener. So, I went with the assumption that if I strip the process for the viewer, and then incorporate it in the story, that he or she would come for the journey into the nature of storytelling. The viewer would be involved in unmasking the process (while still keeping it somewhat part of the illusion) and maybe get a different kind of pleasure from this kind of a ride -- as opposed to just being a participant in a ride which is *all* about the illusion, the mask, the manipulated unified feeling. Perhaps one would enjoy this complex (and fractured) ride better and learn more about this aspect of our social lives.

Mainstream narrative cinema is all about expectations, and really low expectations, to that. We have become used to expecting very little from the films we see, not only in terms of stories, but more importantly and less obviously in terms of the mood, the feeling we get from a film. I think we know what kind of a mood and what kind of a feeling we're going to get from a film before we go see the film. It's from the poster, from the title, the stars, and it's become essential in our decision-making and judging processes. I believe it's really selling ourselves way too short. I like films that surprise me. I like films that surprise me especially *after* they've started. I like a film that goes one place and then takes you for a loop, then takes you somewhere else,

and keeps taking you to other places both emotionally and story-wise... keeps changing the mood, shifts in the process, becomes fearless...

All of this needs to be unified by an artistic vision, making it a spirited collage, not a pastiche. A Robert Rauschenberg.

In the end, I'm surprised to see that it's the reviewer rather than the regular movie-goer who expects and even demands to see a film limited, predictable, subservient to expectations, a film that neatly and vulgarly folds within the framework of a genre and a subgenre. It's especially sad when the genre in question is what used to be known as "art film."

New York, 11 October 2003



How to Invent Reality

Extracts from a forthcoming book

Jon Bang Carlsen

Documentary films that pretend to be just filming reality – without reality acknowledging the intrusion of the camera crew – are dangerous.

Objectivity is a bad excuse for manipulation. We're all trapped in our own point of view. That's inescapable. As filmmakers we shouldn't try to eradicate our own shadows which constantly interfere with the life unfolding in front of the camera. The only way to present to others how we see life is by reflecting life as it reaches each of us back to the audience via our own souls.

Objectivity is a strange animal pretending to contain all points of view in the world, a non-existing monster with billions of crossing eye lines; it is a pure fiction and therefore a strange alibi for storytellers trying to tell about life with elements that are already out there.

Journalism in recent years has had a very dangerous influence on documentary filmmaking. I do not believe that the constant news flow about the miserable state of the world helps people to act. I believe that mainstream journalism is a kind of dope for quite a lot of people. All this worthwhile journalism about worthwhile causes petrifies the viewer because the flood of media misery isn't served on a plate of love.

I see documentary filmmaking as an art form. And art, whatever that is, has always supplied me with an unexpected angle on the life we share that pushed me forward in my private life and maybe even

given me the courage to act, contrary to the intellectually approved one-dimensional kind of journalism which paralyses people into petrified characters on chairs, who will never digest what they just saw, because it wasn't a story told by one human being to another. It was told by a cyclops from outer space with whom we share no human emotions.

Whether you work with fiction or documentaries, you're telling stories because that is the only way we can approach the world: to fantasize about this mutual stage of ours as it reinvents itself in the sphere between the actual physical world and the way your soul reflects it back onto the world. For me documentaries are no more real than fiction films and fiction films no more invented than documentaries. They just represent two different methods for describing our world, just as watercolors and oil in painting are two different materials with which you can try to portray life as you see it.

Personally I find that actions often hide people instead of revealing them. In my view, people are most accessible just before they act, when doubting what to do, and just after trying to face the results of their actions.

Doubt is one of the nobler human abilities and it is saddening to see how doubt is constantly being eradicated in the mental landscape of both documentary and fictional films. Doubt is an endangered species among human emotions. Doubt is the raw material with which democracies are built. To show doubt is not a sign of weakness, but a sign that the person is not petrified in a preconceived view of life.

I have been fighting to find a filmic structure that would allow doubt to be one of the main characters in my films and yet would still function as a solid framework to hang my filmic fragments on. Doubt

is the soil every shot in the film should grow out of. Without doubt, no story, no film, no growth.

Reality is like our own face; you will never see it unless it is projected onto somebody else.

Confessions of a Documentary Teacher [Number 3]

David Wingate

Documentaries should be subversive.
Paul Watson

This is the third article about teaching documentaries that I am writing for POV. The articles have their origin in five years of running a post-graduate course in documentary production at a Norwegian regional university in the early 90's and in the stimulating conversations I have had with Richard Raskin.

What does Paul Watson mean by “subversive”? And why does he insist that documentaries need to have this quality?

Paul Watson is a hugely productive documentary maker. He has been working in British TV for 30 years – the first 20 with the BBC and subsequently for Channel Four and for Granada. He is reputed to have been responsible for over 300 TV documentaries! He has directed some 40 films himself and produced or commissioned the others. In the 1980's he was commissioning editor of the BBC 2 “40 minutes” documentary strand.

Paul Watson's own films are astonishingly diverse in subject and tone and he is able to get close to and film an extraordinary variety of different people. In a recent article in the Guardian newspaper Paul Watson was described the “revered and reviled” documentary film maker. His own films are often controversial and stir up debates. His critics attack his ethics, his methods and accuse him of “manipulation”. His interviewees are candid to the point of what looks like carelessness and he is accused of deceiving them. But he assures his critics that he drums into his subjects the possible dangers of being in his films. His

admirers praise the acuteness of his vision and the attitudes of his films.

It is said of him that he tries to "upset people to the point of political thinking".

Films like *The Fishing Party* (1985) and *The Dinner Party* (1997) are bitingly satirical reflections on the lives and attitudes of the rich, and made a lot of people very angry. His film *Convictions* about young criminals in London so upset the law and order lobby and the BBC leadership that it was never broadcast in the UK, though the BBC did sell it abroad. Other films like *The Home* (1993), a series about an old peoples' home, and *Malcomb and Barbara: a love story* (1999) about the onset of Alzheimer's, or *The Queen's Wedding* (2002) are far more gentle, but just as incisive.

He is recognized a pioneer of the "fly on the wall" observational documentary on British television. He was the first UK film maker – indeed the first European film maker - to direct a documentary TV series, *The Family* in 1974. He is the creator of the term "documentary soap", launching it in connection with his Australian series *Sylvania Waters*, about a nouveau riche family, BBC 1992.

So I think when Paul Watson, a documentary maker of such distinction, says that documentaries must be "subversive" it is worth while trying to find out what he means.

Let me add some more quotes from him to complicate the question of what he might mean:

Documentary film must question the status quo and you can only do that if you speak to ordinary people, not politicians. People need to understand one another better.

My films are unique, they are influenced by the wants and needs inherent in the film. My style evolves and is informed by the subject matter with which I am dealing.

Documentary is a very important medium to help us understand each other. Authorship is everything.

Film makers need to be subversive, probe the stereotypes, dig beneath the surface, bring the evidence into question and live the lives of the people they are filming.

(These quotes are from an interview Watson gave in connection with the Encounters documentary festival in Cape Town in 2000.)

When I was starting the documentary course in Norway in the early 90's it seemed sensible to connect to British TV documentary makers and Paul Watson was one of these.

I used to take students to London every year and he was one of the film makers they met. We would watch several of his films before we went over and always had lively and fruitful discussion with him. He always talked about subversiveness. I was attempting to change Norwegian TV 2 and Swedish TV4's documentary policies, trying to get them to start domestic strands and to commission more national films. I took people from these TV companies to London and brought people over from London to meet them brought people to meet them and Paul Watson was one of those who helped me with this. Both with the students and with the professionals one of his messages was always that documentaries must be "subversive".

But what does he mean by this?

Let me approach this indirectly and first sketch some of my thinking as I tried to find out how to teach documentary.

It seemed to me then that one might think about what the students were to gain from the course in terms of three rather contradictory aspects.

Firstly I should encourage them to find and cultivate *their own documentary voice*. Their films should be “authored” as they say in British TV, the “film maker” being present in the film - in the choice of subject, the style, the attitude and so on.

Secondly, since documentary was then – and still is – mostly financed and distributed by TV - I wanted them to be able to get work in TV. So, pragmatically, I needed to help them be aware of and be able to adjust to and work within the agendas, the formats, the traditions, the tastes and so on that de facto existed in TV in Norway at that time.

But, thirdly, I wanted them to be reformers and changers of TV in their country, their task being to get more and different kinds of documentaries broadcast. So I needed to encourage a skepticism about TV documentary practices and a willingness to contravene these.

Finding their own documentary voices definitely did not mean encouraging them to see their films as vehicles of their own “self expression”. The cult of the film director was particularly strong in Norway then. Young people coming into the industry tended to equate the “film makers presence” or “voice” in the film as being that of the director. They thought the director was THE film maker and the film was his or her self expression. Their underlying paradigm of creativity was almost entirely individual. There was little understanding for the

collaborative creativity and/or for the collaborative nature of almost all film production.

I have always believed the cult of the director is rather silly and impractical. In almost all documentary filmmaking I find the cult of the director particularly inappropriate since documentary is so dependent on the contribution of the people in front of the camera. Exceptions are perhaps certain kinds of experimental documentaries created by single artists working alone or some kinds of nature documentaries made by lone filmmakers. Otherwise documentary is deeply collaborative.

I encouraged the students to think of their films as meeting places between “realities”.

The people behind the camera – director, producer, cinematographer, sound person, editor etc – came to the film with their perceptions and experience of their different realities and with their skills, habits and traditions of film making. All of these contributed to the film and *together* constituted the presence of the “film maker”, the “author” of the film.

The people in front of the camera – the people whose lives were being filmed – I thought then, brought to the film their diverse perceptions and experiences of their different realities. So I encouraged the students to think of their films as meeting places for and hybrids of all these diverse “realities” and rather than any single person’s version of “reality”.

An aside

We of course had documentary history lectures and screenings and the students were aware of Griersons’s ancient definition. This is often quoted as “a personal interpretation of reality”. But I think the original

quote used the word “actuality” rather than reality. As Brian Winston has pointed out (*Claiming the Real*, 1995), Grierson was very influenced by his visit to French-speaking Canada in the mid 1920’s. In Canada then the word “actualités” was in common use meaning non-fiction film in general and newsreels in particular. Winston even suggests that the French Canadians were already using the word “documentaire” for longer “actualités” and that Grierson may have “borrowed” the term from them and then went on to launch his career in documentary at the Post Office Film Unit.

I wanted the students to think that one of the joys of documentary making is the continual discovery that things and people are not what you thought them to be, that other people live in different realities from your own and perceive and experience their worlds in different ways than you do. I wanted to cultivate in the students an open-mindedness and curiosity about the world around them and encouraged them to think of this as being characteristic of good documentary makers.

At the same time I wanted the students to be able to get work in television, and in order to further this goal, it was important to thoroughly inform them about present TV practice, about the existing documentary slots and commissioners. Norwegian TV documentary was at that time still dominated by journalism so that its journalistic agendas tended to determine what subjects and issues were in vogue, how these should be dealt with and thus which films got made. I tried to help the students to be aware of the nature of the current journalistic agenda so that they could find work in these areas of television. But at the same time trying to make them aware of the limitations of that

agenda and the habits and traditions of Norwegian TV journalists. Looking at long form TV journalism from other countries and trying to extract their underlying journalistic agendas, was useful in helping the students see the agendas in their own TV culture.

At that same time, both the public service channel and the main commercial channel were just beginning to commission observational, narrative, character driven documentaries scheduled for prime time. (This became the commissioner's mantra in the years that followed). Observational and inter-active observational story telling documentary had then been in vogue on British television for at least twelve years. So it was important to give the students the opportunity to see a lot of British prime time TV documentaries – singles, strands and serials – what the British were then beginning to call “pop-doc” – as well as British long form television journalism. Paul Watson's films were among those I showed. In this way I hoped to prepare them for a coming trend in the students own national TV channels.

At the same time I tried to make them aware of the limitations of both British and Norwegian television documentary practice and the need to question and perhaps change these. I thought of this as being the “politics of reality”.

I suggested that in a more totalitarian society only certain realities were permitted to be dealt with in the media, and these were usually the realities which gave legitimacy to those in power. In a more democratic society a great diversity of realities was allowed in the media. Indeed the democratic project was one which recognized that thousands of parallel realities co-exist within any society, reality being

different according to your place in that society, your class, your education, your geographical or regional identity, your subculture, etc. One might say that a democracy was a society which encouraged this multiplicity of co-existent realities and saw it as a strength and saw their presence in the media as a natural reflection of the societies necessary diversity. Whereas a more totalitarian society sees this diversity as a threat and those who want to talk about or film unorthodox realities as dangerous and in need of suppression.

Watching documentaries is often an exercise in experiencing new realities. Even in documentaries about your own society, a documentary can take you into places and let you meet people and share their lives for a while, letting you vicariously experience realities you might otherwise never have known. Indeed documentary film can sometimes be said to bring realities into existence by making them public in this way. In the interview book *Kieslowski on Kieslowski* (1993), the Polish director's thoughts about the TV documentaries he and his colleagues made during the first Solidarity period very much reinforced this idea of reality confirmation.

Now obviously the people in positions to decide which TV documentaries get made and broadcast will tend to be of a certain types and their experience of and perceptions of reality will be limited. They will tend to be well-educated, urban middle class and, in Norway, often have a journalistic background. Some realities will be very foreign to them.

Some may indeed be so foreign that they do not believe that they exist. They may then claim that the film maker is lying, is faking it.

As part of the course, I used to give a lecture about the French painter Gustave Courbet whose paintings so enraged the art establishment early in his career. Courbet was the first to use the term “realism” and claimed that he was the first “realist”. I used his painting “The Stone Breakers” as an example. (I was delighted to learn much later that Richard Raskin had written a monograph about this painting.)

It is hard to understand today why this painting caused such an uproar – why it was so “subversive” to use Paul Watson’s term. To us I think it seems like a perfectly legitimate observation of two workers in a stone quarry. In the lecture I asked if the violent rejection of the painting was because the art establishment felt it was not a proper subject for a work of art, or whether it was rejected *as reality*. My suggestion was that the art critics had never experienced the reality the painting was showing. They may have seen such things, but their perception of them was so coloured by their class, their education – their snobbery perhaps – that they were incapable of seeing them as the painter had seen them. Therefore they rejected them because for them they *did not exist*. There was no reality in the painting, it was a mere figment of the painter’s imagination. His claim that it was a realist work was thus untrue and subversive.

Surely, I said to the students, there will be documentary realities you want to show as film which will be so foreign to the TV commissioners that they do not believe in their existence, do not believe they are “documentary” and thus they will reject your film. In Norwegian TV at that time the commissioner saying that the film was not “objective” or not “true” might be a symptom of this kind of reaction. If

you as film makers knew that your documentary was a fair and honest reflection and interpretation of the realities involved then you will know that the commissioner was “wrong”.

But equally there may be realities in your documentary which the TV commissioners find so unorthodox that they will reject your film. These will be realities which they feel *should not* be shown because they are foreign to the consensus about reality to which they, the commissioners, subscribe. Again the Norwegian commissioner then might say the film was not “true”, that the film makers was not “objective”, perhaps even saying that the audience not want to see it.

So here I think we can come back to what Paul Watson meant by the necessary subversiveness of documentary.

Television documentaries should not only confirm the realities in vogue at the time, the stereotypes realities, the orthodox concepts of how the world works and how it seems to us. They should not just stick to the accepted agendas of subjects and issues that television is used to. They should not only retell the kind of realities, filmed the kind of ways that the people in power in television approve of. They should not only confirm the perceptions and the experience of reality in which television executives live.

If one really believes in the democratic experiment and television’s place in it, then one must admit that there are endless realities to be documented. And who is to decide which of these is more deserving?

The Filmmaker As Historian

Rasmus Falbe-Hansen

Today historians recognize that film and TV contribute greatly to people's historical consciousness. Still historians have had difficulties in deciding what to do with history communicated in fiction films. For a long time the reaction has been to ignore historical feature films entirely. Now, however, historians are gradually realizing that films need to be treated seriously, because it is evident that the pictures and stories unfolding on the screen have such a strong effect on the viewer that historians who take themselves seriously need to ask the question: How can and do films communicate history and how can historians make good use of popular films?

Poetic speculations about the past

The objections of many historians are based on the fact that so-called historical films are often made without consulting any actual historians. Filmmakers and film companies often care more about a dramatic plot than any historical accuracy and sense of the past. Few have second thoughts when changing history if it suits the story. Naturally this tendency has been the source of considerable reluctance in the historian towards accepting films as serious representations of history. The fact that historians do not participate in the making of feature films, however, is exactly a point that should make the historians deal with them as viewers and recipients.

Traditionally when historians deal with fiction films, they tend to approach them simply as reflections of the periods in which they are

produced. Theorists such as Pierre Sorlin, K.R.M. Short and Marc Ferro concurrently regard a fiction film as a window on the time during which it was produced. They see a film as a product of its time. When regarded in this light, *JFK* says more about 1991 than it does about the murder of John F. Kennedy.

Today, however, historians and film theorists alike find it increasingly rewarding to approach fiction films as reflections of the past. In the post-modern understanding the boundaries between film and history are disappearing. The historians have become receptive to narrative strategies and fictive elements in the writing of history and the film theorists are watching the barriers between fiction and documentary disappear. Both tendencies are characterised by phenomenological traits. From a phenomenological point of view there is no division between the inner and the outer. It sees the truth in the meeting between the viewer/reader and the text. In the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: 'film isn't thought, it is perceived'.¹ It is the experience of reality that is central, not the look of reality. This is a radical change of thought, especially if held up against the traditional historical understanding of the manner in which to communicate history. And the subjectivity, which is implied in the phenomenological approach to history on film, requires that historical films not be treated simply as traditional written history, but on their own terms.

In general, historians have treated historical films as they would traditional written history. This has had the consequence that the greater part of what historians have produced about films has been concerned with historical inaccuracies in them. This approach to

¹ Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 22 (my translation).

historical films does not provide much knowledge and is of little use to anyone. If the films were accepted on their own terms, however, they would have a lot to offer as communicators of history; they have a different potential from that of written history and thus offer a different range possibilities. The historical film should not be seen as a substitute for written history, nor simply as an illustration of written history, but as a supplement and an extension, which adds depth to traditional written history.

But how can subjectivity and the transformations of the fiction film be dealt with when we approach films as serious communicators of history?

Accepting subjectivity in fictive representations of history is not a new development. Since Aristotle there has been a division between logic and rhetoric, between historical research and historical writing. One theorist who has pursued this theme is the Danish positivist historiographer Kristian Erslev, who stated the following about the writing of history:

1. All writing of history must be clear, it must create pictures, give the reader an experience.
2. The writing of history must contain a living description of a person, that is 'personify' and
3. The writing of history shall be art, the presentation must be dramatic and be done with life and imagination.²

This is not far from the way modern theorists attack the way the feature film communicates history. This new approach to the historical film sees the films as interpretations of the past and not as objective

² Bryld, 1996, p. 54.

descriptions of the facts of the past. Robert Brent Toplin sees historical films as poetic speculations about the past, and thinks that manipulating the historical film is a way of communicating a broader truth – the overall interpretation is more important than the detail.

The theorist most dedicated to approaching the feature film as a serious work of history is Robert A. Rosenstone who argues that the fictive elements of the historical film should be seen as ways of symbolising, summarising and making things more complex. Carsten Tage Nielsen says that films should be judged in terms of the director's subjectivity or interpretation. Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*, to take a current example, should be judged on its success with regard to interpreting the experience of a single man in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Second World War. It should not be judged solely in terms of factual accuracy nor should it be repudiated simply because of inventions or changes of events or settings.

The historical film must be taken seriously on its own premises – as an interpretation of the past and as a poetic speculation on the past. Approached like this the historical film can be read as offering an equally and sometimes even more illuminating representation of history than that of written history. The historian Hayden White mentions atmosphere, feelings, war etc. According to White the historical film has its own discourse which harbours unique abilities. But not all historical films use these abilities properly. A distinction between serious and unserious historical films is necessary, and it needs to be considered what the traditional narrative conventions mean for the abilities of the filmmaker to act as historian.

Historical mainstream films versus historical art films

In order to determine, which possibilities the historical film harbours, we should begin by defining the characteristics of the historical film. If the historical film is to be taken seriously, some films taking place in the past need to be omitted. Accordingly Leger Grindon only treats the films that take themselves seriously as historical representations. Films whose portraits present problems in the setting of the past are not interesting as history. If current issues are presented in the frame of the past it is not communication of history but entertainment. What is interesting in this connection, however, is a film which presents the past for us in the present. It is the past in the present which has our focus, not the present in the past. This division can be problematic, but on the other hand historians, as well as all other academics, usually do not hesitate to leave out all texts that are found unserious and un-academic. So this choice is legitimate.

It is important to recognize that the historical film is not a genre. Even though many historical films have much in common, the plots in these films can play out within a broad range of different genres. Think of the difference between *Saving Private Ryan* and Charlie Chaplin's *The Dictator*, both of which are historical films. The one thing that all historical films have in common is their reference to the past. Nielsen and Sorlin both argue that the historical film is thus defined in relation to the historical knowledge which is situated outside the visual media and the institution of the cinema.

Robert A. Rosenstone has written several books on the nature of the historical film and he takes narrative conventions as the starting point of his research. He indirectly assumes David Bordwell's definition of various historical narrative modes. However, he only uses two of Bordwell's categories: the classical mainstream film and the art

film. This constitutes a natural starting point since it is obvious that the different ways of telling a story have different possibilities of expression.

According to Rosenstone the traditional or classical film communicates history as drama. It is based on cinematic realism, which creates in the viewer the illusion that nothing has been manipulated. There is a beginning, a middle part and an end, which leaves the viewer with a moral and a sense of relief.

The classical film usually places the individual at the centre, which is a cinematic tool that emotionalises, personalises and dramatises the (hi)story. It presents a closed, complete and simple past. Furthermore it presents a view of the landscapes, buildings and artefacts of the past. Finally Rosenstone argues that the classical historical film presents history as a process. As opposed to written history, which separates different aspects like economy, politics, race etc, the classical historical film depicts history as: '...a process of changing social relationships where political and social questions – indeed, all aspects of the past, including the language used – are interwoven'.³

Combined with the view of the past and the individualized point of view, the view of historical films as process oriented creates a sense of the past, which the written history seldom, if ever, can achieve. The one-sidedness, the simplicity and the sense that nothing has been manipulated, which are central ingredients in this narrative mode, may also cause problems, however. Even though alterations and manipulation should be understood metaphorically too much simplicity and one-sidedness can be dangerous. If the story of Holocaust becomes too

³ Rosenstone, 1995b, p. 61.

simplistic and one-sided, we may come to regard the Nazis simply as personifications of the devil that has nothing to do with us or our civilisation. The most important thing to tell about the Holocaust, however, is that the potential for genocide exists and that many Nazis were ordinary men. It is important that history is communicated many-faceted and openly so that we do not forget what we have seen. Furthermore it may be problematic that traditional historical films by means of continuity editing are so skilfully made as to hide the fact that they have been manipulated – i.e. edited. They create the illusion of objectivity and disguise the subjectivity. In order to treat historical communication the position of the subject is very important.

This subjective position is one of the strengths of the art film. The artistic or experimental historical film is characterized by its reference to itself (meta level) – that is, it bares the very process in which the past is created instead of simply depicting the past. Generally this type of film is characterized by being in opposition to the mainstream film, which tends to settle for the simple meaning and instead it tries to communicate a complex view of the past. It is typically abrupt, fragmented, de-dramatised, can be collectivistic and attempts to be open-ended. More often than not it involves a multitude of voices and plays with different points of view, times and places. The art film can tell the stories of the past with more complexity and differentiation than the mainstream film. Judged by traditional historical standards the art film is better able to communicate the past properly and seriously than its mainstream big brother. The disadvantage with the art film, however, is that it has a tiny audience! Furthermore the art

film is often at risk of losing the coherence which is an integral part of the classical film's process-oriented way of showing the past. The most obvious advantage, however, is the art film's ability to tell a story on different levels and with many facets to it.

A kind of conclusion on filmed history

As suggested above, an important point of departure for dealing with the historical film is to accept it on its own terms. This in turn means that norms appropriate to written history should not be blindly projected onto the historical film. Furthermore a critical approach is fundamental as it is with all other history. The historical film must be accepted as a vehicle for communicating those aspects of the past that written history cannot. From a phenomenological point of view, it could be said that it is the feeling of the past, a sense of the past or a poetic speculation on the events of the past, which is the main strength of the historical feature film.

Alterations and manipulations should in serious historical films be seen as metaphorical ways of communicating an overall interpretation of the past as the director sees it. How this interpretation can be communicated depends on the narrative mode. The classical film holds advantages in the process-oriented, dramatized and individual way of communicating the past. The art film has more to offer with regard to complexness and different points of view. But it should be remembered that the narrative modes are contrasts without well-defined boundaries. Many films are situated in-between the two narrative modes, and theoretically there is nothing to prevent serious, balanced and many-faceted historical films. Claus Bryld concludes that the goal must be to find a balance between the traditional film's

narrow and undialectical representation and the broad and dialectical approach of the art film (and traditional written history).

The filmmaker obviously has a lot to offer as communicator of the past. In order to be accepted as a historian, however, he needs to accept responsibility concerning his treatment of the past by presenting the past not just as the setting for a good story but in the perspective of a serious interpretation of past events. On the other hand historians must accept the historical film as simply another way of representing the past than that of written history. If these principles were followed, historians could begin using historical films to a much larger extent in their teaching and research.

When we talk for instance of D-Day, even the most conservative historian would have to admit that images from *Saving Private Ryan* pop up in our mind and that they are more concrete and easier to relate to emotionally than are the images we create when we read about the same event. Images on the screen can make us feel and sense the past to a much greater degree than is possible for traditional written history.

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Making Visible: Reflections on Politics and Film

Brian Dunnigan

"What times are these when talk about trees is almost a crime because it implies silence on so many wrongs?" Bertolt Brecht

" Politics in the middle of things that concern the imagination are like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert." Stendhal

" All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away." Karl Marx

Art and Politics

Politics is concerned with the generation and distribution of power in a society and how we organize our social life together: issues of equity and justice, competing utopias and ideologies, programmes and manifestoes. The political life is one of manoeuvring and intriguing, demonstrating and debating: fighting for a position of real, practical influence and control. Political narratives are directed and persuasive, lacking in ambiguity or subtlety. Action is taken with consequences that impact directly on everyday life. The artistic and political impulses are thus often seen as being in contradiction to one another. For many, art cannot be reduced to narrative simplicity. It is complex, mysterious, enriching and has no need for any justification outside itself. To burden any artistic enterprise with a political agenda is to substitute poetic evocation and richness for rhetoric and moral posturing. The politically engaged for their part may scorn the artistic flight into myth, beauty and imagination as an escape from social and historical realities and there are clearly times when art and politics cannot be separated e.g. the concentration camps, Aboriginal art, work from the Gaza strip. But art as imaginative recreation of the world can exist alongside a more politically refracted art. How can this be otherwise? They are

both aspects of a desire to know and express, to engage with human reality: and both are shaped and framed within a network of economic relations that often compromise their effectiveness.

Cinema: Ideology and Commerce

Mainstream cinema has always embodied this tension between art, politics and commerce. Dramatic realism or imaginative fantasy became the dominant forms of cinematic narrative, springing from a documentary impulse to explore the world or an urge to escape from its suffocating presence - but always with the imperative to attract as large an audience as possible. Art for arts sake but money for God's sake: this was showbiz after all. Cinema however has always been involved in politics in the widest sense of what stories it chose to tell and how it told them: and all narratives carry the utopian traces of the folk tale – hope, emancipation, justice - the very core of political debate. By showing us how the world was it has given people ideas as to how it might be better, though ideological manipulation of audience response has never been far away. Redemptive narrative is a seductive and rhetorical art form, especially as it developed in Hollywood from the 1920's in the shape of a modern fairy tale with happy endings and an emphasis on entertainment. American political and financial elites saw the propaganda value of the movies from an early date and the worldwide success of Hollywood films has since played a major role in opening up markets to American commerce. The overwhelming success of this paradigm and the Americanisation of world culture, have pushed other ways of telling stories, other cinemas and points of view – to the margins. American films dominate the market place shaping needs, desires and our sense of self and making a significant

contribution to our mediated, consumer-driven world of fantasy and fashion. In this non-place of infotainment and individualised pleasure-seeking, films with a didactic political content make us anxious: by presenting us with the Other trying to cross the border into the Good Life or the generalised chaos and violence of the disenfranchised. Politics have become unfashionable and politicians regarded at best with cynical indifference: and yet there remains a hunger in many people to go beyond the fictions of the mediated world and confront issues that only an informed politics can resolve. In recent years there have been huge audiences for films that use melodrama and thriller genres to challenge and reveal the corruption of corporate power (*The Insider*) or the documentary form to expose the hypocrisy of gun ownership in the United States (*Bowling for Columbine*).

Ken Loach: class war

There are numerous filmmakers working in both features and documentary around the world who strive to engage directly or imaginatively with specific political issues and consistently find audiences. One of the most persistent and successful has been the British director Ken Loach. In films like *Riff-Raff* (1991), *Raining Stones* (1993) and more recently *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), he reveals the continued existence of those exploited yet ignored by the political class: a working-class world in which people's hopes of equality and justice are constantly being undercut, at work, at home, in society. Though his narratives are often built around an individual protagonist, he is always concerned to foreground the social and political context of people's lives, as well as the importance of collective action and shared rituals in the face of an increasingly brutal and unregulated economic

system. His naturalistic, observational style eschews aestheticism in the service of an avowed social criticism which some find over determined. The narratives in his films for example often refuse the seduction of the happy end. Society is left to ponder its responsibility and need to change. Loach acknowledges that at times his characters are forced to fit an idea and he is modest about the effect of his films on changing people's attitudes: but his best work by insinuating the wider world into the personal and dramatic, is an effective riposte to critics that art and politics exist in parallel worlds.

New World Order: the politics of globalization

A more relevant criticism of Loach's work may be that the idealised world of working-class solidarity and labour organization that he portrays in his films has changed out of all recognition. It has been argued that trade unionism and other forms of collective action and identity have been hollowed out and rendered ineffective by a new global economic order that transcends the local and national: deregulation and privatisation have created a world of light, mobile capital and an insecure, fragmented work force. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has shown how this more insecure and less predictable relationship between capital and a labour force on short-term contracts has led to the breaking of past solidarities and the decline in militancy and political participation. The shift from a manufacturing to a service based economy and a speeded-up, computerised world has promoted an individualised, consumer-oriented culture and contributed to a radical shift in people's consciousness. In the society of the distracting spectacle and the hallucinogenic shopping mall - fantasy, fashion, travel and the creation of an

individual identity - become more important than anything else, including collective association or action whether work, family or community. In this new world, work has lost its centrality and with it has come a loss of meaning, of a sense of belonging, a stable identity. (Hence the growing interest in genealogy and history-lite tv programmes which offer a virtual sense of roots) The growing influence of trans-national media in shaping our view of the world has contributed to this underlying sense of anxiety: war as entertainment; celebrity culture; reality TV are all part of a *depoliticization* of reality and the weakening of civic bonds. Movies of course are just another commodified element in this twenty-four hour image stream where there appears to be no centre: power has disappeared along with old verities about equality and justice. An unprecedented freedom is accompanied by a feeling of impotence as we continue to be haunted by a memory of what we have lost, the planetary costs of our lifestyle and the Other, on whom our privilege rests.

Liquid Modernity¹

A film like Laurence Cantet's *Time Out* (2002) reflects this new world from a different class perspective. Vincent is a financial consultant, a member of the nomadic elite armed with mobile and laptop, who orchestrate the financial flows of capital and investment that help to create this new delirious reality. When we first meet him he is travelling the non-places of the European highway, phoning home like ET from the darkness of his car to his alien family. Only we realise that in reality he has lost his job and suffered some kind of breakdown that he can't admit to himself or his wife. He invents a fantasy job with the

United Nations while contriving a short-tem scam that involves taking money from friends who believe he is using his UN position to make illegal profits and are happy to go along with him. In reality Vincent is a man who has lost any interest in his work, who is only happy when he is driving alone and listening to music. That was why he lost his job: unable to play the game and meet the targets he now suffers the consequences of living in a culture where the price of failure falls on the individual. As the pressure grows from his wife and parents, the fantasy becomes more elaborate. He imagines himself to be part of a funding group that will help to open African countries to foreign investment and therefore a better future. It is one of the many ironies that Vincent cannot see, unlike his more worldly father, that this is simply the ideological fantasy of a corrupt corporate culture that will not face the reality of its own selfish actions - just like Vincent and his friends. The concern with identity break-down, the isolation of the nuclear family, the betrayal of friends for money around which everything revolves, the importance of fantasy, the overwhelming sense of isolation, the endless drives through a post-modern landscape of non-places, the African Other concealed in a glossy investment brochure – all of these themes and elements make *Time Out* closer to illuminating the psychological effects and social roots of our privatised world and in so doing, make us think about the politics the lie behind the creation of this world.

The End of Politics

For it is one of the major achievements of the new globalised world that *politics* - as a debate over means and goals, about how we live and

¹ The title of a recent book by Zygmunt Bauman

work together on the planet – seems to have disappeared. Free-market globalization is presented as inevitable and beneficial to all, therefore it must be right to attack or weaken any organization, institution or even state that might curtail the efficiency of the market. This claim of inevitability places neo-liberal policies above politics and weakens any political discourse and civic culture: ordinary people have no choice but to share the risks and burdens (cutting welfare, employment security, pensions) in the drive for greater and greater profits. But of course there is a choice: to what extent do we want to regain control over our lives and history, the use of language and media which have been hijacked by unelected NGO's and transnational corporations. Progressive and challenging voices continue to erupt around issues of war and poverty, environment and health care, education and immigration and filmmakers have a part to play in representing these voices and in telling stories that reveal the ideology behind the new economic order. Entertainment and education are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The Personal is Political

A recent German film *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) offers another way in which politics can be represented – through humour. This reverse fantasy, of West Germans tired of consumerism and capitalism, pouring over the Wall to enjoy the fruits of a more community-oriented socialism is touching for its reminder of a less rapacious way of living, the value of a vibrant civic culture and the sudden unexpected collapse of power. In this way whether through the melodramatic seductions of Hollywood, the more overt politics of Ken Loach or the existential meditations of art cinema, film keeps in play other possibilities of being-in-the-world: the exuberance and deep well-springs of human potential,

creativity and desire, love and meaning outside the matrix of shopping and consumption. World cinema contributes to a debate emerging from people's life experience and values in this new age, a debate that includes challenges on several fronts to a one-sided global capitalism. There is no clear dichotomy between art and politics - only what you want to say and how you say it: what it is and what it might be - to be human. In this sense the personal is political and cinematic narrative should be a site of dreaming and desiring that makes the political unconscious more visible -encouraging us to *think* as well as to feel.

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