

Making Visible: Reflections on Politics and Film

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"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 Modernity^[1]

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-term 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 breakdown, 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 that 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 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.

¹ The title of a recent book by Zygmunt Bauman

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