

TOMÁŠ POSPÍŠIL

**NARRATIVE CINEMA AS TEACHER'S PLEASURE:
THE IMPORTANCE OF AMERICAN FILM
IN THE AMERICAN STUDIES CLASSROOM**

The other day, as I was sitting over lunch during a family reunion, I informed the company about the cultural studies courses on American film and society I have taught and also was considering to offer in the future. As I was trying to describe some of the main points of some of the material I was reading for it—such as the question of the construction of the female body in the modern horror (as explained in Carol J. Clover's volume called *Men, Women and Chain Saws*) or in Disney's endearing cartoons (examined, for instance, in Susan White's essay "Split Skins: Female Agency and Bodily Mutilation in the Little Mermaid"), my step-brother, a physician at a Brno intensive care unit, fell subject to an uncontrolled fit of laughter until he choked, could not catch his breath and if somebody had not given him a severe slap on the back, probably would have had to be taken to the very ward he is employed at to be looked after by one of his own colleagues on duty.

Truly enough, for a person who, metaphorically speaking, walks through a morgue to exercise his profession every day, the idea of seriously studying the gender aspects of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* might seem a bit strange or even ridiculous. Likewise, I am not that surprised at his utter disbelief that a university teacher today can waste the time of his talented students by subjecting them to the horrors of the *Alien* and even call it work. His take on the female body is—inevitably—different, horrifyingly more immediate, providing him with little or no understanding of abstract concepts such as cultural gendering or the tracing of the monstrous feminine in Ridley Scott's famous thriller.

Yet, ironically, I am not ashamed for being paid for watching and presenting movies. In addition, I believe, that this activity is, in a certain sense, as socially useful as his. Obviously, this is a very daring claim to make, one that deserves some clarification. Such a statement verges on the absurd in the immediate sense: he saves people's lives and I do ... nothing. If he misses a clue, a person dies, if I miss one, I just make a fool out of myself. Should we, as cultural stud-

ies people, look at our social role in these terms, our presence in the world would be completely dispensable. Yet, I might also turn the question around and ask what would happen if there were no cultural studies classes, such as mine, dealing with film. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but one day for sure a certain awareness might be getting lost. And along with it our capacity for resistance, processing information and appreciation.

Allow me to be specific. Much of today's scholarship in the realm of history and cultural studies suggests that we find ourselves in a thoroughly relativist universe. In the description of both historical and contemporary reality there is a growing tendency to include many different, often quite contradictory voices and views. As teachers of history and cultural studies we should be able to make some sense out of this dizzying multiplicity, or at least by realizing the historical complexity of reality and the existence of many competing stories, we should make our students refrain from embracing easy solutions and simple answers. As skillful readers of texts (both printed and visual) we should be able to share the skill of seeing through the manipulations. In so doing, together we might learn how to resist demagogues. It is our major obligation to spread this particular skill.

There is a great amount of work to be done. Take for instance the various Hollywood narratives about US history. Not everybody is a historian or a cultural studies scholar and whatever history people may have acquired at high school, is, in general, comfortably lost as they try to cope with the practical requirements of their lives and careers. In such a situation most people will get their additional history lessons from film. D. W. Griffith's racist and yet masterful reinterpretation of American Civil War and Reconstruction in *The Birth of a Nation* is the first—if obvious—case in point. As the sudden rise of the KKK in the early 1920s suggests, films have power to influence reality in that they manipulate their viewers. Griffith's version of the reconstruction reality stuck as can be seen by another grand epic with essentially the same bias: *Gone With the Wind*. Indeed, how many people could say that their understanding of mid 19th century America was not informed by the touching story of Scarlet O'Hara? To take a more recent and less notorious example, had John Wayne in 1964 shot *The Full Metal Jacket* instead of the *Green Berets*, the U.S. recruitment office would probably have had significantly fewer—if any—volunteers.

But leaving history aside, the power of film can be far more immediate. In 1994, when I was doing research in Santa Cruz, a film was released which included a spectacular stunt of the main protagonists who at one point in the movie at night lied down in the middle of the road in a kind of Russian roulette. Obviously they survived. The following weekend several young "players" imitating the stunt were killed that way. As we can see, we are being constantly manipulated in one way or another and not to lie down on the road in the middle of the night is only the first in the long series of survival skills of resistance.

Another form of resistance our students should be trained into is resistance to trash. The lifestyle of the species which came to be known as the couch potato, a complacent, indiscriminating consumer of TV entertainment and B-movies

whose evenings are spent in front of the "glass teat," is certainly frightening, at least as frightening as the little Californian town of Santa Rosa after the invasion of the body snatchers.

Also during my stay at Santa Cruz, I witnessed professor Fogler, as he opened his course on post-humanism in literature. He asked his students two questions: how many of them had read *Moby Dick* (about 5 out of 40) and how many of them had seen the *Terminator* (all but 5 of the 40). What follows is not a value judgement on those two texts, in no case would I like to terminate *Moby Dick's* standing in the curriculum at the expense of watching the most famous Austrian next to Adolf Hitler. However, the other text deserves some serious examination as well. Not only because we simply cannot afford to ignore such a popular and therefore influential medium (a quintessentially American one), but also because the film articulates certain attitudes about the nature of humanity, has a consistent stance toward technology, invokes religious myths of the coming of the savior or the eternal return, while at the same time being an excellent example of one of the dominant Hollywood genres. Some of these beliefs, communicated in the second or third plane of the thriller, might become fixed, just like D. W. Griffith's depiction of African Americans. (Not that they would be so harmful.) However being able to pin them down, analyze them, say what they are and how the film achieves its impact is, in my opinion, vital. By becoming aware of the film's manipulations the film does not lose its power. But by looking at its constructed nature, our appreciation moves to a different level: it becomes both emotional and intellectual. As we trace the film's "religious" subtext, we think we recognize something familiar: suddenly we know how we came to be moved by it in the first place.

It has become a platitude to call Hollywood the dream factory. But fewer metaphors have been truer than this one. Let us just remind ourselves of the state the film audience finds itself in the theater. Indeed, it is a condition similar to dreaming. In the film, through identification with the protagonists, many of our secret dreams come true. These dreams speak volumes about who we are, about the values of the culture that produces them. Our film narratives are permeated by mythical stories, our folktales celebrate, in this new attire, a striking, mass-produced comeback. Marshall McLuhan was perfectly right in saying that each of our media is an extension of ourselves. Indeed our celluloid dreams are giving as ample example. Take Klaatu, the famous alien savior from the memorable 1955 sci-fi classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. In his final monologue he gives a wonderful vision of an alien security system based on deterrence. It is not the best system, says Klaatu, flanked by Gort, his doomsday robot, but it is one that works. Such system allows the alien culture to turn their attention to more profitable ventures. I repeat: more profitable ventures. Of course we recognize it: American pragmatism in times of the Cold War.

Films not only inform us about us about our values and hidden (for the most part male) desires and anxieties, they picture the society. But again, much caution is advised. Neither *Blue Velvet*, nor *An Officer and a Gentleman* are quite realistic pictures of U.S. society. Leaving these two obvious examples aside,

even when examining other, less hyperbolic features one should move more slowly and with a critical distance.

Films in a sense produce the images of society in our heads, which later merge with our actual experiences, creating a strange mixture of fact, film and memory. This extraordinary mental material might on the one hand enrich us (say by juxtaposing our experience of Arizona with what we remember from a classical Western or from the Marlboro commercial), but, on the other hand become a source of significant impoverishment. Take for instance the witches. There must have been a greater variety in American witch design prior to 1939. At one point during my stay in the United States, I kept wondering, why all Westlake kindergarden witches looked the same. Only after I saw the *Wizard of Oz*, did it become clear to me that they were all modeled on the Wicked Witch of the West.

Truly enough, the impact of cinema on the viewer's mind is a heavy one. Last Year in New York City, for instance, coming down from JFK to the International House, on Martin Luther King Boulevard, I was instinctively looking for Nola Darling (the protagonist of Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*), since it occurred to me that she might be waiting for a bus at one of the stops that strongly resembled those I knew from the movie. And then, on a Sunday night I turned on the radio—I think it was the Family channel—and just as somebody started to remind me, endlessly and with a great deal of passion, of eternal damnation, I immediately I saw Burt Lancaster's memorable sermon as *Elmer Gantry*. Then on the subway station 96th street, where one must change trains so as not to travel further to the Bronx, I could not help laughing at the joke performed by a card player on the main protagonist of John Sayle's *Brother from another Planet* who promised—as if by magic trick—to make all white people disappear from the car. And then upon leaving the Guggenheim museum, facing the well-known fence around Jackie Onassis reservoir, I thought that in the Central Park twilight, among the numerous sweating joggers, I caught a glimpse of Dustin Hoffman's marathon man. Luckily enough, on the way home to my tiny room at the International House the taxi driver was sane, a Sikh, who with a very heavy accent informed me proudly that he was working on his American dream... Then Betty Shabazz died, the one I was so much familiar with from Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*. This made me very sorry both for the death and for the circumstance. The fact that I did not recognize the face in the New York Times was at that time irrelevant.

In all these instances I believe my reading of New York City was richer thanks to a certain awareness of a layer of entertaining intertextuality, yet maybe, I was missing something else, a wealth of other details and meanings in the immediate reality around me.

Despite all this, I still believe that movies, if properly dosed and administered, have the potential of returning us to life, making us savor our earthly existence rather than escape it. Like Damiel, one of the angels in Wenders' memorable classic *Sky over Berlin*, improperly translated as *Wings of Desire*, we would not trade the taste of the morning coffee, accompanied by a cigarette (remember Peter Falk's memorable appearance?) as well as the opportunity to love somebody for a timeless immaterial existence of a celluloid dream.

So, whereas the role of physicians in emergency wards is life saving, I see our role as teachers of history, literature and film, as life enhancing. We have the opportunity to share with our students our pleasure at examining certain texts, discuss the relevance of certain stories, and by resisting easy solutions and images of cliched happiness we work at our better understanding and appreciation of the rich reality around us. Next to a film director's—the best job in the world.

LITERATURE

- Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- White, Suzan. "Split Skins: Female Agency and Bodily Mutilation in *The Little Mermaid*." In *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*. Ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins. Routledge, NY, London: AFI Film Readers, 1993.

