

The 1999 Toronto International Film Festival—fifth and final in a series of articles by David Walsh

# The importance of knowing something about the world

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Thirty years ago it would have been widely accepted that objective knowledge about society and history was an asset for a filmmaker. Of course some took advantage of their audience at the time and made works that were merely radical tracts, not enduring works of art. The better film artists, however, adopted a serious attitude toward social life and aesthetics. Today by and large such an attitude is considered a hindrance. Pastiche, improvisation, surface gloss are highly valued; art is apparently produced by the organization of clever accidents. This is a temporary state of affairs, but a costly and destructive one. Art, including bad art, has consequences.

Marco Bellocchio began making films in Italy in the mid-1960s. He was 25 or so when he directed his first film, one that had considerable impact, *I Pugnì in Tasca* ( *Fist in His Pocket*, 1965), an allegorical story of a bourgeois family of epileptics and the adolescent Sandro (the extraordinary Lou Castel) who sets about wiping them out to help his older, healthy brother. I still remember more than 30 years later the impression that the director's savage satire made on me. Bellocchio followed with *La Cina è vicina* ( *China is Near*, 1967), a mocking attack on the Italian "left."

He took on the church in *Nel nome del padre* ( *In the Name of the Father*, 1971) and the army in *Marcia Trionfale* ( *Victory March*, 1976). Bellocchio collaborated on a documentary on alternative psychiatry in the province of Emilia, *Matti da Slegare* ( *Fit to Be Untied*), in 1975. His work since the mid-1970s has not generally made its way to North America. He filmed versions of Chekhov's *The Seagull* in 1977, Pirandello's *Enrico IV* in 1984 and Kleist's *The Prince of Homburg* in 1997.

*The Wet Nurse* ( *La Balia*) is also based on a work by Pirandello, a short story. The events take place in pre-World War I Italy, a time of considerable political unrest. Anarchists and socialist are demonstrating; police repression is meted out. Professor Mori, an austere and reserved neuropsychiatrist, and his wife Vittoria are expecting their first child. Their relations are somewhat chilly. During the delivery, Vittoria orders her husband out of the room. "I don't want you to see me," she says. Following the birth, she has no desire to hold the baby. It comes as no surprise when the infant has difficulties breast-feeding. Professor Mori travels to a small village and hires a wet nurse, Annetta. His one condition: she must leave her son behind and devote herself to his.

As Annetta settles in, Vittoria feels more and more left out. The wet nurse seems to take over all the important aspects of her life. The doctor's wife becomes nervous, distraught, resentful. Meanwhile the father of Annetta's baby, a left-wing activist now in prison, has written his lover a letter, which Vittoria intercepts and reads. It says, in part, that most women marry "out of fear, out of loneliness, like their mothers."

Eventually, Vittoria confronts her husband, insisting that he send Annetta away. "There's nothing left for me. That nurse takes everything. It's her or me." When Mori refuses to discharge Annetta, Vittoria sets herself up in their summer house.

Annetta asks Mori to teach her to read and write. Her warmth affects him; she even gets him to sing, badly. The political turbulence in the streets mounts. The doctor leaves one morning, sternly admonishing Annetta not to go out. Mori visits his wife, who is calmly and affectionately holding a servant's baby. Vittoria says, "I read her [Annetta's] letter. It seemed to be made for me." She asks her husband if he's in love with the wet nurse.

As Mori arrives home, he sees Annetta leaving the house, contrary to his instructions. He follows her and discovers that she's been secretly nursing her baby in the apartment of a friend. "I couldn't abandon my own son," she tells him. He goes home. At night, Annetta returns to the Mori household and tries to feed the baby, without success. "He doesn't need me any more," she says, a little sadly. We see her next at the train station. It would seem that Mori, Vittoria and Annetta are all given the opportunity, in the end, to start over.

This is a sensitive and intelligent work. A rare one. It treats social life and primal emotional relationships in a thoughtful and considered manner. It argues against a system of social relations that produces coldness, paralysis and alienation. Life ought to be different, endowed with all the warmth and nourishment that human beings need. It is also unusual to see a work in which people learn from one another, show some progress, no matter how tentative.

Because of his intellectual history, Bellocchio was able to avoid a number of traps into which most contemporary filmmakers would have all too easily fallen. He stays away from obvious violence and tragedy. So many writers and directors today, unable to provide a coherent explanation for most forms of behavior and seeking to make a reputation for themselves, impute a contrived malice and cynicism to their creations. In contrast, everyone in *The Wet Nurse* is perfectly well-intentioned. That's not the problem. They're like most people, semiconscious, stumbling around largely in the dark, trying to make the best of things, capable of goodness and treachery, alterable.

Bellocchio even resisted the contemporary cliché of having Mori and Annetta sleep together. In any event, their relations, in which each alternately acts as teacher and student, have a strong sensual component.

Bellocchio makes a very favorable impression in person, as a man of intellect and artistic integrity. In a conversation, I mentioned first, through a translator, the impact *Fist in His Pocket* had made on me, one of the first "art films" I'd seen. He laughed wryly, saying, "It's been exactly 34 years since I made that film. It was my birth as a filmmaker, but also my

condemnation.” In other words, he’s had to carry around the reputation he made with that first film ever since. When I apologized, he said he wasn’t complaining, merely “identifying it as a fact.”

Since I don’t know the Pirandello short story, I asked Bellocchio if his purpose and theme were different from those of the story’s author. Yes, absolutely, he said. In the original, “the wet nurse succumbs to the bourgeois family. Because of the mother’s persecution, she becomes a prostitute.” In the Pirandello, Mori is a Socialist parliamentarian, “crushed by his wife’s tyranny.” The deputy is something of a hypocrite, not living up to his socialist views.

He explained that he made Mori a psychiatrist to illustrate the conflict between two views of human personality and mental illness. On the one hand, there were the still popular views of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1836-1909), who spent years trying to identify genetic causes of criminal behavior. On the other, there was a social view of medicine. “Most of the medical class in Italy were socialistic in their views, or progressive. In Austria, psychiatry was beginning to make its mark.”

Bellocchio indicated that he wanted to bring out the causal relationship between Professor Mori’s internal frigidity and his wife’s unhappiness. “By correcting the problem, he was able to relate to his patients. The way to deal with illness, to gain access to his patients is to use inner warmth. So his relationship with the wet nurse decreases his coldness. He becomes more open.”

I asked if there were a significance to his making in 1999 a film about the beginning of the century, a century that began with a considerable optimism that it would see the victory of justice and equality. “There is no doubt a significance,” he replied, “but I’m not sure what it is yet. There was more optimism at the beginning of century. We believed science would resolve both medical and social problems. There is a more depressed attitude now. Many don’t believe in anything any more. One sees a resurgence of religion.”

In regard to the specific question of psychiatry, the director explained: “I believe in the uncovering of basic relationships. Today psychiatry tends to be reduced to pharmaceuticals, or genetics. This is how problems are dealt with. I still believe that the way to solve these problems is through analysis, dialog.”

So for him Freud and Marx were not dead? “I have many criticisms of Freud, but his work is important to me. With Marx, it’s more complicated. He was brilliant in his analysis of society and his anticipation of how society needed to be changed. However, those who followed Marx and applied his work left out the unconscious element. They focused only on a material transformation and did not consider the need to change the inner life. This has been the cause of many disasters.

“The problems are the same today, but they are posed in a different manner. I oppose society and the ways in which people act. I propose change, I seek change. The notion of utopia is missing today. It’s more complicated. But the idea is not dead.”

When I asked about contemporary Italian filmmaking, he said he felt it was “looking for its identity.” The majority of Italian films are done in a *commedia* style. “In the past, though, this style was accompanied by social satire. Today it doesn’t have this capacity. It’s lighter, it has less strength.”

His influences when he began making films? “More Antonioni than Fellini. There were the surreal, anti-bourgeois films of Buñuel, the French realists, like Renoir. I wasn’t so enamored of the French New Wave, although I liked them later.”

On the present political situation in Italy, he commented: “I’m not an expert on politics. I think a new idea of politics is coming about. The various parties look like each other. The Left has progressively lost its specific identity. A so-called left-wing party is governing. Another so-called extreme left party is linked to the past, not to the future. I think society is changing more quickly than the parties. What distinguishes the

parties are slightly different attitudes toward administering the state, not visions of changing society.”

The 1997 Toronto film festival screened French director Bruno Dumont’s first feature film, *La vie de Jésus* (*The Life of Jesus*), about a group of small-town youth in a northern French town. I thought the film was unusual in its sincerity and its striving for some kind of aesthetic and emotional purity. I spoke to Dumont who said he felt that “our culture, our civilization, has failed politically, socially, morally.” One can proceed in all sorts of directions from that generally correct observation, and it was obvious that we did not see eye-to-eye about its political implications.

It’s possible that I overpraised *The Life of Jesus*. There was perhaps an element of wishful thinking. One would like to see the best in people and to encourage interesting work. In any event, Dumont’s second film, *L’humanité*, is very weak, in my view.

Nearly three hours in length, the film follows Pharaon de Winter, a small-town French policeman, as he pursues the investigation of the brutal rape and murder of an 11-year-old girl. De Winter (named after his grandfather, a portrait painter of the realist school) lives with his mother in a working class street. He has a thing for his neighbor, Domino, but the young woman has a strong sexual relationship with Joseph, a crude and backward bus driver.

Pharaon has an extraordinary capacity for empathy. He feels everyone’s pain. Rejected, humiliated, thwarted, he pursues his friendship with Domino and Joseph and his inquiries into a crime that stuns him. How can such an awful thing take place? Pharaon’s sincerity is almost superhuman. Everyone else falls short, by contrast. When a strike breaks out at Domino’s factory, Pharaon stands up to the strikers outside city hall. “We’re not very courageous,” Domino says afterward. When Joseph is arrested for the crime, Pharaon kisses him, and, in the final shot, wears handcuffs.

It’s all a little much, at times almost laughable. A local cop as a Christ figure! The filmmaker’s decision to make his hero a policeman appears like something of a provocation aimed at the French Left. *L’humanité*, after all, is not only the name of a film, it’s the name of a newspaper, the daily newspaper of the French Communist Party. I would say this is something less than a coincidence. Dumont is obviously hostile to the official “left” in France. One can sympathize with that, but again, from what point of view is that particular morass being criticized?

One can’t help recall the notorious comments made in the late 1960s by Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of Dumont’s inspirations and an obvious influence in this film, that he had more sympathy for the policemen, sons of peasants, than for the radical students fighting them in the streets. With Pasolini, this was something of an aberration. One fears Dumont has turned it into a principle. His attitude toward the workers in the factory is also rather hostile.

At the film festival’s press conference on European cinema, Dumont spoke somewhat pompously in favor of “truth” and “authenticity” and remarked that it was “the individual who counts.” This is pretty thin gruel as a world outlook. All sorts of people would agree with those points, some of them not very pleasant.

*L’humanité* is a highly self-conscious film. It strives for simplicity and ordinariness with a *vengeance*. If an artist depicts elementary human needs and shows how difficult, ultimately impossible, they are to satisfy under existing conditions, that’s one thing. Or if he or she opposes the directness of the ordinary person to the hypocrisy and dishonesty of those in the higher echelons of society. There are elements of protest and dissatisfaction in such choices. But Dumont makes a fetish out of Pharaon’s simplicity, without convincing us that anything spiritual and uplifting lies behind it. Everything is done here in a rather self-satisfied, false and inflated fashion. One can’t help but feel that for Dumont, unhappily, the portrait of De Winter, who suffers in isolation for mankind’s sins, is something of a self-portrait. These were not the

methods or aims of Pasolini, Bresson and Rossellini, the artists he admires.

My sense is that the filmmaker is entirely at a loss in the face of the present political and social situation in France and what he takes to be the deplorable moral state of the mass of the population. Disgusted, legitimately, by the “left” parties and the trade unions, he is groping about for a more “spiritual” solution. Sometimes, however, there is no substitute for first of all studying and looking into the history of trends and events. It's difficult to produce a coherent and convincing work if you haven't begun to grasp the ABCs of social life.



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