

2000 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 5

A French film of a different sort

An interview with Claire Devers, director of *The Thief of St. Lubin*

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France is one of the relatively few countries whose film industry continues to produce in the face of Hollywood domination of the world's cinemas. Unfortunately, all too many of the works currently made by the art cinema in France are studies of the self-involved and self-satisfied French middle class executed in a generally self-involved and self-satisfied manner. There can hardly be anything more painful to watch.

The Thief of St. Lubin belongs in a different category. It tells the story of woman (played by Dominique Blanc), a part-time worker unable to get serious help from government agencies, who steals meat to ensure that her children have sufficient protein in their diet. A sympathetic female judge acquits her, citing a French legal precedent from the early 1900s (established in response to the theft of bread by the poor) according to which a “state of necessity” overrides laws against stealing. The right-wing media make a fuss about the decision and an appeal is launched.

The “thief,” when we first see her, has obviously just cast a vote for the ultra-right National Front in an election. She tells her friends, without spelling out what she's done, that perhaps the politicians will listen to the people “if we shock them.” Once the details of her case become known the NF publishes a demagogic leaflet defending her. The woman visits their office. The local party boss starts inveighing against the “darkies” who are living off the fat of the land while honest French people are forced to steal. The woman objects, she knows that where she lives “the Moroccans are just as badly off” as everybody else. The racism turns her stomach. “I don't think my life is tough because of the Turks and Arabs,” she tells him, turning angry. “It's sick!” She leaves and starts pulling the leaflets out of mailboxes.

Claire Devers (born 1955 in Paris) has directed a number of films for cinema and television, including *Chimera* (1989), *Max and Jeremy* (1992), *Le crime de M. Stil* (1995) and *Mylène* (1996). She is unassuming and intelligent, a breath of fresh air.

David Walsh: To begin with, what about the origin of the idea for the film?

Claire Devers: It was part of a series produced for the Arte television network in France. The series was directed by Pierre Chevalier, who is a very unusual and particular individual. He's always seeking to get filmmakers to come work for Arte. Of course he can't pay very much. He asks a number of directors to work on the same theme, to give their responses. We were six directors, primarily from the cinema.

The theme was “The Left and the Right,” a theme concerning the present political context in France. We all belonged to the group of filmmakers who signed a petition several years ago supporting the “undocumented” [immigrants] (“les sans-papiers”). We met Pierre Chevalier and he wanted us to talk once again about politics, to return to a political cinema in France, and to work on this theme of “Left and Right.”

We talked a great deal with him, we met at his place. And he decided to

ask us to make political films. For a long time this sort of cinema has no longer existed in France. And I was a bit excited, and a bit frightened at the same time. Because I didn't know where I stood on the political terrain, where I was going. Or even if everyone had his or her own ideas about politics, it had been a long time since anyone had tackled that in cinema.

We all had to discuss the “Left and Right,” but each filmmaker was assigned a particular cinema genre—thriller, comedy, dramatic comedy. I was given the thriller (“policier”) because of *Max and Jeremy*, because of my other films. At the same time we were given carte blanche, we could do what we wanted. It was a bit of a joke, the “thriller” category.

The thriller genre suggested to me something to do with the law. I came up with the idea of a trial. I wanted to discuss the law, the concept of justice, how the law applies. In my opinion justice is related to the living. Law, to be just, has to be related to the living.

DW: I'm interested in the “state of necessity” and the history of that.

CD: The “state of necessity” has to do with a right that emerged in France at the beginning of the twentieth century. There was a judge.... I knew nothing about this, I had never set foot in a court.... The film is based on a news item I'd read. The project reminded me of this news story.

In real life the woman stole meat. Another name for the “state of necessity” is the “right to bread.” There was a trial at the beginning of the twentieth century in France that attracted an enormous amount of attention. The judge evoked the “state of necessity” and the “right to bread” if the family or the life of the individual is in danger because they have nothing to eat.

This “state of necessity” emerges from a contradiction, a moral dilemma. The person on trial faces the problem that he or she knows it is wrong to steal, but at the same time has to provide bread to his or her children to survive. There's a contradiction between what is necessary and the law.

It's a very well-known legal decision. The thief in the original case, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was acquitted. There was an appeal, but many of the politicians of the day intervened in this case, and the acquittal was upheld. It was a famous case.

In the case on which I based my film, at the end of the twentieth century, no one intervened to support this woman. She was ultimately found guilty.

The first judge in her case brought the “state of necessity” up to date. The important thing, the judge said, is that one is able to eat, and she added that today it is not merely a question of having bread; today, we know, that to bring up a child decently he or she must have meat, shellfish, so many calories, etc. The woman found herself in a situation where she couldn't provide that. The news item revealed the difference in

wealth that is growing more and more in France.

What was important for me was the personality of the “thief,” someone I partially invented, a woman who was completely ordinary, integrated [into the society], anonymous. She was not unemployed, she was not one of the homeless, not excluded, she was *in* the society. She normally posed no problems to the society. She was the sort of person who is never discussed, never treated in any statistic, never treated by politics. She represented the “deep French” [like “Middle America”?]. She’s like everybody else.

In France currently there are six million women raising children on an allowance of 4,000 francs [approximately \$US 700] per month. No one talks about that.

DW: Do you think that it’s significant that a legal precedent established one hundred years ago must be used at the end of the century—what does that say about the century and the country?

CD: That nothing has changed.

DW: All right, that’s a simple answer.

CD: And that we must be constantly on alert, and in an attitude of resistance. If I consider my own political thinking, where I was situated, I thought the fact that the Left was in power, that Mitterrand was in power.... “Well, it’s over, now everything is going to go well.” But it’s never like that. We must maintain an attitude of vigilance, of criticism. There are always changes in the relationship of forces, shifts that take place. I think the natural tendency is always toward regression. The movements for justice, liberation, equality are always struggles.

I think contemporary society is in the process of undergoing enormous changes, there are destabilizing tendencies and each time they cause suffering for the most vulnerable layers of society, those in the most fragile condition, like women and children.

DW: The other side of the question, which you mentioned, is the nonintervention of the politicians today. This is not the era of the Dreyfus affair. The official political world has moved to the right.

CD: Even if in France we have the Socialist Party in power, and these politicians know that they have to be attentive to what the voters think. The political problem always boils down to the same, capturing power and the administration of that power. When there is a democratic government of the Left, we have to create minorities to counterbalance those in power, centers of opposition. The Right is incapable of doing that. That’s not their function, that’s not their tradition. The only thing the Right wants to do is gain power again. They don’t play a role of opposition, or counterbalance. That’s why when the Left is in power the political debate loses all interest, the Right is unable to maintain a serious political debate.

What are we seeing in Europe, the only solution for the extreme Right is to organize a coup d’état. Like in Austria. That’s one more reason why when a Left government is in power we have to create a counterbalance, other movements aware of the inequality in society.

DW: In another interview you stated that this fictional woman’s vote for the National Front was not a protest vote. Could you explain?

CD: Of course I invented her voting for the National Front. But when I was working over the actual news item two things jumped out at me. First, what the judge said, about what people need to eat and the way she brought the legal precedent up to date. And, secondly, the quantity of the meat stolen. It was an enormous amount, 1,500 francs worth, kilos and kilos of meat. And I said to myself, this woman could never have eaten all that.

And I felt that there was, in a sense, a violence and practically a destructive urge that expressed itself in this action, it was not simply the desire to feed her children. A real violence, a hatred. I asked myself how did this sort of violence express itself politically at this point, and how a woman like this, without a political outlook, might be attracted by the party of the extreme right in France. And how the essential political phenomenon of recent years in Europe has been the reemergence of the

extreme right, and I knew that when Pierre had posed the problem of the Left and the Right that I wanted to treat this question.

It is impossible for someone of my generation to understand how the far right could come back. It intrigued me.

I think that in every European country there is perhaps 4 or 5 percent of the population who belong to these far-right organizations. There is always this little nucleus, hard-core, racist. But in certain elections it grows to 15, 20, 18, 22 percent. We know that there is the nucleus, but who are these people who suddenly vote for the far right?

DW: First of all, they emerge because the Socialist Party and the Communist Party are worthless parties. This is a problem everywhere.

CD: Yes, but I think there is also a tendency for these people to hand off responsibility to someone else, to some party, who can react in their name. They want someone else to take responsibility for the violence they feel inside and are not able to express.

I find it disturbing.... I don’t understand why when the CP vote goes down, the fascist vote goes up. These are two quite distinct tendencies. I don’t understand the relationship, but it’s there, I refuse to see it. I don’t see how the thinking can be the same.

DW: Here we have what we call the “working poor,” and the 40 million people without health insurance, and a massive gap between the rich and everyone else. When I returned from France in 1995, after covering the strikes, I told people here about the social benefits and they said it sounded like paradise. We have the same essential political problem, a political vacuum, with no way for people to articulate their frustration, anger. In this country, obviously, you have a more restricted political life, with two virtually identical parties and so forth.

I should apologize, I never said to begin with that I liked the film very much. But nobody here is making films about this subject.

CD: Not in France either.

DW: Why?

CD: I watched the six films in this series. I know the other directors. We all participated in the movement for the “undocumented,” we all signed the petition. *Nadia* [*Nadia and the Hippos* (1999), directed by Dominique Cabrera] speaks about the strikes, but in a manner I would describe as personal, an idyllic vision. The film was restricted to the strikes. And an intimate look. I was the only one—unconsciously, because I thought everyone would do this—to take on the problem, who is someone of the Left, who is someone of the Right? That still exists for me. It’s important to maintain that line, it’s a means of thinking, of reflecting.

Among a lot of the filmmakers, especially the men—I don’t know why ... the current thing to say is, “Oh, politics, that doesn’t exist any more. Left and right is the same. The only way to get out of the situation is to take the money.” That’s not a criticism. Very few people think that politics are important for a society. It’s very sad and it worries me that no one wants to take a position.

DW: Your film did.

CD: But I would love it if the six films spoke together. Even if they disagreed, if they had confrontations. Something more energetic.

There are numerous young filmmakers who say, “Politics is the 1960s, the 1970s, we don’t belong to that at all. We’re interested only in the private, the individual.” For me that’s the discourse of the right-wing. They are taking a political side, accepting this sort of argument.

DW: And what is the artistic result? It’s not good either.

CD: Yes! Yes.

DW: I think most French films are not good at the moment.

CD: For example, whose films?

DW: No names! But there’s no spontaneity. People who have an artistic recipe book, but no real passion. They want careers, images.

CD: I agree with you. It’s often very narcissistic. They think that their sincerity is enough. We need the world too in cinema.

DW: Is it possible to be serious about social life and artistic creation? Or

I could put it the other way, is it possible not to be serious about social life and artistic creation?

CD: On this particular film I didn't work in my normal fashion. Usually in my previous work I've used a metaphorical approach. Perhaps because I didn't know anything before about the law I felt the need to be very precise. I adopted a very exact, "short" manner. In this case I felt the need to be very minimalist, pure [*épurée*]. Normally I work very different. I wanted to form a style appropriate to the subject.

For me making a film is an ethical act.

DW: Are there other filmmakers you admire?

CD: In France? Not too many. I think it's a little dry right now. If I like one or two films a year I am happy. You have to watch a lot of movies to come up with two.

DW: Why do you make films?

CD: Because I don't know how to write. [*laughter*] When I first found myself on the set I was relatively old. I had already completed my studies, I became a journalist. Then I prepared for the exams for film school. The first time I found myself on the set I felt that I belonged.

DW: I want to raise the question of censorship and attacks on the right to artistic expression. We've launched a campaign in defense of Deepa Mehta, the Indian-born filmmaker, whose set was attacked by Hindu fundamentalists.

CD: We are at a moment when people not only feel violently, they act on it. This is serious. There is a return to something from the past. People have always used language to express violence, but now at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century there is some kind of historical regression. This is Hindu extremism? That exists too? The filmmaker belongs to the Hindu community? Or is she an outsider?

DW: She belongs to the community, but she lives outside the country. She made a film called *Fire* against which these same forces organized protests.

CD: In France we haven't heard anything about this.

The cinema milieu in France is completely depoliticized.

DW: It's temporary. That's true here too.

CD: The point is not to make political cinema, but to make cinema with some values.... I think we are impoverishing ourselves. In general, I think the French cinema is deteriorating.

DW: It's an international crisis.

CD: It's difficult to make films that go against that. We have the scripts, but it's difficult to find the money.

DW: The present situation is difficult for millions of people, but it will find reflection in films. It must.

CD: You think it must.



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