

An interview with Paul Cox, director of *Innocence*: "Filmmakers have a duty to speak out against the injustices in the world"

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Filmmaker Paul Cox spoke with the World Socialist Web Site during a recent visit to Sydney for the Australian release of Innocence, his latest film. Born in Holland in 1940, Cox immigrated to Australia where he became a photographer and then, in the early 1970s, a filmmaker. Since then he has produced 18 features and several documentaries, including Man of Flowers (1983), My First Wife (1984), Vincent: The Life and Death of Vincent Van Gogh (1987), Island (1989), A Woman's Tale (1991), Exile (1994) and Lust and Revenge (1996).

Innocence, which deals with the social and personal complications produced when two over 70-year-olds meet and fall in love, has already won several prestigious European, North American and Australian film awards. Cox spoke about the new film and some of the difficulties and responsibilities confronting filmmakers today. He is currently involved in editing a film about Vaslav Nijinsky, the great Russian dancer.

Richard Phillips: Before making films you were a photographer. How did you make that transition and why?

Paul Cox: I was doing quite OK as a photographer but I was also doing a little bit of writing and had this strange hobby making Super 8 movies.

I still maintain, by the way, that if you really want to do anything seriously you should do it as a hobby because as soon as it becomes a profession you come under all sorts of pressures and demands for you to compromise. This seems to be the way the world operates.

So in my stubbornness and ignorance I moved into filmmaking. I was teaching photography at Prahran College in Melbourne at the time and my department was given a grant to develop a cinema department. Because I'd made some silly little films, and there was nobody else to teach it, they gave me the job.

Within six months I'd become an expert because I had to stay one step ahead of the students. I knew very little but every week I brought people in from the industry and twice a week we had film appreciation classes and watched all the classics. I had some background because of my father, but it never ignited any passion in me until I started to teach it.

As it turned out I learnt more than any of the students and suddenly I was hooked. It was as simple as that. I had no particular desire to make feature films but discovered it was the ideal way of expressing myself and it took over my life. And in another way it was like a curse that ruined my life.

RP: Ruined it?

PC: I make my films very much as a way of living. The film actually takes over my life and there is very little room for anything else. When I look at people living normal lives... for instance at night they say 'Goodnight' and they go to sleep. I can't do this. When I start making a film it becomes everything, it consumes me completely and generally I can't even sleep. This troubles me at times and it ruins a normal sort of existence but I suppose this is the price you have to pay.

Anyway I was always interested in music and poetry and writing and was quite successful as a photographer. It could have been a very good life but I never saw it as the end of the road. There was always something missing that I was looking for.

I still think that we have only scratched the surface with film. It is one of the great gifts to our time and up until World War II film still had an element of growth, but then it became a product and became part of the so-called consumer society. It consumed all of us and fell totally into the hands of the enemy in America, which is Hollywood. It is now almost completely in the hands of the capitalists, the exploiters.

We are not talking about the export of chicken wings or hamburgers but something that affects all our lives—the dreams of our children, the future of our children—and now it is in the hands of the American Dream, which is not much of a dream. Everywhere, all around the world, 95 percent of the material screened is American; a second-rate product that we are all forced to swallow. This is the big shame of film today.

If you go to an American university today and ask the students any question about the history of film they know nothing. They have never heard of Buñuel. Russian cinema, what was that? The Russians, did they make films? To me this is the real cinema, the cinema that gave me [Sergei] Paradzhanov. They know nothing about film and yet this is the country that actually controls the medium and makes billions while half the population is immensely poor.

Some people have said to me that because I have such strong views why don't I make political films but I regard my films as extremely political. My films deal with the human condition and to do that is a great political act.

Because film is in the hands of capital, the people that control it don't want to know about the human condition. As far as they're concerned there is no time to think about why we are here, where we are travelling and so on. That doesn't consume properly. So I think my films are extremely political because they explore the human condition.

When I look at the power of the film corporations it gets me really mad. Why should I sit in planes, whether they are from Air China to Pakistan Airways, and always see American films? These countries have important film industries. Why is this? Is it because if you buy a plane you have to buy American films with it? These are big questions but when I ask this I'm ignored or they think I'm half mad and shouldn't say such things.

And look at what has happened to Eastern Europe cinema. Who owns all the cinemas now in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland? America. Who is buying up the cinemas in China? The American movie companies. And with the closure of the indigenous film industry goes an enormous and incredibly developed graphics industry. The film posters made by the Poles were magnificent, but that is now finished too. So there is a lot that has to be answered for. It is a great pity.

You can make the most beautiful film on earth if you don't follow the American movie making rules. So why do we have to put up with the rubbish that the big corporations churn out, whose films seem to get automatic worldwide release? For me or other filmmakers to get worldwide release you have to go through a studio where they clip your wings continuously and you can never fly.

RP: Were you influenced by any of the great film classics made in America?

PC: Not really. I didn't see that many. Films that influenced me deeply were *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* [Paradzhanov] for instance, and the early Bergman films. There was an early Austrian film that I saw a long time ago, I think it was called *No More Escaping*. I can't remember who made it but it had a real effect on me.

As you probably know I'm editing at the moment and I work late into the night. Sometimes I take an hour off and turn on the television. There is a program called *Cops*. It is one of these amazing US shows where they go with the police to trouble spots—you've probably seen it. They always arrive at a place of enormous despair and are confronted by people that are either drugged out of their brains, have no money and are living in the most awful conditions. They never show a normal family, as we know it.

I'm deeply angered by what is going on in America. Look at this idiot Bush, who is now becoming president. It is appalling. He talks about god but this is the guy who kills three people every month—generally blacks or Hispanics. There is all this hypocritical righteousness about him and yet he wants to reverse the gun laws, even the law that you couldn't have concealed weapons.

RP: And this is a presidency won on the basis of vote rigging and all sorts of political chicanery.

PC: Yes that's right. All this just drives me crazy when I really think about it. His father is CIA. Cheney is CIA. It's all CIA. We seem to be heading back to the Cold War, the 1960s, or maybe worse. I would like to ask them, what do you think life is?

But coming back to this *Cops* program, the heart of America is very sick and very poor and this is the country that actually owns the medium I work in. So I think we, as filmmakers, have an enormous responsibility. Americans have established film as something we cannot live without but all those in the medium have a staggering responsibility because we have to supply an antidote to all the rubbish we are surrounded with.

The great irony is that when I go to the US with a film like *Innocence* people congratulate me. They are enthusiastic and there's lots of clapping, some even weep in my arms about the film, but I always get quite angry during the Question and Answer sessions.

At San Francisco I said what is the big deal here, it's almost impossible for me to make films in the US. I have to fight like mad to make a film and you clap me and then you go back and watch, or least put up with, 102 television channels of garbage. I said to the audience what kind of country are you living in which allows or tolerates this.

RP: Are there any filmmakers in America that you think are attempting to deal seriously with some of these issues?

PC: People talk about the Coen brothers, they're OK, at least they're thinking. I've met them, and other people, but I think a lot of their work is very cruel. Tarantino to me is an unbelievable imitator and yet his work is presented as great stuff. At least when I grew up I could look forward to the next Bergman film or serious movies by other great filmmakers. Now there is virtually nothing. Kieslowski, the last great poet of the cinema, is dead and Tarkovsky is gone. Who's left and what is there to look forward to?

I'm certainly not looking forward to the next Tarantino film. He has done a lot of damage to a lot of people with his crappy films. A lot of young people think *Pulp Fiction* is really great but to me it is a terrible film and has pushed back cinema for many, many years. There are a lot of imitators at work there.

So I think my filmmaking is very political. I am a dedicated socialist and actually consider myself a communist in the true sense. I believe it [the USSR] had a lot of good things going for it. Look at the films they were making and compare what is happening in Russia today. I want a society where there is none of that rampant poverty. I can't stand all this ridiculous celebration of wealth, profit making and consumerism. It really disturbs me.

Most people in capitalist society use their talents to make money but I think it is our duty to look after our fellow man. There might be a lot of very good filmmakers out there with talent and so on but many get the smell of money in their nostrils and that's what they devote their lives to.

RP: Can we talk about *Innocence*, which I liked very much, and how you developed the idea for it and why?

PC: I think these things select you. I didn't go out and think this is what I have to do, it sort of happened. The title and the subject took me by surprise. It might have been a little glimpse of two elderly people crossing the road holding hands. Perhaps that is what it was but images like that eat away in your brain and haunt you in dreams and then suddenly something pops out. I don't really understand the process myself.

RP: When did you begin writing the script?

PC: I wrote it in about three weeks while I was making a 3-D IMAX film in Canada. For the first time in my life I had a caravan at the shoot with a shower and bedroom, what the big-time directors always get. I generally live in a rubber band factory where everything is done on a shoestring, so I had 100 on the crew, an enormous grip department and lighting laid on. It was strange but most of the time nothing worked. The camera always had to be repaired and the weather was bad so I had plenty of time and decided to use it properly and wrote the script for *Innocence*. It was quite easy and came almost automatically.

I wanted to sum up all the subjects I've touched upon in other films but needed the right vehicle. It probably was the flash of people holding hands crossing the road that did it and then it seemed to write itself. Of course getting the money is always difficult but I got some private money and put every cent of my own into it.

Sometimes I'm accused of making too many films and complaining all the time about the difficulties, but these people have no idea what I have to go through. I live a very simple life and if I have anything it goes into my work.

RP: Where were these accusations coming from?

PC: People in the Australian film industry. This is why I left Australia and I'm not based here anymore. It is easier for me to work overseas. When I want to make a film here I still get asked to produce a track record in order to get finance, so I am not interested in that anymore. Even for *Innocence* I couldn't get money here at first. A little bit of money came later but I had to put a lot of my own money into it.

RP: *Innocence* is at odds with the usual approach of films that portray old people as figures of myth or pity.

PC: Yes, and it had none of the ingredients that supposedly make up a good film. There have been some professional scriptwriters brought out here from America to give classes for young filmmakers. They talk about how you build up your script to a crescendo, how you develop subplots, and all sorts of other mechanical rules. This is nonsense.

Innocence doesn't have a single one of the ingredients that are needed for a supposedly successful film. There is no car crash, there are no special effects and there is no hot sex or any of the things that the marketing people use to sell films these days. And yet already it has been commercially successful and will be released theatrically in most countries. There will even be a theatrical release in Japan and Russia. I've never had this before. Usually my films are sold to television channels that no one looks at.

So why is this so successful? I think because it's very honest, and there is an enormous need in people to be confronted with something that

reminds them of their lives and the way they are ageing and what we do with our lives. Most filmmakers generally ignore these fundamentally important questions.

The film's success, I have to admit, has taken me by surprise and when it first dawned on me I plunged into a very deep depression. For a few months I went very black. It is probably hard to understand this but when a film of mine is rejected I can live with it, or at least this has been the normal process. When the opposite happened it hit me hard.

It's a great irony but I have no sense of victory or "I told you so", it just saddened me. I'm all right now but it really hit me at the time, particularly the glowing critical responses in the States. I would sit there thinking what the hell are you doing?

I've had offers in the past to do a Hollywood film, and I did this once, or at least it wasn't Hollywood but it was money and big stars. David Wenham was very good in it and we had Peter O'Toole, Kris Kristofferson, Derek Jacobi and Sam Neill. We made a magnificent film—*The Story of Father Damien*—and the producers screwed it up completely. We worked on the film for two years and lived with the lepers of Kalaupapa [in Hawaii], they were amazing people and I wrote extra parts for them, but then the producers told me that there were too many lepers in the film. Can you believe it, and this was a film about leprosy!

I found myself in a war zone that was so ugly, but they discovered that I was as tenacious and stubborn as anybody in the book. I was sacked, together with my people, and then there was a great uprising in which the patients, the lepers, chased the producer off the island. He had to flee with the American unions. There were guns and knives. I've written a book about it but it can't be published, it's like a thriller. Then I was called back to finish the film and it was all supposed to be forgiven, but it wasn't. I spent two or three months editing it in Brussels and we had a marvelous film but then I was told that they were going to cut it again and they re-cut it like a commercial film. The long shots, a sweeping broad brush over this incredible landscape was chopped up into little pieces. How these people could be so stupid, ignorant and greedy is hard to fathom but they thought it would be commercially successful if they cut it.

They had a premiere and the whole thing flopped so they asked me to redo it the way it was but by then I'd spent all the money I'd made on court cases. I tried to stop the destruction of the negative and there has been some editing but they've screwed up this film completely. To have full say in these sort of films is virtually impossible and it's just all too upsetting.

This whole business really threw me but this is what most filmmakers—or at least the commercial ones—put up with all the time. They get involved in all this and then produce rubbish. The money that some of them make out of the big blockbusters is ridiculous. How much money do you need in your life? Will they ever spend it?

RP: *Innocence* deals with some of the themes you touched on in *A Woman's Tale* with Sheila Florance. Could you explain something about making that film?

PC: I am a very loyal person and if I find this quality in others it is loyalty until death do us part. I had a terrific friendship with Sheila Florance. In fact she acted in my very first film, and we always used to joke that I would make her a star. When I heard suddenly that she was dying of cancer I visited her immediately. There was no sentimentality or anything on her part—she was an incredible woman—but she said jokingly, "There is still time to turn me into a star, but let's be quick."

I went home and spent three days and three nights writing the script and then with Barry Dickins and Sheila we did another draft. She was given eight weeks to live and so we made *A Woman's Tale* with this hanging over us. This motivated us, of course, but Sheila had a degree of greatness about her. She was a very powerful woman.

It was an amazing challenge to make a film about life, in the face of death. To get the money of course was impossible and I had to pawn everything I had. People have asked me how we did it but to some extent

we were idiotically courageous in taking this risk. Sheila and I joked all the time. I would say to Sheila, "Please don't die on me or you'll kill me". She would reply, "Don't worry I'll be a good girl."

The film won an enormous response around the world and still does. It is still being screened in Japan, which is amazing. I don't know who got the money for it, but that's another very dirty business. At the time nobody wanted to know but we ploughed on and finished it and suddenly it is accepted. This saddened me as well. Why couldn't people trust me, why did I have to go through all this trauma? Nobody wanted to back the film. We had no insurance, in fact, after I completed the film I had to sell my house in a hurry otherwise I would have gone totally bankrupt.

RP: You mentioned before that you decided to leave Australia because of the difficulties you confronted making films here. When was that and has it changed?

PC: It was three or four years ago and I don't think it has changed all that much. Fox Studios is a new development but let's not call it a film industry. The only Australian films that have had an impact internationally are indigenous small pieces with something to say, not the imitation Hollywood films that they try to make here. What I do like, however, is that there is an enormous diversity of subject matter in what is being produced. This is interesting.

At the moment there are a lot young first-time filmmakers, who get three, four, even five million dollars to make a movie but some of them are totally incompetent. I've never had more than \$1 million here for a film and would never get it. We pay our actors very well, and all the crew and we don't waste things, but I look at other films and wonder where it all goes. A lot of it goes flying above the line.

RP: You made a film about Vincent van Gogh in 1987 and are now making one about Nijinsky. Could you explain why you chose these artists?

PC: If I think about it logically it's perhaps a little insane but I didn't consciously select Vincent van Gogh, it sort of chose me. I remember going to the museum in Holland with my mother and she stood looking at a self-portrait of Vincent. She spoke about the grief in his eyes and then my dear mother began to weep looking at this painting. This was enough for me to decide that I would make this film in homage to my mother's reaction to the painting. It was so powerful.

With Nijinsky, years ago I heard some bits of his diary being read by Paul Scofield on the radio. I heard a voice in another room—it was the radio but I didn't know where it came from at the time—"You will understand me when you see me dance." I went into the room and I listened more. There were so many similarities between Van Gogh and Nijinsky in the sense that both minds are on the edge, and, in terms of our society and civilisation, mad. The sanity that came from both minds when they talked about that white light and about love is staggering and it moves me every time I am confronted with it.

The Nijinsky film has been a very difficult thing to do but out of this enormous puzzle I can now see the road. I still have six months to go and have been working on it day and night. It has been such an obsession and some people accuse me of being insane to do it. A certain degree of madness does set in and at times you feel that you have to be careful not to go over the edge. At the same time this work also keeps me sane.

After being plunged so deeply into the beauty of Nijinsky and his work it is such a shock to come back to the so-called real world or to try and logically digest the news everyday. One night I was working late at night, all hyped up from the editing, and I edit the old fashioned way, and I turned on the television to calm down and what comes on are all these women cheering. The camera turns and there is a woman sitting on a chair and the audience is wildly clapping because she had lost 10 kilos. This is completely crazy and I begin asking myself whether I am living in the real world or a mad house. And yet here I am working on something that it is so beautiful and much more sane than anything you can imagine.

RP: What can film do to cultivate a socially progressive climate? Is that how you approach your work?

PC: I don't see my work exactly in this way but I suppose deep down something like that is happening. I know that people will come out of *Innocence* and realise that they haven't been bored or entertained as they normally are and will somehow feel recharged and will want to phone someone they know to talk about it and to make human contact. This encourages me tremendously.

If you try to treat the human condition in any depth then, like it or not, you get involved in a political process and you have to be prepared for all the usual battles. I was an angry young man but now I've become a very angry old man and my attitude now is that if you have a platform then it is your duty to speak out about the injustices in the world.



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