

A serious film requires a serious social viewpoint

Intimacy, directed by Patrice Chéreau

David Walsh
19 December 2001

Intimacy, directed by Patrice Chéreau, written by Chéreau and Anne-Louise Trividic, based on stories by Hanif Kureishi

Intimacy has earned a reputation for itself largely because of its scenes of explicit sexual activity. They take place in a wretched South London flat, between a recently divorced bartender, Jay (Mark Rylance), and a housewife and part-time actress, Claire (Kerry Fox). Jay and Claire, who meet rather anonymously and sordidly once a week, apparently know nothing about each other's life. Claire's husband Andy (Timothy Spall), a taxi-driver, gradually becomes aware of the affair only after Jay tracks her down to a theater in the basement of a pub.

The film's director and co-writer, Patrice Chéreau, primarily known for his work in the French theater, defends the sex sequences (comprising almost a third of the film) on the convincing grounds that "Because the film is called *Intimacy*, you have to show intimate things."

A number of French films in recent years have crossed the boundary of what has hitherto been considered acceptable in terms of depicting sexuality in the non-pornographic cinema. Chéreau's film belongs in a somewhat different category, however, than the work of the absurd Catherine Breillat (*Romance, Une vraie jeune fille*), the exploitative *Baise-moi* (Coralie Trinh Thi, Virginie Despentes) and some of the others (*Une Liaison Pornographique*, etc). *Intimacy*, at least at first glance, has a more serious air about it. However, many of the same questions arise.

It is questionable, in the first place, what's gained by the filming of sex scenes in any work. Such as it is, anything in *Intimacy*, for example, that illuminates the characters' inner lives occurs prior to the sexual acts: the desperation, loneliness, ferocity, etc. It wasn't solely prudishness or fear of the censor that made a filmmaker in another day and age cut to a shot of the night table or window curtains blowing in the breeze at the critical moment. Such discretion also reflected a certain degree of understanding about art and life.

Presumably the film audience not out for titillation is interested in the *sociological* and the *psychological*, as opposed to the *physiological*. Unless there is some distinctly abnormal trait to be revealed—sadism, masochism or whatever—sexuality (and it is relatively ordinary in this film) doesn't as a rule tell us all that much.

This is not, of course, an argument for a return to Victorian moral values in art; but sexual life needs to be treated, as all other phenomena, with some degree of artistic proportion. Those who go around representing sexuality as though it had just been invented are largely wasting our time. And, perhaps more to the point, diverting themselves from tackling more pressing problems.

Given the general intellectual climate and having had the benefit of seeing the rest of his film, one can be excused for thinking that Chéreau's decision to concentrate on the sexual results chiefly from the fact that he doesn't have much to say. Whatever serious veneer the film may possess, in the end, the adulterous trysts seem included primarily to convince the critic and spectator that the filmmaker is grappling with the most basic and important questions of life. But he is not, not even remotely.

To a large extent, the sexual scenes get in the way. One tries to make something of the film around them and in spite of them. A vain undertaking. At his press conference at the Berlin film festival Chéreau pleaded with the journalists "to think about the film as a complete story and not just the sex scenes." Unfortunately, however, the film is anything but "a complete story" and the sex scenes are virtually the only ones with a certain coherent and logical organization—more or less imposed by human biology—in the entire work. If proof didn't otherwise exist that it is more or less impossible to make a serious art work without a serious social viewpoint, Chéreau's film would constitute such proof.

Its dramatic weaknesses and implausibilities are innumerable. Rylance as Jay, with his tendency to recede from every line and gesture as though slightly embarrassed,

is irritating. Anyway, what is he doing in this filthy dump of a house, this man who led a respectable middle class existence and still earns a good deal of money in a fashionable bar? It's all done principally for effect. And the various performers might as well be in different films, particularly the amiable, talkative Spall (a performer in a number of Mike Leigh films), as the betrayed husband, and Rylance. They have a number of scenes together that make one wince. Marianne Faithfull as a friend of Claire's is simple bizarre. And what is the purpose of the gay French bartender, other than to annoy us with his know-it-all expression?

The film is amateurishly done, unconvincing and makes almost no emotional impact.

Intimacy suffers from the current French petty bourgeois malady: it obstinately refuses to draw any links between the isolated, unhappy and alienated couple and the larger world. As we have noted before, making such connections is nearly taboo in French cinema at present. Superficially, the film bears a resemblance to Leigh's *Naked*. But that film, whatever its limitations, set out to document the consequences of definite policies carried out by Thatcher and capture the "structure of feeling" of a particular historical moment. There is almost none of that here. The characters wander aimlessly about, spouting lines that are meant to be profound but mostly seem silly. The film is utterly lacking a sense of the historical.

What Chéreau is attempting to do can't be done, and he's not the first to try it, nor the most talented. He wants to take a serious view of a group of people and their most intimate relations without pronouncing any judgment, indeed resolutely rejecting any such judgment, on the society as a whole, or even attempting to make sense of social life. Sexual emotion has existed as long as the species, so too relations between and within the sexes; sexual relations, however, have assumed different *forms* depending on the development of the family and, ultimately, socioeconomic relations.

No one would dispute the existence of the sexual desperation represented in the film, but does its current "flowering" have anything to do with the state of the world, including the state of the family after several decades of extraordinary economic transformation? Chéreau can't be bothered with such matters. Instead he is given to meaningless utterances such as, "It is always easy to start a love story. It is hard to continue a love story." There is something deeply conservative about this particular middle class "artistic" type. And the world has more than its share of them at the moment. What is potentially earthshaking will never penetrate such a consciousness. It is too pleased with itself and far too narrow. The filmmaker has his little

Bohemian world, his set of "shocking" views that will never expand beyond a certain point, his status as a filmmaking "maverick," and that will always be it. Unhappily, the truly new at this point is more likely to appear in a journal devoted to global business or technology.

Far from adding to our understanding, for example, of the breakdown of the traditional family, Chéreau, as several critics have noted, seems somewhat appalled by that development. There is a distinctly moralizing and conformist streak to the film. Jay's non-married existence, as well as that of his drunken or drug-addicted friend, is a nightmare. The scenes of his previous married life seem almost blissful by comparison. Whatever vague claims the director makes about the sexuality in his film ("It is beautiful because it is life"), in truth, the coupling is made to seem repugnant and unsatisfying (which it needn't be, as a matter of fact, because even unhappy people can know moments of genuine pleasure; physiology has its own claims within certain limits).

Chéreau believes that by stripping his characters of their garments he is "getting down to the basics." In a limited sense this is true. Sexual emotion is an elementary fact of life. However, it always takes place under definite conditions. Chéreau ignores the more complex and rewarding question, the character of those definite conditions, in order to show us, in a banal and distorted fashion, that which we already know.

It should be simply noted in passing, without belaboring the fairly obvious point, that while the portrayal of all manner of sex acts is now permissible in contemporary filmmaking, genuine criticism of the existing social order and the suggestion that there might be an alternative are unofficially, but effectively proscribed.

The artists of our day principally differ from one another in the manner in which they avoid making a reckoning with the character of our epoch, including its specific social psychology, and the historical events that produced it: some do it through cheap romanticism and shallowness, some through open subservience to the status quo, some through the worship of art as the only supposedly "pure, uncorrupted" activity, others do it through rejecting the idea that history or objective truth has any meaning, still others through sex. There is not that much to choose between these means of evasion.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact