Director Carlos Reygadas at the Colombo film festival: But what is cinematic art?

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A number of films by Mexican filmmaker Carlos Reygadas, including *Light after Darkness* (*Post Tenebras Lux*, 2012), were screened at the International Film Festival of Colombo in September. The other works presented were *Japón* (2002), *Battle in Heaven* (2005) and *Silent Light* (2007). Reygadas (born 1971) visited Colombo during the event and was there to discuss his films after all the screenings. He also conducted a Master Class on filmmaking during the festival.

Overall, one observes in Reygadas' films a focus on the irrational behaviour of the protagonists whose ambiguity often requires the viewer to fill in the blanks and grasp the goings-on. Does this effort "pay off", or is the viewer sent on something of a wild goose chase?

His films often contain a mixture of the real and unreal, or past, present and future, hardly distinguished from one another. Therefore, the viewer has to make the effort to comprehend the meaning or "flow" of these films. Reygadas explains, "It's true there is no clear code to read it, whether this is the past or the future, or if it is imaginary or not; but it's supposed to be like that, and you only understand retrospectively". He has said, "For me the plot is a skeleton from which things are hung, and not the whole point of a film."

His latest film, *Light after Darkness*, begins with a lengthy shot of a toddler (Reygadas's own daughter) wandering around, along with horses, dogs and oxen. All of this is set against an evening sky in an abandoned football ground, in the middle of trees and a farm setting. The camera revolves, so the scenery goes round and round. The repeated circular motion and the unconscious creatures combine to create a kind of surrealistic image of the world. According to Reygadas, the viewer may enjoy this scene for its beauty and derive its connection to the ensuing drama, probably after the fact, as he or she wishes.

The child belongs to an urban, middle class family living on the farm. The husband and wife, even though the family seems to have all it needs economically, seem dissatisfied with life.

Reygadas uses a demonic animal figure that comes into the house in the middle of the night. One imagines this figure has some link to the unruly character of the males in particular depicted in the film. Throughout *Light After Darkness* men are depicted as dark, unclear characters.

A worker hired by the family for house renovation and such, an uncultured type, is driven to a gruesome suicide. His personal situation was in such a bad state that he has become an outcast. He admits he is a bad person, since he can't resist drinking, gambling and other evils, for reasons unknown to him—or to the viewers.

The viewer is compelled to wonder whether Reygadas is favourably contrasting unconscious beings, such as animals and infants, to thinking human beings, who apparently are the source of most of the evil in society. The dissatisfied human soul is the root of such evil. But then what is the source of this dissatisfied soul? The filmmaker seemingly does not want or care to answer or examine this question.

Here we encounter the distinct inability, or unwillingness, of the Mexican director to shed light on social conditions and how these affect people. Are there not macro world and historical forces working on relationships and the microcosmic psychic conditions of individuals? We learn almost nothing along these lines.

In the middle of the film, seemingly unconnected to the rest of the work, the director stages a rugby match. Reygadas indicates that he wanted to show how life goes on with all its difficulties like such a match. Is this helpful? It is not clear that the director has any particularly clear ideas that he wants to communicate. One might even conclude uncharitably that the obsession with the unconscious and irrational in such a case is largely the intellectual laziness of someone who either is overwhelmed by present realities or accommodates himself to them, or both.

Reygadas' previous feature film *Battle in Heaven*, centres on Marcos (Marcos Hernández), the middle-aged chauffeur for an army general in Mexico City. The poverty-stricken man and his wife kidnapped a baby for ransom, but the infant died unexpectedly. Marcos and his wealthy

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employer's daughter, Ana (Anapola Mushkadiz), who works as a prostitute apparently to pass the time, develop a sexual relationship and share secrets, including about the kidnapping. Marcos wants Ana to stop whoring and he eventually kills her, perhaps because he fears she will reveal the truth about the baby's death. He then seeks refuge in religious rituals while the police come after him. The film begins and ends with oral sex between Marcos and Ana, either real or imaginary.

As Reygadas indicates in interviews, his main aim in this film was to bring out the contradictory behaviour of a person with a guilty conscience, from the perspective of the individual himself. He told *Senses of Cinema*: "I think that somehow in life, if you have committed a terrible crime, or someone has died directly because of a crime you have committed, then somehow you must be doomed. At least there should be some dread. So, of course, there's always this weight upon us, upon Marcos—we're Marcos in the film. I feel it can only end badly from the beginning."

To create an abstract "guilty conscience" seems largely an empty effort. "Doomed" here, whatever Reygadas may think, has a religious connotation. Many of the truly criminal, including in Mexico, we might note, get away scot-free at present.

Images of a massive Mexican flag and army drills recur a number of times. However, it is difficult to establish a connection between these images and the main thread of the drama.

Reygadas' first feature film *Japón* was briefly reviewed by WSWS in 2003. The work revolves around an artist (Alejandro Ferretis) who goes to a remote part of Mexico to kill himself. He becomes emotionally attached to an elderly woman (Magdalena Flores). The woman's grasping nephew, just out of prison, claims her property and wants to dismantle her house and use its building stones for himself. The painter protests, but no one cares. The local population is portrayed as backward and cruel. Tragedy befalls nearly everyone here too.

The WSWS wrote in 2003: "The film has a number of striking or shocking images of nature, brutality, taboos of various kinds. … The filmmaker wants to be forceful, bold, enigmatic, but his conceptions about life are limited, so much of the work has the feeling of something done largely for effect. He has succeeded with the critics, who find the work 'amazing.'"

In a number of his films, Reygadas creatively and artistically brings out the sensations or feelings of his central characters in relation to vast, impressive landscapes and natural sounds and lighting. But is this where a work of art should stop? Would it not have been important, for example, to probe the suicidal sentiments of the painter in *Japón*, a question that Reygadas entirely ignores?

The director asserts that most films today are merely comic books and he compares real cinema to music, which conveys emotions. According to Reygadas, "Declaring a philosophical, religious, or social truth will turn it into dogma and therefore will prevent it from being experienced as real; it will always be normative. On the contrary, what feels real is poetic, ineffable, open-ended. Truth, by definition, is intangible."

Truth is so relative and fleeting, and subjective, that it cannot be grasped by conscious thought. All we can do is feel the moment of truth intangibly, vaguely. If one attempts to grasp the essence of things, or analyze and examine it, one loses it. Therefore, cinema is limited to sensations and impressions, and nothing more.

This is a form of agnosticism or solipsism, which argues that objective reality cannot be comprehended as it is, and everything revolves around one's mind and how one thinks. In other words, Reygadas has his own "philosophical, religious, or social truth", except it is a very conventional one and enters into his work unstated and uncriticised. This type of ideology paves the way for people to accept the world as it is. The most one can do is feel it deeply and empathise, and that's all.

In fact, art has a powerful and almost unlimited capacity to cognize life. Every serious and truthful work of art must also contain an element of protest that contributes toward bettering the situation. This element of protest lies in the very examination of the world. The stronger and deeper the examination, the greater the element of protest. This element is lacking in Reygadas' films. His genuine talent is lost in a mist of abstract and not very intriguing considerations about guilt, immorality, suicidal feelings, etc.

Reygadas has acknowledged in public that he suffers from ideological inadequacy when it comes to challenging the ills of capitalism. But this lack is not something incidental; it makes it difficult for him to tear the bark off sensations and look beneath them. Hence his filmmaking cannot escape a primitive and naïve, and immediately impressionistic, realism. By contrast, truly important art starts by removing the veils from things and stripping them bare. Reygadas faithfully reproduces certain sensations and conceptions. But the essence of cinema lies in bringing the world closer to us in all its glory and abundance and revealing it to us from unseen angles.

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