

TRANSLATIONS UPON CINEMA AS A PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC RITE

by

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Translations Upon Cinema as a Psychotherapeutic Rite

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ABSTRACT

The following retraces the path of a director tracing the path of a muse from early Spring 1979 through January 1981. What resulted was a form of psychodrama enveloping the cast, crew, and director in the making of an autobiographical feature film, "The Flower of Pain."

As the lessons of life are learned through one's mistakes, the enlarging of these mistakes and personal failings onto a cinema screen affords both the illumination of motivation and the expiation of the past. The cinema can no longer be a place one goes to in order to escape but rather, a place one goes to in order to find oneself; one enters the cinema for repairs. Similarly, there is inherent therapy in the creative process, and this must be imposed onto the viewer. One must be able to take a film home and use it. To the extent that this kind of filmmaking is a communal act, it requires the development of techniques and refinement of skills that encourage the actor to live concentrated in front of a camera, confident that his own personal experiences, his traumas and philosophy, coincide with the film's design.

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Introduction

The verbalization of an often discreet, transitory, but nonetheless biologically vital sensation as the recuperative power of the cinema and of the creative act upon me necessitates that what follows be called "translations." The instinctive floating-to-the-surface of an image, a line spoken, a line traversed -- the process of selection -- the sense determining organization -- the communications between actor and director -- the entire creative nexus -- employs a language frequently spoken without, in between, and despite words, effectively propelled by a drive, simple and complex -- the will to live.

I make a film in order to stay alive. This statement has no connection to economics and, in fact, the exorbitant cost of making films, self-financed, makes "living" perilously difficult, the precise equivalent, in taxation (all kinds) and reward, to having a baby. Rather, filmmaking (and, for that matter, film-viewing) has become for me over the last few years a form of therapy. Although it remains that mysterious passion discharged from the shadows of childhood, a new element has been added which is, perhaps, desperation.

I. The Reconstruction of Motivation

When asked once to give his definition of a film director, Ingmar Bergman stated that, "A director is someone who can't think because of all his problems." The feeling that to make a film is

somehow to attempt to concentrate, distill, and freeze all that is going on inside me just in order to see what's there has become for me a predominant one. Of course this is not the only reason I make films -- making films is also the way I assume my social position; they are what I contribute to the universe. In short, giving someone your ideas, feelings, aesthetic in the form of a film is a way of loving more intensely. Above and beyond this, each and every film possesses its own individual *raison d'etre*, a complex of motivations both reasoned and unconscious.

Starting out with the title, "The Flower of Pain" (from Edvard Munch), and a desire to come to grips with my recent history, for the past two years I have simply jotted down those images, words spoken, scenes which came to mind, never sitting down with the intent to write, although behind all of this I'm sure existed and remains the need to find clues that might enable me to understand what led to the end of a relationship and nearly the end of a life, as well as the need to exorcise my own sense of guilt. These notes were invariably painful (even happy memories are now the most difficult to support psychically). Then during the Winter of 1979 I began to sit down with all these little pieces of paper and gradually expanded these fragments into 14 scenes, enveloped and amplified by a variety of images. Each scene was given a title for reference:

1. Well scene
2. Wolfman scene
3. Bed sequence
4. "Lots of Kisses" argument

5. Reservoir scene
6. Early morning Ruth scene
7. Fight scene
8. Photo Lab sequence
9. Female conversation scene
10. Male conversation scene
11. David's breakdown sequence
12. Wave goodbye sequence
13. Affectionate fight scene
14. Final phone conversation

although the order was kept casual so as to allow the film's editing to be a creative act as well. No formal script was ever written or presented to anyone involved, although eventually certain scenes were scripted and I kept random notes for each scene on index cards that were frequently used as a point of departure. The film would consist exclusively of a male and female lead, with a single appearance of a male and female confidant, and an occasional appearance of a young man in black although this image runs parallel to the narrative and is not directly linked to it.

Regarding this structure, which, despite some changes and additions, has remained intact, my concern and fear have been that the requirements of the short film form (which are markedly dissimilar to those of the feature film) might prove inadequate in delineating things that emerged gradually throughout a two-year involvement, that the 14 scenes pulled out at various points in the affair would seem disjuncted and frustrate viewer identification. Since the film as yet remains to be seen, so too does the answer to this question.

II. Technique and the Rite

"So you go somewhere with some people, bring a camera with you, and get into a collective psychosis, just like that...with the camera.

I believe the cinema to be a way of immersing oneself in dream, so I don't see it as having much to do with battle. The growth of an abscess somewhere within the system, that's truly political. It's more political than...confrontation... it's simply something being said and something being done, somewhere. It's the scenery you set up for yourself...it's not setting yourself up against the world. It is, in fact, people forming a circle and beginning to look at each other."

- Philippe Garrel¹

The history of the casting for "The Flower of Pain" is an involved one. It entailed seeing hours upon hours of usually bad theater, locally-made films, of visits to psycho-drama workshops, parties, numerous ads being placed in the papers and at universities, going up to total strangers on the street, calling friends of friends, friends of strangers... . Over a period of six months, I interviewed more than 100 people, usually spending a minimum of an hour with each individual. At no point did I ask them to give readings, to "act," and the interviews (which I attempted to make more like conversations -- each person being free to ask questions of me) consisted of explorations into their history in the fields of love, their values, hopes, scars, on as intimate a level as could be achieved. Many of these people were professional and semi-professional actors and actresses accustomed to having to sell themselves in a few minutes time and it is my belief that there was a general feeling of

gratification and welcome acceptance on their part to these interviews and with my intention not to make any judgment as to whether someone was a "good" or "bad" actor, but rather to type-cast a very specific individual which I declined to describe to them. In essence, what I was seeking in the male role was myself in someone else's body; in the female, I was seeking the kind of girl I would get involved with if I were to get involved. These are not things which can be acted.

As a director, I reject the notion of becoming someone else, of "acting." Although this makes casting much more difficult, it also makes the final result more genuine, more potent. As I move more into arenas of improvisation as a way of attaining "naturalism," I am even more confident that any point what will spontaneously be expressed by the actor will correspond to anything I might have imposed. But I will return to what I mean by improvisation, since this is a simple word often applied to a complex technique.

Briefly, the cast history was as follows: the lead actress, a Harvard photography student without prior acting experience, named Sooni, was cast first. In December of 1979, a few weeks before the first phase of filming was to begin, Sooni quit, stating that her boyfriend objected to her doing the film. The lead actor at this time was Dan Genetti, a part-time actor and school instructor in Boston. In March 1980, a replacement for the female lead was at last found, Ruth Gamache, a construction

worker and aspiring anthropologist, again without previous acting experience. Shooting began in April. After two weeks, having shot over a third of the film, I decided, after considerable discussion, reflection, and anxiety, to stop production and recast the male lead. Essentially the reasons for this directly concerned quality of performance. After another lengthy and unsatisfactory series of interviews in the Boston area², I placed a call to a filmmaker friend of mine in California, Tom Conser, who I had been out of contact with for nearly two years, offered him the role, and surprisingly found him quite enthusiastic about the venture. Shooting rebegan in July for a week, and again in October.

Throughout this period of filming, the decision to adopt a particular technique of direction grew organically in each case out of the nature of the scene. In the final version of the film what I suspect should prove quite interesting is the combination of controlled improvisation, scripted, and wholly improvised sequences.

An interesting example was the manner in which I approached the fight scene. My initial image for this scene was to begin with two people on opposite sides of a room literally pinned to the walls by the tension generating between them. It was to be a scene without reconciliation, a scene where honest remarks are expressed but in such a way as to be defeating. I knew from experience that in such highly emotional situations, where both

partners are hurting and combative, the potential overlapping sentences, incomplete thoughts, and broken phrasing would make scripting difficult for even the most professional actors. What resulted was a controlled improvisation.

Tom was given a starting point, a list of specific topics, all of which were kept from Ruth (Although I gave her a few defenses in case he said certain things, Tom had the advantage of knowing Ruth's rebuttals beforehand), and both Tom and Ruth were given a time frame and definite ending for the scene. But all of this was merely deciding to select a framework, it remained to ignite the emotions necessary to bring the thing to life. One thing seemed clear, if it erupted it would be unrepeatable. This required shooting with two cameras simultaneously and selection of a single screen size. Sound and camera-men were placed in position, ready to be cued at a second's notice. (Note: they had been instructed not to make any light or conversational remarks throughout the set-up in case they inadvertently eased the tension in the air. It was precisely this tension I wanted.)

I decided to get an actual conversation started between Tom and Ruth in position. I had become aware throughout the week's shooting that real tension had developed between the two of them. Tom, in particular, although he admired certain qualities in Ruth, had very readily become annoyed at what he perceived to be her limited emotional investment in the film and in him, though

no discussion of this had as yet occurred between them. I directed Tom in private to take the discussion any way he wanted but to emphasize the negative and avoid mention of Ruth's positive traits. I, too, would be on Tom's side of the room helping to nurture the argument. If all this produced the kind of charged emotional exchange I was seeking, my intention was to cut them off mid-stream, roll camera, and hope that they would carry the emotional intensity into the scene. Now there is a considerable risk involved here and an extremely interesting one. At the moment you decide to begin the scene, the real life situation has become so strong, so 'real' (this applies particularly in the case of an argument), that the actor will rebel and say, "Fuck you! You can't say those things to me and expect me suddenly to jump into your film." This didn't happen. Ruth cared about the cinema.

There were additional elements as well which I believe contributed to the highly charged atmosphere and are worth mentioning, such as the wonderfully intense music I put on during the hours of set-up and throughout much of the pre-film conversation (Nurse With Wound, the Peter Brotzman Octet, Periodikmindtrouble); I dressed menacingly and maintained a distinctly cool attitude in dealing with Ruth. And ultimately, despite a spasm-inducing camera jam and sound roll out (both of which I could have and should have prevented) I believe we snatched out something worthwhile. It is interesting to note

that the experience of watching what these people were doing to each other had me and one of the cameramen in tears during the filming.

A last word on this sort of direction, and something I only learned about as the making of the film went on, is the responsibility toward everyone involved after the camera stops. Ruth, who burst into a beaming smile immediately after the fight scene was over and appeared quite pleased with what had been achieved, went through an anxiety attack when cast and crew packed up and left her alone in her own apartment minutes thereafter.³

For Tom, and again undetected by me at first, the scene had become thoroughly genuine and like the character, he felt entirely frustrated and fed-up with Ruth, quite seriously unsure whether he would be able to go on with the film, and it was really the passage of time and the "processes of oblivion" more than anything else that enabled us to continue.

III. Cinema and Cathexis

"I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. We need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be an ax for the frozen sea inside us."

- Franz Kafka

"...in the depths of reality, the filming is a completely privileged moment, which projects those who are a part of it into a state of fantastic intensity, where effectively everything outside of it is dropped. It is because of this that one leaves the set completely emptied, that one no longer knows where to go. The set is a place where one hammers a stake, where one inscribes everything that is in oneself..."

- Philippe Garrel⁴

All this bloodletting, this trying of past history and the stumbling block of memory, all before the unblinking eye of a camera, would be undeniably perverse if the twin sisters of Beauty and Truth had not been sought in the process. It is for this that I humbly strive...for something that might teach us how to live...for a cleansing by shadows.

Granted there is still something perverse in turning what was a nightmare into anything even remotely beautiful. All I can hope in terms of the film is that some of the nightmare remains. In truth, the essence of life is perversity. I now see that it was always my intention to provide images which are both distressing and beautiful at the same time, and I suspect I will continue to strive for this cutting edge in the future.

Perhaps the single most difficult aspect for me directing "The Flower of Pain" was to be fair to the female half of the film, if indeed it is even half. While it is evident that it is Ruth who ends the relationship, it was crucial to avoid the danger of making a film that would seem to be about a bitch and a broken heart. As in physio-therapy where one is forced to exercise muscles which are partially paralyzed as a way to restore circulation, to look with a cold eye at my own culpability in the disintegration of my last relationship has not been easy. And at this stage, I quite honestly haven't any idea to what extent if at all I have succeeded in illuminating for others to see these undercurrents of intolerance, insensitivity, mistrust, and outright cruelty. However, as Godard observed recently, "A camera is a kind of X-ray machine where you can see your own disease," so perhaps there was no stopping it. I am by virtue of my approach enmeshed within the frames of my film, figuratively (the young man in black), and psychologically. I am already well aware that if by accident this film were to be destroyed before completion, I, too, would be destroyed and would find it extremely difficult to go on. I have now invested as much in the film as I did in my relationship, in the same amount of time. And this is as it should be.

For both creator and spectator, a film *must* be this, and more. A film must be very nearly unbearable; it must tear you apart and reassemble you transformed by a rediscovery of your

true identity.

* * *

In the next to last scene of the film, Ruth tells David that "It is not enough to love someone, you have to know how to love someone." "The Flower of Pain" is, quite simply, about people who do not know how to love each other, "emotional illiterates" of a very particular age and milieu. In the end there is no specific reason that can be cited for the breakup of this relationship (the actual split is intentionally never shown) only, perhaps, an accumulation of things, hinted at in each sequence. These glimmerings into the mysteries of love are the mainspring of this work.

As for the future -- words clench, the flesh ruptures, the crystalization of my heart's horizons begins anew.

Footnotes

1. Philippe Garrel, Afterimage (London) V. 1, Autumn 1970
2. At this point I began videotaping a few minutes out of each interview, something I had previously refrained from doing, and sought consultation from members of the M.I.T. Film Section. In addition, I had Ruth partake in each of the call-back interviews.
3. Throughout the filming, wherever possible, I used the locations where the actors actually were living at the time.
4. Philippe Garrel, "Cerclé Sous Vide," Cahiers Du Cinema, No. 204, Sept. 1968. Translation by author and Dr. Rene Hourii.

Note: Accompanying this transcript is a videotape 20 minute excerpt from "The Flower of Pain" (transferred without the 1.85:1 aspect ratio mask intended for the final 16mm version print).