

Interviews

Cezar GHEORGHE

“The film inscribes itself inside your body”.

Interview with Ivone MARGULIES

Cezar Gheorghe: How did you come up with the idea to write about the hyperrealist everyday aspect of Chantal Akerman’s films?

Ivone Margulies: I made a film in Brazil, before leaving to New York, and I had a friend, a poet, who told me: “when you get to New York you must see *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*.” When I arrived in New York, I went to the movies every day after courses. I found a cinema that screened two movies at the price of one, and one day I saw an incredible double bill, because both movies were very long. One of them was *Jeanne Dielman*, and the other *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, by Jacques Rivette. While watching *Jeanne Dielman*, halfway through the movie I became impatient. All of a sudden I started being aware of my body. I started moving in my seat, and, when I was about to leave – because I knew the movie, I knew what was about to happen –, something changed. Weird things began to happen: it moved from the non-dramatic to a stranger dimension. I was very impressed by the film. It was my first semester at postgraduate school. I wrote a paper on *Jeanne Dielman*. My professor asked me then: “How many times did you see the movie?” Back then, movies were not as easily available as they are today. I said: “Just once.” And he asked me: “Then how come you remember everything so well?” I replied: “I remember because the film inscribes itself inside your body, in your memory.”

C.G.: It instills inside your body. It’s a visceral reaction.

I.M.: Not only visceral, but, also, extremely detailed and sensually complex. I am not the type of person that remembers the details. But this time I did. I wrote that essay and I continued my studies at the doctoral school. When the time came to choose the subject of

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my thesis, I wanted to write about four filmmakers: Wim Wenders, Godard, Warhol and Akerman, starting from the idea of the everyday. A colleague of mine, a Brazilian researcher, told me: "I think that you should focus only on one director." I could not give up on the others because I wanted a comparative perspective which would help me to define the specifics of each filmmaker. Afterwards, I gave up the comparative view, but not entirely, because in my dissertation, which later became a book, I have a first chapter which is about the cartography of everyday life in European and American cinema. So, I wanted this multifaceted perspective on Akerman's films.

C.G.: In your writing you follow a strong post-Bazinian tradition. Why do you think that Bazin's theories continue to exert such an influence? I'm thinking about the period between the '60s and the '70s, when he was strongly criticized and contested. But, for a couple of years now, Bazin seems to be back in the film studies. What would be the explanation for his newfound success?

I.M.: I think the criticism brought against him during that period was quite unfair. The discussion was extremely ideological and political. I'm thinking now about *Screen* magazine and the criticism against Bazin during the '70s. I think that discussion lacked something fundamental, and I tried to write it in the introduction to my book *Rites of realism: essays on corporeal cinema*. Bazin really understood cinema as a phenomenon when he wrote about the aesthetics of realism. He was never naive. He saw realism as a tendency and never as something prescriptive. Anyone that reads him closely will see that, the critic inside him won the fight against the cinephile every time. And he always spoke about different types of realism, never about one type or about a realism which surpasses other types of realism. On the one hand, I tried to understand this diversity, because I have an affinity for this type of aesthetics and, on the other hand, because I understood that in his case it was never a question of something that took place at the surface. He always spoke about the casting mistakes in Renoir's films; he always spoke about these tiny "fractures". The example I give in my book concerns his analysis of the making of *The bridge on the river Kwai*. He says: "at the end of the film, the bridge really spans over the River Quai; it is not a studio model [...] the director was right to deem necessary the destruction of the bridge."

C.G.: So, you are speaking about authenticity in the production process.

I.M.: I am interested in more than just authenticity. The material aspect was important for Bazin. He was interested in the link between the visual effect, representation and the actuality of what is really happening with the bodies involved in the process. That is why I insisted on this aspect of corporeality and on those tiny ruptures that he identifies. When I wrote the book, there weren't so many people writing about Bazin.

C.G.: What do you think about Bazin's proximity to the authors writing for *Les temps modernes* such as Merleau-Ponty or Sartre? What do you think about comparison made between his theories and phenomenology?

I.M.: I believe that this link exists. It does not deny the materiality, but he is not a materialist in the strong sense of the word. But what seems important to me is that

materialists, in the historical sense of the word, like Jean Louis Comolli, have reached this sensibility through Bazin. I believe that he was incredibly influential for the perception of materiality even for those who criticize him. Comolli does not criticize him, but others do. But, given the finesse of his critique and the attention paid to films, he can of course be considered an existentialist. I have no doubt about this, and I believe that this makes him take into consideration the body in a particular way, an aspect that brings him closer to those about one might believe that are against him. I tried to change that line of thinking in the introduction of my book. One cannot name him a "materialist." He does not present himself like this, but materialism is there. Philip Rosen, who wrote one of the essays about Bazin in *Rites of realism*, calls attention to the phenomenological aspect, but also to Bazin's considerations about casting (in the discussion about Soviet cinema).

C.G.: Your more recent writing is focused on the aesthetics of reenactment. The film *Reenactment* by Lucian Pintilie (1969) was voted the best film in the history of Romanian cinema. What exactly attracted you to this subject?

I.M.: I know the film. A student of mine told me about it. I also know about another film called *Reenactment* (1960, dir. Virgil Calotescu), based on the true trial of some people who robbed a bank. What interested me about this film – although the one made by Pintilie is wonderful – was that the people who took part in the real incident played themselves in the film. So, I'm interested in the situation when real people make a reenactment, not necessarily the reconstruction of the past. It can be about an event, it can be their entire life, I'm interested in this double of consciousness and physicality in reenacting, which can be reached with great difficulty, because different filmmakers use people involved in the real event as actors. There is an element of memory in this experience; it's the situation in which you lend your body to the director.

C.G.: It is the presence...

I.M.: The presence indeed, which can be more or less empty. I traced the history of reenactment. I have a theory about this. It started in the postwar period with Zavattini. He was the first who proposed this idea according to which everybody should play themselves.

C.G.: Yes, he was the most radical of the neorealists.

I.M.: Extremely radical, especially in the context in which neorealism lost its popularity, now replaced by popular movies with Gina Lollobrigida and Sofia Loren. When Zavattini spoke about this idea I believe that he was talking about a kind of exemplarity, in the sense that you tell your story, you are anonymous, and your story will be a sort of social example for other people. When the movie is screened, it represents a sort of lesson. Then, there is a second *cinéma vérité* moment, which is at the same time a type of self-consciousness, but which also has a collective meaning. So in *Chronique d'un été*, Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch imagine that the projection is an opportunity for those involved to look at (and to comment on) themselves, to think about their lives and their actions. Therefore, there is an element of reflexivity

in the sense that, in Pintilie's case, there is a reflexivity of the medium of cinema. But this time, those that are involved in the film are not interested in saying "This is a film"; but rather to use the film as a social mirror. There is a very strong testimonial element during the '80s after Lanzmann's movie, *Shoah*. He writes great things about reenacting, especially about going back to the place where the actual events happened.

C.G.: I find it interesting that he was chief editor of *Les temps modernes*, the magazine which Bazin also wrote for during the '40s.

I.M.: Yes, Bazin wrote there from time to time, but Sartre was the central figure. Lanzmann was a coeditor. There's an entire history, which is intriguing. There is a very strong Existentialist line. There are different concepts regarding theatricality in film. I believe that minimalism is very important. Everything is very pure; essentially you only have the person and the space.

C.G.: It is a simplification of the elements of the medium.

I.M.: Yes, everything is minimal. We only have a person and his memory. In the scene where the hairdresser cuts the hair, the action and gestures trigger the process of remembering. Lanzmann goes on with his questions. In contemporary cinema, starting with *Shoah*, there is something very harsh in reenacting. This is because it does not allow catharsis. The films that interest me live for the public. They do not resolve things in a pleasant way.

C.G.: And this is because there is no escape into fiction.

I.M.: Yes, but, for example, when we are speaking about murder, the director tries to make the killers confess their guilt, but they do not do this, they have no remorse. And in some cases, these people are still in power. The film *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) is a very good example in this sense.

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