

In Search of the Lost Gesture

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- *Beginning from the importance that Jean Renoir and Roberto Rossellini conferred on the new television technique of directors working closely with actors, I will then go on to look at the interpretation methods the two European creators of realism and modernity practiced. From different theatrical processes, we discover the same humanist goal, where both artists tried to register the most essential (real) gestures of the human being. Finally, we ask what has become of this tradition in the current audiovisual landscape.*

"Modern society and modern art have completely destroyed man. Man no longer exists and television can help rediscover him. Television, an incipient art, has dared to go in search of man".

This was the response Roberto Rossellini gave to André Bazin when he enquired into why the Italian director had been attracted to television at a time when film lovers were more wont to criticise the new medium. In the same interview, Bazin also put the question to filmmaker Jean Renoir, who had shown a similar interest in television production. The director of *The Rules of the Game* replied matter-of-factly that some of the shows on TV bored him less than the recent presentation of a number of films. He said the format of the interview, for example, gave television a sense of completeness that film, particularly in recent years, had been unable to reach. Renoir recalled a number of questions about political processes where at times he

could read the face of the people onscreen: "In two minutes we knew who they were and I found that fascinating, I found the show indecent, because it was almost an indiscretion, but the indecency came closer to discovering something about man than many films manage to do".

These revealing, although very different, statements from the two big filmmakers of realism and modernity were included in André Bazin's famous 1958 interview published in the magazine *France-Observateur*. Both statements, before either Renoir or Rossellini had worked in television, can be established as clear premonitions of the significance that new television techniques would come to have in their later works. Effectively, in their work of trying "to put the public into contact with human beings" (RENOIR: 1993: 132), television offered them a way of reaching more direct realist resolutions, as a new research tool for recording the most secret gesture of mankind.

The big theatre of Jean Renoir

In the interview with Bazin, Renoir mentioned he was preparing a made-for-TV film, an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde* (later released under the title *The Testament of Dr. Cordelier* (1959)), which he wanted to film with various cameras, uninterruptedly recording the dialogues and gestures of the actors as if it was a live broadcast. Renoir wanted to be able to give more freedom to his interpreters so they could act without concern for the shot or camera location.

In fact, the French director's concern for capturing the actors' gestures in their characters was always present in his film itinerary. In the interpretative register Jane Marken and Jacques Borel employed in *A Day in the Country (Un partie de campagne)* (1936) when they skip through the

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fields as if they were masked players in a commedia dell'arte, laughing and kissing each other's hands in an exaggeratedly friendly gesture, it is clear that Renoir, 23 years before discovering the advantages of the multicamera, was already trying to capture the hidden quintessence of his actors. Eric Rohmer (2000: 277) said that Renoir's way of getting an actor to exaggerate so outrageously could bring spontaneity to the interpretation. He said naturalness emerged when an actor, "tired of wanting to appear", forgets he is acting and identifies with the character. The possible imperfections that a live broadcast could involve did not fill the French director with fear: rather, they could be an outlet for his sought-after naturalness. Furthermore, as Àngel Quintana (1998: 267) said, "Renoir knew intuitively that, thanks to television, he could materialise the idea of a film in which the interpretive work was the main creative act".

If we go back to the early days of his career, particularly his second film, *Nana* (1926), we can already detect Renoir's interest in considering the actor the centre of the scene. It was with the actress Catherine Hessling (his partner at the time) that he seemed to experience a taste for interpretative exaggeration. In the role of Nana (a theatre actress who ruins the lives of three aristocrats), Catherine Hessling adopts a bombastic, vamp-like pose that contrasts with the practical immobility of the three love-smitten noblemen, thus becoming the only focus of the scene. However, her artificial gestures were criticised by a public who considered her work to be too unrealistic. A delicious paradox had begun to appear in Jean Renoir's work, but it would not be until the late 1930s, after making films that were as acclaimed as they were realist, that he began to understand the point to which *Nana* contained the beginning of an aesthetic approach that would end up configuring his film philosophy.

In films like *La Chienne* (1931) and *La Bête Humaine* (1938), he discovered the dangerous ambivalence of realist direction: in his memoirs, Renoir said that in these two films he did not allow the actors to wear makeup and he tried to get them to live for a time with the men they were playing, to copy their manners and ways of speaking, but that once the films were finished, he realised he had only provided a great range of real elements to a scene which, at the end, served to underline the artificialness of his actors. Thus it was that Renoir discovered he was not interested in

constructing an *external reality* but rather producing an *internal reality*, which could spontaneously arise from the actors. Renoir wanted his actors to forget their characters so the public could see that acting was a giant fantasy. He thus configured one of the simplest but most revealing propositions of realism: when faced with the evidence that a filmmaker always organises a production, why hide from the viewer the fact that he is also seeing an actor acting? The Chaplinesque characters in *A Day in the Country* are thus more realistic than the falsely reconstructed workers of *La Bête Humaine*. In the same way, Catherine Hessling's histrionics in the role of Nana could underline the fictional nature of the character, the literary and cinematographic naturalness of the protagonist.

It is therefore no surprise that Jean Renoir should, in his last creative stage, construct an extremely personal poetics that he unleashed on theatre stages and television studio sets. In films like *La Carrosse d'Or* (1952), *French Cancan* (1954), *Elena and the Men* (1956), *The Testament of Dr. Cordelier* (1959), *Picnic on the Grass* (1959) and *The Little Theatre of Jean Renoir* (1969), the Renoirian universe again used the easy and confident masks of the commedia dell'arte to express everything risible about contemporary society. However, the big theatre of Jean Renoir was not just about entertaining: in clear correspondence with Brechtian postulates, his later works had the markedly didactic aim of helping the viewer critique the world.

The big observatory of Roberto Rossellini

At the time Roberto Rossellini and Jean Renoir were responding to the questions put by André Bazin in the interview mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper, the Italian director, who had demonstrated a great interest in capturing reality based on close work with actors, was preparing a film and non-fictional series about India for French television. As with Jean Renoir, Roberto Rossellini immediately saw that the television medium could be a good tool to work more intimately with actors, a new instrument that could allow him to continue to reveal the truth that he had already been able to capture in his films.

We know that in the films *Rome, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*) (1945) and *Paisà* (1946), Rossellini mixed professio-

nal actors with non-actors to better record reality. In both cases, the method he followed to choose his interpreters was based on closely observing the men and women who wanted to work with him and then making them repeat in front of the camera the things he had seen them do naturally. "The idea was to get their muscles used to making gestures so they could be comfortable in their role" (1987: 226). He had not been able to put Renoir's hypotheses into practice, because Rossellini considered that "they had to dig beneath reality", i.e., given that films could record the tiniest movement, the Italian director feared that things would seem exaggerated. Likewise, he wanted the text to reveal as little as possible, which meant the actors didn't know exactly what they had to say until just before shooting. Thus, without repeating (*wasting*) the text, Rossellini found it easier to *reveal the truth* of reality.

Having recently come from the Hollywood studios, one can easily imagine the conceptual shock Ingrid Bergman felt working with a director who did not believe in rationally following a definitive script. Married to the Italian filmmaker, the Hollywood star agreed to put herself under the microscope. Rossellini not only wanted her to repeat the gestures he had fallen in love with, but used the camera as a penetrating instrument to capture (rob) his wife's most deeply hidden emotions. *La Paura* (1954), Bergman's last film with Rossellini, had, even in the same narrative device, a character who discovers (by spying on her) that his wife is having an affair with another man. The protagonist is only interested in it in so far as he wants to use his knowledge to control (monitor) the woman's emotions, to make her confess her adultery. This passion for observation led Rossellini to discover the most carefully concealed gestures of Ingrid Bergman at the same time the viewer did. Moreover, the public was able to see one of the biggest names in Hollywood not as a shining star but as a beautiful (real) human being.

In a different vein, before beginning his television period, Roberto Rossellini began to experiment in films such as *General Della Rovere (Il generale della Rovere)* (1959), *Era notte a Roma* (1960), *Viva l'Italia!* (1960) and *Vanina Vanini* (1961). These films, preliminary sketches of his later television works, contained a view that revolutionised his way of observing reality. In effect, in *General Della Rovere*, Rossellini invented an instrument (which he called a pan-

cinor) to film (observe) the actors from a distance, but which produced a close-up of them. With the pan-cinor, a type of zoom lens with two motors that allowed him to vary the focal distance with great ease, he barely had to move the camera at all. In *Era Notte a Roma*, Rossellini experimented with the pan-cinor with more precision, anchoring the camera to a single point and using the instrument to zoom in or out. He was thus able to maintain a directing style composed of long shots without having to prepare the actors' movements according to the location of the camera. With scenes generally made up of sequential shots, Rossellini thus did not have to resort to the paraphernalia that a dolly or crane shot requires. He could thus improvise during takes, so that if an actor had not been exactly in the place he should have been, he could correct the position with the pan-cinor. With this system, he could obviously wait from a distance for the most interesting (emotional) gesture to appear on the actor's face and slowly zoom in to eventually provide a close-up shot for the viewer.

Roberto Rossellini was thus able to record his actors' most humane gestures. His audiovisual masterpiece *The Rise of Louis XIV (La Prise de Pouvoir par Louis XIV)* (1966) is in that sense the result of the maturing of the tests he had been carrying out in films. The shots of each big scene of this French production feature a tempo that has little to do with that of classical fiction: the slowness impregnates the length at the rate of the (sometimes imperceptible) camera approaches, with the camera seemingly spying on the actors' every movement. In this repositioned take on a living 17th century portrait, the viewer watches a show displayed from a distance, without concealing the gaze that frames the Rossellinian representation: when the pan-cinor pulls in to the actors' faces, the power he has on the historic past of humanity becomes even clearer. As occurs in Renoir's works, the world becomes a stage to be seen from a distance, a distance that is necessary not just to bring about the emergence of a critical sense in the viewer but also to understand that behind the dimension of the celebrated gestures of Garibaldi (*Viva l'Italia!*), Descartes (*Cartesius*, 1973) and Jesus (*Il Messia*, 1975), there lies a simple gesture that is real and always fascinating, i.e., a human being.

This distanced view of actors and the reality represented that reveals to us the essentialness of mankind can also be

seen in the recent works of directors still active today. Followers of the Renoirian and Rossellinian inheritance, including Jean-Luc Godard, Manoel d'Oliveira, Nanni Moretti, Jean M. Straub, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer and Joaquim Jordà, do not search in their films or television productions for formal perfection (that external reality that Jean Renoir detested) but rather play witness to the live meeting of a director and actor, to find moments of real spontaneity portrayed in the scene. They have all understood that the duty of a realist filmmaker is to repeatedly remind the public that fiction is an artistic manipulation. However, except for the works of the veteran directors mentioned above (to which we could add the films of Abbas Kiarostami, the batch of young Iranian filmmakers, the Dardenne brothers and some of the works of members of the Dogma movement) contemporary productions associated with reality do not seem very interested in experimenting in this direction. Modern films do not understand, for example, that the elaboration of reality often goes hand-in-hand with a fictional recreation that overestimates the effort of staging a scene or documentation. They do not understand that there is not the slightest interest in distancing oneself from that which one is filming to rethink or better give a sense of reality. They do not understand that the costliest production artifices are clumsily exhibited to make a production more prestigious. They do not understand that one should take formal perfection into account when affectation hides the light or colour of reality. Nor do they understand that they are tending towards a uniformity of interpretive registers in which reality is measured by a plurality of different words and gestures, or that live broadcasts (which have created so many expectations) have ended up forming part of conventional television programming: that in recent times, one could say that the observatory Rossellini proposed has become, far from what its founder imagined, a space for the public to contemplate (or monitor) not the greatness but the destitution of mankind.

In his 12-part television series *France Tour Détour Deux Enfants* (1978), Jean Luc Godard went so far as to demonstrate (in a clearly critical way) the spirit that could end up dominating contemporary screens. In the series, Godard chose two 10-year-old boys who had never worked in front of a camera before. The cruelty with which he extracts

their least-expected reactions is similar to the experiment Rossellini carried out with his wife Ingrid Bergman, only here the implacable Godardian gaze is devoted to *revealing* the stupidity of children who reproduce the gesture and words of men and women who no longer believe in reality.

Given this European farsightedness, it is not surprising that on the other side of the Atlantic, the great postmodern American creator David Lynch should suggest in his latest film *Mulholland Drive* (which began as a pilot episode for a television series) that viewers, when faced with the illusion of representation, fall into a terrible abyss. Lynch shows us this idea in the scene where the protagonists find themselves in a small theatre called Silenzio where they listen, deeply moved, to a singer. Tears roll down the singer's cheeks while the two women sob convulsively before this stirring show. Suddenly, the immense emotional function is sharply interrupted: the artist faints, but the song continues playing with the same intensity. Never has the illusion of representation been revealed as so deceptive, false and dishonest. *Mulholland Drive* was developed in the heart of Hollywood to denounce the terminal nature of contemporary North American fiction, but even still, the director, who knows about filmmakers' loss of confidence in reality (that confidence that brought Renoir and Rossellini's works to life), preferred to close his film with an empty stage with an exaggeratedly made-up actor demanding "silenzio". To my way of seeing, this calls for a long pause for reflection.

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