

The Enduring Value of André Bazin: A Report on the 46th Thessaloniki Film Festival, 18–27 November 2005

• Michael Grant

Thessaloniki has been my favourite city for many years, and my first visit to its International Film Festival has fully justified my regard for it. The location of the festival is the area in and around the port. This is itself a part of cinema, being the location for many of the later films of Angelopoulos. Not only this, but Thessaloniki has for centuries been a major cross-roads between east and west, and now that relations with Turkey have improved Thessaloniki can see itself as the centre of a thriving cinema of the future, that of the Balkans. For this reason, the Festival was notable for wide ranging discussions relating to the Balkan Fund, the aim of which is to encourage the development of the cinema of the whole region.

The Festival screened something in the region of 360 films over nine days. It was of course impossible to see more than a small fraction of all that was available. What impressed me as an evident feature of the Festival's programming was a concern with relations between east and west. I have little space, and will therefore select only four films to exemplify this. I will start from the two major retrospectives, one devoted to the work of the Taiwanese master, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and the other to the cinema of Patrice Chéreau, one of the major figures, not only of cinema, but also of theatre and opera, in contemporary France. The most recent films of the two men make an interesting contrast. Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Three Times* (made in 2005) takes Taiwanese history as its theme. Ranging from 1966 back to 1911, the time of the Japanese occupation, and onto the present, the film relies for its major effect in its three stories (each using the same actors) on creating an intense

preoccupation with what people do in the course of their everyday lives and the manner of their doing it. Ordinary tasks, like cooking, setting the table, washing up and caring for elderly relatives, take on a powerful resonance here, largely by virtue of their being done again and again against a background of violence and intimidation. However, *Three Times* does not seek to present an historical overview or political thesis concerning the iniquities inflicted on Taiwan; its concern is rather to acknowledge what such iniquities obscure, namely, that which in human life stands against the distortions of political and military power. Chéreau's *Gabrielle* (2005) is, by contrast, a highly theatrical piece, based on Conrad's short story 'The Return'. The film depicts the break-down in the marriage between Jean Hervey (Pascal Greggory) and his wife, Gabrielle (Isabelle Huppert). The action is set in 1912 and played out against the heavily shadowed and richly hung interiors of Hervey's opulent Parisian home. With production values at times reminiscent of *The Age of Innocence*, the film generates an overpowering sense of artifice, an impression reinforced by the mannered acting of the two stars. The contrast seems obvious. *Three Times* belongs to a tradition of realist cinema whose great exponent was André Bazin. As the retrospective made clear, Hou Hsiao-hsien's work has deep affinities with Vigo, the early Visconti and Rossellini. Chéreau, on the other hand, may be thought of as having reverted to a style antipathetic to this tradition. In *Gabrielle*, cinematic significance attaches especially to the highly wrought and brilliant dialogue. Whereas Conrad gave only one (extremely significant) remark to the wife, in

Chéreau's film she responds at length to her husband, often with icily decorous irony and wit. The self-conscious articulation of the dialogue results in an equally self-conscious emphasis on the pondered silences that intersperse the epigrammatic exchanges and on the couple's hieratic gestures of antipathy and contempt. The everyday is as rigorously excluded from the world of the Herveys as it is from the art of Gustave Moreau.

Another Asian director whose style is one of significant contrast with certain western modes is the South Korean, Zhang Lu, whose third film, *Grain in Ear* (2005) was entered in the international competition (regrettably, it did not win). Like *Three Times*, it has a contentious political theme, the conditions under which Korean immigrants live in China, where, all too predictably, they are treated as inferiors. Zhang Lu's control over rhythm, the long take and composition in depth I found masterly. He creates a compelling sense of the obstacles and burdens (both physical and moral) confronting the main character of the film, Cui, who is forced to eke out a meager living for herself and her small son by selling illegally her Korean pickles. The achievement of *Grain in Ear* is inseparable from the way Zhang Lu engages the active participation of the spectator in the construction

of the film's world, and I think in this connection of an image from Bazin concerning *Paisà*: to respond to it is less like crossing a bridge than jumping from stone to stone across a mountain stream.

One other film struck me very strongly. It too can be seen as realist in the Bazinian mode. The film was *Angel's Fall*, a Turkish-Greek co-production directed in 2004 by Semih Kaplanoglu. The director has an unerring eye for locale and setting, and his use of extended takes and mobile camera allows his non-professional actors to establish their characters less by the verbal expression of interior psychological states than by the rhythm of their movements through their surroundings and by gesture. The film put me in mind of the early Angelopoulos. As with *Reconstruction*, the death and sexual violence it addresses are crucial to its major achievement — its sure touch with the ambiguities and contradictions that are the stuff of its characters' lives.

In conclusion, I would like to note how well the Festival was organized, and how helpful and generous were the staff who sustained the proceedings. The 46th International Film Festival in Thessaloniki was the result of an engagement with cinema whose seriousness and intelligence cannot be too highly commended.