

Thinking Political Cinema Now: A Response to Tom Whittaker¹

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I'd like to express my thanks to Tom Whittaker for writing a thorough and careful review of my book and to *Film-Philosophy* for its generous policy of allowing a right of reply. Naturally enough, I will focus in what follows on those aspects of Tom's review that I disagree with or where I feel some further explanation of what I was arguing might be helpful. I hope that makes sense.

Tom seems to suggest that the theoretical should have been 'woven' more thoroughly into the 'fabric' of my book. Immediately before this point and paving the way for it, he notes that the third chapter 'touches on' the writing of Laclau and Mouffe. This is fair enough as far as my use of Laclau and Mouffe goes, but unfair perhaps to the book as a whole which has substantial recourse to

¹ Tom Whittaker (2009) Review: Martin O'Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film since 1995*. *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 13 no. 1, April 2009. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2009v13n1/whittaker.pdf>>

Brooks (on melodrama), to Balibar (on different types of universalism) and, above all, to Rancière (on the intersection of the aesthetic and the political and on the necessary theatricality of politics). Neither Balibar nor Rancière are mentioned in the review. The neglect of my use of the latter is frustrating as his work was so central to what I was trying to do in a way I'll now briefly explain.

The core argument in my book was that we can no longer think political cinema in the same way. Post-1968 political film drew on an elaborated political language and a familiar 'dramaturgy' of political struggle, with an established cast and script and meaning-laden locations such as the Fordist factory. Mobilising epic actors, it was effortlessly universalising in its scope and carried within itself a sense of history and future possibility. Contemporary political cinema is condemned to work in the ruins of this old dramaturgy or to invent a new one. The epic has given way to smaller, more fragmentary stories cut off from the past and deprived of a future. The language of leftist resistance is no longer available to articulate struggle and give it access to a universal frame. Oppressions are no longer mediated by a politics, often impact directly on the body and are threatened with invisibility and inaudibility. It was in the context of these momentous changes that Rancière seemed particularly useful to me. His concept of the 'sensorium' as the domain where the political and the aesthetic overlap struck me as the ideal concept to engage with films whose interest lay less in their explicit content than in their struggle (at the level of the sensorium) to make systemic violences visible and audible and to find productive ways to engage with the broken articulation between public language and embodied resistance. Furthermore, equality before the word being the axiomatic basis of Rancière's politics, I was particularly interested in how the films I looked at were able to make the mute body eloquent as a way to express yet refuse its silencing.

Melodrama is the second area where Tom and I don't see eye to eye. He rightly notes that I essentially makes use of Brooks's classic study of the topic and suggests that I am insufficiently aware of the difference between literary and

cinematic melodrama. I don't feel this is a fair criticism.² Although Brooks's book focuses principally on prose fiction, it also looks, for example, at stage forms. The mute body, the declamatory voice and the expressive use of gesture are among its central concerns and translate well to the cinema that I am concerned with, as does much of its broader argument, as I hope I show. Tom suggests that the key aspects of *cinematic* melodrama are a critical use of *mise-en-scène*, camerawork and, most crucially, music. This is certainly true if one is looking at Sirk or Almodovar but does not map well onto the often austere, broadly social realist dramas that I was working on.

Tom suggests more broadly that I pay too little attention to the aesthetic and to issues of film style. I would plead partly guilty on the second count and innocent on the first. Because I was interested in tracing overarching shifts in the nature of political cinema, I was *relatively* unconcerned with stylistic differences between, for example, Bruno Dumont and the Dardennes, unless these differences were important for my broader argument, which they sometimes were in ways which I hope I explained. But what I was consistently interested in – and this goes back to my use of Rancière – was in the aesthetic, at least as I deploy the term. The articulation of the bodily and the linguistic; the dislocation of spatial relationships; the collapse of mediation and the resultant enforced proximity to intense local dramas; are these not aesthetic issues? If, when we look at film aesthetics or film melodrama, we prescribe a concentration on only those elements that are deemed to constitute the specificity of film (*mise-en-scène*, editing), are we not falsifying our object of study (in all its glorious Bazinian impurity)?

Tom also suggests that, as the body has been central to 'the construction of working class identity', I should have explored the 'cultural meaning' of the bodies shown in the films. My response here is that I was not interested in identity construction (the allotted task of a shrunken politics) but, again inspired by Rancière, with 'disidentification', an authentic politics only arising when

² Peter Brooks (1976) *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, London, Yale University Press.

subaltern groups (theatrically) refuse the place, role and script allocated to them. The point when looking at a character like Rosetta in the Dardenne brothers' eponymous film (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 1999) is to see not how the character's body and actions are defined by a situation but how they oppose it, opening a gap between subjective desire and objective context, fissuring the on-screen world, opening it to struggle.

Where I think Tom is to some extent right is when he suggests that the book leans a little too much towards coverage of the films. I had wanted to examine a broad range of works, some of which had never made it to export and felt I had to give at least a sense of what they were about, although I did try to make my descriptions analytical ones! My argument was consequently less concentrated than I would ideally have liked. I should perhaps also have signalled more strongly that what I sought to pin down in the films was their capacity to hold onto a polemical framing of the contemporary terrain. The films in my sixth chapter do not, I hope, show that 'political resistance is largely silent and futile' as Tom puts it. They show, rather, that even without an elaborated politics, films can make the 'sensorium' an object of struggle.

My thanks again to Tom for his review and to *Film-Philosophy* for this space.