

INTRODUCING STEVE CONNOLLY

In a recently released movie, I saw in the credits the usual phrase “A film by...” followed by “all of those who worked on it”. I really enjoyed the irony, especially because I think that it is inappropriate to consider that a big full-length film could be the work of a lonely, all mighty author.¹

The filmmaker, unlike the writer or the painter, is immersed in a staff of technicians and other artists. Furthermore, and possibly worse, he has got to meet the requirements of a producer who offers/provides and controls the money that is needed. Last, a film is a product that should also meet, at least minimally, the demands of the market. And the market imposes not only subjects and approaches, but also formats, and exhibition patterns.

A filmmaker wanting to be an authentic author should begin by giving up everything previously mentioned. This is the reason why total freedom for the creator involves a huge sacrifice. And this is precisely Stephen Connolly's sacrifice. A filmmaker who has found the expressive freedom through renunciation, denial of the many “facilities” that professional cinema can provide with.

Such renunciation might be not easily understood. And that is perhaps the reason why Connolly's work could be, at first glance, disconcerting. Especially because the filmmaker also demands a renunciation from the public. Renunciation from clichés, cinema “bien fait”, and the comfortable codes of genre, immediate and lineal readings.

Connolly is an inquiring filmmaker, he takes exception, and has got things to say. Moreover, he has got things to question. One of them is “authority”, especially when it, according to Hobbes' warning, “surpasses the limits of what is necessary and constitutes itself in a superfluous power”. That is to say, absurd.

Hence the amount of absurd in Connolly's cinema. He establishes a discourse of the absurd of the situation, a new absurd coming from rationality. He seems to tell us, “There is no way to fight ‘no-sense’ of reality if the performance does not reflect its own lack of sense.”

In his works, Connolly, like a belligerent guerrilla using everything handy to set up his barricades, freely uses every resource the audiovisual has to offer.

The director as a result of the renunciation previously mentioned, is in charge of the camera, sound, editing, and script. So he is not afraid of mixing formats (16 mm, video), a single-shot, single-take film, or of travelling through miles of American territory.

¹ The concept of “cinema d'auteur” gained importance and widespreading within the French “nouvelle vague” movement. Authors such as Godard, Truffaut, Resnais, and others fiercely defended the role of the filmmaker as the “author” of the movie. They actually meant the director as predominant and controlling the filmmaking.

Stephen Connolly is a true “auteur” of a provocative and reflective cinema who makes no concessions whatsoever, and who has renounced much of what few filmmakers would be willing to give up. An approach to his brief and complex films requires a lot more than just a viewer, one has to approach him as a “lecteur”.

THE WHALE

Stephen Connolly’s films, like current conceptual paintings, are complemented and enriched by their titles. “The Whale” is a wonderful example. The reference to Thomas Hobbes’ most outstanding work is the key to delve into a film that is difficult to understand and plagued by the apparent absurd. The film maker, who without restriction is the absolute “auteur” of his films, can allow himself –like artists can- such freedom.

As it is well known, Hobbes writes his philosophic essay “Leviathan” –one of the biblical names of the whale- that constitutes a reflection on the relationship Man and Power. And according to the philosopher, this relationship is marked by “fear”. Hobbes seems to say, “Power is necessary, because men fear one another.”

Taking this reference as a starting point, the absurd dialogue between mother and daughter that is heard in “The Whale” makes sense. The mother persistently asks the child what she would do if attacked by different animals. And consequently, the answers emerging from the dialogue are defensive, protective. That is to say, it is possible to overcome fear and defend oneself against unexpected attacks.

From this point of view, the public should incline towards a possible denial of power, only necessary to overcome fear (according to Hobbes); or towards reasserting power and the need for it.

Once again, Connolly highlights the fact that he is narrating nothing; but rather inducing a reflection. Especially an English public, familiar with Hobbes and his work.

In order to state the “non-narrative” nature of the work, Connolly makes deliberate “mistakes”: blurry images, asynchronous image and sound, “deficient” framing, among others.

It would not be too risky to assert that, within the context of Connolly’s work, “The Whale” is also an “aesthetic manifesto”. It is perhaps the work that better sums up the filmmaker’s concepts about the reflective possibilities of cinema, and therefore, those of the audiovisual.

Once accepting of the challenge reading this film presupposes, the public is free and willing to face the other works by the filmmaker. And it is possible that even their own perception of the audiovisual might undergo a great change along the way.

THE READING ROOM

Can it be made a documentary film of one shot, one framing? Steve Connolly seems to say yes. And he proves it in one of his most enigmatic works: "The reading room".

In this documentary film, Connolly seems to base himself on the aesthetic proposal of the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov about the "kino glass" or "eye cinema". Vertov postulated that the cinema wanting to portray the truth should be to a certain extent automatic. The filmmaker's participation should be minimum, and limited to placing the camera, which then appropriates reality by itself. However, the method has a flaw: The filmmaker will always place the camera, he will decide where, when, and which is the temporal space of the filming.

This is a minimum of freedom, but enough for the English filmmaker, who places his camera in the great Library of the British Museum. Once again, Connolly operates with his favourite strategy of discourse: let the film be really made in the head of the public. It seems as if this inquiring filmmaker had taken to cinema a principle of the Taoist philosophy. As the divine Lao Tsé proposed his famous "wu wei" –doing without doing-, Connolly works on "saying without saying".

That is the reason why the film "tells" nothing, but rather invites to reflection. It forces the public to reach their own conclusions, which also could be none. Nevertheless, there are some hints along the way. By staging the whole sequence in accelerated movement, Connolly introduces a discordant and provocative element. Such rush turns out to be shocking in the visual image of what is usually considered as a respected centre of knowledge. The space acquires an atmosphere of fun fair, forcing the public to reconsider what is really going on there. Has the place where Karl Marx wrote "Das Kapital" become banal? What do the current readers look for? Is true knowledge there? Questions like these may come to our heads.

On the other hand, the subtitle announcing the price paid for a sound track... in which nothing is heard, turns out to be completely contradictory. In a world plagued by this most subtle form of pollution, noise, it seems that stillness and silence, common to thinking and reflection, has become an asset that we have to pay for.

"the reading room" with its silent sound track, and that one and only shot that seems to aim nowhere, reminds us of the thoughts that come to our minds in a library, like dreams when taking pauses from reading.

FILM FOR TOM

"Perhaps I could find myself in someone else", says a voice off screen in "Film for Tom", a documentary film by Stephen Connolly. And beyond Tom's statement (it is supposed to be his voice that we hear) it seems an invitation from the filmmaker.

Tom, we will learn later, is “a violent, bisexual, unemployed, and frequently ‘homeless’ person”. At least that was the assertion of the court in charge of his death, needless to say violent. He was stabbed in his living room. And his murderer was shown certain legal consideration, if not impunity.

However, before knowing all this, we identify ourselves with Tom, his fears and anguish. His concern for control, or even better, the lack of it. Control over a life (our life?) that seems impossible to seize, trapped in his circumstances and mechanisms beyond his understanding.

The documentary film is structured following recordings of interviews with Tom. This is curious, because Connolly is a filmmaker who likes silence. To him, silence is also language, and sometimes most eloquent. But “Film for Tom” is invaded by an unusual talkativeness.

The presence of Tom’s voice, who of course talks in the first person, practically manages to transmit the documentary film an “autobiographical” feeling. The images, sometimes repeated, of his vital environment, of his space, and the presence of his voice, make us feel this is about a film of Tom’s, made by Tom, and not “for” Tom.

Once more, Connolly plays with the “non-narrative” nature in his films. It is not about “Tom’s story”, that makes every biographic film end up being a narration –more or less coherent-, a story, a tale. The filmmaker forces us to face the “biographed”, to enter his world, to share his anguish.

In fact, Tom’s world is our world. And Connolly achieves this with particular efficiency. Hence the surprise, the misunderstanding, when we discover that perhaps Tom is not “like us” (he is “violent, bisexual, homeless”), and we, the public, assume that we do not share such characteristics. But it is not true. “Film for Tom” is also a film for every one of us. We all are Tom, Connolly seems to say.

THE GREAT AMERICAN DESERT

The mental image most people have of the United States of America is a result of American cinema. By creating this image, cinema has stressed on the two “shores” of that huge territory. On one hand, the East coast: New York and its skyscrapers; on the other hand, the West coast: the beauty of California. Although it could also be mentioned a third “shore”, that of the Great Lakes, location of the always disturbing Chicago.

Stephen Connolly offers us his peculiar vision of the US by showing that area barely portrayed –except in “westerns”- the Midwest. The vast land between those two fresh and proud lines. Those huge arid plains: “The Great American Desert”.

What Connolly does could be compared to one who, showing a great mansion, surreptitiously breaks in through the backyard, where garbage and

disenchantment are accumulated. And this, the proud owners do not like showing.

Without any didactic vocation, but more like casually, dark areas –little known or intentionally forgotten- of the great American nation appear in the documentary film. Such stifling and infinite stretches of land function as a background to the interview, that mentions not less crushing and sordid aspects of American life.

The atomic bombing of the Japanese territory, the distressing environmental pollution, the irrational use of land, the deficiency of medical services, the always confusing relationship with the Mexican neighbour, running away from stress...

Especially, there is a very subtle insinuation about the circularity of a culture that calls travelling the endless joy of always seeing more of the same stuff. If the American culture is deficient in something, it is precisely that. An autarchical look at the World, as if it began and ended within the vast territory of the Union.

Europeans must find this fact astonishing. They are used to territories where cultures, languages, landscapes, alternate in high standards of contrast and diversity within a few hundred kilometres. Americans seem to enjoy a repetitive monotony that they take for “the world”.

Hence the fact that Connolly overwhelms us with an extensive material practically made up of one single endless travelling. Making us listen to a sound track of shallow dialogues.

In Connolly’s opinion, there is a vast and great American desert, that seems to be located in the soul of the protagonists of the film.

MÁS SE PERDIÓ...

“Más se perdió en Cuba” (More was lost in Cuba) is a Spanish phrase, not Cuban. It was introduced by the Spanish soldiers when they came back home defeated in 1898, at the end of the war that brought them simultaneously face to face with Cubans and Americans. Cubans fought for their freedom for many years, Americans prevailed by using their power at the last moment in order to take possession of Cuba. Spain lost its most precious colonial jewel, and it seems that after loosing it, cared little for loosing anything else.

The phrase, charged with resignation to misfortune, is used by Connolly as the title of his documentary film shot in Havana in 2008. But he only uses the first part of it, and in Spanish: “Más se perdió...”. From the very title, Connolly demands an effort from the public to finish the phrase. This effort should be continuous, because it is the public who “finishes” (or concludes) the documentary film, and also has to broaden its meaning to a wider and more complex reality.

In fact, the whole documentary film becomes an overwhelming synecdoche, that shows Cuba through barely three locations: a rundown area of the

wonderful National School of Arts, a group of young men working out in a park, some workers repairing a street in colonial Havana.

These three locations could very well express three levels of approaching Cuban reality. The young men, apparently doing nothing, work out their muscles. That is to say, they are getting ready to use them subsequently. Perhaps they express a huge young potential waiting, while lying idle, an opportunity to set their muscles to work.

In the mean time, one shot that is repeated over and over show the workers repairing a street of Havana without much interest. It is an old street, and the reiterative shot seems to be connected with the repeated restoration of that which is outdated. Ancient and obsolete things keep reappearing as a result of consecutive efforts at restoration.

Last, and this seems to be the core of the documentary film, a huge conflict of wills. The magnificent architecture of the building meant to be the future National Ballet School appears as a forgotten ruin. It was built during the first years of the Revolution, a time of foundation and energy. It was the fruit of a superb will that sought the cultural development of the country.

No resources were spared in order to build such architectural wonder. Those were years of hard and thorough work. However, shortly after the will of “la prima ballerina” –and this is read in a title- rejects and discredits the construction.

The building, not having a practical use anymore, begins to ruin, it is destroyed little by little. What has been built is a ruin. Or something that becomes a ruin, as a result of the wishes of someone who exercises an excessive authority.

This is, in my opinion, Connolly’s most cinematographic work. Without betraying his attachment to non-narration and figurative language, the film maker introduces a much more literal reading. All this with the intention of making a much more beautiful and exquisite photography.

Editing is also much more “classical” in this case. Although the filmmaker continues to take liberties –such as the identical repetition of one shot- that allow him to remain true to his poetics.

About Cuba and its peculiar situation, hundreds of texts have been written, thousands of feet of film have been shot. Connolly has barely needed a few minutes to make a movie that is deeply analytical and revealing. He seems to prove once again that understanding can be achieved through something closer to poetry than that usually understood as “cinema”.

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