

**CINÉMAS CROISÉS N°2**  
**Crossed portraits**  
**Claire Simon - Annie Ernaux**

A.E.: I'm very happy to meet you because I think we have a lot in common, you in the cinema and I in writing.

C.S.: What has always fascinated me about everything you've written - I certainly haven't read everything - is the idea that it's all built around an image that you explore in its full extent.

A.E.: I think I'm trying to 'reach reality', to reach the real. What also interests me in the films I've seen of yours is this way of... to "make reality sweat"...

C.S.: What you write is a literary project, totally so, but it's a literary project that doesn't involve the masters.

A.E.: That's a nice expression.

C.S.: It's a bit like what we might call documentary; it's about speaking outside the masters, about making art new all the time. I don't like the cult of masters and brands, it's more or less the same thing, it's the same thing. I think fiction is sometimes involved here. It seems to me that to do something is necessarily to go into unexplored continents. That's one of the things that interests me about what you do.

I find that writers have greater freedom than real people.

A.E.: I don't know if there's greater freedom, because we're caught up in a tradition. I very often come up against this strong tradition in the literary field, which is the idea that literature is about transfiguration. I immediately say no, for me literature is research, the search for the real, because the real is not immediately given. I'm told that, in that case, literature is not art.

C.S.: In the same way, there is this widespread idea that a documentary is not a film, because of this notion of transfiguration; a documentary is not art.

A.E.: It's this idea that art can't be the truth, or shouldn't be. I think that it's life that can't be the truth, and that it's art that should be. Because in life, you can't live in the truth, it's not possible... and then you don't know it.

C.S.: In fact, what people are asking for is know-how; fiction is the idea of knowing how to do things. That's why I was talking about masters. But I really like certain fiction films when I get the impression that they are simply searching for the truth. In the criticism that is made, "it's not a film, it's a documentary", you don't see the identifiable know-how of the person who made it. I had the impression that this wasn't the case with literature... In cinema, people are convinced that you just put the camera down and things happen by themselves...

A.E.: Think again, it's the same with literature! To an extent you can't imagine. As everyone knows how to write to a greater or lesser extent, I often receive lots of stories in which people tell their lives just like that, believing that it's enough...

1

C.S.: You say, and I like this a lot, "all the things happened to me so that I could write about them". "It's like being the theatre of things..."

A.E.: Yes, that's right. When I was writing *Le Journal du dehors*, I had this very strong feeling that I was being "passed through by people like a whore". I was crossed by images, but also crossed by life...

**Something almost religious**

C.S.: I find the idea of the book *Une Femme* and the diary *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit* extraordinary, because they're not at all the same thing ... It's part of the idea of truth as something almost religious and unattainable. It moves me because it's the relationship with

time: you think you've got a text that's completely written, finished, and then you pick up the diary and you say to yourself that there's something there that hasn't made it into the text... it's the same thing for me when I'm filming. That's why I film a lot in documentary mode... there's something almost religious about the order in which things are done, the order in which they happen, the order of thoughts... Afterwards you can reconstruct everything, but it's as if there's something absolutely elusive there, something greater than yourself.

A.E.: I feel exactly the same way. It struck me a lot when I was writing the book about my mother, as if I had to rediscover what I called the ideal order at all costs, in the writing itself, caught up in the chronology of a life that had taken place and disappeared, but that had to be preserved... It's difficult to explain what happens when you write...

C.S.: This idea is very strong. It's the religious side of order, something in the succession, like there could be an unconscious of time that contains a truth... that is very difficult to create in fiction.

### **A material cinematographic style**

A.E.: I really like the way you film work, the way you film gestures, the way you film hands... When you film the hands in *Scènes de ménage*, when Miou Miou picks up a hair from the floor, when she wrings out the white jumper, when she shucks the peas. These gestures are so important, they have to be seen, they have to be shown, they have to become visible.

And then there are the words, which are totally accurate, they're there. I'd say that your cinematography is material. In *Coûte que coûte*, you make money material, you make it material, because it's there all the time, in this divorce between work and money... There's work on one side and there's money on the other, which isn't there.

### **Playtime**

A.E.: *Récréations* is a terrifying jewel. The great thing is that all you see is the children, the playground. Everything is there and you very quickly forget that they are children. They are the men and women of the future, there is a terrible life, a vital force in children, a taste for the power of destruction, cruelty...

C.S.: The playground is an abstract place, a place where children can play out the future. But above all it's a place where they are no longer controlled by adults, no longer protected, a kind of future agora.

The question is: does the other person believe in my story? Basically, I only exist if the other person believes in my story. Children are always trying to see if the stories work for one or the other, and if they can lead somewhere. And for it to get somewhere, it has to have the weight of flesh... so it has to be documentary, i.e. it has to tell exactly what's going on there, otherwise it doesn't work.

2

### **Shame as an origin**

C.S.: You've written a book called *La Honte* (Shame) which I like very much... Was shame at the origin of the book?

A.E.: Yes, I think so... because it took me so long to write it.

C.S.: When I made *Récréation*, it was very clear to me that shame was the driving force behind the film. I took my daughter to this playground, thinking "if she gets away with it here, she'll get away with it everywhere". I'd watch the scenes in the morning and relive what we went through at nursery school. What I saw was that as a child, the desire is so strong: I love you, you don't love me... you don't want anything to go wrong. As a child, I was like the cooks in *Coûte que coûte*, I was ashamed that things were going badly. We're always ashamed that things are going badly. Later, as an old child in the playground, I can now tell people that I was ashamed when things went wrong!

A.E. : I think that shame is indeed the driving force, but I don't know all of it. I wrote *La Honte* with this founding image in mind, but is it the right one? On the contrary, is the founding image what's in the hollow of *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien?* I don't know. But it's true that these are the driving forces. For you too? Or is there something else behind every film you make? I mean a secret motive?

C.S.: It's a trait that reappears. For example, I've rediscovered that it was shame that allowed me to travel 800 km apart, that it was shameful things, and that it's precisely with time, time-lag and distance that you can look at things that you weren't able to look at before.

### **Fragment and genre**

CS : The fragment is a way, like the documentary, of trying to grasp something without asking the question of mastery, of trying to find any path to the truth...

A.E.: Yes, I think it's important to try and avoid presenting a total, and therefore totalitarian, vision of reality... It's important to leave a kind of multiplication of things.

C.S.: People are always saying to me "if you want to continue making films, you're going to have to agree to make normal fiction films".

A.E.: People ask me when I'm going to stop writing autobiography. It's a question of genre. I don't want to say "you're making a documentary or a *cinéma du réel*".

C.S.: What you write has nothing to do with autobiography. You could say that people who write autobiography are obliged to record... Often autobiography feels like it's not even literature.

A.E.: In autobiography, we see a kind of ... life story.

C.S.: It's also the question of the documentary filmmaking: we say it's a document, and because it's a document we have to tell the story as if the importance of the thing, the alibi, were outside the work. It's the opposite of what you do, the driving force behind your writing is inside the work all the time.

A.E.: It's about not sinking into something pre-established...

3

C.S.: I was talking about fragments, because it's a question I ask myself all the time, I really like anything to do with the serial, the fragmentary? Because I have the impression that it's a way of walking, even if you don't know where you're going; and that it's also a relationship with reality, you say to yourself that it's bigger than you, you can't oppose a position of mastery, which I find old-fashioned! I don't think we can now say "I'm going to give you an image of the world that I've mastered perfectly" ...

A.E.: As far as my work is concerned, I know what I'm doing, I write a lot of fragmentary things that sometimes have nothing to do with each other, but in cinema: how do you do it? It's much more concrete, you're bound to a direction...

C.S.: With 'purely documentary' films, it takes me a while to decide on the territory, where I'm going, what's the film about? But the territory is still the fact that there are gaps everywhere, that's what interests me, that there are holes everywhere.

A.E.. When I started writing the fragments for *Le Monde extérieur*, which became *Le Journal du dehors* (the title always comes later), I said to myself that many writers would do the same thing, but to serve a fiction, to enter into a fiction. But I couldn't do it, not because I couldn't, but because I wanted to leave something to the people, to leave to the people I met just what they had given, their words, their vision, an aspect, as you say, almost religious of the encounter, of this reality. I didn't want it to serve any purpose, I didn't want to make them part of anything, but to make them exist in their reality through these two or three little fragments.

C.S.: That's also the strength of the work; the little fragment has its own absolute truth, so it can't be used. I get the impression that what you're saying about the fragments in *Le journal*

du dehors, that writers would do to serve the big story, the real story, is nothing more than a class relationship within the narrative, and at the same time, a kind of comedy of mastery that I absolutely can't believe in.

A.E. : At that point, we're still in a kind of game, a kind of gratuitousness. It's also a question of absolutely wanting to make sense, to make sense of everything, to impose a meaning. Don't speak "in place of".

A.E.: Don't you think that what you do is political? I always think that what I do is political. It's political because it's about changing, changing perceptions, making people see things.

C.S.: Yes, I hope so. I feel it very strongly in what you write. For me, the political side is the 'here and now' side, I don't speak for others, I speak about what I can claim to report.

A.E.: Yes, not putting yourself "in other people's shoes".

C.S.: That's the starting point.

A.E.: I often talk about La Place. I explain that I'd started a novel and it didn't work, because even though I was talking about my father, I was putting myself in his place. If I was talking about him as a little merchant boy in the ditches, it didn't work, I was in his place. So I wrote with his words, with everything I saw as a child and nothing else. There was no reconstruction of his being: I had to suggest, to show, but through the words he heard, the looks he gave me, the stories he told me, nothing else, no show.

CS : Yes... When I wrote the script for *Sinon oui*, the question of "in her place" kept bothering me: while shooting I invented a character who was half me, half this woman I didn't want to go and see in Portugal... I thought it would be better to meet her,

4

but I thought it would be too hard for her to ask her about her story. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to tell the story so that I wouldn't be in her shoes, so that I wouldn't be in anyone else's shoes.

A.E.: There's actually something going on around this character that's hard to explain; she remains opaque and that's wonderful; opaque like someone who's real.

### **Cross-dressing and the "I"**

A.E.: I was wondering: if you want to film something from your own story, you can only do it in fiction with a character, you can't film something that happened to you...

C.S.: I film it transvestite in the documentary. That's my cross-dressing, it tells the story of my life, totally, but in a real way... The cross-dressing in fiction that people demand, for me, is exactly there. Whereas you talk totally about yourself, we have the impression that we know you, a little, when we've read quite a few of your books, and at the same time, you're the 'I', the person, the character, we don't know you at all.

A.E.: No, in fact, this 'I' is an 'I' that exists within the text, but the person is behind it. I think that in writing *L'Événement*, I found something that concerns what I do... When I was talking to this Catholic student about abortion, I said that I was trying to draw him into the fascination of reality, and I said to myself: that's what I do when I write. It's not the 'me' that I put in my books, it's something else, but it's me all the same, it's reality.

C.S.: I have the impression that the 'I' in writing is the real, the guarantee. It's the blood of the real.

A.E.: That's it, I couldn't do without it; you say 'guarantee', in fact, it's proof of something.

C.S.: At the moment I'm making a film with a friend who tells the stories of her life. It's in her home town of Nice, where I've made four films. Our idea is to go to a place where a sound, a colour, evokes something for her and leads her to a scene (or several, at different times) that she tells. So it's necessarily a fragmentary system. The principle of randomness and

fragmentation is doubled here by the fact that when I wrote the project (I asked for the advance), I said: I can't tell you about my friend's life because I bet that for it to be strong, she has to tell me things for the first time. This means that the story of the thing being done is as important as the stories themselves. So it happens that in the film, it's not the stories that Mimi might have thought were the most important in her life that are told, it's the stories that happened in the film. Throughout all this work, there is this kind of religious truth that makes the story, in the end, undecidable. That's the real path.

I really like finding paths between documentary and fiction, but if I've got a knife to my throat, I'd rather make a film in the entirely documentary mode, because I know that I'll have a lot more joy and the unexpected, a lot of very difficult things to do, in terms of art and style. Much more than reconstructing what seems to me to be on the business side.

AE: I have a very strong feeling that my area for doing new things is not in the novel. If I had to write a novel, not only do I not believe in it, I would even say that I would be below what I need to do.

## **Shamelessness**

5

AE: For being 800 km apart, haven't you been criticised for filming those closest to you? I get criticised all the time for talking about my parents or a lover.... But the difference is that your daughter obviously knows; whereas when I write, they don't...

CS : I've been accused of that a lot, yes. As far as what you write is concerned, it's a silly reproach; the relationship between reality and the book is nobody's business. It's all literature.

A.E. : The question is that it refers to existing people, as the text completely implies. That said, the real person is well masked, you can't say it's so-and-so, my parents were dead. But there are novels with keys...

C.S.: If I'd filmed my parents (there's a film about my father that I haven't shown much), people wouldn't reproach me, because that's the logical line, in cinema, you worry about where you come from... but with 800 km, I'm filming my daughter ... well, I tried to make a film more about a filmmaker than a mother. What was less usual, what was a bit shocking, was to look at my daughter from a distance, with her boyfriend, and to see what was happening beyond me, what was going to overtake me, what was going to live far beyond me. My theory is that, basically, it's the primitive scene in reverse. I don't want to film anything to do with sex - it seems so obvious to me.

I said "I'm making a love story without fucking", that's the condition. It's interesting to think that there's something that the filmmaker can't see, for a fundamental reason, which isn't a stupid reason. It sounds scandalous to say it, but I think that by saying "she doesn't have the right to film her daughter", we're asking for the sex scene, thinking "as long as we don't see it, we don't believe it".

A.E.: People have often reproached me for my shamelessness, it comes up all the time: men, critics, sometimes the public...

C.S.: That's what's so beautiful about your books, and it's a real freedom!

A.E.: I've wondered about that. I think that every time people talk about shamelessness, it simply means: I'd like to but I don't dare, what would people say about me, what would people think of me?

C.S.: What you have to say about shamelessness is, for me, a 'paradox of style'. Your writing is very precise and very lofty: you often talk about the desire to rise, with your mother .... In your writing, we sense this extremely precise desire to be elevated, and at the same time, in *La Honte*, for example, you describe the gesture of slapping the buttock. In other words, this

desire for elevation and this precision of language work with all the social and bodily traces in the stories and in the language...

A.E. : I've been criticised for this. In a literary programme, a critic said that what was shocking was that I had such lofty reflections on the picture formed by an unmade bed, etc... and immediately a remark: "I didn't wash to keep his sperm"! And that's when I realised that it was this relationship that was shocking...

C.S.: That's what overwhelms me... it's what tells me that I can be you, that I'm a reader in my own right, and that the world is whole, it's eternal.

A.E.: Neither cinema nor literature is about objects, it's about the way we treat things. To say that there are things that shouldn't be talked about, no! Everything can be written or shown, it all depends on how you do it.

C.S.: Yes, because that also says something about heterogeneity... We were saying earlier that fiction was the desire to create a world that would function on its own and that would be mastered, but that's not what fiction is about.

6

But in the end, in this paradoxical style, there is the idea of a whole world of which you are not the lord.

A.E.: And the idea of 'giving an account'. I often use this expression, " giving an account ". It's often used in a flat way, but giving an account is something else... That's what people didn't understand when they talked about Madame Bovary in connection with Passion Simple. Flaubert writes about Bovary, whereas here it's Bovary herself who's writing! And that's got nothing to do with it. We're still under this machismo towards women's films or books.

CS : It's a great jubilation and the great desire of art to say to oneself: what is the painting that the Mona Lisa would paint? What is the point of view? In the search for truth, we dream of hearing Emma Bovary's thoughts, of being as close as possible, in jubilation...

AE: I thought the same thing a contrario when I saw Scènes de ménage: there hasn't been a film that shows a man gardening, doing DIY, and what that man is thinking about. We don't know, there's a hole there, a gap, and with your film you make me think about that gap. All the women at some point are the women in Scènes de Ménage and they recognise everything, they recognize both the thoughts and the gestures. By showing them, this film makes them question themselves... There's no film by a man that's the same.

You've shown something new... that's what's important. But I think there's still a long way to go...

April 2002