

Text published in *Lettres Françaises*

The Faces of the Actor: Documentary & Fiction

What I'm looking for in the documentary mode within a fiction film or a documentary film is a kind of brutality.

You hear the word naturalism being used here and there to tidy things up, to put them in a box and thus put an end to the taste for documentaries, but that seems to me to be very unjustified. For me, naturalism is a search for the representative, for what has already been identified as a stereotype, and which returns in a proven form. A cliché, re-enacted as if it had just been found, there by chance in real life, conforming to preconceived ideas. We are all affected by stereotypes, we play with them, but we are not one or more stereotypes. Now, in naturalism there is this idea of the embodied cliché, of a preliminary sociological identification that would preside over the choice of those we film. They are the right models, we know them, we recognise them as such. To film in this way is to be submissive, to take orders. There's no room for singularity or distance in this attitude, which seeks to verify the representativeness of the film, given the television channel that produces or commissions it.

An old shrink, a great actor and author of definitive phrases used to say: "The real is what doesn't work".

We also say when we discover a difficult denouement, a harsh revelation:

"That's reality! In this floating idea of reality, there's brutality, singularity, resistance, hardness, opacity, we don't understand and we understand too well. It's always surprising, and you can tell at a glance.

Today I'm still running from one bank of the River Cinema to the other, sometimes fiction, sometimes documentary. Always looking the other way, I want to swim in the middle of the river, even if I can't get my foot in and the current is strong, I've sworn to myself that I'll stay there without sinking!

Hence my terrible ambivalence about the actors...

When I film in documentary mode, the face of the person I'm filming is always the right one! Because that face tells me its story, it tells me the history that has shaped it, it's dramatic, upsetting, harsh, surprising. I can't invent anything, I don't want to. I'm caught up in another passion: diving into this face and trying to see all the layers at the same time. Will I be able to see, film and show all that this face hides, contains and promises? As I look at this face, I know that I must discover the story, not invent it. Thinking I've guessed it, I sometimes dream it, embellish it, but certain features, certain expressions, certain flashes of lightning call me back to order: History is here, the History of mankind. This face is not just mysterious, it is social, historical and geographical. But above all, this face, which plays only one role and always the same one, his own, this face belongs to the tragic. It hides a story, a desire, that I seek, that I guess, that is unique, irreversible, because it is his life, and also his death.

Sometimes a face is so beautiful (or sometimes so strange) that we can't guess its story, its drama, even its singularity. Sometimes everything recoils before the violence of this beauty, this strangeness, which has a divine dimension: it is a 'god', a 'goddess', that I am given to see. This face is no longer a story, but the representation of a myth. This beauty, this strangeness, silently grips me, fascinates me, because it tells me above all that NOTHING IS WRITTEN. A figure, a tension, a desire, anything can happen, the future is open, one story or another can be written, as if on a blank page. Such is this face, which lends itself to myth, regardless of the character; it suddenly has, thanks to its beauty or

its strangeness, a sacred dimension. All at once I recognise it and know nothing about it. Or let's say that I don't want to know her story, I don't want to know her, I see in this inaccessible face of beauty, of intimidating strangeness, the greatness of some hero or other, known only by name and who might be there, a mask for the time of a reverie, of a film.

This is undoubtedly what we look for in actors we call 'stars', and no matter how many different stories they have told, their face always seems to be a blank page.

Distinguished, illuminated. The story no longer emanates from the face; on the contrary, it fails to reach it. This face, like the viewer of the film, receives the story from within, endures it, resists it, feels it, experiences it. What we see of this face is its plasticity, onto which a story, any story, is projected. So does this mean that with an actor we miss out on the tragic? That the tragic is kept at a distance by the sleight of hand agreed on both sides, between the film and its viewer, which consists of pretending it's real? Or is it this very distance that is tragic? Impossible to touch the life and death of the character, only possible to signify it through fiction? Would the tragedy lie in the elusiveness between the actor and his role, what he lends it, what he gives it, and what he keeps in front of him, his being, his life? I have the feeling that the actor is never totally there, and that it is this slight absence that is tragic.

And paradoxically, the face of the documentary actor, which is tragic because he is playing his own role, is just as absent and elusive, because first of all we never know him completely, and his style is so singular, so uniquely personal, that I only feel his greatness because he is part of the History in which I too live, and I can never really feel his resistance to his own history, because it emanates from him and not the other way round, as in fiction. Claire Simon