

The Cinema of Irony

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At the Limits of Classical Narrative

As we are trying to define the contemporary European cinema, it becomes clear that we may need new categories, which go beyond the notion of national cinema, but which are also not altogether tied to the idea of the director as artist seeking self-expression. The following is an attempt to look at a range of current filmmaking practices in France, Italy and Germany across a category that is neither simply a negative one ("European cinema is everything that does not conform to the mainstream Hollywood model"), nor so bold as to claim that European cinema is sufficiently homogeneous to qualify as a separate mode or even 'genre'. I have chosen the term 'irony' in order to mark the fact that there is a double system of signification at work, one of whose referents is indeed the classical American cinema. But I also think the term is useful, if we consider it within the broader terms of (literary) genre theory, where it plays an important role, for instance, in the work of Northrop Frye. In contrast to tragedy and comedy, romance and irony are 'low mimetic' genres, they are mixed, and they stand in an intricate relation to the 'classical' genres. My suggestion goes in the direction of considering the American cinema - despite the word 'classical' - as above all belonging to the genre of the romance (typified by quests, love and adventure), and (provisionally) to reserve the category of irony for European cinema.

Specific about contemporary European film-making is that the distrust of the spectacle - nagging doubts about presenting as logic a purely aesthetic causality - has produced misgivings about the status and function of fictions (their ontology and their ideology- what reality and above all, *whose* reality do they codify as verisimilitude?). Films that have any claims to truth have to battle with the difficulty of not being able to assume any kind of a-priori correspondence between the universe of fictionality (in which a feature film necessarily moves) and the 'real world' (of which it iconically represents the external appearances). Whereas at one time this manifested itself in a self-conscious stance that owed much to the films of Jean-Luc Godard of the 'sixties' (reminding the spectator of just how arbitrary and fragile a construct he was watching), filmmakers now tend to draw attention to their labour, their own intervention in the signifying and representational act by rather more indirect means. In almost all cases the stance is one of ironic 'as-if': holding the fiction at arm's length. When calling this stance 'the cinema of irony', I understand the term not so much in the everyday sense of an utterance designed to puncture inflated pretensions and to make assertions that are tongue-in-cheek, but also in a more technical sense. It names all the strategies of displacement, reversal, detachment, suspension - verbal, visual, structural - whereby a statement, a message, a communication, image or action may be qualified, put in question, inverted, parodied or indeed wholly negated *while still preserving as visible*

that to which it refers itself ironically. As such, irony is dialectical in intent and invariably points out a potentially significant gap or break between the signifier and the signified.

The Irony of Document and of Excess: Werner Herzog and Claude Chabrol

In practice, the cinema of irony covers a very wide range. It may be that irony is structuring the plot, as dramatic irony: a film like Orson Welles' *THE IMMORTAL STORY* turns on the trust we invest in the narrator, and the reversal this trust undergoes in the course of the narrative. But irony can also attach itself to a story told 'objectively' across the interaction of different characters. It can be embedded in a neutral delivery, and remain underplayed to the point where it is no more than a slow-burn energy generating an oblique ambiguity, as in the films of Alain Tanner or Claude Goretta. It may even embrace two totally opposed kinds of cinema. For instance, that of Werner Herzog, where a fiction develops (not in the form of a plot, but as a series of 'what happens if' propositions) which only intermittently rises from a documentary flow. Contrast this to Claude Chabrol's cinema, where the plot foregrounds itself sometimes with an almost operatic theatricality verging on the Grand' Guignol. What unites the extremes is a radical suspension of naturalistic action and psychological realism, a foregrounding of montage-effects which let the image in its presence hover, as it were, between the possibilities of precise meaning and obscure allusion. In the work of Herzog, the scenes are dissolved into 'moments': discrete, suspended, before they become opaque and solidify into blocks, harsh and uninviting in their unmetaphoric there-ness and facticity: they are as if actuality material, but without the action. The more these moments - often comic, grotesque or pathetic- are presented with the factual neutrality of the botanist or the documentarist, the more they charge themselves with potential meaning. Put differently, the more 'ironic' they are, the less they lend themselves to a uni-linear, causally determined, forward movement, acting not only as points of retardation, but blocking altogether the direction of meaning within the overall narrative flow. It is as if these moments - intensely poetic, but laced with violence, such as when a horse is slipping off the raft in *AGUIRRE*, or an uprooted palm-tree catches fire in *EVEN DWARFS STARTED SMALL*- are epiphanies, rewarding the film-maker when lying patiently in wait for a reality that is simply and profoundly itself. Although Herzog, by his own account, detests both *cinéma vérité* and *le direct*, the documentary quality of his work manifests itself as a resistance to narrative-generic meaning, holding an image or an action in suspense as long as possible, before a viewer can absorb them into semantically determined contexts and thus reduce them to a function of the fiction: this resistance, too, would be a feature of the cinema of irony.

At the opposite end stands Chabrol. If Herzog is on the side of the 'world', engaged in preserving a pristine irreducibility through the very medium of artifice, Chabrol is all on the side of the 'word', demonstrating the all-pervasiveness of signs and designs, of language and meaning in the realm of objects, motivations, passions and emotions. In a universe where everything means and nothing can simply be, irony becomes the figure of excess, underscoring the profusion rather than mitigating it. Films

like *LE BOUCHER* or *LA DÉCADE PRODIGIEUSE*, with their strongly linear, suspense-oriented plots, have so many carefully composed symmetrical patterns overlaying but also deflecting the momentum of the story-line that they draw attention to the design itself. One is reminded of Hitchcock, except that in Chabrol the 'plotting' almost amounts to a counter-structure of visual and verbal motifs, superimposing itself on the movements of the intrigue, and thereby undercutting its credibility. The effect is to make the film more discursive, commenting on itself, but also more explicitly an artifice. The irony does not insinuate itself with the viewer, it coldly keeps him at a distance. As with other directors who wear their film culture on their sleeve, Chabrol - comparable to Jerzy Skolimowski in *DEEP END* and *LE DEPART*, combines formalism and detachment with an intense moral stance. A situation is created where the spectator can catch from the discontinuities of the narrative a glimpse of a rebus-picture of another fiction hidden in the foliage of the conventional plot: this double-take works as an ironic reversal, retrospectively installing another point of view.

Fictional Worlds of Make-Believe: Alain Tanner and Eric Rohmer

Perhaps *the* most striking characteristic of European cinema today, and one that unites an uncommonly large number of otherwise quite distinct films is the way fiction-making in one form or another is itself presented as a moral and emotional hazard. As such, its ironic reversals and pitfalls are taken into the film, to become the constitutive element of the intrigue, its secret theme and *raison d'être*. There, the fiction 'en abime' carves out of the material the ironic space, the reduplication, where the lines of meaning, as if traversing a prism, build up a new narrative architecture. Irony, underscored or dead-pan, chisels away emotion, identification, dramatic assertion or any other form of complicity between spectator, protagonists and the director, in order to lay bare the recesses of a visual structure that seems to recede and leave no firm ground at all.

A good example of a film where the fiction-making is attributed to the protagonist is Tanner's *Le Salamandre*. By choosing as his hero a writer who wants to play the journalist-detective, Tanner sets up a mechanism inside the film which generates the action, as if by itself, almost on behalf of the director, who is free to step back and observe the trap he has set up. The writer and his friend, in their effort to make of the young woman a protagonist in their story, bring about motivations and reactions in their 'subject' which plainly and painfully elude the pattern they attempt to impose. The woman is too 'real' for this fiction, too honest for this game, she does not respect the boundaries that should separate (and protect) the teller from the tale. Tanner can let 'reality' spill over into the 'fiction' and vice versa without apparently becoming himself guilty of the charge he levels against his heroes. An ingenious yet open-ended structure of ironic reversal and comeuppance relativises and dissipates any fixed position we might wish to attribute to the author. In *Le Salamandre*, the counterpoint to the men's games is the increasing isolation of the young woman. But in her own world of private,

though socially provoked fantasy, she, too, is fiction-bound. Balancing the asymmetry of the two, Tanner makes his presence felt while remaining studiously detached and 'objective'. The filmmaker, engaged in a quest for his characters to reveal themselves, cannot manifest his commitment other than by emphatically disclaiming responsibility for the fiction, and pointing to the significance of his gesture by a heavy authorial silence. His irony becomes the guarantee of his sincerity, and the film sustains itself by paradox. The neutral tone and a strategy of reversals, of parallels and counterpoints, assumes a degree of autonomy that is clearly the product of an a-priori conception of where the film is going, but it does not presume to know what the action intends to mean.

Tanner is on comparatively safe ground. His film does not push its ideology of ironic self-cancellation beyond the assumption that reality is a complex affair, to be approached only by way of possibly self-defeating bridges thrust into the unknown. Not quite the same applies to Eric Rohmer, who also tends to place his characters in situations which make them objects of other people's designs. In film after film, a relationship takes shape, out of thin air, at first only toyed as a pleasing conceit, before it becomes deadly serious. The irony is both superficial and profound: the hero enters into what he takes to be the spirit of the occasion, but the *badinage* soon reveals itself as an existential vortex with no moral moorings. Chance and opportunity insinuate themselves, they become a veritable obsession, and the male has no other choice than to step into the role held out with teasing (dis)ingenuousness by his female antagonist. The challenge accepted, he comes close to losing his balance, but he just scrapes through, stepping back to the status quo, but characteristically on terms that make his a victory look more like defeat, leaving him and his values bare, hollow and exposed. Love is the dignity-stripper par excellence, at least for the man. From one moral tale to the next, Rohmer remains faithful to the pattern: LA COLLECTIONNEUSE, MA NUIT CHEZ MAUDE, LE GENOU DE CLAIRE, L'AMOUR L'APRÈS-MIDI. What changes is not the constellation, nor the nature of the game, but the circumstantial forces that void the hero of his moral and emotional substance. Never, however, are these forces confused with reality as such. Rohmer's strategy is to let one provocation (and being a complacent bourgeois is provocation enough) fight another. Only limited, self-circumscribed and self-interested views are allowed to intersect in a discourse that does not demand of Rohmer to declare himself, because the action shapes its trajectory according to the ironic (and thus structurally satisfying) logic of the pyrrhic victory, i.e. of 'defeat, snatched from the jaws of victory'. Yet Rohmer's morality is not only a convenient device to hold the narrative in ambiguous suspension: however charming and engaging his heroes are, they cannot disguise the fact that their playing games with each other is the result of moral cowardice, but also of being idle, rich and blasé: dandies of *la desinvolture*. It makes their gestures parables of irresponsibility and the film a run-through of the kinds of dissatisfaction that might make even a bourgeois flirt with changing his life. His heroes almost accept the Pascalian wager, but then in a flurry of barely suppressed hysteria, they run for cover. Sophistication and elegance, finesse and esprit are, so it seems, the

products of a vacuum. It is this rarefied atmosphere that Rohmer's ironic aloofness reproduces on a stylistic plane, and it has to stand for the protest that the moral pessimist in him does not dare to manifest against life as it is lived by the class he understands so well. In his aesthetic, he would probably like to think of himself as a disciple of Fritz Lang, another wily pessimist, particularly in the way Lang, too, allows chance and contingency to bring about the ironic implosions on which his stories hinge. Fate (the secret architect of the plot) intervenes not on the side of fictionality to tidy up the pattern, but in order to tip the scales in favour of apparent incoherence, the accidental, the unpredictable and incommensurate. Only the hero, in his cocksureness, can think he has it all worked out. For Rohmer, as for Lang, the world is unknowable, but it needs fiction to demonstrate this truth.

The Bressonian hero and late Bunuel

By contrast, Robert Bresson in *FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER* gives the struggle of the solipsist with his life-denying fantasies a much more sombre colour of obsession and destructive intensity. Possibly because he is not willing to abandon his hero for the mechanisms of ironic detachment, the director refuses to juggle opposites and come down on the side of the merely contingent against the hero. Where Rohmer might expose to ridicule his protagonist's obstinate pride, such pride in Bresson is invariably the sign of a problematic but inalienable and utterly personal spirituality. For Bresson the world is not unknowable, nor are his heroes the sum-total of their own and other people's projections. Such grim avoidance of irony in structure and tone, despite a meticulously understated narrative diction is itself a token of another irony. Bresson gives us a clue to the impulse that lies behind treating the fictionality of life and the life-likeness of fiction in the ironic mode. The ironist tends to strip or divest the individual of his pretensions to an autonomous self. But he dislodges the trust in an anthropocentric world-view without wishing to commit himself to any other view of reality. Not so Bresson. The dialectic of the non-ironic stance serving another irony which is God's grace makes his heroes' dark night of the soul the contrasting foil of faith. In a more gnostic vein, one might add the films of André Delvaux, whose protagonists (in *THE MAN WHO HAD HIS HAIR CUT SHORT* and *BELLE*) are obsessed with fictions which the spectator can see are suicidal, but whose hopelessness gives their actions a special radiance and purity. Knowing about the danger they court, they persist in stepping through the mirror, and once again, as in Bresson, the director seems to be on their side, not wishing to undermine the radiance emanating from the single-minded solitude. Unlike Bresson, however, no higher irony beckons to receive them when they fail.

All these films, whether fuelled by the irony of hesitancy or the irony of certainty, do present themselves as artefacts which are self-contained, 'well-wrought urns', objects out there, even if this 'out there' does not wish to be mistaken for the real world. They exist in their suspended realm, a realm not quite philosophical and not altogether wholly

given to the senses, by a logic of their own. Sometimes they seem to need the presence of an audience less than the audience needs the presence of a narrator as guide, but this is itself part of the fiction of make-believe: the space of (narrative) cinema, at once wholly self-sufficient and wholly there for the spectator's eyes only. The cinema of irony, it is true, makes a more indirect appeal towards identification, compared to classic Hollywood film, whose narration is geared towards generating fairly specific emotional or psychological reactions from the audience. Irony and pointedly neutral observation may impose on the spectator a more intellectual response of cautious and wary interest as befitting an object of uncertain status and meaning. Yet however refracted the action is across what is perceptually present and what is subjectively imagined, the directors discussed above have found a way to make the two planes fit. Irony is the force that lines them up, one against the other and perfectly matched, but it is also the space that keeps them separate, just enough to stop them fracturing: the collision if and when it comes, happens in the spectator's head.

Among the things that makes *THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE* perhaps the most interesting film in this context is how differently in Bunuel the audience is thought into this structure of double mimesis. He, too, attributes to his protagonists the fictions and fragments of stories and dreams that make up his film, identified as recurrent, obsessive fantasies - some psychologically plausible, others quite oblique - of people locked into their worlds with manic abandon. A bourgeois dinner party, more and more openly disgusted with itself is waiting for a kind of apocalyptic deliverance that fails to materialize. However outrageous the guests' and hosts' behaviour, it is tolerated, because of the secrets they all share, as members of the same class, family or associates. In fact, most of the time, they seem like conspirators, hatching childish plots. But if they are truants from life, as it were, their cool, insolent, urbane style makes them very good company (for themselves and for us). They typify the glamorous and compelling appeal of the cinema as spectacle, and their brazen hedonism and escapism parodies that of the spectator. It is significant that, soon enough, Bunuel chases them onto the road, into no-man's land. But their pilgrimage is not even in search of the whore that awaited the travellers at the end of *LA VOIE LACTÉE*, which is more than a hint that Bunuel hopes the spectator will be wondering where the film is taking him. The images convey the momentum of what can barely be called a story only by appearing to detach themselves from the screen itself. The intrigue breaks open and peels off like flaky paint, the narrative coils up upon itself, and would do so, even without the 'Saragossa manuscript' device, where each reality turns out to be a dream from which someone is trying to awake. As it unwinds, the film revolves around an void, projecting itself onto what is unmistakably a blank space at the horizon of the fictional world, which the spectator must eventually confront on his own, unaided, uncomforted by the director, whose irony is Olympian in its remoteness. One is tempted to say that the film has a structure that collapses unless supported by the spectators' effort to sort it out in his own mind: he is that centre and he completes the circularity of an action that has no real beginning or end. An exemplary 'deconstruction' of fictional realism, therefore,

because the absent centre (as the onion is being peeled) and the stretch of country road (visualizing the metaphor of life as a journey) are the film's basic situations from which its fiction hangs suspended. The road, with the characters shambling along or walking briskly, either way without making any progress, also connotes the path on which linear narratives usually travel towards climax and resolution. In its desolation it functions as a reminder that tight plotting and psychologically coherent motivation must not be expected of this film, nor of these stranded individuals. Like the unwilling survivors of Godard's *WEEKEND*, they are on this road people who have not heard the news: the catastrophe has already happened.

The dialectic inaugurated by Bunuel indicates one direction in which the refusal to render a self-contained fictional world in the cinema can take the filmmaker beyond merely asserting a sceptical relativism. A new kind of co-operation between spectator and film will have to replace the old structures of complicity. The spectator's expectations, his anticipated gratifications - even where these are disappointed or frustrated in the interest of suspending reference and reality - will have to return to him as irony. As the aggregate state of possibility and deferred meaning, a cinema that intervenes through irony and discontinuity is a step towards creating open structures, spaces within space, and stories within stories, where characters can have a narrative that does not trap them in a pre-ordained goal. It would be like a new beginning, after the nameless disasters that make irony so necessary as the negative side of sense. Such a space at the core marks this cinema's vulnerability, but it also gives it a special resonance.

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