The Red Poster

The Red Poster, winner of the prestigious Jean Vigo prize in 1976, is a deliciously complex film. Directed by 31-year-old Frank Cassenti, who worked as an assistant to Costa-Gavras on The Confession, the film offers complex emotions and a welcome plethora of intellectual riches, impenetrable as they may at first appear. Well before the picture ends, you are looking forward to seeing it again.

The Red Poster is striking because it is at once politically and aesthetically satisfying. Though it exploits the current movement in all the arts toward increased self-reflection, epistemological self-questioning, and the insistent unmasking of the art work, Cassenti avoids climbing the tempting ivory tower to "bliss out aesthetically." Yet, though he obviously sees himself as a political filmmaker, he feels no need to adhere slavishly to a worn-out "realism" nor to conventional narrative structure to get a message across to the mythical masses. There is something for both formalist and activist in this film.

The movie opens on a black screen. Two disembodied voices begin debating how best to capture, for a play they want to do, the essence and the "reality" of a rag-tag bunch of resistance fighters, mostly leftovers from the Civil War in Spain, who were shot en masse by the Nazis during the Occupation in France. The voices despair of finding out what things were "really like," and the blackout ends when one of them expresses the hope that the dead men will live again through those who are going to play them. During the course of the film, this rather conventional artistic notion will become literally and fascinatingly true.

A long shot of a forlorn line of condemned men filing through the woods suddenly appears. The colors, predominantly yellows and browns, are faded and bleached, and yet at the same time seem quite artificial. The men plod wearily toward the place of execution, under the watchful eyes of their Nazi guards, as the unfleshed voice reads a farewell letter from the leader of the group, Missak Manouchian. The letter is presented straightforwardly because it, unlike memory and even art, as we shall come to understand, is true to the way things were, for it existed then and it exists now. Because it is an actual fragment of past reality, it can be trusted in the present. This opening scene, then, for all we know, is a simple dramatization of the historically verifiable events of 1944.

Just before the firing squad executes its orders, the camera cuts away to two young men, apparently in the present 30 years later, who are questioning a middle-aged dancing teacher about her friends in the group, about "how it was." After each of her responses we cut abruptly to starkly simple credits in a bold, purposeful red on a field of black. These sharp cuts (not superimpositions) between credits and the earnest questions of the "playwrights" serve to point up the similarity between the work of these young men and that of the director of the film we are watching. The fact that they are going to try to reconstruct the past (in both the play and the movie), to select and arrange the real events to make an aesthetic object (and invariably include their own subjective responses to the events) will distort to some unavoidable extent what "really" happened. And this is what Cassenti would have us understand: the awesome power of art to modify and manipulate. By continually confusing the two, he shows us how different art really is from life. As spectators, he suggests, we are too readily passive and uncritical and thus easily manipulated. Cassenti spends the rest of the picture brilliantly preventing our accustomed slide into illusion.

The film reminds us that it is important to keep this function of art, or in its more commonly encountered form, "show business" (different only in degree), clearly in mind. Thus, it will steadfastly refuse to turn the story of the resistance fighters into spectacle. Cassenti makes clear that this is precisely what the Nazi propagandists tried to do in constructing their "red poster" ("red is the color that frightens people" sneers one Nazi) to discredit Manouchian and his groups as criminals and low-lifes posing as freedom fighters. A scene early in the film shows the Nazis taking pictures of each prisoner with what looks like a movie camera. At one point, Cassenti even shoots a tight close-up of the lens of the Nazis' camera (and, since we are
unable to see his face—just as we never see Cassenti’s face—the cameraman remains chillingly impersonal), further underlining the similarity between what the Nazis are doing and what he, Cassenti, is doing, between propaganda and art. The Nazis are careful to eliminate those of Manouchian’s band who are native Frenchmen, or women, or youngsters from their “red poster,” for a stronger effect. How is this different, Cassenti implicitly asks, from the manipulation of reality which goes into making a film or any work of art? The Nazis, of course, are using the power of the camera to isolate and abstract in order to falsify reality purposefully, for political ends, and in this they surely differ from the artist who purports to seek truth. But does this difference in intention affect the ultimate truthfulness to reality of the “honest” work of art?

The Nazis’ “artistic” construction of the red poster also comes to be seen as but one representative instance of a global strategy. Thus, Goebbels emerges as a grand puppeteer, a master impresario, the Sol Hurok of the Third Reich. In one particularly macabre scene in the film, Goebbels, surrounded by blackness, explains how his grand scheme all along has been to raise the war to the level of elaborate spectacle. In this brilliantly stylized sequence, the Minister of Propaganda gesticulates wildly, drenched in a heavy gray and black make-up which heightens the artificiality of the entire scene, rendering the master showman into nothing but appearance and image.

Cassenti, therefore, would not have us slip into the alluring embrace of illusion, and refuses to give us the “objectified,” dramatized portrait of the past that we crave. His strategy is embodied in the central premise of the film—the actors who are playing the resistance fighters in highly realistic, utterly convincing scenes set in 1944 are the very same as those who are playing them in the present-time play we watch the actors prepare themselves for. Present-day scenes merge imperceptibly with re-enactments of the past, and often it is difficult to tell whether we are in the present of the film or back in 1944. We see the actors prepare their roles, apply their make-up, and then with the most unobtrusive of transitions we are in the midst of another scene from 30 years before. Usually at this point we are tipped off, given some clue as to where we are, by German soldiers, for example, momentarily passing within the camera’s field of view. Likewise, we know when we are back in the present when people walk by carrying flats and stage props. But these clues are never offensively obvious.

The film is structured through a series of vignettes; most of the narrative movement that does exist occurs in the fragmentary depiction of past time, for nothing much happens in the present scene. As a matter of fact, the play itself is never
put on, and by the end of the film we realize why—we have just seen it as a movie. (By the same logic, and continuing the analogy, we never see the Nazis’ red poster until the final scene of the movie, when both “artworks” are finally completed).

Cassenti was wise not to carry the art/reality theme to its logical conclusion by having his young actors engaged in making a film about the Manouchian band. For one thing, this would have unnecessarily cluttered the set with distracting technical equipment (as in Truffaut’s Day for Night, where the technical clutter is meaningful), and he would not have been able to effect the delicate transitions between past and present that work so well. Treating a play, the director purposely limits himself to essentials and thus makes his point with commendable clarity. Finally, by including another medium (instead of getting trapped in the sterile regressus ad infinitum of making a film about making a film, etc.) he is able to suggest the applicability of this theme to all art, in its widest sense.

From the beginning, we are offered a spectrum of art and reality by means of which the director suggests how easily the former can be substituted for the latter. At one point, for example, we see two of the freedom fighters assassinate a particularly hated German general. The entire scene is done very realistically, and there are no purposefully alienating effects within the scene (as in some of Godard, for example). When they rendezvous afterward, the assassins are told by friends that they are just in time for the performance of a light comedy in the style of the Italian commedia dell’arte (a favorite metaphor of other French directors like Renoir and Carné). The trials and tribulations of the French partisan will be treated humorously and of course the Germans will come in for some heavy-handed and well-deserved ridicule. The whole spectacle, the most consciously artificial end of the art-reality spectrum (corresponding, in these terms, with the forced fakery of the Goebbels scenes) is played with just the right amount of amateur bungling to make it convincing. Near the end of the piece, the comedian’s stage son brings him a letter from his brother. It turns out to be a farewell letter (like that read to us at the beginning of the film), and as the actor, still in his part, is overtaken by grief reading it aloud, he comes to the edge of the stage, lifts up his stylized mask and finishes reading. Up to this point, we had thought the letter a part of the comedy. Suddenly we realize that his brother was one of those shot by the Nazis as part of the Manouchian band. In fact, as we learned previously in the film, he was shot along with the two men who assassinated the German general earlier in this very scene. The assassins are no longer present, of course. The time overlap is made complete when the camera dollies back to reveal the audience watching this little play within the play, among whom are characters we have come to identify as part of the present-time of the film.

In another scene, we watch a character as make-up is painstakingly applied to his face. At the same time, he is being coached by the mother of the man he is playing and is told that the man was to have bravely said, after finishing a cigarette given him by his German torturer, “I’ve finished, now go ahead with your work.” Another smooth transition and we are in the scene the actor was preparing for. But it is all done so slickly and so realistically, that before we know it we are fully engrossed in the dynamic of the scene between the resistance fighter and the German officer and have totally suspended our disbelief. A few absorbing minutes later, the prisoner kills the cigarette he’s been smoking and says “I’ve finished, now go ahead with your work.” The artifice of what we are watching suddenly becomes disturbingly apparent and we realize how easily we have submitted to the artist’s will.

Later, near the end, even this slight respect for the individual ontological integrity of both art and reality dissolves when, for example, two characters get up from the banquet being held in the present to commemorate the resistance fighters, to play a 1944 scene. Expressing their love for one another, the sole female member of Manouchian’s band and her husband do the entire scene stripped of all props save one: the illusion-destroying actors’ clothes rack which contains, among other costumes, several prominently displayed Nazi uniforms. Though the moment is painfully artificial, it works magnificently. Here the past and present, reality and art, merge, but for once, honestly, without perpetrating a distorting, manipulative illusion.

Obviously, a great deal of dramatic control is
needed to play purposely confusing scenes like these, keeping us precariously balanced between uneasy opposites, and the acting throughout the film is uniformly brilliant. Pierre Clementi, Roger Ibáñez, and Laszlo Szabo, probably the three best-known members of the cast, manage to keep us believing both halves of Cassenti’s equation. The photography of Philippe Rousselot confines itself to the difficult, seamless transitions on which so much of the film’s meaning depends, and within each shot, is properly subservient to the multi-layered script written by Cassenti and René Richon.

The film does drag a bit on occasion (perhaps unavoidably, given its subject matter), but in spite of the preponderantly intellectual tone, it does manage to involve the audience emotionally. Yet it is a film of ideas and is ultimately important for the themes and abstractions it works with, most particularly for its successful reconciliation of the anti-illusionist, aesthetic-distancing techniques of so much “high art” of the last half of the twentieth century and its historical and political subject and theme. It is reassuring to see that it can be done.

—Peter Brunette

Books

Three Books on FILM AND ANTHROPOLOGY


About half of this slender book is given over to an essay by Edmonds that sets the groundwork for thinking about documentary. The other half details a course in documentary given by Edmonds and includes eight essays written for it by students. Edmonds’s introduction is not a history or criticism of documentary, but poses broadly the questions of how to define documentary (the book’s title is the short answer), how to tackle the issues of truth, authenticity, and objectivity as well as the other side of the coin, style or personal authorship. In doing this Edmonds does a great deal since other readily available books on the documentary either pass over these issues in even less space, handle them badly, or integrate them into an overall argument from which it is difficult to extract an introductory statement. A 64-page essay cannot probe very deeply but it is ample room to invoke the puzzles and excitements that lie in wait; and it is surely not the least of the book’s advantages that it can serve as a starting point for a structural, semiological, or systems theory approach as well as more traditional ones. Edmonds notes, “It is apparent, that truth is not so much a matter of facts, as it is a matter of relationships”—precisely the kind of opening that can support many fruitful lines of development.


This is an invaluable book for anyone concerned with ethnographic film, specifically, or visual anthropology generally. Its contents are drawn mainly from papers given at the International Conference on Visual Anthropology in 1973 and therefore represents current assessment of the field by its most respectable members (which is, of course, a liability as well as asset).

Many of the papers generalize from specific film-making experiences, especially in papers by David MacDougall (whose “Beyond Observational Cinema” is one of the best), Jorge Preloran, Gerald Temaner and Gordon Quinn, Asen Balikci, Stephanie Krebs, and Timothy Asch. Others roam more broadly, including useful histories of ethnographic film by Emile de Brigard and by Jean Rouch, reflections on observational cinema by Colin Young, advocacy of the cultural study of fiction