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‘WHAT LOVING THEM COSTS’:

A REVIEW OF *NOBODY WANTS THE NIGHT* (DIR. ISABEL COIXET, 2015) AND *WE COME AS FRIENDS* (DIR. HUBERT SAUPER, 2015)

CINEMA HAS BEEN GLOBALISED since its very first days. One of the first things the brothers Lumière did upon perfecting their camera and projection technology was send photographers across the world to bring back images to middle-class French audiences. But these days just to type that word “globalisation” is to be overwhelmed by theoretical and philosophical debates that have become breathtakingly tedious. Two recent films, as different as they could possibly be in form, offer an escape from that temptation and sketch out the contours of the cinematic debate.

In Catalonia, there has been a modest and scrappy tradition of filmmaking since the 1970s, after the death of Franco and the rebirth of the culture. In more ways than one it compares well with the filmmaking of Quebec: much of it is basically for local consumption, and a few of its filmmakers, such as Montreal’s Denis Villeneuve (who is hard at work on *Blade Runner 2*) are now working in Hollywood. Isabel Coixet is the Denis Villeneuve of Catalan cinema. She’s made a few films in her country, but she’s better known for Hollywood work like *My Life Without Me* (2003), starring Sara Polley, or the Patricia Clarkson and Ben Kingsley vehicle *Learning to Drive*, which is just leaving multiplex screens now. Replacing it in shopping malls worldwide is her multinational adventure film *Nobody Wants the Night*, which stars Juliette Binoche and Gabriel Byrne. I saw it in Coixet’s hometown of Barcelona, where I had to travel to the edge of town to find the one theatre playing a non-Spanish-dubbed version (to Barcelona’s most globalised neighbourhood, actually: Vila Olímpica). It was worth the trip; it showed me just how far a globalised cinema has travelled.

It tells the story of Josephine Peary, wife of famed Arctic explorer Robert Peary and played here by Binoche. Although the word “Canada” is not spoken even once in the film, it opens on Ellesmere Island, from where Peary launched his 1906 expedition to Greenland in search of the North

Pole. In the film Josephine goes to join him, arriving first on Ellesmere and then setting off with an Irish sailor called Bram (played by Byrne) and two Inuit guides (played by Greenlandic actor, Orto Ignatiussen, and the Catalan actor, Albert Lo Jee) to try to catch up with him at the pole. Bram dies en route, and the two Inuit, sensible guys that they are, turn back once they reach a midway camp. Winter is coming, and the endless night along with it. As the title says, nobody who knows what they're doing wants a piece of that at the high latitudes. Josephine Peary insists on staying and awaiting her husband's return, and a woman called Allaka (played by the Japanese actress, Rinko Kikuchi) insists on staying with her. She turns out to be Robert Perary's "country wife," and is pregnant with his child. Strong bonds, along with *really* strong weather, follow. It does not end well.

The key to understanding the film, or at least its place in a globalised cinema, is Gabriel Byrne's Bram, who dies a third of the way in. He has a traditional tattoo on his nose, is close to the local Inuit and disdainful of the Europeans who de-humanise them, and seems to have picked up a bit of the language. When I tried to explain the story to my friend the next day, I told her that he "was kind of the Harvey Keitel character, although it's Greenland, so we never see him naked." I was referring to Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano*, which featured Keitel as the macho and Maori-integrated romantic foil to Sam Neill's prissy colonialist. Holly Hunter's character in that film is far more interesting than that of Binoche's Josephine Peary, and her performance a lot more subtle. Some of this may be accounted for by the fact that Hunter is acting in her native tongue and being directed by a fellow Anglophone; I also found Binoche very awkward in Olivier Assayas's recent *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014), where she mostly speaks English (and I greatly admire both Binoche and Assayas' other work; that is to say, their work in French).

That's not all of it. The comparison with *The Piano* is enlightening because both of these films have terrible politics, but only one of them makes you want to ignore that. Both films are colonial adventures, aware of the folly and arrogance of the endeavour in the proper modern fashion and dutifully enamoured of the wisdom of the local indigenous folk, but never able to set aside European projections of a wild *terre sauvage*. To be unashamedly, domineeringly colonialist is one thing, and is super-rare these days. What is far more common is to be liberal and colonialist at the same time, something

that is to my mind *way* worse, given how implicated in liberal reform was so much of the colonial impulse to "improve," "modernise," and ultimately "help" backward lands, backward peoples. To watch Holly Hunter playing Michael Nyman's score on that piano on that beach, with a 10-year-old Anna Paquin frolicking around her, is to experience one of the most overwhelming sensual moments of 90s cinema. And *The Piano* has loads more where that came from, the underwater shot of the titular symbol of European culture crashing into the Pacific Ocean being only the most memorable. *Nobody Wants the Night* has a few moments of power to compare with that, such as when the Arctic winter finally destroys the Greenlandic shack in which the women are holed up, a shack that literally explodes with the wind and the ice.

It's not on the same level of intensity, however, and for a film like this it needs to be. *The Piano* is a lasting film because its director was so overwhelmingly in command of every aspect of her medium. That she was also so implicated in a kind of neo-colonial gaze really does create a dilemma for the viewer, really does challenge you to love these images, to ask yourself why you love them, what loving them means, what loving them costs. No costs are at issue in *Nobody Wants the Night*, no pain follows from immersion in its images. *The Piano* was early, raw globalised cinema, and it hurt to watch it. *Nobody Wants the Night* is its shiny successor, and just about the worst thing I can imagine saying about it is also true: "sure it was a nice film."

Hubert Sauper's films are fully haunted by a post-colonial melancholy, a melancholy that he constantly links to that essential machine of globalisation, the airplane. He's been making documentaries since the 1990s (Barcelona's Festival de cinema independent just finished a retrospective), but he came onto the international stage in 2004 with *Darwin's Nightmare*. That was a portrait of the state of Tanzania, seen through the injustice embodied by its vigorous industry of fish exports from Lake Victoria and its conditions of squalor and famine throughout. Images of airplanes are everywhere; we open at a small airfield, spend time with Russian pilots (who Sauper clearly thinks are smuggling arms to profit from the region's various wars in addition to carrying away its fish), and generally come to see the vehicles as the ultimate symbol of a fully globalised neo-colonial project.

His newest film, *We Come as Friends* (just leaving most screens, it is due for release on DVD in 2016), goes this one better. Sauper shifts from

Tanzania to the world's youngest independent state, South Sudan, travelling all over the country, in and out of small villages, many of which are near the oilfields that are emerging as pawns in a geopolitical game China is playing against the United States. He interviews Sudanese villagers and politicians, Chinese oil workers and American missionaries, all in search of some sense of why South Sudan has come into existence, and what it means to be a country born in the midst of destructive wars, resource riches and material poverty. How, might you ask, does he manage to move across the famously failed state of South Sudan with such ease? He built his own airplane and it is the object that defines the film. Setting aside its wingspan, it looks to be about the size of a VW Beetle. It is small enough to land almost anywhere (we see it touch down in a farmer's field), light enough to move easily on the ground (we see it being pulled by a goat), and fuel-efficient enough to cross the entire country of South Sudan, which we see Sauper do over the course of the film.

What this immediately recalls is one of the godfathers of global cinema, another French filmmaker who worked in Africa, Jean Rouch. (Sauper is actually Austrian, but has lived in Paris since the 1990s.) France is really where Rouch has made his career. He made ethnographic films all over West Africa, work that challenged the era's conventional scientific approaches by presenting Africans as part of a modern, hybrid culture, one that struggled to remain distinctive at the same time that it embraced the world around it, including the experience of being colonised. His most infamous film was *Les maîtres fous* (1955), which documented the process by which members of the Hakua group in Niger ingested hallucinogens and performed a grotesque masquerade of the colonial administrators. Part of his project of making Europeans see Africa in a new way involved making cameras smaller and more portable. When he turned to his own "tribe" to make a film about Parisians (including some students from the Congo), he worked with the Québécois cameraman Michel Brault to build a new camera that would be lighter and more portable, so that they could shoot in the street and still have synchronised sound. That was 1960's *Chronique d'un été*, now a classic of documentary cinema (and available on a Criterion Collection DVD). "We made a film at the same time we made the camera," is how Rouch explained it to the filmmaker Lucien Castaing-Taylor.

It's easy to see this sort of thing as quaint, in our age of omni-present and super-small cameras. Being able to shoot with synch sound? That was a

big deal? Geez, man, I can do that on my phone now! But *We Come as Friends* is not only the advancement of Rouch’s project of making Europeans see Africa in a new way, in no small part because the film is much more strongly implicating Chinese and Americans rather than their continental cousins. It is also the advancement of his technological project. Rouch made more nomadic, open-to-possibility films at the same time that he built technology that was able to go anywhere. Sauper, in fine Rouchian fashion, made a plane at the same time as he made a film, made a plane for *We Come as Friends* in the way that Rouch made a camera for *Chronique d’un été*. This is a variant on the *Piano-Night* split that I was talking about earlier, although a happier retelling of it. Rouch was early, raw globalised documentary, and his films were sometimes painful to watch. That’s certainly true of *Les maîtres fous*, with its images of dancers literally frothing at the mouth as the hallucinogens send them into seizures. Sauper’s cinema, and most definitely *We Come as Friends*, is a more fully engineered successor. It’s a film that builds the technology it needs, a technology that is the indispensable element of globalisation, a technology Sauper clearly believes to be complicit in the neo-colonial project, and which he nevertheless dares not only to redesign but also to integrate into the very fabric of his cinematic implication of that project. Indeed, it’s the technology that really allows Sauper to see the full ravages of that project, its worst excesses and the ways that it is literally ripping apart a continent. The best thing I can imagine saying about Sauper’s cinema is this: “sure that was hard to watch.”