

Pourquoi? – round two

An assistant to one of your writers phoned up to ask why I make films, explaining that you were quoting a number of filmmakers on the theme. I replied, "to make a living – it's my profession." True but a limited answer, as I explained in response to a similar question from Louis Skorecki of *Liberation for the 40th anniversary of the Cannes Festival*.

It occurred to me that the extended answer I gave to him might interest your readers and therefore I've enclosed it here.

Why do I make films? Money? To make a living is an answer but it calls to mind the last Hangman of Britain. In an interview I asked him why he got into that line of work. "Well", he said "In the Depression it was awfully hard to get a regular job." The answer doesn't quite answer. So to push into the matter further, for me it's a way to make a living doing something which we all have to do whether we like it or not: make some meaning out of life. It's a compulsion for me because, as a child, life was bloody confusing.

When I began my career the choice was between filmmaking or philosophy, which I'd read in university in the naive hope of getting answers. But philosophy is about questions and perspectives, a kindly professor explained, like looking at the world through different colored glasses. "You can read and see the world through Plato's eyes, or Aristotle's or Kant's, for example, and these are interesting views." Indeed, but I wanted answers and I hadn't paid much attention to Hume.

So I turned to filmmaking in the equally naive belief that if we could just capture life on film exactly as it happened perhaps we could see through the misunderstandings which cause such misery and this precious insight would set us free. Being men and women of goodwill, we could then live happily ever after.

And since alcohol was said to be the cause of events hurtful to me as a child, my first film was *Skidrow*. (John Grierson liked it a lot.) What the film expressed, however, was more about the cost of deprivation than the evils of addiction or the virtues of prohibition and, while I hadn't found answers, I thought perhaps I was on the right track so I determined to pick up the path in Calcutta with *Rickshaw*, a film which was meant to explore the experience of living at the rock bottom of economic existence. But what emerged said more about man's almost infinite capacity to endure with dignity. The fact that we have choices – that in the face of adversity we can laugh or cry, rage or sigh, embrace a living death



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or curl up and die – this central fact hadn't been much evident to me as a child. Perhaps choice is the reward for growing up and one possesses choice to the degree one grows up – if, indeed, one ever does.

However that may be, I wasn't ready to look clearly at the implications of choice. My rooted notion of childhood was that I was a victim. I thought of myself as Little Orphan Allan, though I wasn't – only in my most precious fantasy, as I discovered working with Sheldon Heath, but that was years later. So I became obsessed with exploring childhood.

Warrendale, much to my surprise, turned out to be a film about rage, more particularly, about the outrageousness of life and death as experienced by a group of so-called "disturbed" children – because life treated them with especial indifference. They had lost parents, never had parents or, one way or another, had been deprived of adequate parenting. The rage this produced was handled in many ways: denial, indifference, self-destruction, depression and, for some, deeply experienced feeling and insight. The film ends with a romp and a song.

A Married Couple, an examination of a marriage in conflict, followed *Warrendale* directly and naturally from my central obsession. If problems of childhood come from problems in parenting, these in turn often come from conflict in marriage, from broken marriages. (Yes, yes, I

know it's more complex than that, but we're talking one film at a time here!) The surprise was that not only did the film turn out to be a comedy, dire – yes, black even, but it revealed as much about the audience at large – "us" – as it did about "them" – the couple. We project onto others so much of our unconscious hopes, fears, hungers and anxieties that it is utterly amazing that we see each other as we actually are at all. Our need to maintain grievance as a defence against intimacy is desperately strong and the need to scapegoat as a defence against difference is the other side of the coin. For *A Married Couple* the audience split into four equal parts: loved him, hated her; hated him, loved her; hated them both, loved them both. Same couple. The *Warrendale* audience offered another clue – that part of it which hated the staff who worked with the children for not being perfect parents.

But to give up the notion of perfect parents may mean giving up the roles of victim and dependent. They are sturdy defences against freedom, which is perhaps our greatest fear of all. We need victims just as we need scapegoats.

Who's In Charge? explores the experience of being unemployed: painful feelings of helplessness, panic, rage and depression. What we discovered was that when we allow ourselves to "experience the experience" (to use the words of Austin Lee) we are able to mobilize our strength, anger and even humour; we become articulate, full of fight and begin to take charge of our own lives again.

What was startling was the need for some of the audience to see the unemployed as helpless victims, inarticulate and pathetic, confirming Gordon Lawrence's notion that society needs victims: for example, the unemployed, to carry our shitty feelings of helplessness and deprivation "because we don't want to carry them ourselves, thank you very much!" The notion also explains in part (obviously there is much more) the perseverance of unemployment in the richest, most skillful society mankind has ever known.

Who's In Charge? also exemplified Wilfrid Bion's description of the way large groups (club, tribe, society, the state, take your pick) unconsciously avoid the pursuit of their avowed task: in the search for an omnipotent leader who will do our work for us; the discovery of a magic text which will save us the trouble of thinking for ourselves; the flight into irrelevant activity; the search for a scapegoat; and finally, identification with the group as a mystical entity which will save us from all harm (Pierre Turquet's notion).

Anything to save us from the hard work of grappling with reality to make sense of it. How often in the middle of the struggle have I thought, "Oh God, if I could just pay back the money and get out of making this film!"

Who's In Charge? also offered interesting evidence of our compulsive need to tell stories: as solace, illustration, metaphor, avoidance, many reasons. Sometimes we tell stories to help us express experience, sometimes to deflect it because it is unpleasant or disturbing. This notion also accounts for the difficulty new work has in gaining acceptance. We agree on stories about reality in order to encompass it but new stories require us to reexamine and perhaps restructure our sense of reality. Since structure is well known as a defence against feeling, no wonder the genuinely new is often seen as a threat. (It may also be specious.)

Why Do I Make Films? From the compulsive need to tell stories: sometimes to express experience, sometimes to avoid it.

My most humbling discovery as a director was that my best scenes (my?) occurred when I was out of the room (off the set) and for the three best works I was rarely on set at all. So perhaps my work is something about providing the conditions in which others can work at making meaning for themselves within the conceptual or task definition which I as a filmmaker must of necessity provide. Certainly one's work is much more a gift, one is much more merely a vehicle than the ego might like. But that, as the man said, is the reality of the matter so far as I know it. So be it.

Authorship is perhaps the hardest work we know, often painful, sometimes rewarding. It offers and demands from us freedom; it certainly delivers us naked. Thus when an interviewer asked me years ago "If you were given a million dollars free, what film would you make?" the instant reply was, "I'd put the money in the bank, live off the interest and never make another film again!" And for years I believed this was true but now, a little wiser for wear, I realize the compulsion to make meaning is innate and irresistible. The old farmer was right. "What would you do if you were given a million dollars?" "Och," he said, "I guess I'd go on farming till the money ran out." When something grows, when a little insight emerges after all the digging, it's a reward almost equal to love. A little light. And as the man said, "Let there be light!"

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