

# *The Art Cinema as a Clue to Contemporary Existence*

WILLIAM E. RHODES

**R**OD Steiger is playing a psychiatrist. He is in a room with a half dozen tough men. Every one of them has been judged criminally as well as emotionally wrong. Steiger sits astride and backwards on a plain, wooden prison chair. He faces the half circle of men who spend hours telling about themselves, commenting on each others' problems. The doctor relentlessly keeps prodding and parrying each man so that the real reasons for irrational acts are made clear. Steiger smokes incessantly; his handling of cigarettes and quick comments show that he is a tough guy—just as tough as any who are in that bare room. But he is a guy who can love because he really knows himself.

As a doctor dedicated to rebuilding men's lives through group therapy and innumerable individual consultations with each man alone, he must establish deep relationship with his people so that they can take off their masks—so they can reveal themselves to him — and more importantly, to themselves. He must push, cajole, console, josh and often just wait. He fights for the insights; he teases out the self-insight; he waits and works; works and waits. Some are healed. Some are not. In the motion picture, **The Mark**, one of Steiger's men is made whole. The man finally wins his way; he wins a wife; he wins a child. But it was not easy. In fact, in the end it was not all solved. One left the theatre knowing that life is like that: there is still much to do even though much has been done. And there are no guarantees that it will all work out to a nice fairy-story conclusion.

WILLIAM E. RHODES is Chaplain of The University of Denver. This address was delivered at a convocation at Colorado Woman's College.

Raymond Finney in another film plays a broad-nosed hard-head of twenty-two or so. He is a young man from the poor classes of industrial Nottingham. He works in a bicycle factory. He runs one machine all day. He hates his machine. He hates the system which is also a machine. He puts a dead rat on the tray of fittings to which a woman worker returns. She becomes hysterical. He laughs. His shop foreman cannot prove that Finney did it, but he is pretty sure. He threatens Finney and claims Finney will come to no good end. Finney decides to show the foreman a thing or two. Finney goes to the foreman's home; he seduces the foreman's wife. Then follows a long, involved, sor-did affair—often in the foreman's own bed. Finney doesn't love this sorry creature who has given her heart to him. Everything in the relationship is plain to see—too plain for puritan tastes, especially in the bedroom scenes — but most plain is the cynical hatred of society, the system and all the other road-blocks to happiness which keep a poor English man from going any where. Such is a tough and yet often tender exploration of real life.

I know how true was the portrayal because I spent a summer in Nottingham and spent much of my time with the industrial poor there. In our age they are disinherited doubly—not only from their own English middle and upper classes, but England itself is uncomfortably "out of it" these days. I recognized the streets, the parks, the houses and even the Raleigh Bicycle Works which we toured and which were less than a mile from where we lived. But the recognition went further than places, people and things—it was the situation that rang true: cynicism, frus-

tration, fright, hate, temporary fun, sordid sex, and—so little hope. Such was the motion picture, **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning**.

Marcello Mastroianni for almost three hours lives through a dozen rather unrelated scenes in *La Dolce Vita*, the epic art film of the decade. His emptiness and opportunism and hedonism and insecurity and spiritual shabbiness are often disgusting but more often frightening. Here under the shadow of Rome's St. Peter's, the capital of Christendom, are the deadly doings of the sophisticated international set which has feared nothing, done everything, and now settles in for bored "kicks." The photography is unrivaled for its composition; the settings are natural and beautifully realistic; the relentless exploration of the camera never lets the viewer back off from the tedium and awfulness and phoniness of existence except for a few brief tantalizing touches of something better. The viewer of kindly disposition and optimistic outlook wants to scream back at the picture, "No. Life just is not like that. It can't be. This is a travesty!" But—as the cynical sophisticate is portrayed as having his own wrong empty world—how do we know that "good" people have not created quite as unreal a world for themselves?

This is the philosophical question that the art cinema, along with most of the arts of our time, asks: "What is existence, really?" "What is life all about?" "Who is deceiving whom?" "With all these different contentions about life, which one can be believed?" In a scientific era, it is popular to look at all the facts. Certain creators of motion pictures are trying to show certain of the facts and what they mean—but by way of an art. A new art at that.

This new art must speak in the tongue of its new age. Meaning is undergoing a hard time in our time. For one reason or another, the old values are gone—or at least they are up for serious question. Could one say that most people in the urban centers of our civilization

now live by the values of Moses, Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul? Who really lives in our time by the principles of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Calvin? How often in modern literature are the Ten Commandments of Moses honored except in the violation? How many people in business and in the military genuinely believe with Jeremiah that what they must do is to the very glory of God? Who in your town and mine lives like Jesus by the principles of humility, self-crucifixion and evident love of God? Who in education these days following Paul makes Jesus Christ central to and above competence, culture and knowledge? Who lives these days by the rule of Plato's overarching rational Idea: that the Truth is the truth and let there be no tampering? Who after Aristotle really thinks out the chief and proper end of man and then shapes his own life as well as his society around this proper end? Who knows that he is primarily a citizen of Augustine's Heavenly City rather than one limited by this earth? Who Calvinistically knows that his chief business is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever? Do we live in these traditional kinds of world values? Hardly.

We live in what the anthropologists call a "sensate" culture. It is a world of sensations. Our bodies control our values. Biblical people thought God should. Philosophical people thought ideas should. Not appetite, but spirit and mind, said they. This is reversed in our era. We are not in a theological culture nor an ideal-rational culture. We are in a sensate culture. We live for our bodies, for our physical well-being. The problems for our time are problems of physical existence (military peace, food, shelter, clothing, money, warm sex and such).

In our era we are preoccupied with business. We think most about the business of getting security, getting ahead, getting a reputation, getting a husband, getting a wife, getting children, getting money, getting a house, getting two cars,

getting things done, getting an education to get ahead, get a good name, get a husband, get a wife, get a child, get money, get a house, get cars, get it done to get education for our children — whoops! this is where we came in. The getting of getting. That's "us."

We are overwhelmed with all that there is to be gotten: there is the technological explosion of things. There is the information explosion of items to remember. Ninety percent of scientific knowledge has been uncovered and recorded in the last dozen years! There is a communication explosion of telephone, telegraph, machine-gun like printing of magazines and newspapers, radio, motion pictures, radar, television and more yet to come. There is the population explosion. And in all these explosions is the explosion of expectations by everyone that everyone should expect to get his fair share of all the things that there are to be got—this is especially true in the non-white, non-Anglo-Saxon parts of the world.

And then, as a counter to all this materialistic, sensate getting, faith is the genuine possibility that this whole wonderful business can go "poof!" Wyllie's *On the Beach* is not fiction; it is a fact with which we have to live every minute of our day. This is a different age. It may be better or worse than some other age, but it is not the same. And it requires a new understanding.

This new era is a major preoccupation with modern art. It wants to find and expose contemporary meaning. If ancient truths still hold, they must be re-discovered and then portrayed in the new forms. Old truths in old forms do not speak. Traditionalism has little vitality—in art as well as in politics or production or transportation or war. New times demand new attempts to speak.

The modern art cinema is at the forefront of the new statement. This is particularly true because it is one of the newest of the arts. It combines and recombines so many of the older arts into

one new medium made possible by the new age. Cinema art is uniquely a technological art—you won't see many of its pictures without an electric outlet or somewhere along the line a whole series of brand new chemical treatments. Technical possibilities are as numerous—and its scope the age's. We have in cinema art a whole new arena for profitable experiment.

Before concluding with some generalizations about cinema art as a clue to contemporary existence, let us note certain things about art itself in order to distinguish cinema as art from motion pictures as entertainment or document. One way or another, every artist asserts that "art is the lie without which truth cannot speak." That is, art exaggerates; it selects from and remolds the forms of existence as they are experienced at the matter-of-fact level.

Art has always done this. Greek art idealized things so that human bodies would be portrayed in symmetrical perfection, buildings exemplified mathematical formulae and vases were shaped to please spiritually as much as to carry water. Modern art exaggerates, selects and reinterprets in its own way. Especially, modern art attacks a sensate and soulless culture. In painting we have artistic truths after the manner of impressionists, expressionists, abstractionists and what not. Sculpture the same. Modern music has comparable idioms which would drive the classical "Papa" Haydn right out of his mind. Modern literature is more than story-telling; modern theatre is more than putting on a play. Nor is modern cinema, which rests upon all these arts and which combines them in its brand-new art, to be held down by the mundane, the prosey, the document, the matter-of-fact, the average, the popular, and the sheerly utilitarian.

Art cinema is to the ordinary motion picture what Eliot's poetry is to Joyce Kilmer's; what Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" is to an advertising agency's inter-office memorandum; what

Rodin's sculpture is to a typical oil station; what a Wagnerian love aria is to a ten-cent greeting card; what a Van Gogh painting is to a **Newsweek** photograph. Art cinema has the standards of high art, not those of mass media or the pragmatic business of "getting things done." Art is not simple recording, communicating and problem solving; art is adventurous, selective portrayal done with extraordinary, imaginative skill. Thus art cinema, while contending with its own time, will generally be ahead of its time in its terms; and it will speak usually to the few, not the many.

If contemporary existence is such a brand new affair, then we must, if for no other reason, for our own protection and gain, explore this existence relentlessly. Art cinema is one relentless exploration. It is uniquely appropriate to its own subject because it is so modern, so technically complex, and so unflinching. Much of the exploration will be in the areas of life which middle class people would like to ignore. Often we figure that if we do not talk or think about something then it will somehow just not be there or it will go away. That is irresponsible sentimentalism. Poverty, murder, cruelty, filth, hypocrisy, disease, degradation, rape, seduction, alcoholism, injustice, infidelity, racism and all the rest of our modern unlovelies just don't go away. In fact, they get worse if we do not look at them squarely and find workable rearrangements and controls.

In our time impersonalism and bafflement because of bigness are prime problems. We had better look at them. Estrangement from others and estrangement from self seem to increase in proportion to compulsory togetherness. We had better look at all this with all the penetration that we can muster.

Art penetrates. Art cinema, when it is good, is an extraordinary penetration. It often gets at existence in its deepest reaches, no matter how lovely or unlovely. It, through exaggeration, selec-

tivity and vibrant portrayal, can speak in a unique language of revelation.

In art cinema vividly are seen some of the clues to contemporary existence. Sin is one of these clues. Emptiness is another. Danger is there, too. We are called to be in this world—to see it as it is—though we do not have to be of it. But there is grace and goodness and integrity and joy in the world, also. These, too, have been seen by the art cinema. The art cinema gives us goodly range as well as penetration.

Now, of course, the "tart" film disguised as an "art" film is vulgar display and gives few clues to genuine truth for our times. "B.B." and worse have been featured in crass commercializations of sex. Sex and sin do not make an art film, though art films in a prudish, self-commending era often have to break through the conventions in order to get at "life." And such "break throughs" are not for all eyes, especially the young.

For contemporary clues to modern meaning, one can commend: **La Dolce Vita**, **Citizen Kane**, **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning**, **La Strada**, **Room at the Top**, **The Mark**, **The Connection**, **The Island**, and **The Savage Eye**.<sup>1</sup> Not only these, but many others should be seen . . . even the bad in order to know the good. Wherever we have cinema which wish to be high art, we have some real clues.

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<sup>1</sup> Less great, but worthy, from past recent seasons: *The Taste of Honey*, *The Two Women*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Never on Sunday*, *Raisin in the Sun*, *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, *Look Back in Anger*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *All the King's Men*, *Freud*, *David and Lisa*, *The Sky Above and the Mud Below*, and that joyful little non-sexy French thing, *The Red Balloon*, plus those that did not quite make it—maybe because they imitate earlier successes or because they skirt mere exploitations of sex and sordidness: *The Entertainer*, *Boccaccio 70*, *L'Avventura*, *Rocco and His Brothers*, and *Last Year at Marienbad*. Many others can be mentioned such as: *The Balcony*, *This Sporting Life*, *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *Breathless*, and *The View from the Bridge*.

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