Lost in Transit

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A TORTUOUS PATH: FROM THE FILMMAKER TO THE VIEWER

MOST discussions and writings on the subject of motion pictures, including those scrutinizing film's structural characteristics, aesthetic qualities, and effects on the audience, have traditionally referred to the film work in a relatively abstract sense, i.e. without considering the actual state of the film print as projected. Their authors tacitly imply the existence of the "perfect print" -- a complete and authorised version presented to the viewer in an immaculate state without distortions, as if just released from the studio's laboratory, released without delay and screened on an adequate projection equipment in an equally appropriate environment.

Film is generally understood as a recorded medium which allows each print to be repeatedly screened, thus generating a series of identical performances; this inherent quality makes movies different, for example, from the stage play or a musical interpretation where every single performance is unique. It seems however, that this theoretical attribute of the film medium has been accepted too literally in everyday practice; more attention ought to be paid to examining how far the actual viewing situation conforms to the ideal one -- in other words, what the film viewers *really* see.

Although one can assume that a "perfect" print really exists and could be properly presented in the way as intended by the film's author in a "perfect" screening, it is evident that such an occasion would be rather rare; this is not different today from any other time in the cinema's century-old history. Premiere releases in the movie's original country of production would probably come closest to fulfilling such a requirement. In the real world, the audience is rarely able to enjoy the "perfect" print; in fact, it sees a specific, or "real" print which is made available to him in concrete circumstances. In these conditions, various external factors interfere with the discourse between the filmmaker and his audience. They may, and often do, alter the print's qualities and, consequently, the viewer's perception of the film.(1) These influences may impede, disrupt, even restrict the film's availability to those wishing to appreciate its qualities. It is not difficult to conclude that viewing one "real" print may differ in many ways, sometimes significantly, from viewing another print of the same title in different circumstances, and, particularly, from the print in the production studio's vault.

This means that in the traditional bipolar filmmaker -- viewer equation the audience must look for and reckon with several influential unknowns outside the structures of the film work as such. The significance of these variables as well as their relative obscurity call for an examination since they are without doubt co-determinators of the film's individual and societal impact. These variable factors are part of the relatively uncharted territory which extends along the complicated path from the filmmaker to the viewer.

This territory comprises several large and diverse aspects of an area of study which some scholars have grouped under the umbrella term *filmology.* This includes film distribution and exhibition; film deterioration and destruction; efforts as to its preservation and restoration; various forms of governmental, institutional and individual censorship; all kinds of print distortion and manipulation (the latter becomes important particularly when film is shown on television or sold on videotape). Each of these areas opens a door which may introduce a change, in one way or another, into the communication avenues between the creative artist on one end and the audience on the other. These variables determine how the film work will be experienced and interpreted by the public, when and in which condition it will reach its viewers -- or if it will be allowed to reach them at all.

None of these elements is unknown. Most of them have been individually discussed on more than one occasion in the present and the past, sometimes quite thoroughly. Relatively recent disputes about the colorization of black-and-white films, for example, remain in the collective memory of the international film and television community; the perennial conflict involving film and media censorship will probably be discussed forever. Articles pointing to the problem of preserving nitrate film and transferring it to the safety stock, the fading of colour stock, the costs of restoration, digitalization and archives' function sporadically appear and disappear.

Yet they seem to be looking mostly at the details which, although themselves very important, are only a fragment of a much wider picture whose combined impact upon the perception of the film medium is enormous. Lack of global understanding of the problem causes misconceptions and ultimately leads to film's far-reaching mythologisation. In fact, the role of the *post-authorial* elements for the film's proper understanding deserves much more attention than it is currently being given. This problem has to be properly identified, its overall impact examined, taking into consideration the intentions of the films' creators. Let us consider some of the factors involved.

Recent observations upon the state of contemporary cinema, a medium and an art form which has just entered the second century of its existence, have often focused on the subject of "shortage of good films." Such commentaries, both written and spoken, are usually targeting filmmakers for losing their imagination and creative energy -- one frequently hears the nostalgic remark that "the lions are dying out;" the producing companies for setting their economical priorities wrongly; the governments for insufficient support of the arts; changes in the society's structure, people's tastes, cultural decline and the like.

But this is at best only half of the truth. A glance at the international film production of the last five years or so will confirm that good films have not disappeared from the face of this Earth. They *do* exist. They are a minority but this has never been otherwise and the proportions between quality and trash are not much different from those of three, five or thirty years ago. Sometimes one has too look for value in areas or countries which have been traditionally ignored.

If anything has changed, it is the fact that many excellent films are not *distributed* outside restricted and hard-to-reach circuits, such as festivals, repertory cinemas and film societies, and that, in some regions and countries, they are not distributed at all. Nostalgia aside, the mainstream distribution systems were never favourable to other films but the mainstream production -- in the past as in today. In recent years, however, more people than ever are becoming aware of this situation and they painfully perceive this deficiency.

To a significant degree, this is a result of the new information technologies, the television and particularly the Internet, which started to communicate detailed information *about* film production (including quality images, moving images and sound) to millions of people. They even facilitate and encourage global discussion on these subjects -- who made what where -- yet are unable to supply the revealed film works themselves.[(2)] In a sense, this paradoxically resembles the situation in some economically underprivileged countries where people, having observed the affluent lifestyle in the developed countries on television, start to demand the same for themselves.

There are plentiful illustrations confirming that the distribution problem is getting worse by the year as the global film output increases while the distribution structure remains as rigid as ever -- the "debt" of stalled films incessantly accumulates: On the North American continent, for example, a number of splendid, internationally honoured films, are awaiting to be distributed and exhibited, some of them for almost a decade. They include Krzysztof Kieslowski's 1988 *Decalogue*,[(3)] Emir Kusturica's 1995 *Underground*, Alain Resnais' 1994 *Smoking, No Smoking*, Akira Kurosawa's 1993 *Madadayo*, Hou Hsiao Hsien's 1989 *A City of Sadness*, Theo Angelopoulos' 1995 *Ulysses' Gaze* (whose central theme is actually a *lost film*), most of the Jean-Luc Godard 1990s' output, films by Marco Ferreri, and Michelangelo Antonioni. These films represent only a small sample from a very long list of works by distinguished filmmakers young and old, many of them recipients of prestigious festival prizes and awards; these films remain unavailable but to a select few. It is unclear as to when and if these works will be theatrically exhibited.

In other countries, for which Canada is a revealing example (probably with the exception of Québec), this problem is amplified by the exemplary failure to bring that country's indigenous production into its cinemas; the Canadian public has little chance to get acquainted with films made in its own country. Ironically, a number of Canadian video shops carry the domestic film production under the "Foreign" label -- that is, if they carry it at all.

On another continent, in Europe's Czech Republic, a country with an old, well-established film production tradition and an educated movie audience, the access to a wider spectrum of international film production has dropped over the last decade almost by half. Films from only about ten countries were distributed in 1994 and a few more in 1995. Ten years before that, twice as many national productions were represented on

the (then) Czechoslovak distribution menu, despite the repressive cultural policies of the totalitarian regime of that period.(4)

Additional examples would easily fill most of the space reserved for this article which is not intended to dwell exclusively on this specific predicament.(5) Above all, implications of the distribution problem must be examined and properly understood; this by itself would be a significant step towards a solution. As to the above-mentioned "lack" of good films: the misunderstanding about where this supposed shortage actually originates has to be examined and clarified.

It is quite evident that the blame for this inadequacy can be placed on the filmmakers and other film artists or producers only in part. There is a great structural fault within the existing distribution system, a factor outside the film production process, which prevents rather than enables good works of motion pictures, sometimes true masterpieces, to reach their destination. Distribution has, to a non-negligible degree, become counterproductive. An increasing number of individuals have realised this. Some of them have made attempts to bring valuable films out of the vaults and onto the cinema screens; among the relatively successful ones is the well-known Italian director Nanni Moretti.(6)

If and when some of the ignored films eventually become available for theatrical exhibition (or are broadcast on television or transferred to video), they will have changed; before all, they will have aged. Somewhat displaced in time, they will seem to be addressing problems irrelevant for much of the new audience which will already have seen other films dealing with similar problems. The new films may perhaps be less original but will certainly be more fortunate in reaching their audience quickly; the older films will then seem out of place, despite their ultimate originality. It will be hard to explain that it is them who ought to be credited as the true ground-breaking works. Naturally, not all their impact will be lost; the greatest of them will transcend time, like the masterpieces of literature, drama and other arts in the past. Yet even the best films, when stalled, will be viewed from a different perspective than if they had been released immediately upon completion. Such delays will inevitably distort the films' intention and impact.

Then there are thousands of films which *were* once shown and enjoyed by millions of viewers and talked about extensively. These movies, too, are nowhere to be seen today. The traditional practice of the existing distribution and exhibition systems is that movies, after having been exploited in the first and second run and perhaps also in repertory theatres, are shelved. (A number of them will be made available in video rental stores.) This means that if you want to enjoy the film which impressed you three, five or fifteen years ago, the one you once missed, or the one you could not have seen because you simply did not exist, it will probably be impossible for you to do so, or at least very difficult. With some luck, you will be able to see some of them on a videocassette or a laserdisc; the chances that they will come to your "neighbourhood theatre" are practically nil. From the viewer's personal perspective, films which one cannot access and, above all, which one knows nothing about, do not exist.

Occasionally, a restored version or re-release of a famous movie title will appear in repertory cinemas (recent examples include Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 *Vertigo*, David Lean's 1962 *Lawrence of Arabia*, or Luis Bunuel's 1967 *Belle de jour*), or will make its way to the "big screen." Such ventures are quite admirable but considering the mass of good -- and great -- films of the past which remains inaccessible, they are practically negligible. Many of the old films will never again find their audience, simply because they will be destroyed (and thousands of them have already been destroyed) -- by natural causes, as a result of negligence or a deliberate act.(7)

The path from the filmmaker to the viewer is not simple even when a film receives a proper and prompt distribution. There is no assurance that one will see what the director had intended. Probably one of the most obvious and discussed obstacles here is censorship. Much ink has been spilled on this subject; only to describe some details would require several volumes. Evidently, censorship is one of the old key elements of thought control; one can wish but cannot expect that it will ever go away. At this moment, let us point to censorship's multifaceted character; there are many forms it can assume.

In the so-called western democracies and in puritan societies, the "moral" aspect gets mostly into the spotlight; in authoritarian and totalitarian countries it may be the political and issues which will be more relevant. A comparative historical and cross-cultural study of "objectionable criteria" would be very useful;

it would without doubt help to point to censorship's arbitrary nature. Seen from a global perspective, films are mutilated in many ways; what the audience finally sees may be quite different from the author's original intent.

Let us stress that the term "censorship" usually denotes only the officially sanctioned and precisely determined interference with the film (or other work). Like a lightning rod, this institution is also the focus of the struggle for freedom of expression which is directed against it. This is understandable, particularly from the political point of view, as the existence of censorship is an important question of human rights. From a more practical perspective, however, an officially sanctioned censorship represents only a tip of the iceberg, a small part of the vast network of interference with the motion picture work which the film will have to face upon leaving the studio before it is able to communicate with the viewer.

It is almost impossible to list in detail all these hurdles which also involve economical and even personal factors. This network of obstacles includes the obscure domain of *invisible censorship*, an area very difficult to define, seize and name -- it is even hard to call it censorship since there is no specific institution and no real censor behind it. Some of the interference may be in fact unintentional. Yet it is precisely because this "guerilla censorship" mechanism is acting behind the scenes, surreptitiously, anonymously and without rules, because sometimes the viewers themselves fail to take notice of what's going on, it may be particularly damaging.

This kind of interference is at work in many ways, but it becomes most evident in situations where a film is exported and shown in a different country or through another medium: Subtitling, dubbing, shortening, occasional re-editing and renaming are quite common in international transit. Subtitling may be simply incompetent, full of mistakes, or used as an additional censor's tool; dubbing -- a significantly more profound intervention into the film's structure -- may be even more damaging. Re-editing, to make the film "better understandable" by less astute audiences may transform or mutilate a film work beyond recognition;[(8)] renaming may suggest an element which does not properly reflect the film's character or creates false expectations by the audience, ultimately distorting the work's impact.

When the film is shown on television or video, it suffers probably the most extensive deformations. In addition to the loss of image size and definition dictated by the current state of mass-market television and video technology,[(9)] the viewer of films on the television or video screen must consider the loss of original aspect ratio, additional censoring interference by zealous network managers, additional cuts to make more space for commercials to fit the film into the programming slots, substandard video transfers and dubbing. An added factor are advertisement intrusions including juxtaposition of commercial messages over the image or soundtrack in parts of the film considered by the network programmers as "unimportant" and other interventions into the film's original structure. Some alterations of the film work may be almost invisible, such as a subtle increase in projection speed in a televised movie to obtain more commercial time.

The general practice of television networks and stations to cut off the edges of a widescreen film image to conform it to the traditional 4:3 television screen ratio[(10)] represents one of the most flagrant assaults on the film's integrity. Most VHS videocassettes and many laserdiscs are produced in "flat" versions. Few people are aware of the fact that up to about one half of the original image area may be lost this way, together with the -- sometimes crucial -- visual information communicated to the viewer by the film's makers. The traditional argument put forward by the TV networks that "this is what the consumers prefer" is, if true, a sad reflection of the visual literacy of the television audience; it is, not surprisingly, also confirmation of the complete abdication of the networks' own responsibility in respect to maintaining a certain quality of their programming.[(11)]

Changes to the film's structure and to the artistic intent do not have to mean only that something has been removed. Sometimes, a new element can be added, as it is in the case of colorizing old monochrome films screened on television. This problem was subject to extensive discussions in the early 1990s when this technique became practicable; television broadcasters' practices were contested by a number of prominent filmmakers, cinematographers and other motion picture artists in several countries. Nevertheless, it still remains one of the obstacles on the complex road between the filmmaker and the viewer.

It seems that the audience and even most film reviewers and critics have tacitly accepted this state of things

-- they rarely speak about it. It is much easier to mount a frontal attack against the official censors than against invisible anonymous hands. This is quite disturbing in itself but even more perilous is the fact that film material thus altered or mutilated often serves as a basis for serious professional analysis, interpretation and evaluation. The teaching of film equally suffers as in most cases not even the teachers themselves have access to crucial film material. This is the point where mythologisation and misrepresentation of cinema's history begin their work.

Notes

1. Factors such as the individual viewer's physical and mental disposition, his mood, viewing position and the like, also contribute to the nature of the film's perception; however, they are not the subject of this study.

2. Or at least not yet. The Internet has the capacity to transmit moving pictures and sound which makes it a tool that will likely help to imptove access to films.

3. The Part 5 and 6 of *Decalogue* were released in a special (longer) theatrical version entitled *A Short Film About Killing* and *A Short Film About Love*.

4. According to the statistics published in *Filmový přehled*, films from Australia, Argentina, Bulgaria, P.R. of China, Cuba, Colombia, France, Germany (West), Germany (DDR), Hungary, Italy, Japan, Mexico, North Korea, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, UK, USA, USSR, Vietnam (North), West Berlin, and Yugoslavia, were imported to Czechoslovakia in 1986. (*Filmový přehled*, Index 1986.) In 1994, films from Australia, France, Ireland, Island, Italy, Germany, Slovak Republic, UK, USA and Yugoslavia were shown in CR. (*Filmový přehled*, Index 1994.)

5. This problem and some of its U.S. implications were mentioned recently by Richard Corliss in the *TIME* magazine: Richard Corliss, "Fellini Go Home!," *TIME* 149, No. 2, January 13, 1997, pp. 46-48.

6. In 1991, in protest at the poor state of film distribution in Rome, Moretti bought and started running a cinema called Nuovo Sacher. This movie house offers an excellent and critically acclaimed selection of films, shown mostly in their original language. Since then, Nuovo Sacher has become a meeting place for the local cinematic talent; it also makes an effort to support good Italian and international films.

7. One of the exemplary institutions trying to counter these destructive forces is the reputable festival of silent film, the Giornate del cinema muto in the small North-Italian town of Pordenone. In conjunction with film archives of several countries, it has been presenting restored prints of old films.

8. A famous example of radical re-editing was the American release of Max Ophuls' 1955 masterpiece *Lola Montès*.

9. Improvement in this respect has been brought by technological advances such as the high-definition television (HDTV) and the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD).

10. This is a general practice by the great majority of television broadcasters in North America; in Europe, it is less frequent.

11. Even the new 9:16 (or 1:1.77) television screen ratio which is still in its infancy matches only the narrowest of the existing theatrical film formats; full Cinemascope, for example, has generally been using 1:2.35 (formerly 1:2.55) ratios.

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