

1) Where did you grow up? How do you think it influenced you as a filmmaker?

I was born in Belgium, in the City of Charleroi, in "the black country". It's a region which developed thanks to coal mining. My paternal grandfather worked all his life underground, while my mother's father, a violinist and orchestra leader conducted the band during the projection of silent films in the city's brasseries. These are two influences, the artistic influence on my mother's side (who was herself an actress) and the social influence of working men and the hard side of life on my father's side.

My first film when I finished my cinema studies was called "Black country, Red country" referring to this coal mining area but also to the workers' struggles, strikes, insurrections and social traditions inspired by the colour red.

My second film, "Chronicle of the seasons of steel" was also rooted in this world of work. It painted the portrait of four workers from different generations, four characters working in the steelworks in the region of Liege in Belgium where I have lived for 30 years. Each character symbolises a season of life, spring, summer, autumn and winter. The social and political commitment of my films obviously stems from this proximity to the world of work during my youth.

2) What was the first documentary you remember seeing, and how did it affect you?

I do not precisely remember the first documentary that I saw, but I remember the films which influenced my adolescence which were very much to do with reality or rather social realism. They were mainly Italian neo-realist films. The first to touch and move me was "La Strada" by Federico Fellini. I was also influenced by the films of Robert Bresson, in particular "A condemned man has escaped". I was sensitive to the realist style but also to the dramatic narrative of these films and their poetic treatment of reality. And so it was mainly fiction films which motivated me to take up the profession of cinema director. And at the dawn of my cinematography studies, I was highly influenced by the cinema schools which can be classified as social and realist: the Russian school (Eisenstein, Dovjenco, Pudovkin and especially Dziga Vertov) French poetic realism (Carné and Prévert) Italian neo-realism (Fellini, Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti) and finally the new Brazilian cinema (Carlos Diegues, Glauber, Rocha, etc.).

These films motivated me to go out and interact with people, but also to confer dignity on them through the cinema, by a dramatic treatment of the real which would also be a crystallisation, sublimation and a poetisation of reality.

3) Which person, living or dead, would you most like to interview, and why?

Like many people, I think that I would most like to interview my parents, in a very personal and intimate way. My mother is dead and has therefore taken certain secrets with her to her grave; because of a natural reserve and shyness I have never dared interview my father in this way. But I think I know a lot of things about their past life.

But outside the family circle, I would like to interview several public figures beginning with one of the most important political leaders of the 20th century, Lenin, who thinking he would establish a regime of equality, Utopia and brotherly love on earth, brought about a totalitarian dictatorship which sent so many people, particularly intellectuals, to

their deaths or to the Gulag. I would like to interview him to find out what he made of the end result of everything he had hoped for, the complete annihilation of the Communist Utopia at the end of the 20th century.

Similarly, I would also like to have an interview with Mobutu which might (given that he is now dead and no longer needs to preserve his image, with nothing to gain or lose), reveal his secrets and who he really was deep down. How he managed to go from being a simple young African, born in poverty at the heart of the equatorial jungle to becoming one of the most wealthy and feared people in the world, before dying in exile in the dustbin of history, buried in Morocco, far from his native land.

Finally if there was a creative person and artist that I would like to interview, it would certainly be Pierre Paolo Pasolini, who was one of the most courageous, rebellious most politically incorrect and most sincere artists of the second half of the 20th century. A man who paid dearly for the coherence of his art, his commitment and his life by being assassinated at the summit of his career.

4) What are the most important topics that need to be covered in documentary today

I think that the most important theme remains men's struggle for their liberty, their integrity, and their identity. This struggle is universal and timeless. It is the struggle of the light against darkness, the forces of life against the forces of death which increasingly ravage our contemporary world. I also think that there is a forgotten continent whose people are living out of a terrible tragedy. I mean Africa, and mainly Central Africa. This part of the world has experienced the wounds of slavery, colonisation and after independence, the yoke of dictatorships and single party government which have plunged these countries and their people into misery and total cultural and existential disintegration.

That is why, for my next film, I am returning to the Democratic Republic of Congo to go back up the Congo River in manner of Joseph Conrad, going into to the "Heart of Darkness" but to look for light, life, solidarity and resistance.

5) What does a documentary film maker gain from being an outsider?

I think that there are many advantages and privileges in being an outsider. The fact of being a stranger allows me to film with more distance. But also with a candid and humble eye and a critical spirit. It's all about saying to oneself: I know nothing and I want to discover everything, and therefore become the intermediary for an audience which knows nothing either. This will obviously necessitate having certain keys to comprehension of society in which one is filming, which means having done research and having talked to various intellectuals, "mentors" to try to immerse oneself as much as possible in the heart of the foreign society.

The other privilege of the foreign film maker means, in these dictatorships such as Zaire or Iran were I have shot two films, to be able to take risks that local filmmakers could not take without endangering their family and immediate circle. It's a case of going across the red line, transgressing taboos and risking arrest (which happened to me in several countries) and expulsion, which happened to me in Mobutu's Zaire.)

The fact of being an "outsider" allows you to explore differences, and put things in perspective. In Iran I was assisted by an Iranian film crew and I even had three assistants from three different environments, A lay person, a cleric and a woman. I was advised by many Iranians intellectuals and supported by Iranian filmmakers. They helped me to shoot pictures and sequences that they could not do without risking their life or at least being sent to prison. I honestly think that the foreigner's point of view can bring people and cultures together and take them in the direction defined by the Iranian president himself, Mohamad Khatami, who in his address to the United Nations talked of the dialogue between civilisations, as a response to the other problem defined by some American neo-conservatives. Who, today, see the world as being under the shock of different civilisations.