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Belgian
Memories



FILM: JEAN-JACQUES ANDRIEN

The work of memory in Louvet clearly did not take place without critical labor. This same labor is found in the career of Jean-Jacques Andrien, but adapted to the demands of cinema. Thus, his films make a broader place for narrative construction and also represent more concretely and immediately the worlds to which they refer. Here we shall examine two films, *Le grand paysage d'Alexis Droeven* (1981) and *Australia* (1989), which are based on the same scenario. Both films portray run-down regions: an agricultural area in the first, the city of Verviers and its wool industry in the second.¹⁶ Two young heirs, the first a farmer, the second the head of a firm, are in financial difficulties and threaten to give up. A member of the family intrudes from the outside and encourages them to break away, holding out the prospect of a more modern lifestyle and its advantages. Gripped by doubts, the two char-

16. Luc Sante, a New York novelist originally from Verviers, has evoked that city and its decline in a beautiful narrative of a search for origins titled *The Factory of Facts* (New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, Inc., 1998). It has been translated into French by Christine Leboeuf as *L'effet des faits* (Arles: Actes Sud, "Un endroit où aller," 1999).

acters nevertheless end up sticking it out and trying to salvage what is essential. In this way they own their heritage.

In each of the films, memory is initially filtered through the melancholy that suffuses the landscapes. Each time, the sustained quality of the gaze and the photography enable Andrien to pay homage to rural or urban settings, which become the most tangible witnesses of a past and a lost grandeur. It is as though films had to direct all the resources of their art toward salvaging the memory of a culture that had long permeated the sites of human labor. Andrien does not, however, indulge in nostalgia for its own sake. Thus, in *Australia*, as the two backgrounds alternate, the modest Walloon landscapes are placed in a difficult rivalry with the sumptuous views of the Australian natural environment. But, laden with history and poetic for that very reason, they bravely take that contrast on.

If the two films have similar themes, the second develops them more powerfully and more brilliantly. It is also true that *Australia* is a more expensive production than *Le grand paysage*, and stars Fanny Ardant and Jeremy Irons. In retrospect, this makes *Le grand paysage* look like a draft of *Australia*, but one that is remarkably able to evoke the difficulty that lies in self-expression and the concomitant labor that goes into reconquering one's speech.

The central character of *Australia* is Edouard Pierson, the son of a wool manufacturer from Verviers, who goes to Australia for professional training before World War II. The war catches him by surprise and keeps him there: he establishes a family there (even though his wife soon dies) and a small wool trade. Thus in this phase he breaks with his origins. We then witness his return to his homeland after the war. He has been summoned by his brother Julien, who has carried on the family business and finds himself threatened with bankruptcy. Edouard shows his brother that the local industry is functioning according to obsolete principles, and that, in any case, wool washing and subsequent operations will henceforth be taking place on another continent. Edouard then leaves, but not without obtaining a financial respite for his brother.

Thus the film is constructed on a strong contrast between the old world and the new. Andrien's innovation consists in having the character from the new world who is critical of the old world also be heir to this declining world. A subtle form of distancing takes place: the external perception is internalized as the action develops, according to a dialectic that Irons handles very well. What is being questioned is not

so much obsolete economic management as the lack of awareness vis-à-vis this obsolescence, which is expressed in the way the bourgeoisie portrayed here calmly indulges in its pleasures: a violin contest for the ladies and gliding for the gentlemen. Moreover, Edouard, who began by disowning the world from which he came, reestablishes a relationship of desire with it, through the sudden passion stirred in him by Jeanne, the wife of a solicitor, who draws a strange authenticity from her peasant origins and her personal intensity. Julien, the brother, engulfed in old habits, is himself extremely passionate, even in his desire for death (see the beautiful sequence of his gliding in the night sky). In this very gentle film, a violence smolders, a hope takes effect: they are those of a world that has preserved, no matter how severe its decline, more than just the memory of the dynamism and conquering spirit of its founders. Is this why, at the end, a thin ray of hope remains, even if the facts do not justify it?

As in Louvet's work, the experience of memory is also problematic in Andrien's. First in its form: while the former reconstitutes a past as bravely as its fragmented anamnesis allows, the latter manages the appropriation of memory in a more linear, but also more slowly progressive fashion. Then in its content: the film does not bring us glorious episodes, but tales of dilapidation stained with impotence and failure. The choice to show the truth was made without needless pathos, because the two works are based on a materialist conception of history, whose embrace enables one to take note calmly of what was while detailing how things happened, without being afraid to point out errors and contradictions. It is best not to sugarcoat the pill when one is addressing a forgetful society.

Verheggen, Louvet, Andrien, and others—poetry, theater, cinema. Seen up close, these represent so many scattered attempts, not a concerted movement. But these attempts have not been without effect. To give only one example, if the young Walloon government has recently stood out for its unprecedented heritage policy, classifying and restoring monuments and sites, this "cultural good will," limited though it may be, can be seen as a continuation of the momentum begun by filmmakers and writers. Above all, however, these artists have set in motion a new relationship to memory. They have awakened a whole community to the significance of identity. They have taught it to consider

the productions of the past as the fundamental elements of a social personality. They have made it understand that every people has a right to its image and that this image depends on acts, works, and persons that will likely determine how others will come to see it. In short, they have provided the impetus for a will to remember that is unprecedented among Walloons.

—Translated from the French by Barbara Harshav

Belgian Memories

Edited by Catherine Labio

What is the nature of the relationship between memory, identity, and culture in a recently federalized nation? In *Belgian Memories*, writers and scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, including ethnology, linguistics, philosophy, literature, history, film, art history, and geography, ask to what extent Belgium's literary and visual environment (from novels to paintings, comic strips to movies, and architecture to urban planning) reflects distinctly Belgian ways of dealing with the past. Such issues have become more pressing since Belgium has reconstituted itself politically and must deal with the prospect that it might itself become a memory.

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