



HOLLAND
FILM MEETING



NETHERLANDS
PRODUCTION
PLATFORM

VARIETY CINEMA MILITANS LECTURE

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By Paul Cox

Thank you for inviting me here. I've always envied those bishops preaching in these large cathedrals, impregnating their god-fearing subjects with guilt.

Actually, fear and guilt are not so bad. I'd rather face a fearful, guilt-ridden, God-loving audience (like yourselves) than the many hedonistic, disco-driven, robocop looking film executives who don't know the word guilt and who are more or less in control of the cinema. Only recently I caught up with a film called Die Hard... I probably don't have to tell you that this film celebrates the gun and every possible violation of the spirit. 'It's fun', they say. 'Don't take it seriously', they say.

No, we're not so stupid as to take it seriously, but let me quote you a few excerpts from an article I found in the New York Times:

'Nathaniel White recently ripped a woman open with a knife, slitting her from the top of her chest to her abdomen. He told the police he saw it done in the movie Robocop II and tried hard to copy it.

White killed six times in upstate New York. He felt he got it right, just like they did it in the movie. The local video store said White rented every violent movie they had, but he got Robocop I and Robocop II dozens of times.

In Salt Lake City, Utah, William Andrews was executed by lethal injection... for a killing he said he copied from the Clint Eastwood 1973 movie Magnum Force. During a hold-up at a hi-fi store, Andrews and a friend forced five hostages to drink the drain cleaner, Drano. All but one died.

A nine-year-old girl was sexually assaulted with a broom handle by four other children on a deserted beach in San Francisco. They said they copied it from the Linda Blair prison movie Born Innocent they had seen on TV.

These are just a few of the more prominent cases. Please allow me to bore you with a few statistics to make my point clear. Real violence is certainly increasing, especially amongst the young. Murders committed by those under 18 rose 16% between 1981 and 1990. Rapes committed by youths under 18 rose 28% in the same period and assault was up 57%. All this at the same time as the number of Americans under 18 actually decreased.

A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association compared the situation in the US and Canada with South Africa, where television was introduced

much later and many had limited access to cinemas. They found the homicide rate among white Americans nearly doubled between the introduction of television in the 1950s and 1975. The biggest surge in US slayings occurred after 1965 just as the first generation of children who grew up with television reached adolescence. The same thing happened in Canada. But in South Africa, where television was not introduced until 1975, the homicide rate for whites remained flat between 1950 and 1975.

By 1987, as South Africa's first television generation came of age, the homicide rate more than doubled. Meanwhile, in the US and Canada, homicide rates between 1974 and 1987 remained relatively stable.

I think that the violence one sees on the big or small screen doesn't make people more violent, but it makes them more willing to accept violence from other people. But what is the difference? I heard a story about a young boy in an emergency ward in New York. He had been shot in the leg and couldn't believe it hurt so much - he'd seen so many characters in the movies who'd kept going after they'd been shot, as if nothing happened.

Just consider for a moment a single day's worth of destiny for American children. Every 36 minutes in the US a child is killed or injured by a gun. Every 7 minutes a child is arrested for drug offence. Every day 135,000 children under 16 take their guns to school. Yes, Die Hard was a very successful movie. So was Die Hard 2... and I believe a Die Hardest or Die Harder, with a lot more fast dying, is in the making, with the star being paid a mere 10 million for all his dying. Meanwhile, we should very quietly consider that every three seconds, somewhere on this planet a child is dying hard of hunger. Very quietly.

America controls at least 80% of all airways around the world. The US has a total monopoly over us mortals and even the silliest American movie can march into a cinema right here and find an audience, replacing local product. How is it possible that a culture that has so many troubles and so many problems within is now totally in charge of the greatest gift to our century? How is it possible?!

Every airline in the world flies mainly American films. Are the Dutch films too earthbound to be taken up into the sky by KLM? Or has KLM no say in the matter?

Is cinema dying? Yes, it is. It is dying rapidly and hard and harder and hardest because if the movies don't violate our human dignity or don't celebrate consumerism, we don't have a product. Human beings are now called consumers. The family home has become a piece of real estate. The family watch is now the Swatch and a film in the making is called a project - a pseudonym for product. Our consumer society can only afford to celebrate the surface, the outer. The inner is totally ignored. Yet the only films we remember are the ones that penetrate the psyche, that linger in the subconscious, that balance the inner and the outer - the type of films that we're not allowed to make any more and, if we do, that will not be released - or on a very small scale - as they are voted not commercial enough by the experts in Armani suits.

I know of about five films that have never left me. Bergman's *Persona*, for instance. I know of other films that have somehow burned a hole in my subconscious and are still travelling with me.

We are saturated with images flashing at us from all directions - images of a consumer society - that have no past, no future, no substance. To appreciate a good

painting, one has to look at it for a long time. Nothing can trigger or stimulate the heart and the imagination when the accepted formula is Fast and Painless.

In his book, *Voltaire's Bastards*, John Ralston Saul argues that western civilisation is without belief for the first time since the decline of the Roman Empire. We've killed God and replaced him with ourselves. No civilisation can survive without belief. Without spirit and faith, we're doomed.

Cinema is dying because spirit and faith - the very foundation poles of the act of creation - have been consciously replaced by greed and hatred. We now consciously pollute our oceans and our rivers.

Consciously we destroy our forests. Consciously we build our cities as drab and grey as possible. Consciously we allow reason to invade our dreams and the dreams of our children. To assume that consciousness is nonsense, is absolute nonsense. A child may be physically small with simple conscious thoughts, but a child still identifies with the prehistoric psyche and is capable of offering his dreams to the world as absolute reality. If we could only invent some type of mechanism that could be implanted into a child's mind and work like a movie camera, film would reach its true potential and science would be justified. With the progression of science and knowledge, the world has become more and more dehumanised. Jung already noticed that man was losing his emotional unconscious identity with natural phenomena. Thunder is no longer the voice of the angry gods. Rivers no longer contain spirits; no more demons live in mountain caves; no voices speak from stones, trees or animals.

Yes, cinema is dying, because film has lost the ability to ask 'Who lives in this world? What forms of life? What living creature? What is our destiny? What does it mean to be human?' In our private world we have our children, our friends, our families. We find some sanity, some peace and creativity. The big world out there is full of trepidation and treachery. Now let us once again very quietly consider that every three seconds, somewhere on this planet a child is dying hard of hunger.

In the middle ages, whole towns or villages went mad. An epidemic of madness, waves of collective insanity affected the people. The same thing is happening again because now the whole world has gone mad. How else can you explain the enormous, terrifying success of *Die Hard*? And what about *Silence of the Lambs* winning the Academy Award some years ago for best picture? That indeed was a grim moment for any thinking, feeling, struggling film-maker. A serial killer fond of human liver plays cat and mouse games with a female investigator and in the end walks free to make a sequel possible. Yes, the film was well made and well acted and well directed, but so was the Second World War.

Nowadays, to try to make films that attempt to penetrate the human condition in some depth is also an act of madness. One virtually becomes a target for those who oversee the financing and carry the heavy responsibility of controlling the budget. 'This is not commercial... too arty... not enough action... too deep... the characters aren't interesting...' These people make sure that film becomes, or remains, a product which aims at a particular market and with no intention other than to make a large profit.

This is, of course, one of the reasons why films are so bad. When I see people lining up for a movie to buy tickets, I cannot help thinking about Sam Goldwyn's famous quote:

'There is one God for all creation, but there must be a separate God for the movies. How else can you explain their survival?'

Most films are so bad that even after your friends tell you how bad a film is, you can't believe it until you see it for yourself. Why is this? After all, film is the most extraordinary gift to our century and, together with music and the visual arts, should enrich our lives instead of pandering to the lowest levels of our consciousness. In a bookshop one can always find something of interest, whilst the average video shop splits at the seams with bad taste.

Until somewhere after the Second World War, an audience wasn't yet conditioned to expect a formula. They were open to a film-maker's dreams and illuminations. Film hadn't become a product, packaged to suit a consumer society. Now the film-maker has become part of a team of manufacturers who produce a product for a certain market.

Fortunately, no-one has ever been able to discover what makes a successful film. Apart from the obvious ingredients of sex, violence and rock 'n roll, the experts are often totally wrong. There is something in the collective psyche of man that strangely enough rejects the here and now and searches for a larger truth. Most Academy Award winners soon disappear into oblivion, but Jacques Tati's *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday* is still shown all over the world 40 years after it was made. Whether he ever made any money out of it is another question, but he was allowed to explore his own humour on film without feeling trapped by commercial demands. A sense of true optimism rises within me when I see this type of film still being appreciated after all these years. But would Jacques Tati be allowed to make his films if he had lived and created in our time? Would Bergman have risen from the ashes? Would Fellini have made his masterpieces? Would Ray have been recognised? Would Bunuel be appreciated? I know so many fine film-makers who are loved and respected by the movie buffs, whose contributions are essential to keep alive and inspire others, yet have enormous problems finding backers for their films.

An article in the *New Yorker* tells us that in the States, the big studios don't make films as such: the film starts as a project, becomes part of a package and then goes into production with all pre-arranged and anticipated deals in place. Most films are conceived and planned in accordance with these deals. To make an advance sale to television or theatrical chains, the project must come from a best seller, an exciting hijacking or a thinly-disguised showbiz biography of someone who came to an apparently wretched end. How else can you interest buyers? Certainly not with anything that tries to treat the human condition with some depth. Those in charge of the money like to feel safe. They prefer to spend big on something stupid than spend on something worthwhile. They feel safe with big star packages with known ingredients that avoid all complexities.

A total lack of vision is essential to being a successful studio producer or successful executive producer. Very few of these people have grown up in an artistic milieu: they don't have the background, the instincts and information of those who have lived and sweated films for many years - the committed film-makers. But these people feel they are creative people and reserve their enthusiasm only for films which make money. Strangely enough, the only films they consider good films are the ones that make money. These creative giants also reserve the right to have final cut and can over-rule the director and his team at any stage of the production.

Film is not a product like shampoo; film is the most powerful invention of our time. It has enormous power. Man has no history of being able to handle power; power is always being abused.

The Third Reich used film very successfully: we have all seen Leni Riefenstahl's expos, of the gods and her well-backed insights into the remarkable workings of the Third Reich. Let's all thank the gods that television hadn't been developed in the thirties. If Hitler and Goebbels had been able to go on daily talk-back shows, the Third Reich would most probably still be marching. I also don't believe that Ronald Reagan would ever have risen to fame and fortune without his basic Hollywood training.

I believe that one should never underestimate the so-called general public and I get deeply upset when I see films made by committees catering for what they think the general public wants or is looking for, when one knows that people want something that touches them, something that deals with emotional truths. But you say this to an American producer and he'll say, 'What emotional truths? What do you mean? This is show business man, it needs a hook.'

If cinema is art, then one must not expect it to be easily understood. No-one expects this of the other arts. The core of art is vision and kindness. Through vision we find divine origin everywhere - in the sea, the sky, a tree, a leaf, a simple smile - and kindness keeps us close to the child, close to the gods. And if we collectively have any future at all, it lies in the protection of our children, allowing them to retain their natural gentleness and kindness, so that they are not forced to die hard but live gently and die softly.

Is cinema dying? Yes, it is. Where are the moments that linger? ...Isabelle Huppert cleaning the lettuce in *The Lacemaker*, Bibi Anderson and Liv Ullmann changing faces in *Persona*? ...The homecoming in Satyajit Ray's *The World of Apu*? Or Kasper Hauser crying out, 'Everyone has deserted me!'

When one of the English journalists captured by the Iraqis during the Gulf War was asked what he thought of during his ordeal in an Iraqi jail, he said, with tears in his eyes, 'The little moments in life... When I went for a walk in Normandy in the French countryside with a beautiful French girl who later became my wife... When I held my daughter's hand and we walked along the beach.'

Those really important moments. They have nothing to do with all that violence, with all that violation, with all that compromise, with all that greed, with all that hatred, with all that ignorance. These moments are drenched with humanity, with human feelings, with longing and hope and, above all, with our dreams. Just imagine if someone dared today to have the idea of making a film called *Forbidden Games* (*Jeux Interdit*), Clement's great film about two children stealing crosses for their own cemetery. I saw it here in Holland some forty years ago. It had a lasting effect on me and I'm sure had much to do with my future direction. Just imagine if you were to take this script and try to get it funded now. Just imagine...

On a more personal note, I'm glad to report that my films have no heroes, no killings as such, no fast cars, no special effects - in fact, none of the ingredients that make successful films. Against all odds though, my films travel, have found an audience and, strangely enough, often recoup their budgets. My little heroes are real - like you and I - because these films are not made for the lot of you, but for each one of you

individually. So why haven't I been asked to direct Top Gun 5, Rocky 12 or Robocop 25?

A few years ago a dear friend - a woman called Sheila Florence - was dying of cancer. During her long career she was always too outspoken and too talented to become a big star. Audiences loved her. Producers and directors feared her. She'd played small parts in many of my films. Now it was time to do something big.

But how do you finance a film about an old woman dying of cancer, with approximately three months to live?

First, we needed a script. This took three days and three nights. A pre-sale was out of the question, of course, and in the process of trying, we lost much valuable time. Nobody really wanted to know and despite our pasts and the minuscule budget, things looked grim. Sheila suggested we mortgage her underpants, but I thought this was too risky as she only had one pair. Finally, we persuaded the authorities who mattered to support us, breaking a few rules. The insurance was my house and my Dunhill pipe. Before we started, I said to Sheila, 'If you die on me, you'll kill me.' She said, 'I won't. I'll be a good girl.' Due to some final opposition, we lost another two weeks. We had six weeks left.

During the filming of *A Woman's Tale* we laughed and cried a lot. Never doubted the outcome. Everyone involved gave their last drop. It was a political victory of sorts - a victory over all the awful commercial demands of the film business. In that dreadful atmosphere of Die Hards, we'd made a film about love and life in which death - real death - was the metaphor.

A few days before Sheila died, she said, 'There's still so much love in me; it's oozing from me; it can't be stopped.' No, it didn't stop. The film was remarkably successful. The reactions restored my faith in the medium and in the human race. Several people, however, still haven't forgiven me for making this film. Someone even suggested that I'd made a snuff movie.

In contradiction to everything I've said, there's one more story about another film that I'd like to include, in the hope that it might inspire others never to give up. This is an abbreviated version from my diary.

A few years before her death, my mother and I visited the Kröller-Müller Museum here in Holland. When we finally arrived at the Van Gogh collection, she was a little out of breath and sat down in the middle of the room. There was nobody else around. We felt very privileged. I left her sitting there and started to view each painting carefully. When I'd completed the circuit, I arrived at Vincent's self portrait. Of all his self portraits, this one I find the most powerful. I stood there a long time. Then my mother quietly joined me. Vincent stared at us both with the most painful, hurt expression.

'There's such grief in his eyes...such grief,' said my mother softly. She started to shake, then a flood of tears...all embracing tears. 'That great grief of human kind', as Vincent calls it in his letters, had totally overwhelmed her. It was there and then that I decided to make the film *Vincent, The Life And Death Of Vincent Van Gogh*. I owed it to my mother.

When we got home, I discussed the idea with my sister Angeline and her husband Jaap, who both worked with the museum, and nothing more was said for quite a few years. As we know, to find support for a film that in terms of box-office has nothing to

offer, is not an easy task. An American company was extremely interested, though and suggested that I talk to Michael Douglas, as his father had played Vincent some 25 years earlier. To use him would be a good gimmick! This very suggestion made it quite clear that we didn't have much chance of getting the money from the States.

A few others I approached all thought it essential to have a big star playing Vincent and thought my approach - the whole film to be shot from Vincent's point of view - far too risky and too experimental.

I saw this film as an homage to a great soul and didn't want either my ego or an actor's ego to interfere with Vincent's spirit.

Then a courageous Canadian woman, who headed an American distribution company, helped us with the required pre-sale - at least, with the promise of a reasonable pre-sale - and due to some favourable tax laws at the time, we managed to get the money together. In our offer document, our pre-sale was mentioned, but we never had a signed contract. At this point I didn't worry too much about a few minor legalities and was sure that all would be sorted out by the time we'd finished the film.

I started to write the script like a man possessed. Too many years had gone by, too much fire and passion lost since the first conception.

My co-worker and assistant, Millie Comfort, feverishly typed out the pages I produced in a room above her office. My young daughter ran up and down with new pages and corrections. The initial burst of fire and passion delivered a finished script within two weeks and never required a second draft.

For the next two years, we were virtually on the road in search of Vincent. Interiors and roster were done in Australia, but the tracing of Vincent's footprints, of course, had to be done in Europe. We had a deal with KLM and flew up and down to Europe at regular intervals.

It wasn't always easy to find the last century without a constant reminder of the times we live in. Even the most remote spot would have a plane in the sky or endless power lines spoiling the horizon. Every forest seemed full of empty beer cans and plastic bottles.

We had a small van in which we travelled through the seasons. In the back, an old 35mm Arriflex with a solid tripod. Vincent's words travelled with us and gave us inspiration and guidance. I'd edited and sometimes retranslated his many letters and in the process of doing this, automatically learned the script by heart.

Each time a particular phrase or line matched the landscape, we would bring the van to a screaming halt, set up camera and tripod, like easel and canvas, and record the landscape. I would at times whisper Vincent's words whilst filming, in order to move the camera at the right speed.

One day a beautiful tableau of the last century appeared, an old shepherd leading his sheep through a yellow-green valley, half obscured in the early morning fog. The landscape behind him rolled on for miles, without the usual obstructions of roads and power lines. Even the shepherd's clothing was from the late century. Someone remarked that if we had staged this for the film, it would be quite an expensive scene but it all came to us as a gift, a gift from the gods. I was so moved that I fogged up the eyepiece and filmed without being able to see what was happening. The film opens with this shot.

The editing of Vincent took approximately eight months. Apart from the filming, I also had to do the editing myself, as I was incapable of explaining how the film should be put together. After the first rough-cut, I flew to England to record John Hurt for the voice-over. For three days John exhausted his heart and soul and gave Vincent's words music. Then Vincent was completed and ready to travel.

We took it to Cannes and showed the first cut to interested parties. It was a horrendous first screening, with most of the people walking out. The concentration span of the people at Cannes is - to say at least - poor, but we were dealing with a mass exodus. Afterwards, the few that had remained were silent and our so-called American pre-sale which had, meanwhile, changed hands, was cancelled with the line, 'Beautiful film, Paul, but not for us... Our company would never do it justice.' It was obvious that the film had no sales potential and, according to one expert, wouldn't even get a video release. Who wanted to see a film on Vincent van Gogh without actually seeing the man?

My friend and producer, Tony Llewellyn-Jones, and I were left with a dead turkey and had to go home and face our investors. At first I was too stunned to realise what was happening. I thought we'd made an honest film that would move all those who knew a little about Vincent, but obviously I was totally on the wrong track. Even some people close to us didn't see anything worthwhile in the film, which we found very hurtful. Some investors threatened to sue. They had come to realise that the promised pre-sale didn't really exist and that the film's future looked grim. We borrowed more money to buy them out to avoid going to jail. I went in to my usual post-film depression. Only this time, it was much more severe than ever.

Fortunately, many film festivals around the world wanted to show the film. I decided to accept most invitations and to travel with Vincent. Wouldn't let him out of my sight.

At the Vancouver Film Festival the film received a long standing ovation which, after two years of intensive, hard work and everything I'd gone through, moved me so deeply that I had to flee the cinema. The owner of that cinema offered us some sort of release, but still no major sale.

Tony and I had visions of courtrooms and jails and nervously monitored Vincent's critical success at the various festivals. However, still no distributors were forthcoming. One reasonable offer had come in, but it was somehow jeopardised.

In desperation I went to New York, where the film was given a two-week season in a repertoire cinema. Andrew Sarris from *The Village Voice* gave a full page to Vincent and called it, 'the most profound exploration of an artist's soul ever to be put on film'. God bless him. Our dead turkey had come to life. Vincent showed in cinemas across the States for well over a year, was even released here in Holland and starred in *Variety's* Top 50 list, which was rather comical.

We never lost faith in our audience, in the individual and in Vincent. He never lost faith in us.

On a lighter note, but no less serious, I must read you some quotes from my various encounters with experts in their fields.

Departing words from an enthusiastic producer/con man in Hollywood: 'I'm passionately committed to your project.' Never heard from him again.

Distributor who didn't honour verbal contract: `Beautiful film...I loved it....
Unfortunately it's not for us; our company would never do it justice.'

Overheard... producer at Cannes flicking through the pages of a new brochure in front of a man called George: `Where are the tits, George? ...Where the hell are the tits?'

Hollywood agent ready to sign me up: `I'm not a high-concept guy. I'm a unique individual in this business.'

Parting words from a distributor who refused to pay us our share: `We'll communicate long distance...'

Same man:

`It's true... I must be honest with you... your film did quite well but, as you know, we had some horrendous expenses. It'll take some time before we're going to see some money.'

`You mean, before I will see some money.'

`Yeah, that's right.'

`What about the money you've made already?'

`We're in this together...you know that.'

Conversation with a female producer in Venice, wearing a purple hat and matching handbag:

She: `What did your film Island cost?'

Me: `What do you think?'

She: `I guess about 6 or 7 ...oh, no, maybe that's too much... I know you work with low budgets...probably 5...'

Me: `No... one million.'

She: No... No... not what you got paid...the budget...what was the budget?'

Me: `One million.'

She: `Why can't you tell me?'

Me: `Obviously I can't.'

Admiring female:

`I loved your film, Local Hero.'

`That wasn't my film. That was Bill...'

`You don't have to be so modest. I love your work.'

Hollywood producer:

`Here's a script my wife wrote... She want you to do it.'

`What's the story?'

`It's the greatest load of bull you've ever read. Please tell her you're impressed, but too busy.'

And another producer in Hollywood:

`Here, have a look at this.'

`What is it?'

`My wife's. She's written this script.'

It's absolutely marvellous.'

`What's the story?'

I'll be damned... shit... I couldn't tell you.'

Boss of a TV station after having seen one of my films. He's standing next to me in the men's, talking to his offsider behind him:

Offsider: `What did you think of Paul Cox's film?'

Boss: `What a heap of shit. He's the biggest wanker in the business.'

Offsider: `He doesn't understand the audience.'

Boss: `He understands nothing. Arty-farty crap!'

Me: `I thought it was great.' (Pause)

Boss: `You don't know your arse from your fellow, old boy.' (Pause)

Me: `I am Paul Cox.'" (Long Pause)

Boss: `Sorry!'

Very famous American actress:

`I love all your films.'

`Which ones have you seen?'

`I haven't seen any but my friends... the ones I trust... just love them.'

Angry union rep:

Rep: `I know about your type of films.'

Me: `What do you mean.'

Rep: `You know damned well what I mean.'

Me: 'No, I don't.'

Rep: `Don't play funny buggers with me, my friend. I don't like your type of films.'

Me: `What type of films?!'

Rep: `I think I've made my point.'

I hope I've made my point, too. Yes, the cinema of dreams, of illusions and delusions is dying. But there is some hope. Without a flutter of hope there's no life, so what option do I have but to contradict my own despair? There is some hope if we put our faith in the individual, if we allow that individual to become once again the end product of our society instead of being used by that society to be, above all, as good consumer. Let's not go for bums on seats but for fellow dreamers ready to make the journey. Let's trust that younger generation of film-makers dying to have a say and change things. Yes, let's fight the good fight and never doubt the true power of the medium and its effect on the individual. Each one of us has the most haunting, all embracing film hidden deep inside. Let's have faith in one another's dreams, one another's hearts and put these film into motion. Thank you.