

About Realist Fiction: A Conversation between the Producers Pierre Chevalier and Jordi Balló

Pierre Chevalier is a film and television producer. For 12 years he was the head of the Fiction Unit at the ARTE station, where he produced some 350 works. He has worked with internationally renowned artists from France and abroad, including Joao Cesar Monteiro, Tsai Ming Liang, Lars von Trier, Arturo Ripstein, Oliver Assayas, Chantal Akerman, Emir Kusturica, Walter Salles and Hal Hartley. He was also responsible for discovering some of the most interesting French filmmakers in recent times, including Robert Guédiguian, Laurent Cantet and Erik Zonca. On 30 September 2003, the day before this interview took place, he resigned from his position at the head of the Fiction Unit at ARTE, although he will continue to form part of the work team. He is now set to begin a new stage in his professional career at Villa Médicis in Rome.

Jordi Balló (J.B.). The purpose of this conversation is to reflect on a certain type of fiction that is at the vanguard of the industry, i.e., reality fiction. Do you think the term is appropriate?

Pierre Chevalier (P.CH.). Yes, absolutely. What interested me what I first began to work in television, a medium I knew very little about and what little I knew was mainly negative as I came from film production, was in fact the idea of what is real. I have the feeling that in France there is a certain exhaustion of the generation of filmmakers who were very influential in the 1960s and 1970s, the years of the *Nouvelle Vague*, a movement I think is dying out, losing the notion of author and even, sometimes, authority. In the 1990s there was one exception, Maurice Pialat, who, like the state of filmmaking, took as a basis, or as his creation material, that which was real. The same has been done on television with *Une maison de bois* and in film with *A nos amours*, *Loulou*, etc., always with a spirit of realism that in fact was vastly

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different from the spirit of imagination and authorship of the new grammar of *Nouvelle Vague*. I think television is a place of confrontation with things that are real and that this is a real struggle, much more important than the person who decides to generate imagination in works, in the works that make a work. The notion of a *programme* seemed to me to be more important than the notion of a work, and the notion of doing more important than the notion of *creating*, if we're going to make a working hypothesis. I decided that the big difference between television and film was that the starting points for film were spirit, intelligence and imagination, while the starting point for TV was reality, and that the function of television was, above all, a communicative function, a social function, an informative function, and that the important aesthetic function was always denied. It has sometimes been recovered in a frankly regrettable fashion by commerce, e.g., by video clips or advertising, especially following the invention of video. What interested me was

producing TV programmes with people who had never worked on television in their lives and who had no working hypothesis about what is real, of confrontation with that which is real. People whose work within the movie world, even first works, found or invented another world and who didn't work inside this world, inside reality. I was really excited about that.

J.B. I have an anecdote about Maurice Pialat that involves Joaquim Jordà and which happened not long ago. Jordà made a great documentary about social hypocrisy, based on the case of a paedophile in the Raval area. We had just finished showing it at the Sant Sebastià Festival when the person responsible for calibrating the film said to Jordà, "I think the colours of this film are the same as the ones Pialat uses in his". Joaquim Jordà got very excited and said, "It's magnificent. This has to be the first time a calibrator has seen Pialat's films". In Pialat's films, the shoot is recorded, which is a characteristic of many reality films, of many of the films you produced for TV.

P.CH. Yes. That's how the tension of a shoot creates emotion. Emotion is not the product of a working script but the fruit of a work of chance.

J.B. Does the shoot have to be chronological for that chance to be visible? Is that important to you?

P.CH. Are you referring to Renoir's hypothesis?

J.B. Yes. Seeing as you think the idea of chance can be a positive contribution, do you think it is important to respect the chronology of the film during the shoot?

P.CH. I think chance can be found all around, at the beginning, at the end and in the middle, and that each filmmaker has a method and that this method cannot be exhausted or imitated. I could offer a filmmaker certain solutions but it is up to him to find the method and it's his job to state and work out quickly and in real time the chance that will flourish during the shoot. For me, the shoot is just as much an affirmation of chance as the pursuit of the programme goal.

J.B. In other words, the film does not imprison the script.

P.CH. I've realised that I've never been interested in the script.

J.B. But today, with the policy of made-for-TV movies, the script is very important from a conservative point of view, and furthermore it is where the station's ideological policy emerges.

P.CH. I absolutely agree.

J.B. So bearing that in mind, what is your work on the script, on the writing, when it comes to choosing projects?

P.CH. It's very difficult because there are many parts to a work: there is the collection, i.e., the individual films that make up the series, there is the tradition of television, the loneliness and risk of TV, there are many more conventional things and things that are much more creative and original. One example could be *La porte du Soleil*, a story about Palestine seen from the viewpoint of the Palestinian people from 1947 (when the State of Israel was being created) to today, based on the stories of people who fought, who you know will die, which used a script that was not chronological but fragmented, broken up, like the occupied territories. In any case, there are very different sectors of intervention. However, the thing that generally concerns me most is the point of view of the realisation, much more than the narration. It is really different. It starts from a tool in the form of the script. For me, the script is only a tool, it is not a goal. It is a toolbox. You can always do a lot of work on the script before you begin shooting, you can do seven or eight versions. There is always a big difference between the version prepared for filming and the version filmed. In any case, the script is fully written during the editing. In my opinion, the script is a process, a work stage that is absolutely necessary but which is never enough. It is a precarious, provisional work stage - although we shouldn't forget it, either.

J.B. I think it was Claire Denis who said in response to a question once about what was real that the only real thing was her fiancé kissing another woman across the street [laughter]. I think it was Claire Denis, because there are two Claires, but I think it was Claire Denis.

P.CH. There are three Claires: Claire Simon, Claire Denis and Claire Devers.

J.B. I think it was Claire Denis because Claire Simon was Wenders' assistant, wasn't she?

P.CH. Exactly, and that's the sort of thing Claire Denis

would say.

J.B. I find it interesting to reflect on the idea that that which is real, i.e., what you have called *reality fiction* or *reality*, is a concept closer to the viewer than the filmmaker. It is a concept understood as a truth.

P.CH. It is the invasion of reality.

J.B. Yes, true.

P.CH. And for me the invasion of reality has for the past 10 or 15 years brought about many good things: it has got rid of a lot of dogmatic thought and artistic copying and completely wiped out the notion of the author, because what is real are a thousand authors. A thousand authors forced to be, to work with what is real. This is a further problem and a different struggle from that of imagining a work. It is a real struggle that must exist and which must go on. To tackle reality is to do something. And that, in my opinion, is new. It is new among artists, authors and art.

J.B. Every time someone says, "OK, let's make a film about what is real" in a programming policy, it seems to be conceived as a genre, that of *fait divers*. I suspect reality is not to be found along those lines, that it is not a genre.

P.CH. I think that, in any case, works about what is real compulsorily escape all information and all objectivity. A work about reality is very personal, it is never an objective work and sometimes it is a very dangerous work for many people because it stirs something in their memory, it crosses an impassable wall. And that action is very dangerous for society in general and for the political majority.

J.B. That justifies a broad programming policy because the objective might be indescribable. You don't know exactly what it is but you look for it.

P.CH. What is real is indiscernible. That is what is so interesting. It is working on the indiscernible and working with borders continually in a state of flux. That is what a work on reality is about and it brings out that which is not discerned in general. I find that thrilling.

J.B. Have you seen Jaime Rosales' film that won the Critics' Prize at Cannes?

P.CH. No.

J.B. It's a film you should see because it has that tension we were talking about. But I would say that what is interesting about this idea of the indiscernible is the method, the strategy, the way of making it, the necessary plurality. It is a fiction that requires the point of view of the filmmaker but which at the same time is not an auteur film.

P.CH. I had never thought about it in those terms but that is exactly right.

J.B. At the same time, I have the feeling you have had to organise these singular films in the form of collections to be able to present them to the viewer in an organised fashion.

P.CH. Quite right. I had to have a mechanism. And it is true that the great idea of TV is serialisation, the idea of the serial. A single idea is never seen alone on TV [laughs].

J.B. That's television's big contribution to culture, isn't it?

P.CH. In television, an idea exists with the condition that it has to be repeated with small differences, whether we are talking about news broadcasts, the weather or recurrent heroes. It is the same idea that musicians and creators of virtual images work with.

J.B. It was already around at the time of the Greek Pantheon, the idea of telling the same story with small differences. It is the pleasure of the small difference.

P.CH. Exactly. It is difference and repetition, as Gilles Deleuze puts it. I had to inject the notion of the series into the mechanism, which was the small working group of filmmakers, authors and producers. It had to be a fairly vague idea so it could interest very different and very eclectic people. That was absolutely necessary. Otherwise, I would have lost it. If I didn't have that small mechanism it would have been impossible. It would have been impossible because the television machinery would have swallowed me up. It was a mechanism that involved peaks of resistance to the narration, the script, to a majority image or notion of the author that was so different to that of a group, which can include six, eight or ten different directors or filmmakers. We had to find something else, and that something else was working together. It is important to remember that that was practically impossible before. Each person tended towards a principle of individualism, which in fact was understandable in French cinema in reaction to the big

commercial films of the 1950s and 60s. That's what *Nouvelle Vague* was about. It was the beginning of the affirmation of the individual.

J.B. We spoke at the beginning about the absence of borders.

P.CH. Ours is truly cross-border work, both with regard to the work itself and the countries that participate. ARTE is a trans-national station that includes France, Germany and Europe, but it is also a station that has prioritised documentary making and the thematic unit, i.e., the reflexive approximation to that which is real, by observing, analysing and critiquing reality. I should also mention other cross-border work between film and TV fiction, or documentaries and fiction, information and fiction and genre and the undetermined. We have really worked on the notion of the border and the evolution of borders.

J.B. Marc Recha and Joaquim Jordà work on either side of the border: Marc Recha works in fiction but chance can be seen in his films and therefore that which is real forms part of them, while Joaquim Jordà usually works on documentaries but introduces elements of fiction with a new language which is not that of reconstruction. I have the feeling that you have always been interested in these types of authors, with that indefinable approximation to reality.

P.CH. It is a movement that has begun and which will continue - and which, happily, will not become the dominant form, it will always be in the minority. I believe this creativity is what we have seen with filmmakers like Claire Simon or Rithy Pahn, a Cambodian director who made an extraordinary documentary in which fiction was very powerful. I also quite like the filmmakers in the Near and Middle East who work on reality, who work on the fruits of what is real and, for the same reason, fictional films.

J.B. How do you work? Do you seek out authors or producers?

P.CH. I seek out the filmmaker firstly. I work the other way around to the other stations. The other stations, the big stations, generally look for producers and often it is the producers who then find the authors, the script. They only work according to the programme goal, the time it is scheduled to be screened, a fragment of the public, a theme

of the channel etc. and then get a filmmaker in. I ask the filmmaker first. I ask what he wants to do in this little space of fiction. We exchange ideas, we toss ideas around. We agree on a project that can be included within a collection or which might be a stand-alone piece. He chooses the scriptwriter and eventually picks the producer and, if he doesn't know of any producer or can't choose one, we end up coming to a joint agreement. There are two groups: the station's promotional group, which has the power of the money and its equivalent force, and another group, which starts from the filmmaker and includes the filmmaker, author, scriptwriter and producer. The programme is born from the balance and exchange between these two groups, and we also make the two groups from these types of forces.

J.B. So in other words you don't make films, you make programmes?

P.CH. I think that's a good way to put it.

J.B. But it's true that some of the films you made for the station ended up in the theatres. I have the feeling that the movement that a film generates around itself is very important for it. A film can be forgotten, even its authors can be forgotten, but when a film catches on, it generates a very strong movement. Many of the films you have done could go into the theatres. Robert Guédiguian's film *Marius i Jeanette* was a production of yours, wasn't it?

P.CH. Yes, that film generated a lot of money and I had only made a small made-for-TV movie, not a feature-length film because that didn't interest me. Robert Guédiguian decided to write it by himself, we gave him 2.5 million francs and the film made back more than three million. He worked on the editing, he carried all the weight during the shoot. Also, it got very complicated because Arianne had to go into hospital, she had to be operated on. It was a very eventful shoot. The producer, Gilles Sandoz, organised a small screening for the people most closely involved and who should come along but Gilles Jacob, who said, "I want that film". It opened the section called "Un certain regard" in Cannes. It was a made-for-TV film and the industry experts said it could no longer be considered a TV programme and obligatorily must be considered a film with a running sheet and that was what eventually happened.

J.B. It sounds a bit like what happened when Lars von Trier made the series *The Kingdom*. It was television that changed Lars von Trier's style, not *The Idiots*. It was the TV series that clearly demonstrated the possibility of creating that sense of realism. But it's true that the move to the cinema takes the discussion to another dimension.

P.CH. It gives it a public dimension. The film-versus-TV debate doesn't interest me in the slightest. I like making films, working in films. Whether they end up being shown on TV or in the theatres is only interesting to the people who work in the industry, not the public. It is a point of great interest to the image of the station or the film company but it's not interesting to the general public. I think that's understandable and there's no point kicking up a fuss about it. A lot of detailed work has been done on units, or collections, which strikes me as much more important than these little problems, these micro-problems.

J.B. I think, based on what you said, that the mobility of film is more important than the station transmitting films. However, a film is seen by more people when it is put on TV. At the Masters in Creative Documentaries, for example, we produced four films: one by J.L. Comolli, one by J. Jordà, one by J.L. Guerin and one by I. Lacuesta. At a conference I held, I asked people which of the films they had seen or heard people talk about. Nobody had heard anyone talk about Comolli's film. Yet it was the only one that had been screened on TV. In other words, many more people had seen Comolli's film than the others but because it hadn't been released in the cinema it hadn't generated either the movement or the repercussion of the others. The most remarkable experience I had happened the first time we showed Joaquim Jordà's *Mones com la Becky* at a festival and some young filmmakers went up to Joaquim to tell him they hadn't thought you could make a film like that. It's true that if we remember some of the films that first screened on TV and then went into the theatre it is because they entered as a type of prototype...

P.CH. ...in conditions of equality.

J.B. And I agree with you that it's not a question of language but it can be a political question.

P.CH. Exactly. There was a political effect in *Son Frère*, by Patrice Chereau, which was partly produced by the ARTE

Fiction Unit. When it was shown on TV it was seen by around a million viewers and now it has been released in theatres in France and, in my opinion, will get around 70,000 viewers. However, it is true that the visibility of a film is heightened if it is released in the theatre.

J.B. Do you have an ongoing relationship with the authors you work with, such as Erik Zonca, Claire Denis and Laurent Cantet? Do you do the same as Eckart Stein, in the sense that you work with someone once and that's it or do you practice a policy of continuity?

P.CH. I could give you some figures. We worked with 337 different filmmakers in 12 years. We would work with people once, sometimes twice, but usually only once because it was a space where people would arrive and then go off again. It was a very tough space economically. It was very hard for the filmmakers, producers and actors, with regard to financial questions. But once they had gained the experience they would go on to something else and we would, too. It was a transitory space. I consider this phase as a territory.

J.B. Films are sometimes understood as something that escapes from television and therefore leaves television alone, but they should never leave television alone. I support films being released in theatres because it is another vehicle, it gives them another life. This policy you mentioned about filmmakers, about production, about opening up a language and generating strategies about what is real, has changed in different countries throughout the history of film. Presumably in the 1930s, American *film noir* was where there was the greatest index of reality.

P.CH. And in the 1950s it was Italian neo-Realism.

J.B. And currently, one has the impression that there is a strategy that brings television, the movies, documentaries and fiction together, in which borders are being abolished. Do you think we are dealing with an international movement? What part do you think you have in the fact that it's an international movement?

P.CH. It is very complicated. Again, there is a type of East-West divide. The assertion that that which is real is found, oddly enough, beyond Western Europe, the United States and Latin America. In the Far East, invention is based on things other than reality. It really is a very complex issue

which is linked to the policy...

J.B. ...the political orientation of a station.

P.CH. The political orientation of the world, the division of the world. There is a big division of the world today between East and West. We can see that the West works with reality, it tackles it, in line with economic and capitalist guidelines, while in the East they assert thoughts against religion, against totalitarian regimes. You can see it in the films from Taiwan or China.

J.B. As a matter of fact, I recently saw a Korean film about serial killers based on a real event. Throughout the film the viewers kept changing their minds about who was guilty and at the end the mystery was left unsolved. The viewer was left without having the question of who was responsible resolved. And what happened was what you just said: it was an event, it was the reality, but the narration strategy, which was completely realist from the production viewpoint, had an irrational element. It was left up to the viewer to reconstruct the film if he wanted to find the solution.

P.CH. The irrational is an invention of Asia and the Near East. Take Iranian films, for example: they always begin with that which is real, they always have a thread of reality. That's what's good about them.

J.B. And the idea that love is still possible is also found in this type of cinema. You see an Asian village and think that love is still possible. Do you have any plans to work with Asian authors?

P.CH. If I were to continue, yes. But after 12 years I don't have any energy left. I have to stop. But, if I were to continue, I would be very keen to work in Asia and I would also be extremely interested in the notion of the virtual, i.e., the micro-image. That will be the big thing in the next millennium.

Transcription: Glòria Salvadó Corretger