



Melinda Camber Porter Archive of Creative Works
Volume I: Journalism and Volume II: Art and Literature

International Standard Serial Numbers:
ISSN: 2379-2450 (Print), 2379-3198 (Ebook), 2379-321X (Audio)

Liliane Cavani, Personal Films, Intimate Truths

By Melinda Camber Porter

The Times, April 18, 1977

“The capacity to be aware of the grey areas of life, instead of the black and white, and to be able to see that hate is inseparable and often indistinguishable from love, is not merely interesting, it is necessary for progress in public and private life,” says Liliana Cavani, in an attempt to defend her last film, *The Night Porter*, which won her commercial success, controversy and suspicion.

Cavani, accustomed to the vicissitudes of her profession, and two years battling for her project about Lou Andreas Salomé (writer, psychoanalyst and close friend of Rilke and Freud), did not bow down before my attack. “Look, in my films I try to see beyond simple definitions. We tend to make superficial separations between feelings and we cloud our insights with a moral system which is merely an instrument to make society function. If you care to look at our society, you might conclude that this moral system is rarely functional.

“Words are the culprits. We have so many words to dissect and catalogue feelings, but they are imprecise and lead to total misunderstanding. My definition of love will depend on my experience and so will yours. And yet, we use the same word to refer to totally different feelings and experience” Cavani suggests that the erasure of definitions will uncover deeper truths about human nature, suggesting that is sufficient to peel off the superficial to find the profound.

Cavani realizes that she paces herself outside the mainstream of Italian film-makers by stating that her responsibility ends when the audience’s awareness begins. She refuses to direct her audience towards an ideological or practical commitment. Throughout her career, as television and film director, she has been censored and criticized because she refuses to place her films under the auspices of a political party. She said that she was forced to leave television because she was asked to take an ideological stance on every subject, ranging from Women’s Liberation to Saint Francis of Assisi. “I have always tried to describe reality as I see it, not via an ideological grill. I refused to say that *The Night Porter* and *The Cannibals* were political films. They were personal, and I presented them as such. For I think that it is nonsensical and old-fashioned to make a film with a primarily political aim. People say that the subject of their films concerns ‘us’. I say, it concerns ‘we’, because the only truth I can offer is the one I feel and now intimately. In Italy, you are conformed by a tradition of communist artists who are all attached to socialist Stalinism, as if Enrico Berlinguer had it shown that another form of communism is possible. The symbolic spirit is fundamental in the arts and in life. And, in my view, democracy is of the prerogative of one political party.

“The moment politics becomes a religion, like communism, it becomes autocratic. Political parties are merely instruments to make our society function. They are not the purveyors of truth, nor should they pretend to be such. When they take up this role, they prevent people from needing to think or speak for themselves. Any party must be contested by the individual voice. But, in Italy, all culture is to the left, and if you refuse to give yourself to a shared conviction, you’re immediately considered right wing. The situation for artists is becoming quite ridiculous.”

Cavani believes that a crusading film-maker will inevitably create “schematic, didactic, interesting films.” She says if any simplification of adjustment of an idea to the standards of a public is merely a sophisticated way of talking down to them. She must remain true to her “authentic interior process,” even though her unexemplary background and education suggest that she might be out of touch with concerns of her public. Cavani, however, is reticent about the process which transforms self-expression into communication.

“I can’t pretend to share the problems of the majority of women in Italy, since I never had to conquer my freedom. It seemed perfectly natural that I should make films. My mother took me to the cinema in the afternoons, when I was little. When my parents separated, I was brought up in the country with lots of other children and dogs and freedom, and my grandparents treated me as a person, not a little girl. Every evening, at dinner, we would discuss politics, so having social conscience and a political awareness came naturally. When I came from the North to Rome I was shocked to find that people didn’t take such attitudes for granted.”

And, therefore, Liliana Cavani refuses to present herself as an “emancipated” woman, or as a “political” director, even though she could easily choose to fit into those slots. Her intransigence has created problems for her, and only recently has she started filming her script about Lou Andreas Salomé. Of course, Cavani does not see Lou as an example of an emancipated woman, nor is she interested in her achievements. The film is based on the young Lou, before her fruition, and Cavani says that she is mainly interested in the ill-defined, inexplicable behavior of the young girl.

Melinda Camber Porter
The Times [London]
April 18, 1977

The Melinda Camber Porter Archive of Creative works
Just published:
Melinda Camber Porter In Conversation With Eugenio Montale in Milan 1977
(includes Montale’s Nobel Prize Lecture in English and Italian)
www.MelindaCamberPorter.com