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FIRST VIEWINGS (AS TOLD BY TOBY MILLER)

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EDGAR PÊRA: So, can you tell me about first viewing collective experiences that you know of?

TOBY MILLER: In the early 1980's, for the first time, television satellites were becoming available across Australia and one of the anxieties that a lot of people felt was that tribal Aborigine Australians, people who lived in the desert and were unused to commercial culture would fall prey to the domination of Hollywood cinema, that they would be deeply affected in terms of their traditional lifestyles by the inculcation of consumerism. What was interesting was that when they started watching some of the films that came out, and you recall them, the "Rambo" movies were very popular... (Not Arthur Rimbaud, the poet, this is Sylvester Stallone's Rambo, the mad killer...)

And, in terms of spectatorship, and different ways people interpret things, something quite remarkable happened. So, for a lot of us, watching Rambo movies raises issues about violence, about masculinity, about the Vietnam war, about the United States, about vigilantism. What

was the issue that was raised for them? “Where was his mother?”, because their way of interpreting narrative is about family: where are the members of the family, what are they doing, what happened to them?

So, the idea of a sultry individual who is taking revenge for slights in the past, imagined or real, as per the story of John Rambo was not really relevant to them, all the killing wasn’t so relevant, the spectacle wasn’t so relevant, what mattered was the question of where is the family. And I think that was an early lesson for me in the relativism of spectatorship. The fact that there is no universal story to be told about about how we all consume movies, television or anything else.

E.P: Actually, I never... I rarely do films with families...

TOBY MILLER: So your films have nothing in them for Aboriginal Australians (*laughs*).



EP: Do you have a memory of your first cinema going?

TOBY MILLER: Yes, t seeing “20.000 Leagues Under the Sea” with Kirk Douglas and getting in trouble for doing this all the time in the movie theater – I couldn’t stop waving my hands – which I still want to do (*smiles*).

But my most formative experiences of the cinema, and something really special. When I was 7 years old, so this is the mid 1960's, and every wednesday in my school in London was a half-day – so in the afternoon you could leave. My parents had a friend who was a viola player, who also worked in a record store, and she had flexible hours and she would take me to the movies. And the first 2 movies we went to were reprises of "Dr. No" and "From Russia With Love". I'd never seen action adventure really of this kind, I'd never seen the ideas of modernity you get in the James Bond films. I sat there absolutely thrilled – and of course I didn't have this language to discuss it – but I guess what was going on for me was the pleasure of the picture and the sound and the story, but also the desire to become someone like Sean Connery, probably... Not very politically correct... (laughs)

EP So there was this process of identification...

TOBY MILLER: Undoubtedly! Identification was very important to me at that time – because I saw someone on the screen – although he was 3 times my height , and 3 times my age and much more significant and powerful than I would ever be – I could imagine trying to become that kind of man.



EP: And what kind of stuff did amaze you later?

TOBY MILLER: I guess in my teen years I became interested in the *avant-garde*, so moving away from the conventions of narrative cinema as per Hollywood and the notion of a very straightforward narrative, a theological narrative: you start with a problem, you apparently solve it, more problems present themselves and then there is a narrative resolve at the end. I was interested in, what we thought of in those days, and I was living in Australia and Britain, as "European Cinema". And European Cinema seemed more centered on character rather than "task", it seemed to center on visual beauty rather than individual human beauty, so the visual beauty of landscape. And also, a lot of the film-making, a lot of the shots, the long takes, and so on – were not motivated by storytelling so much as by visual pleasure.

i think those were the things that started to have an impact on me in my teen years – at the same time as I was interested in reading existentialism, and the philosophy and novels of people like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus... suddenly had a massive impact on me, and then, also the impact of Feminism, Simone de Beauvoir and later writers – and thinking about the ways in which my understandings of femininity and masculinity were driven very much by things like "Hollywood Cinema".

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