



CLAIRE DOLAN.(Review) (movie review)

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Introducing a screening of Bertolucci's *The Conformist* recently, Paul Schrader remarked that the overriding influence for directors of his generation was the European art cinema of the Fifties and Sixties, whereas for today's filmmakers it is music videos and commercials. That's a pretty loaded statement, and though Schrader meant it neither as putdown nor dismissal, it does smack of hard truth. It also brings to mind a few questions, not least what to make of those younger directors who are influenced by what may now be thought of as the classical art cinema. For instance: Lodge Kerrigan, whose second feature, *Claire Dolan*, has become unfairly notable for the fact that it has yet to be picked up by a distributor despite invitation to the Cannes and Toronto festivals in 1998. Kerrigan is a gifted filmmaker, a "real" filmmaker in the best sense, and what has happened to him and his film is a sad reflection upon the current status of art-cum-indie film in America today. His movie is a spare, uncompromised vision, every shot full of thought and meaning. And while *Claire Dolan* isn't exactly some lost masterpiece, an *Ambersons* on the shelf, it is a compelling film that deserves the chance to find its audience. Challenging, rigorous, and ambitious, it's exactly the type of film -- and Kerrigan the type of filmmaker -- that needs to be championed by the outsider-establishment of the Last Exit Before Hollywood crowd.

Kerrigan's first film, *Clean, Shaven* (94), was driven by the frenetic, high-wire performance of Peter Greene as a man who may or may not be a serial killer. Now best known for his role in *Pulp Fiction* (as Zed, the hillbilly boy upon whose ass Marcellus Wallace proposes to get medieval), *Clean, Shaven* was Greene's first film role (though Nick Gomez's *Laws of Gravity*, filmed after, made it to theaters first). Besides Greene, the movie's most notable element is its radical sound design and jagged montage, which create a buzzing, manic subjectivity for Greene's world, plummeting the viewer into the mind of a man who, if not a killer, is nonetheless deeply, deeply disturbed. The film has an elliptical mystery to it, for as the pieces fall together and more information is revealed about who's who and what's going on, there are essential facts that remain hidden. The film never tunes in to any station long enough for everything to be made sound, and much is left for the viewer to negotiate. It is a haunting, disturbing piece of work, introducing Kerrigan as a talent of great imagination and skill, and someone whose future films are to be looked forward to.

While there is much to connect *Clean, Shaven* and *Claire Dolan*, it is one of the true strengths of Kerrigan's work in his next film that he has given himself over to his material; instead of indulging

"his style," he frequently submerges himself, the better to get across his story and his characters. (I believe it used to be called discipline.) The picture opens with geometrically composed shots of skyscrapers rendered abstract through reflection. The buildings don't change, but the way we look at them does, in much the same way the film's seeming stasis provides it with an odd momentum. When we first see Claire Dolan the character (Katrin Cartlidge), it is from the polite distance of a medium shot as she makes a few calls from a pay phone. She calls a man and flatly professes how much she has missed him, how much she'd like to see him. She hangs up. She dials again, making the same proposal, albeit in a more graphic manner, to someone else. The traffic mocks her when she says, "I'm at home," but the man at the other end doesn't care, he buys it all the same. Heading up to meet him, Claire is endlessly reflected back at herself in the mirrored walls of a hotel elevator. It should be a private moment in which the viewer gains insight into the "real" Claire; instead we get the unsettling feeling that her external demeanor is all that's left, a hollow echo of the person who once inhabited this shell. The elevator doors slide open and Claire Dolan disappears.

Following a mostly unseen sexual interlude, Claire checks her messages from the phone in the hotel room's bathroom. She learns her mother has died. Kerrigan doesn't punctuate the scene with grand swells of music or a big sob scene. He lets the gravity of the moment speak for itself. The only sound you hear is the silence of someone bottoming out. As she will throughout the film, Cartlidge does an impressive job of holding herself in check. An easy complaint lodged against Claire Dolan is that it is "flat," but by resisting emotional overstatement, Kerrigan invests a grandeur and import to even the smallest of gestures. Later, Claire misinterprets a woman's politely vacant smile at a newsstand as genuine kindness and blurts out, "I buried my mother today," to be met by a blank face and quickly receding footsteps.

In numerous recent films (*Under the Skin* and *Romance* come to mind), actresses have been forced to invest their characters with an innate dignity, some inner force by which they rise above the difficulties of their situation. Through most of *Claire Dolan*, Cartlidge takes a different tack, mapping what happens when the reserves run dry and there's nothing left to draw from or fight for. In time it is revealed that Claire owes a man (Colm Meaney) some money, apparently quite a bit, and though he seems to have known Claire and her family for quite some time, he now acts as her pimp. The film's essential stillness can barely contain the malevolent violence and seeping hatred of Claire's world as it boils up to the surface, a thin skin ready to burst. Walking down the street, eating in a diner: the simplest task becomes an eternal struggle. Claire's phone continually rings; there is never anyone on the other end.

Both of Kerrigan's films concern themselves chiefly with the distance between who we are and who we want to be, and the closely related subject of how we perceive ourselves in relation to how others perceive us. In *Clean, Shaven*, Peter Greene simply wants to be a good father, yet his erratic behavior stands in his way. Even the most bewildering of episodes, to him, have their purpose. Claire Dolan wants, in many ways, the same things -- to escape the crush of her life, to regain the

fullness that has been sucked out of her. In a bar she asks a stranger (Vincent D'Onofrio) to dance with her, and through their quiet moment together he becomes intrigued and involved with her. He accepts what she does and who she is, and tries to provide comfort and assistance to her, particularly when she becomes pregnant. He is rendered merely a passer-by, however, by Claire's intense need for self-reliance.

The film's ending is one of the most difficult things about it, and if the preceding events hadn't unsettled the viewer enough, the disquieting ambiguity of the denouement will. Claire pays off her debt, turns over some quick money at the airport, and books herself onto the next flight to anywhere. When we last see her, she is staring at the sonogram of her developing baby boy and, for the first time, she smiles ever so slightly. We end on the stranger and the pimp, casually bumping into each other on the street and exchanging wary, uncomfortable pleasantries. There is something between the two of them, some bond that can't be shaken. It will forever nag at the both of them: whatever happened to Claire Dolan? It is the creeping power of the film that viewers are left with much the same spare, unsettled feeling. Let's just hope people aren't forced to eventually ask, whatever happened to Claire Dolan?

Mark Olsen wrote about *Go* in our May/June99 issue. Robert Horton did the career piece on Kevin Smith in Nov/Dec99. Harlan Kennedy is our European Editor.

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