

Memento Mori

Mark Power

Camera Buff isn't a great film, and certainly not Kieslowski's best. But the first time I saw it (just three years ago, high in a Warsaw tower block) it made me feel uncomfortable. It touched a nerve, told me something about myself, and I didn't like what it said. I wasn't expecting it; no one had demanded I watch the film because they thought it would change my life. It's doubtful if anyone would have made the link.

I'd just begun a project in Poland that I am continuing to this day - a photographic survey of a country in transition. It's probably a foolhardy objective, but nevertheless I continue, and *Camera Buff* has accompanied me, without fail, on each subsequent trip.

It has been useful because - like all of Kieslowski's early movies - it is a valuable insight into Poland under communist rule, and therefore explains something of the past. That said, it's not as successful in this respect as *Dekalog* - the location for which, curiously enough, the window of that same Warsaw block overlooked - although it does it well enough. But I carry *Camera Buff* for more than just historical reference.

Made in 1979, it is often cited as Kieslowski's most autobiographical work, marking the point in his career when he stops trying to uncover political scandal (he made several 'straight' documentary films very much in the manner of the hero of *Camera Buff*, Filip Mosz) to concentrate instead on more intimate experiences. The scene at the end of the movie, where Filip turns the camera upon himself, profoundly marks this shift.

As I watched the film that first time I recognized that Filip and I - rather alarmingly - share a number of characteristics: a somewhat obsessive

personality; a detachment in the way we look at the world; a difficulty in expressing emotion; a guilt for failing to successfully balance our work with our personal lives.

In *Camera Buff* Filip's delicate *work/hobby/family* balance is challenged by theories about the moral and social responsibility of the artist, a recurrent theme of the movie. By using real-life critics and directors, who play either themselves or *pastiches* of themselves, Kieslowski's own views on this are made abundantly clear. A judge of an amateur filmmaking competition in which Filip is awarded third prize declares of the entrants: "They talk of social commitment, modern narrative, a documentary of our times, but... they reveal instead a knowledge drawn from TV and newsreels, and not from personal experience." In the world of Kieslowski, in other words, work *is* life, a dictum that ultimately destroys the fragile existence Filip and his wife have built about themselves. When Irena finally leaves him Filip frames her departure with his hands, as if she were nothing more than a character in his movie.

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In his youth my father had been a keen photographer. Ships were his favourite subject. While in the Merchant Navy he produced an almost Becher-like catalogue of tankers on the distant, always immaculately straight, horizon, an aesthetic predicting his future career as an engineer. Years later, as a teenager, I discovered his homemade enlarger – an upturned flowerpot with a camera lens attached - gathering dust in the attic, surely the catalyst to becoming a photographer myself.

Dad also owned a clockwork Revere, an American standard 8 movie camera. It was used primarily on holiday of course, for my father was (thankfully) no Filip Mocz. Great excitement filled our household when the yellow Kodak envelope - a freshly processed film inside - fell onto the doormat. That evening our small family would gather to watch Dad's version of another holiday successfully completed.

Perhaps, sitting together in that darkened room, we imagined that what we had would last forever. Indeed, looking at them now, forty years later, there is little evidence that those films were made for posterity. Dad's eye dwells far longer on a ship entering a harbour, or the engine of a plane seen from a window seat, than it does on Mum, my brother or me. But I don't blame him for that.

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On September 19th 2005 my dear Mother passed away. Such a profound and tragic loss inevitably took me back to a past now long gone, to vague and sporadic memories of childhood, of long, sun-filled, worry-free summers; a potted history now consumed with sadness and pathos. All those unasked and unanswered questions.... all that regret. My mother was my link with that past world and, now that I am more aware of my own mortality, my buffer from the next.

There is a scene in *Camera Buff* that has since become acutely poignant. Filip is asked by a friend, Piotrek, to film him while driving his van, a second-hand hearse. Filip obliges, before panning the camera to an upstairs window of a nearby tower block where his friend's elderly mother is watching. Later in the film she dies but Piotrek is strangely absent from her funeral; Filip finds him sitting alone in his tiny apartment, unable, he explains, too "watch her being buried in the ground". He asks to see the clip that Filip had innocently shot some weeks before and watches it obsessively, clinging naively, desperately, to some vague notion of immortality. These few precious frames, we assume, are all he has left.

And there is *my* mother, some years younger than I am now, beautiful, happy, full of life. But to those who didn't know her these images are simply an addition to the multitude of found family snaps that already litter the world. We all have pictures like this, the roots of most of our memories, and I would not expect you to care much about mine. To understand this is indeed a painful truth.

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I had not been back to Leicester, the city in central England where I spent most of my childhood, in nearly twenty years. Sitting in my van outside our old house, watching the new occupants come and go, I felt an overwhelming surge of sadness. Life suddenly seemed so short and so very precious. Behind my camera, through tearful eyes, I saw the unpredictability of memory; it's beauty, it's fragility, and the lies it tells us that we desperately want to believe.

And so, rather like Filip, I have turned the camera upon myself. My hazy, indefinite pictures of particular places and spaces of my childhood represent only *my* truth; they are made *only for me*. Making them was not a cathartic experience (surely a fictional concept); it did not *help*. But, perhaps, through the experience of profound loss I have reached a point where objectivity - the world as it looks - might no longer be enough.

Mark Power. January 2007

This work is dedicated to the memory of Doris Emily Power (1930-2005).