

Laudation on the Winner of the Peace Award 2009:
The Messenger

by Robert Thalheim, director

For obvious reasons, I have had some deep thoughts, over the last few days, what sort of a film, a Peace Film should be. In a press release of the Peace Award it says: The Award is given to a film which uses its aesthetic means in a special way such as to serve peaceful co-operation and social commitment.

What does that mean exactly, however, to use one's aesthetic means to serve peaceful cooperation? Watching the award-winning film *The Messenger* yesterday, I have appreciated this definition all over again. In a most striking way, it became clear to me what a Peace Film can be.

The Messenger actually uses its means in an extremely skilful and touching way to open our eyes for a quite different view on the consequences of war. The film gives us a view on the backstage of war. There are many movies that try to kind of re-create the cruel reality of war by picturing explicit brutality in all its details.

The Messenger, on the contrary, succeeds in showing the impact of war without showing one single war scene. By looking behind the scenes of the patriotic home front, this film spotlights the aftermath of war – the wounds and deformations it inflicts upon the family, the loved ones and the survivors. In their awarding statement the Jury has also pointed out that this film succeeds in showing this with great subversive and narrative power. And this is what I consider the excellence of *The Messenger*, indeed.

I don't want to forestall anything. You are going to watch the film shortly and I will certainly not go into details of the plot and the characters. But I would like to pick a few scenes in order to show what accounts for this subversive narrative power as I see it. Let me call your attention to HOW this film manages to describe so very impressively the fate of the individuals distorted by war. Because it is exactly the means chosen that make *The Messenger* undermine the well-known illustration of war in US cinema.

We all know about the Army's film subsidy. Military consultants meticulously monitor the way the Army is represented in cinema. This results in those pictures that we as the audience know all too well.

Especially with regard to delivering the news about a soldier killed in action, my impression is that I have seen this many times in movies. The picture of military men in full dress knocking at white timber houses somewhere in the Midwest of the United States has a familiar ring. This is like a

standard scene in US movies. Mostly these are scenes without words but with grand orchestra music. The men in their spotless uniforms lift their hands to their fronts to present their military salute, usually with the sun setting behind them. And then we see a mother or a wife – conveniently in full make-up – collapse with tears in her eyes, just as if she had been waiting for this entrance.

This implies in the subtext that this scene has greatness; that it is a heroic moment: A hero hasn't come home. Usually this scene is followed by funerals with military honors. Gun salutes. A trumpet sounding. A Star-Spangled Banner is being spread over the coffin. In slow motion even. It is on purpose that I am conjuring up these pictures because I want to remind you that this is also a way of staging the death of a soldier.

Because what you are going to see shortly has nothing to do with this ostentation, as the means used in *The Messenger* are completely different. Together with the young soldier Will Montgomery we are introduced into the task of breaking the news to his family that a soldier has been killed in action. This ranks among the most touching scenes I have ever watched in cinema.

You will not hear violins playing, you will not catch people just in the right moment, there are no gallant (pan-shots? close-ups?) on eyes full of tears. The hand camera follows the reactions of the next of kin like in a documentary, not always in perfect close-up, sometimes blurred, sometimes too dark. This is how the film manages to make the perspective of the leading character almost physically perceptible. We share Will Montgomery's uncertainty, his lack of experience. Thus, the film permits us to concentrate totally on the actors and enables the actors to get fully into their characters.

Ben Foster, the actor playing Will Montgomery, has just described in an interview how great a privilege it was for him to make people heard, who are suffering such trauma and such loss, by playing Will who is not able to start grieving but after having watched other people' mourning, in which process his perspective never fails to be our perspective too.

Thus we are experiencing scenes of high directness, honesty and tremendous emotional concentration. Breathlessly we take part in the calls of the messengers, we walk with them through neatly mown front gardens, past the flags, our heads full of those precise instructions and wordings that military discipline demands.

You will feel that anyway, but allow me to advise you to observe how great an artistry it is to shoot, cut and act scenes exactly this way and not otherwise. And how very subversively this works against so much of what we know from the commercial Hollywood cinema.

All this is especially palpable in the military funeral scene. There is one also in *The Messenger*. As usual we see the widow of the dead soldier mourning at the grave. But before that, there is a scene that is kind of off-stage. We see the widow buying a black suit for her little son in a shopping centre. By chance she is being watched by Will – hand camera through the window of a shop.

At the same time, two soldiers are enlisting/recruiting young men for the Army. As the widow comes out of the shop, young men are signing in with the army officers. Watching the soldiers and realizing the situation, the widow starts walking towards the group. She seizes the registering documents from their hands, shows them the things she has purchased for the funeral a moment ago and sends the boys home. Quite confused the boys leave. A common scene, a glance backstage of the perfectly organized funeral staged later on by the military. A scene, however, that changes our perception of the funeral scene and will maybe change our perception of all such scenes in cinema from now on.

There are many such moments in *The Messenger*. Let me mention just one other of these moments that clearly reveals this skillful playing with the perspective, that backstage glance:

The two messengers get out of their car and start straightening their uniforms mirrored in the reflecting car glass. They are like preparing for their performance when they will act as representatives of the army on the home front stage. What they haven't noticed: Their audience is already watching. Behind them there is a playground. Even we as the audience don't notice that but when the children's yelling suddenly dies away. The two men turn around and look into the silent faces of the families who have interrupted their picnic, and of the kids who have stopped playing to stare at the men in their uniforms.

This is certainly a funny scene but also infinitely sad. This balancing of the extremes is something the film manages surprisingly well. After the first half of the film you are quite happy that, in the end, this is still a movie that also follows the elements of classical cinema. There is a love story and the buddy movie element as well. But even the way these stories are told is aesthetically remarkable. Please carefully watch the main love scene, where two people are struggling, in a seven-minute shot, to find to each other albeit their past and the scars they have suffered from the war – and still fail in the end. There is no music needed in this scene, not even cuts.

There is also a wedding scene as you might think you know them from comedies: Will attends the fancy wedding party of his ex girlfriend. She still loves him, but for pragmatic reasons she went for the nice rich guy next door. On the spur of the moment Will decides to go to that wedding, he's drunk and his clothes are torn from a brawl he has had before. We have seen that in many a comedy, but please note how, in *The Messenger*, this sequence is getting definitely spooky.

Because this wedding guests, that's us. And amongst us suddenly there are scruffy and stinky soldiers. How are these men treated when they are not wearing their shiny full dress?

Let me go back to the definition I mentioned in the beginning: The Award is given to a film which uses its aesthetic means in a special way such as to serve peaceful co-operation and social commitment.

Please observe how The Messenger manages to use its aesthetic means particularly to serve its protagonists. In doing so the film provides us with a new perspective, a glance behind the scenes of a well-oiled war machinery that works perfectly even at the home front, a perspective that influences even the images of our subconscious, thus making them serve a peaceful co-operation. That is exactly what makes this film subversive.

Even if The Messenger does not analyze the global political situation or the mechanisms that lead to war and have induced the USA to enter into the war in Iraq, the film still denounces the army and the war, not in a great political gesture but very emotionally in a minor key. The Messenger shows the consequences of war for the families of the casualties and for the survivors. This view behind the scenes is so touching because it also homes in on a general experience: at the fundamental experience of loss, of grief, of loneliness. But in the end the film also gives an outlook on the chance for such experiences to be, if not overcome, then at least met with in life. What more can a Peace Film achieve?

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