

## **Interviews | Reigniting the Flame: John Gianvito's Profit motive and the whispering wind**

At the 2001 Vancouver International Film Festival I had the good fortune to catch a screening of *The Mad Songs* of Fernanda Hussein, a three-hour independent feature by film scholar and curator John Gianvito. I had not heard very much about the film itself, but I had heard Gianvito's name; a friend of mine interned with him at the Harvard Film Archive around this time. (He held this post for five years, and is now an Assistant Professor at Emerson College in Boston.) *Mad Songs* is a political film that encompasses multiple stories, but does so following a film historical road less travelled—beginning with D.W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) and leading most recently to *Fast Food Nation* (2006). The stories never intersect; instead, they examine the problems of a time and place (the suburban US during the first Gulf War) almost geologically, by taking samples from discrete layers of American life—an alienated progressive teen, a psychologically shattered veteran, and the so-called madwoman of the title, persecuted by bigots and eventually left a broken person, wandering the New Mexico landscape in much the same way that *Vertigo*'s Carlotta Valdez haunted the streets of San Francisco. Part of what makes *Mad Songs* so poignant, and at the same time incredibly strange, is the hope and earnestness with which it concludes. No film I'm aware of has given so much space to peace activists, sitting in meetings and testifying about the transformative power of nonviolent resistance. To a generation of critics and cinephiles reared on post-noir cynicism, Gianvito's treatises surely sounded like transmissions from another planet.

Gianvito's remarkable new film, *Profit motive and the whispering wind* (limited capitalization intentional) is as lean, poetic, and rigorous as the earlier film was sprawling, expansive, and even a bit ramshackle. *Profit motive* is an experimental documentary and not a fictional feature like Hussein, and so the comparison may not be entirely fair. But it is instructive, since Gianvito's latest effort enters a cultural landscape remarkably similar to the one in which *Mad Songs* aimed to intervene. Today, Marx's famous line from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* about history hardly applies as written. Bush 41's Iraq War was already both tragedy and farce, leaving us little option but to cast Bush 43's protracted rerun as *Grand Guignol*, a maniacal bloodletting orchestrated by a crazed, castrated cowboy-emperor. It's a scenario Antonin Artaud could scarcely have improved upon. In light of this, Gianvito now allows the Iraq War to serve for the most part as the new film's

structuring absence, something tacitly understood but largely unsaid. In part this is because there's so little left to say on the topic that cannot be recuperated by our affirmative corporate culture. But it's also the case that to focus exclusively on our present moment, however dire it may be, is to inadvertently fall into what may be our culture's greatest trap—the evacuation of history.

In just under one hour, *Profit motive* takes us on a tour of the United States via its cemeteries, minor monuments, and out-of-the-way historical markers. There is no voiceover narration, virtually no explanatory on-screen text, and very little camera movement. Instead, Gianvito has created an unconventional landscape film, one that recalls the strategies of certain avant-gardists (James Benning in particular, and perhaps Peter Hutton to a somewhat lesser degree) while at the same delivering a bracingly unique experience, one that leaves viewers awestruck by its rigorous simplicity. Over the course of the film, it becomes clear that we and the film are tracing a chronological path through the American Left, paying near-silent homage to our comrades, those who fell in battle (slain by police or Pinkertons during strikes; felled by assassins) or those whose lives had simply run their natural course. Inspired by Howard Zinn's magisterial *People's History of the United States*, Gianvito's leftist vision is righteously ecumenical, encompassing Eugene V. Debs and Frank Little, Sojourner Truth and Malcolm X, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Cesar Chavez, and many, many others whom mainstream historical accounts have buried far more comprehensively than their undertakers. In addition to forging a radical remapping of the American terrain, Gianvito's film provides its audience with the rare opportunity to pay our respects by proxy.

Between these sequences, Gianvito provides a continual filmic refrain. He aims his camera upwards, capturing the rustling of trees in the wind, light usually peering through the branches. In addition to providing a sombre objective-correlative to the film's consideration of the transience of both human life and populist politics, these sequences offer a vague inkling of a force that may still remain afoot in our world, a voice or a spirit or an idea alight on the wind. The concluding minutes of *Profit motive* make this restlessness explicit, in a manner that practically recodes the entire film, shifting its terms from the elegiac to the cyclotronic, a conscious harnessing of available energies. At a time when most attempts at political cinema result in the equivalent of hastily xeroxed

leaflets, Gianvito has produced a document, one we will no doubt be examining for years to come.

CINEMA SCOPE: At the risk of stating the obvious, Profit motive is an extremely different type of work than your last film, *The Mad Songs of Fernanda Hussein*. However both films were clearly conceived, in part, as interventions into their specific political moment. How would you characterize the changes between these moments, both in terms of the state of the world and in your own work?

GIANVITO: Six years separate the two films. *Mad Songs* had its first official screenings in March 2001 at the SXSW Festival. What happened later that September and the continuing reverberations of those events have, I suppose, wrought the most dramatic changes, at least domestically. Outside US borders, the terrible events of September 11th have only enabled the further extension of American's unrelenting reign of terror in those places where its "national interests" lie, not really a change for the oppressed and disenfranchised peoples of the world.

When I first began to conceive the project that became *The Mad Songs of Fernanda Hussein*, around 1993 I believe, it grew purely out of seething rage over the events of the 1991 Gulf War, the mainstream suppression of those events, and concern over the continuing support of lethal sanctions and military "containment" of Iraq. By the time I saw the film to completion the entire situation had only grown graver and more infuriating. Just listening to Bush this morning in one of his rare press conferences continuing to insist on the link between September 11th and Iraq is angering enough. But hearing Bush state with a straight face that he understands "that this is an ugly war. It's a war in which an enemy will kill innocent men, women and children in order to achieve a political objective" when the enemy he describes is precisely us, when minimally tens of thousands of Iraqi civilian deaths have resulted from our actions, well, it's enough to make my blood boil. Imagine what such hypocritical rhetoric does to those on the receiving end of America's might.

So what to do? Beyond those ways I acquit myself as a citizen, teacher, friend, etc., I guess at this point I can't imagine making films that aren't politically engaged on some level. Excluding a hastily put-together video short, *Puncture Wounds*, that I made

a few months after September 11th, I was searching for subject matter in which I felt I could perceive at least some hopefulness. Along the way, I found myself re-reading stretches of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, re-encountering some measure of what is admirable in this country's past, the words and deeds of so many, known and unknown, who contributed to the historical struggle for a more just and egalitarian society. In time the idea took root to want to pay homage to this history, as well as to this book which continues to mean so much to so many of us, and by so doing, the hope was to draw sustenance from the sacrifices and efforts of those who came before us. *Profit motive and the whispering wind* was intended as a small poem to this progressive past.

SCOPE: There are lots of ways you could have approached the project you describe. How did you decide to focus on historical markers and gravesites?

GIANVITO: I've always had a fondness for cemeteries, for the literal contemplative space they afford those who wander through them. Perhaps living in Massachusetts as I do, which showcases with pride great swaths of its history with markers, historic trails, etc., perhaps this was also a spur. On a very personal level, there was a desire to make some kind of tangible connection to these stories, these individuals that I was reading about. Ironically, by visiting their gravesites, often the result of much detective work, it made these individuals and this history more alive for me. It's odd I suppose.

When I first took on the idea my concern was that it might prove woefully uncinematic. I mean, what could be more static, more "lifeless" than a tombstone? I thought people might feel it was an idea better suited for a photo-essay than for a film. And while, as you know, there are other kinds of imagery and movement in the film, I had the feeling that in the presence of these sites something more is transmitted beyond just what is read. What that "something more" is is hard to describe, but I think those who respond to the film are also responding to what might be characterized as the material resonance of these sites. Many of them are tucked away in hidden corners of little visited cemeteries, some as you see are eroding, and just as important is the aural/sonic environment encompassing the sites. Of course, starting out I didn't know what I would find and how interesting or not this would be. Little by little, I got more pulled in. The

discovery, for example, that others had made similar pilgrimages was always interesting, taking note of the objects people would leave as gestures of solidarity. It had a little bit of the feeling of putting a puzzle together.

Ultimately the challenge was how to reflect this history, to pay tribute to it, without coming across as attempting to give a kind of short-hand version of the experience one gets through things such as properly sitting down and reading Zinn's compelling text. I knew that many of the people and incidents cited would be unfamiliar to many audiences, maybe even the majority of them. Early on I toyed with incorporating on-screen excerpts from Zinn's book, as well as, in some cases, still photographs of the massive turnouts for the burials of certain individuals whose names are largely unknown today. But this tactic started to make the film veer too much toward PBS. If people have no idea who Anne Hutchinson was, or Osceola, or what the Ludlow Massacre was about—isn't that part of the point? Take Henry George, for example. At the time of his death in 1897 he was purportedly the third most famous individual in America, after Thomas Edison and Mark Twain. How many today recognize the name, let alone have read or even heard of his book, *Progress and Poverty*? Why is this history unfamiliar? And who gains by its suppression?

SCOPE: Exactly. I know that as a viewer, I was intrigued and a bit troubled by those names and events with which I was unfamiliar, precisely because it had the effect of emphasizing the crucial holes in my knowledge. This prompted me to hit the books, and I suspect I'm not alone in this. As you imply, a PBS-style documentary would provide a bit more data about these people and events. (How sanitized that data would be, of course, is another issue entirely.) But it would also provide a false sense of mastery over those facts, and would probably contribute to a sense that this "past" is over and done with. This seems to me what entities like PBS and The History Channel do best.

GIANVITO: Your experience with the material is really no different than mine. A further motivation for undertaking the project was precisely to attempt to gain some greater familiarity with these figures and events. Each time I view it myself it provokes me to read more, to try to understand the network of connections. I have been thinking about setting up a website that would afford at least a rudimentary profile of those represented in the film, with links to more full-bodied material. There are also some

interesting stories about the sites themselves that shed further light on the sociology of this history. For instance, for 88 years Anna Lopizzo's grave was essentially unknown, poorly marked and tucked away in a seldom-visited pauper's corner of Immaculate Conception Cemetery in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Lopizzo was one of the 30,000 mostly immigrant workers who participated in the so-called "Bread and Roses" strike against poor wages in the Lawrence textile mills in 1912. Lopizzo was shot by policemen who were seeking to break up a lawfully sanctioned picket. When a researcher finally located the plot in 2000, union workers from Barre, Vermont stepped up to donate all work and materials for a proper marker. Why? Because during the 63-day strike, in order to protect the strikers' children from harm, union comrades in Barre, Vermont had opened their homes to these children. This many years later, the memory and sense of solidarity apparently survives there.

The Eugene V. Debs marker is another example. In the film it appears to sit alongside the Debs family plot, which is where I first went looking for it. But in fact the plot is in an altogether different place with no signs pointing the way, as, even after his death, the family felt the need to keep his grave secret, fearing vandalism or even graverobbers—such was the ire his socialist ideals stirred up. The Ludlow Massacre memorial site was in fact terribly damaged by an unknown vandal in 2003 who decapitated the statues and disappeared with the heads. I had to wait two years for the funds to be raised and work to be undertaken to restore this tribute to the immigrant miner families who were besieged by the National Guard for the offense of standing up for fairer and safer working conditions. It's shocking to realize that there are still people whose feelings move them to lash out at this tragic history. It's almost like the victims were massacred again.

SCOPE: It is startling that this suppressed history, of which most of us are kept scrupulously ignorant, has these concrete eruptions in the present in unexpected ways. I think we generally understand, in a materialist sense, that this past has produced the conditions of our present. But one thing your film dramatizes, which I think relates to both the positive and destructive acts of remembrance and action you describe above, is that there is a dialectic at work between historical time and contemporary space. Maybe this is also a dialectic between what Raymond Williams called "the long revolution" and these jabs and bursts of historical consciousness, which are more like the fleeting

moments Walter Benjamin described. One gets the sense from Profit motive that there are multiple time frames at work, both a long memory and a radical, unpredictable present.

GIANVITO: In a sense it is the past literally imbedded in the present, visible and invisible at the same time. It made perfect sense to me that the film was recently invited to be shown in Paris in a series called “The Tiger’s Leap” after Benjamin and his notion of seizing moments from the “continuum of history” in order to forge a revolutionary present. One of the things Howard Zinn is always emphasizing is that the study of history is never a neutral act. And that the risk for many researchers is getting stuck in history because, as he says, “it’s all just so interesting.” The point is to make the past speak to the present. And to choose from that continuum those ideas that lead, if not always to hope, at least to a greater awakened consciousness of why things are the way they are. And as Brecht said, “Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.” I believe that.

SCOPE: Yes, the film traces a particular lineage, forging a narrative that both explains and empowers. (Another obvious problem with public television’s style of history, with its “great men” structure, is that it frames human history as remote and beyond any possible intervention.) Perhaps this issue of fashioning a history through cinema could lead into a discussion of some of Profit motive’s formal characteristics. Although much of the film is comprised of the monuments, markers, and graves, there are other types of footage as well. Throughout most of the film, you connect the memorial imagery with two opposing kinds of motion—the trees rustling in the wind, and the rotoscoped animations of frenzied capitalist activity. They provide counterpoint at key junctures in the film, and the animations in particular are jarring and unexpected. How did you arrive at this material?

GIANVITO: Someone asked me the other day if the inspiration was the Leonard Cohen song, “The Partisan”: “The wind, the wind is blowing, through the graves the wind is blowing, freedom soon will come.” It’s certainly a song I know well but was it an influence? I don’t know. You remarked initially on the differences between Profit motive and my previous feature Mad Songs, but among links between the two films is the expression of my pantheism. I assert that the place of nature is as vital as the overt political

content in these films but it is hard for me to explain why without resorting to clumsy language. In Profit motive, certainly the wind serves as metaphor but it also more than that, something both more material and less.

As for the brief animated interventions, there was early on the feeling of structurally needing another element, the taste of another ingredient. I wanted to reference capitalism but in the simplest way—focusing on physical gestures of commerce. These small gestures have a major impact on reality. And I wanted to render these hands via my own hand through drawing. Not that anyone need know, but the imagery is a stylization of brief moments from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), *Eclipse* (1962), and *Greed* (1924), and is inserted more or less with historical connections, such as the 1848 California Gold Rush and the 1929 stock market crash. While these segments total less than a minute of the film, I felt the desire to disrupt the spell, if you will. The insertion of the trading floor clip, for instance, contrasts the serenity of the primary material with the animal ferocity in the money pit.

SCOPE: One of the things I find most thrilling about Profit motive is its leftist unorthodoxy. As you mentioned before, there is a treatment of wind and landscape that is both materialist and pantheistic. This is somewhat unusual—classical Marxism has tended to treat the earth as the inert ground that must be transformed by human industry—but vital, especially if, for example, the philosophies and cosmologies of many of North America's First Nations peoples are to be grappled with in any serious way. Likewise, the “usable past” that you trace through Zinn is highly diverse. The film seems to consider various liberation movements (labour rights, women's rights, African-American and Latino movements, AIM, GLBT rights) as, ultimately, part of a single historical force. This is a powerful idea, especially after 30 years of identity politics and its unfortunate fragmentations.

GIANVITO: A few weeks ago in Atlanta I attended the first US Social Forum, an offshoot of the World Social Forum, which brought together about 10,000 activists and progressive-minded folk from around the country and the world, and this problem of fragmentation was forefront in many of the discussions. In the organizers' own words this was “an experiment in movement building” and, while generally there appeared to be a great deal of positive energy and information sharing, it was clear that much more work



is still required to build relationships between various communities (including by the Social Forum's organizers themselves who, for example, reached out to native peoples early on in the event planning, inviting them to not only participate but to lead the opening day march, and then on the final day, provoked a firestorm of emotion when they took the microphone away from an indigenous gentleman in the middle of his remarks. This insensitivity was soon confronted head-on and worked through but it felt indicative of the amount of work and care we must all demand of each other if we're ever to forge a real path out of the social mire in which we're entrenched, some much more than others.) For those truly awake to the idea that "another world is possible," it is critical to reinforce the idea that far more unites us than divides us. As "experimented" with in Atlanta, this leads to intense, messy, heart-rending, impassioned, provocative exchanges, all of which I ultimately found to be very moving, and the embodiment of a way of moving us forward.

SCOPE: This perhaps leads back to Profit motive and the specific type of political work it can do. One of the things that blindsided me the first time I saw it was the unbridled optimism of its conclusion. Granted, the history you depict in the film certainly earns that optimism, and reminds us of that long tradition of Americans working for a better world. But one of the things that struck me was just how different—in terms of tone, sensibility, attitude—Profit motive seems from so much of the rest of contemporary cinema. It seems like a film that belongs in festivals but could end up seeming strange there, since it abjures certain fashionable cynicisms.

GIANVITO: Given that the film has not been seen much as yet, time will tell how widely your perception is shared. At a recent screening at the Marseille Documentary Film Festival, one gentleman, after first telling how very much he admired the film, went on to describe the finale of the film as reminiscent of a George Romero film. What you perceived as optimism was apparently for him spectral, a chimera. Not that such a reaction was in any way my intention. For me it was important to indicate that this trajectory of struggle was not something dead and buried (though not the living dead!). As far as one's thoughts about our present predicaments or about the future, I have no difficulty understanding from whence the pessimism and cynicism springs. However, what's critical for me is that regardless of one's thoughts, one's actions must be those of an optimist. Otherwise one is only further assuring that the status quo remains unchanged.

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In speaking with Gianvito about his work, one of the things that struck me was his encyclopedic knowledge of film history and his voracious cinephilia. (For example, he recently edited a collection of interviews with Andrei Tarkovsky.) But in spite of this vast array of knowledge, he's not interested in namedropping, or positioning his films within this or that tradition. Instead, his work issues from an uncompromising drive for social justice, and as a result he has absorbed cinema differently from most of us. It isn't a question of stridency or mere use-value, but of the ethical and political dimension of forms. If Mad Songs' nonviolent organizers made some film-festival audiences fidget with discomfort, or if the conclusion to Profit motive moves us in ways that are exhilarating but not immediately assimilable, it has everything to do with our own decisions about how to engage with the world. At some point or other, every leftist cinephile has had to decide to devote him or herself to the aesthetic realm, to engage with representations, to take on faith that "work on the text" has material repercussions and that, pace Marx, interpreting the world is at least a partial means towards changing it. Gianvito's work does not disagree. Profit motive is, after all, a radical work of art and by no means a pamphlet. Any attentive viewer will immediately perceive Gianvito's faith in the capacity of art to motivate through both beauty and intellection. But, like a select few others in history of film—the gadflies and conscience-prickers, like Peter Watkins, Straub/Huillet, and Jon Jost—Gianvito makes work that asks a delicate, crucial question again and again. What can film do? And when is film not enough? If you are roused to action by Gianvito's film but find that inspiration strangely disconcerting, perhaps it's because it both prompts you to take to the streets, and asks you to reconsider the reasons you may have given yourself for not doing so.

By Michael Sicinski. In. Cinemascope. From The Magazine. Interviews

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