

On "Cloud 9"  
Robert S. Griffin  
www.robertsgriffin.com

I was captivated by a film on DVD last night. I was there, completely, with those people, that circumstance, those events. I wasn't backed off, self-conscious, sitting in a chair, my mind going here and there. I cared about what was happening and deeply moved by it. This morning, I feel different, shifted, somehow new. At its best, art can do that. The film was "Cloud 9," German, 2008, directed by Andreas Dresen, just out on DVD in America. I got it from Netflix, but I noticed today that it is in my local video store.

As I think about the film writing this, it reminds me of the ones I have written about previously on this site: by the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu from the 1950s, and two Romanian films from this decade, "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu" and "4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days." (See the thoughts, "On Three Films That Touched Me" and "On Two Romanian Films.") All these films involve ordinary and anonymous people dealing with private concerns that matter incredibly in their lives, and, in some manifestation, our own. On the surface, these stories appear simple, but they are actually layered and complex and profound. We experience the issues the protagonists confront and the choices they make and how things turn out for them directly, intimately. Film technique doesn't distract us, pull us away: scenes are extended, not chopped up into pieces, cut, cut, cut; the camera is stationary, not moving here and there and in and out, people move about within a frame and enter and leave it in natural fashion; there isn't master shot-two shot-close up conventionality, sudden shifts of perspective, or cinematic trickery to remind us that this is but a film. They have a *cinéma vérité* or documentary quality. "Cloud 9" and the others I've written about were about these people and these events and me, that's it, or so it seemed, and evidently that is what I want right now. Nothing mediated the connection between what was going on in the film and me, or at least seemingly it didn't; I realize that in fact there are all sorts of artistic contrivances in these films, but they are subtle and unobtrusive, and serve to heighten reality, not detract from it.

(Earlier this week, I watched a DVD of a Jean-Luc Godard film from the 1960s, or started to anyway, called "My Life to Live" in which the first five minutes is the back of characters' head as they

talk to one another. I didn't catch a word that was said. All that went through my mind during that time was "This is a Godard film" and "This film is about filmmaking," which perhaps was the point, and arguably it is artistically a legitimate point. But nevertheless, after sitting through more of this kind of thing in the scenes that followed the opening ones, I didn't care a whit about what happened to any of these people, and I quit on the film, turned it off.)

The protagonists of "Cloud 9" are in their late 60s and 70s, quite remarkable in itself. So unusual, this film is about old people; they are not bit players in younger people's lives. And, oh my gosh, the film deals with the sexuality of people that age, and it is not just suggested: there they are, seventy and seventy-five-year-olds, naked, having sex. There is nothing gratuitous in the film, what's shown needed to be shown to tell this story, but fair warning, the voluminous and sagging flesh on the screen, and seniors rooting and grunting, could gross out more than a few viewers, especially younger ones. I had my own problems with this, I'll admit.

The basic story of "Cloud 9" is a woman in her late 60s, Inge, who looks every bit her age, dumpy, your cleaning lady at the Sheraton, married for thirty years to Werner, who appears to be in his early 70s, suddenly falling for another man, and an older one at that, Karl, 76. In the face of the advice from her grown daughter, Petra, not to, Inge tells Werner what's going on, and the film is about what happens from there. The dialogue in the film appears to have been largely improvised, and most often that doesn't work, but to the actors' credit--all four were superb--and the director Dresen's, it serves this story well.

What I want to say about "Cloud 9" involves giving the film's ending away, so you may want to put this thought aside now, watch the film--I'm recommending it--and come back to it after you've viewed it.

For most people, "Cloud 9" is Inge's story. She is the star of the movie. She's in every scene, and she provides the narrative line of the film. And indeed, watching it last night, I basically saw things from Inge's perspective. This morning, however, it's not Inge I'm thinking about but rather her husband Werner. Art involves an exchange between a work of art and the viewer, consumer, whatever the best term is for the person taking in the art. In this case, the art was "Cloud 9"--those images, those events, in that order--and the

viewer was me--who I am, where I've come from, where I am in my life, what I care about, what I'm dealing with at this point (I'm the age of the characters in the film), and what I may deal with in the future. I'm thinking about Werner because he's an old man and I'm an old man. In a lot of ways, I am Werner, or I could be Werner, or I will be Werner.

Just as, for me, the two Romanian films were about the end of someone's life, "Cloud 9" is about the end of someone's life, Werner's. While there is a touch of ambiguity, it is quite certain that Werner ultimately takes his own life. For many, I presume, this is a melodramatic way to end the film with a bang (perhaps literally, though we are not informed of the details of Werner's likely suicide). But if you look at things from Werner's perspective rather than Inge's, and you take into account his back story and its possible consequences, this ending flows, or legitimately could flow, from what Werner has gone through with Inge and where he is in his life now in his 70s.

We are told that Inge and Werner had been married for thirty years. Not forty, thirty. So they were married when they were around forty, Werner likely a few years older than that. Inge brought children to the marriage. The daughter, Petra, the only one we meet, refers to Werner as Werner, not as dad. It could well be, and the depictions we see are consistent with this possibility, that Inge, not particularly qualified to earn a good living, uneducated it appears, who now makes a few dollars as a seamstress, was looking for financial stability and a father figure for her children--not a real father--and that was Werner. And that while having affection for Werner, he has never really done it for Inge as a man. Thirty years of living with you're-a-nice-guy-but-you-aren't-really-dad-and-you-aren't-really-my-man can chip away at you. More, Werner is not exactly, how to put it, a ball of fire: his interests by and large come down to watching TV news and listening to recordings of trains and taking an occasional train ride. The most enduring image of Werner is sitting at the small kitchen table up against the wall in their cloistered, downscale apartment drinking a cup of coffee.

So in comes Inge who says I've found Karl. And what does Werner do? Stunned, hurt, dumbfounded, diminished, basically he never gets up from the table. She starts to go out the door, he says where are you going, she says that's my business, and he sits there looking as devastated and alone and immobilized as a man can be.

Inge decides she wants to live part of the time with Karl and Werner goes along with it. She's in bed with Karl and gets a phone call from Petra. By Inge's reaction, it's clear what has happened. The last scene of the film is Inge and Petra at the burial. And all of this was, and is, absolutely real to me.

What am I taking away from "Cloud 9" this morning? First of all, I'm grateful to this director and these actors for the--and I think this is literally the case--unforgettable experience I had last night. And beyond that, I'm left with the intention never, if I can help it, to be Werner. Women can and, under the right circumstances, will do this kind of thing to men, and the challenge for me is to be ready for it if and when it happens and to deal with it in some other way than turning on myself. (Saying this is not to infer that men don't do this kind of thing to women. They do. It is just that in this instance I'm looking at from the man's perspective. I suspect few in the audience of "Cloud 9" do that.) The challenge for me is to have a solid foundation of physical health, self-worth, and personal viability at 73, or whatever Werner's age was. If you are marginalized, compromised, emasculated (we are led to believe Inge and Werner had a sex life, but how much was she into it, and what effect did that have on Werner?), and your life is about TV and trains, you aren't in the position to do more than what Werner did, cope, endure. A man with dignity, a self-important man, a purposeful man, a man engaged with the world, a strong man, would have had the wherewithal to tell Inge to get out and stay out, or to move out himself.

I hope when my time comes to deal with something like this, in whatever form it takes, not just in a love relationship, that I don't respond by sitting hangdog, forlorn at the kitchen table drinking coffee. I intend to be in a position to get on with my life with integrity and vigor and effectiveness when I'm hit. But to get to that place I have to keep working hard on myself (I've been getting at it for the last couple years especially), to make a project of the quality of my own being, something I sense strongly Werner didn't do. I don't think what the work entails is a mystery. And even if it does seem like a mystery, we can just do something, anything, and see how that goes and learn from it and go from there. In my case, it is as simple as looking people in the eye, something I've never been able to do. Everything counts, little things add up. Little things lead to big things.

John Lennon wrote a song called "Nobody Loves You" that includes the lines:

Nobody loves you when you're old and gray  
Nobody sees you when you're on cloud nine

It's true, as I can attest, that far fewer people love you when you are old and gray, and far fewer see you when you are on cloud nine, or in any other state of being, for that matter. But, contrary to Lennon's lyrics, someone *might* love you when you are old and gray, it's possible, and really, it only takes one person to love you if it is the right person. And someone *might* see you, you can't be sure no one will. However it turns out, though, the existential challenge, to call it that, for me and someday for you, is to live fully and with honor anyway; to affirm our lives, not end them.