

RICHARD BRODY

TRICKED BY A GREAT FILM



By Richard Brody

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I've just got back from the Maryland Film Festival, in Baltimore. Among the many excellent movies I saw there,

✚ evolution of a Criminal” (which

will play in New York next month in [BAMcinemaFest](#)) stands out as a work that undermined some of my fundamental notions about filmmaking.



This is my fourth year attending the festival; in previous years, all the screenings were held at one multi-screen theatre. This year, they were spread over a half-dozen other venues, which made for pleasant jaunts and a variety of sights but required a little planning. On a friend's

recommendation, I dashed to the theatre where “Evolution of a Criminal” was playing, and I grabbed a seat without looking at the program guide. Meanwhile, the filmmaker was delayed owing to traffic, and the screening started without his introduction.



The film tells the story of Darius, a sixteen-year-old from a Texas town, whose close-knit family is experiencing financial difficulties. Those troubles are compounded by a break-in that strips the family of their valuables and their home-entertainment system. Darius, a straight-A student who works at a local big-box retailer, figures out how to steal some V.C.R.s from the store to replace the ones that were taken. He gets away with the scheme, but it has no effect on his family’s underlying trouble paying its basic bills, and so Darius decides to rob a neighborhood bank. He recruits two friends as accomplices, and together they carry out the crime. The rest of the movie, which I don’t want to spoil, traces the results of that crime.

The film tells the story with a remarkable blend of voices. Footage of the sixteen-year-old Darius at school, with his friends, and elsewhere

in the course of his daily routine leading up to the crime is intercut with interviews, seen in low-fi, seemingly consumer-grade video, mainly in closeup, with the people in Darius's life—family members, friends, former teachers—who don't address the camera but, instead, speak directly to the protagonist, who remains offscreen.

The word I haven't used yet in describing the movie is "documentary." That's how "Evolution of a Criminal" is listed in the festival program, and the filmmaker is the onetime criminal Darius Clarke Monroe. Yet there's nothing in the film that labels it as a documentary. It's obvious that the scenes of the bank robbery and the surrounding events are staged reconstructions, or, simply, fiction filmmaking, and as I watched the film I wondered whether even the interviews were scripted and performed by actors.

By and large, I'm the sworn enemy of fictionalized reconstruction in documentaries, which are often either a deception (staged events that are intended to pass for unstaged ones, new footage that's meant to be taken for archival images) or dramatic filmmaking that's often done without the imaginative and interventionist skill of even run-of-the-mill fiction filmmakers. But, in "Evolution of a Criminal," the reconstructions have the opposite effect: the overt fictiveness of the reconstruction (no filmmaker could have been on hand to film a bank robbery in progress) reflect onto the entire film, giving it the aspect of fiction. What's more, the film's first-person testimony is so dramatically powerful and moving—and filmed with such a poised, untheatrical, fixed-focus, and long-take style—that I found myself wondering whether the director had composed it as a script and gathered a cast of actors to perform it for the camera.

The next question is: What difference would it make? The designation of “documentary” is a strange one—it’s an extra-cinematic label, a term of marketing or of advertising. There’s nothing within a movie that can affirm its status as drama or as report. Even the depiction of widely known historical events may be fictionalized. (Taken to its fullest extreme, doubting the power of cinematic or journalistic observation leads to paranoid conspiracy theories.)

In any event, much of what’s understood in movies depends on factors external to the film, starting with cultural context, which lets filmmakers get away with visual shorthand or outright omissions of what viewers can be expected to know. But, in general, there’s something strange about labels of genre. Whether documentary, Western, science fiction, or romantic comedy, they invite an unfortunate form of aesthetic discrimination, as if different rules and different terms of evaluation apply to a movie because it features a cowboy, a robot, a love story, or a real-life event.

I often feel that the very notion of genre is much more important to a studio’s marketing department than to the art of the movie itself. Documentaries are no less works of art than are dramatic films; the virtue of dramatic films involves a core of emotional and ideal authenticity and a sense of wonder, just as documentaries do. Yet, unlike dramas, documentaries rest on the claim of factuality, of the events in the movie having actually taken place. There’s a continuum linking naturalistic drama and documentary that seems to be broken when special effects are involved.

That’s why the Chinese director Jia Zhangke’s films “Still Life” and “24 City” stand as such signal works of cinematic modernism. In the

former, a drama about life alongside the enormous Three Gorges Dam—based on the lives of people whom Jia encountered there—is punctuated by surprising special effects. The latter, about the demolition of a former industrial complex and its replacement with a blend of luxury apartments and offices, features interviews with employees and residents, some of whom are played by well-known actors. The very notion of reality is psychological. The ease with which reporting is skewed by selectivity and interpretation, by editing and tone, should suffice to override the apparently obvious distinction between “fact” and “fiction.”

The verifiability of journalism is its crucial and indispensable social function, and is precisely the limit that keeps it from becoming art. The art of nonfiction, the essay, is intimate, subjective, and interpretive. It’s precisely what can’t be checked—the writer’s inflection—that turns a report into an experience. The collection of facts in “Evolution of a Criminal” is just interesting. Its images, its shape, its tone, and its implications make it a terrific movie, as well as the birth of an artist.

Above: Darius Clark Monroe. Photograph: Relative Noise/Aliquot Films/Deerjen Films.



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