

*The Men
Who Would
Conquer China*

Nick Torrens

A Q&A WITH FILMMAKER NICK TORRENS, INTRODUCED AND EDITED
BY MARTHA ANSARA

What distinguishes a
documentary from current affairs?

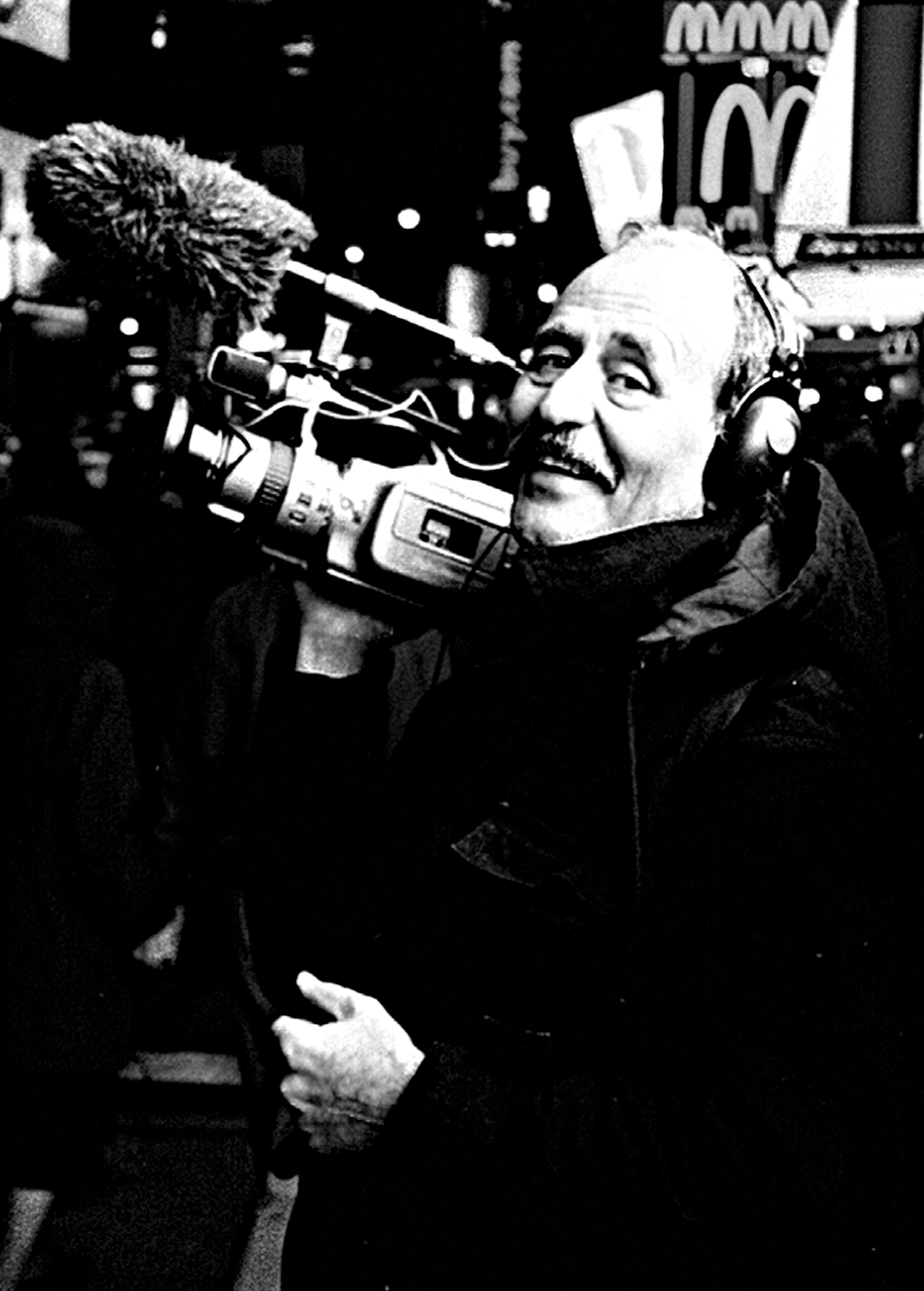
HOW does a filmmaker transcend surface reality and incorporate within the immediacy of observed characters and events a more profound analysis, while at the same time maintaining story and narrative impetus?

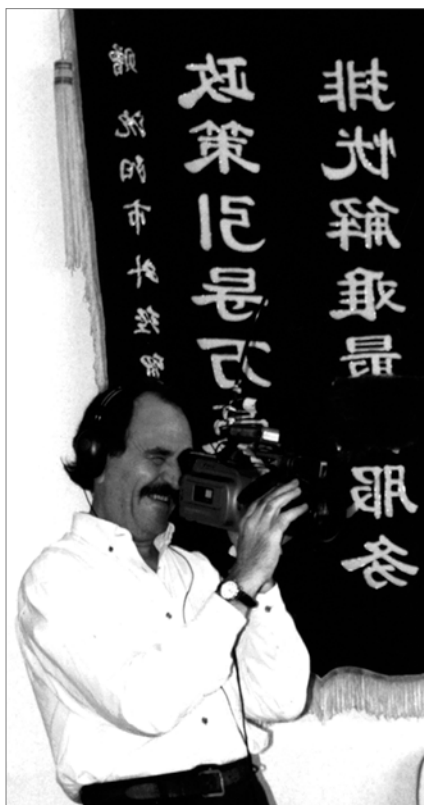
Character-driven feature documentaries, which achieve analysis in action, often take a long time to make and are difficult to finance. It is particularly demanding – personally, intellectually, emotionally, and physically – to make documentaries exploring great historical upheavals. Outstanding Australian films that do so are *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* (Bob Connelly, 1989) and *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (Dennis O'Rourke, 1991). And now comes *The Men Who Would Conquer China*, a work which engaged Nick Torrens and his co-director and partner Jane St. Vincent Welch for four years, and is

far better in its feature version than its cut-down TV hour.

The Men Who Would Conquer China follows the efforts of wealthy New York investment banker Mart Bakal and his well-connected Hong Kong business partner Vincent Lee, as they join forces to take advantage of the investment opportunities provided by China's transition from a socialist to a market economy. The film moves between New York, Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai and other Chinese cities over almost four years as the pair try to put deals together, engage in difficult negotiations with Chinese government bureaucrats, and tour Chinese factories seeking ideal investment opportunities. Their differing cultural perspectives prove frustrating and the partnership frequently seems on the verge of dissolution. Each has his own objectives in dealing with the Chinese government to purchase







failed state-owned companies for restructure and resale to multinational corporations. Set against the background of China's soaring foreign investment and rising social inequality and unemployment, the film offers a unique insight into the changes emerging from the impact of capitalism. It follows on from Nick's first film about Vincent Lee, *To Get Rich is Glorious* (1998).

The style of the film, as Nick explains in the interview that follows, is largely observational, and follows defined rules in shooting. Although Nick does not become a 'character' in his own right, we hear his voice in narration and his presence is fully acknowledged by those in the film. His camerawork is highly interpretive, as is the editing. In one example, the camera walks through wealthy downtown New York with Mart (who is wearing his luxurious and stylish overcoat), as he explains how he has helped transform former communist countries into more Westernized economies. A rolling list of multinational companies with their Eastern European names is super-ed over his face – a crude, but necessary device – and then, in a wide shot of Mart still walking towards us, we see in the foreground what appears to be a poor person in a cheap jacket going through garbage. The seamless editing which



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TORRENS FILMING IN SHENYANG; VINCENT AT OPPOC MEETING IN BEIJING; COLIN AND NOLA IN *DARLING RIVER KIDS*; *THE MEN WHO WOULD CONQUER CHINA* INSET LEFT: FILMING *TO GET RICH IS GLORIOUS* IN TIANANMEN SQUARE

carries Mart's elegant figure into the second shot with his voice continuing over, then pausing at the right moment, draws a depth of meaning from the shot composition and from our memory bank of similar images – especially the figure scouring garbage behind Mart when he first introduces himself.

Shots, editing and the overall construction of the film similarly build meaning in sequences relating to cars. A critique of the correspondence between the development of capitalism and skyrocketing car ownership is woven through sequences shot in urban China – in cars, around cars and in traffic jams. This culminates in Mart's observation of the wisdom of investing in car parts as he takes off once again for Beijing, arriving in a thick cloud of smog. Two shots from the aircraft highlight this. Although there's no comment, in context it communicates much more than just another of the film's succession of plane arrivals.

Of course, one of the strongest elements in constructing the tone and – however obliquely – the meaning of the film is the

music by David Bridie and Paul Anthony Smith. It is a complex, multi-layered film which benefits from repeated viewings.

Having already garnered a number of awards, *The Men Who Would Conquer China* recently won the Dendy Award for Best Documentary at the Sydney Film Festival 2005. A further screening of the film was held at Popcorn Taxi, followed by a Q&A with Nick Torrens, moderated by film critic Paul Byrnes. A revised version of this discussion follows.

The Interview

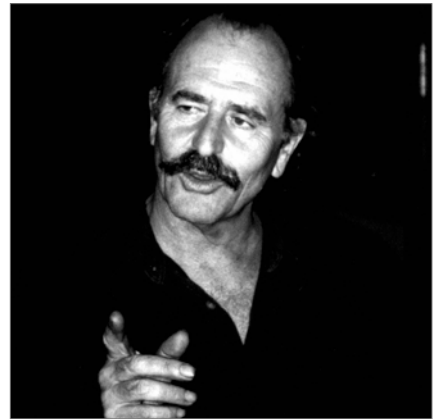
The initial questions were put to Nick by Paul Byrnes. Later, questions were taken from members of the audience.

The Grierson school of documentary – giving a voice to those who are denied a voice – tends to concentrate on the poor, the powerless, but this is a story about the powerful, or perhaps about the illusion of power.

It's an enormous departure – principally



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MART AND RONALD MCDONALD IN CHONGQING IN *THE MEN WHO WOULD CONQUER CHINA*; NICK TORRENS; TORRENS WITH BADGER BATES AND GROUP AT MUAWINGA NSW IN *DARLING RIVER KIDS*; THE LEE FAMILY IN *TO GET RICH IS GLORIOUS*



because the more traditional documentary subjects, historically, are about the under-classes, the exploited, the people who have little control of their destiny – that's the point. Vincent and Mart however, are used to controlling their lives, careers, their families and they make the decisions about how they will run their lives. So it becomes a very different film from those I've made in the past. Also, this is the first time I've made it clear from the start that the subjects won't have any controlling input into the film, nor will I show them cuts on the way through. Normally, I would be seeking feedback from the subjects to monitor that what I'm representing is correct. In this case, I was conscious of this experiment; I very rarely saw films about the wealthy and educated, except what you might call the photo opportunity documentary – not what I consider social documentary. And I thought, 'I've been around a little while, I wonder if these people can be as self-revealing and as candid over a long period of observation as we filmmakers expect our subjects normally to be.'

So why treat the rich different to the poor, in that sense, in terms of collaboration?

It's always an unknown factor, a mystery, why people participate in documentaries – why people agree to be the subjects of our films. And you can usually only guess at it. In most of the films I've made before, people are actually wanting to tell their story. In *Darling River Kids* (1986), I was originally looking at a long-term observation of a town with a sizeable Indigenous community to show the realities of black-white relations in 1988, leading up to the Bicentennial festivities when I anticipated that we were going to congratulate ourselves heartily after 200 years.

Now after two years of getting to know the people of Wilcannia, they said 'No, mate, the film you want to make is this.' So it was not exactly a commission, but I was finding a way to make the stories which they felt were most important for mainstream television audiences in the cities to know.

This film is different: if I allowed Vincent and Mart to commission me in any sense, I would be operating under a conflict of interest. They are used

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to having authority over how they're portrayed and what they do. I made a decision that this could not happen with this film. I'd be utterly compromised. So we discussed our differences of opinion about globalization, about world events,

political direction and so on, and they knew where I stood. They knew they couldn't have an input, but that I would phone or email about developments – and get help – check facts and information.

Of course, it's impossible for your subjects not to influence what the film will be. They will guide, in some way, what you will eventually film.

Absolutely. I'm dependent. I'm just hanging around their world. I'm living with them. I'm following events as best I can. I'm not asking them to do anything. I'm not asking them to 'get in the car again'. It's pure observation in those ways.

What do you see as the differences between your kind of observational documentary and the more polemical kind of documentary which is becoming quite popular, particularly since Michael Moore.

It's enormously gratifying to see a point of view which is opposed to the rightist media monopolies – and being presented to a huge audience. I admire those efforts to use your medium to make a direct change. However, I'm not tempted to use those strategies myself. The methodology there is to source all kinds of different material and stitch it together in the same way, actually, that current affairs often does. Michael Moore and the new American polemics, if we can call them that, basically use the techniques of the right-wing media to tell the opposite story. It brings it back to a balance in some ways.

But I've always felt – and it's a very strong conviction – that people are actually convinced about something if they feel they've made the decision themselves, without being told how to think.

I think if you let people watch a story *in context*, and if you provide the subtext strongly, then an audience arrives at the truth themselves. I think people often react *against* polemic.

What sort of rules do you impose upon yourself when you're filming?

No matter how much television people have seen, it's impossible to imagine that they know what an observation will mean to their lives – how much you'll be there, what manner of thing they are taking part in. That's a process of learning for both of you. In the beginning, I'll say, 'It won't be 'Roll, action, cut' – or anything like that. I will be filming lots of the time – and you won't know whether I am filming or not. Say anything you like to me at any time. There is no question of 'don't look at the camera'. There is no question of those devices that documentary used to be full of: 'Could you walk through that door again? Could you get out of the car now, and I'll get the other angle?' [It's more] 'Take as little notice as possible of what I'm doing, just do what you do. And talk to me whenever you like. If you don't want something to be filmed,

tell me to stop and I'll stop.' They're the basic ground rules. And when you honour those rules, people begin to trust.

There's a scene where Mart in New York is talking to Vincent in Hong Kong and you've got both on camera. Does that present a dilemma for you?

Not at all. The film is an observational narrative. The narrative drive is what television feeds on, lives off. It's not like the days when filmmakers like Gary Kildea with *Celso and Cora* (1983) were exploring how to make representation as believable as possible by including camera stops and not cutting. I love that. But in this film, with the conversation between Vincent and Mart, what was important was that this occurred after these two men had split up – this partnership was on hold. In the narrative what happened next was vital. None of us knew what that would be. So when that call came from Vincent, I was filming Mart in New York, but I'd also filmed Vincent, of course, talking to Mart when I was in Hong Kong. There was no problem for me or Jane, my partner and the co-filmmaker, to use those shots of both ends of the conversation. The priority was to help the audience understand how these people feel about coming back together again. And what is going to bring them back together again? An idea of Vincent's – which he calls about. If we don't have Vincent in this telephone conversation, it loses its power.

I wanted to ask, how do you get to make a film like this film over four years? How do you live?

As you are aware, Paul, people of my generation actually came into filmmaking before it was in any sense an industry – although it may not really be an industry now. We had different aims and motivations, I think. And basically, I haven't been able to make the switch to, you know, a cost-effective, business-like approach to filmmaking. For me the project is the dominating force, the imperative. And whatever it takes will be given to it. For as many months or years as it takes, you're involved in somebody's life. So, I responded to what I thought would be most important to film in this saga, and in the middle of filming it comes September 11, 2001. This virtually closes Mart

down for a year, and a lot of the material I'd shot before then is now useless because he starts again with new leads. So, yes, I thought, 'My God, this is going to take quite a while!'

What was the reaction of Mart and Vincent to the film?

Vincent wrote back and said, 'How the hell do you think I'm going to play this, it's on VHS.' And I wrote back, 'Vincent, go and buy one. I haven't made a DVD yet.' And he wrote back, 'My sister had an old one in a box. It was very dusty.' He said, 'I watched it with Loretta' (his sister). 'I've never seen Loretta laugh as much. I really like it,' he said, 'In fact, I emailed Mart and I said, "I saw Nick's film – we're like an old married couple, constantly bitching at each other, but tied together".' [laughter]

And then with Mart, I didn't hear for nearly three months after he'd got the tape. And I worried about what he'd do if he really didn't like it. Was it possible that he'd think of bringing a case against the film? Mart and I had had a continuing dialogue about all the big issues, and the differences of opinion between us. And towards the end of the cut I'd warned him to expect possibly contentious material, like 'You know that scene where you swore your head off at Vincent, it's in there Mart.' And many other examples. But I didn't hear anything. So I worried. Then after Vincent had sent him that approving email, I received a very brief reply. The subject heading was: 'I saw your film. I had to buy a VHS player.' [laughter] And then, 'It's a very clever film. I am very glad you are my friend ... tell Jane the editing is wonderful.' I think there are at least two meanings in that and I still don't know which of them he means.

You haven't seen him since?

Oh yes, he came to the Chicago Festival and we were on stage together afterwards for the discussion.

So how did he fare in front of an audience?

I think the many filmmakers in the audience loved the film. But the North American audience, I think, would have liked me to be more polemic. I think they felt

that I let Mart get away with too much, which is, of course, an interesting reading because I don't think he does. And there were people who were very angry about the attitudes of the film's subjects – and the implications of the victory of capitalism. So there was quite a lot of anger in the room.

You talk about the North American audience feeling that you hadn't condemned capitalism, but it's all there in the shots. It's all there in the details. It's all there in both the montage and the mise en scène.

Yes, the subtext is very important. Once it was established that the film would be a narrative for the ABC and for the international distributor – not a more stream-of-consciousness essay on corporatism which I would have loved to have made – once it was a narrative, careful creation of subtext was imperative because, otherwise, we'd only be making a story of two men. It would mean losing, I would think, two thirds of the opportunity we'd been given. We had to find ways to put meaning in and around the central action, and within every frame. This provides information about the larger picture – sociological, historical, the way that all the forces are working – and the absurdity of some of these forces. That has to be part of it.

And then we wanted to alert the audience to look for this subtext. In this case, we used a very mannered opening – rural China in a frame within a black screen. With text. The idea is that China, being the oldest continuing civilization on earth, existed in isolation, and this continued – with some exceptions – until Deng Xiaoping opened the doors in 1978.

This device alerts an audience that there is a filmmaking agenda ... something to look for. Otherwise we wouldn't be enabling an audience to see and to understand much of what I myself saw and learned ... Otherwise, they're just going to get the story.

Can you continue more specifically about the way you framed shots, and about your thinking at the time of shooting?

It's there all the time. When you're shooting, you're never shooting for coverage. You're always shooting with your idea in mind – and it's more or less visceral, and even less intellectual when you're filming alone because you know what you want.

I'm shooting for the shot and the idea as I'm seeing the eventual film screening in my mind. I'm seeing and anticipating the way the camera will move, and the way that the world of these subjects seems to be broken up into certain identifiable components. I want to repeat those components until people notice that there are reflections everywhere, there are amazing eagles' eyries where they work and live. There is luxury, there is constant flight, there are elevators going up and there are planes climbing at 45 degrees – and there's always a process going along the ground – at times confident, at times a cover-up, often scrambling and in difficulty.

I'm locked into the knowledge of what I'd like the film to look like. So if I'm shooting Vincent's father, Mr Lee, it's virtually never going to be in medium shot. For me, he was so important. He was the voice of traditional China that was seeking continuity, promulgated by his son. Actually [addresses Paul Byrnes] you brought that point out in that review at the Sydney Film Festival of the first film, *To Get Rich is Glorious*, that it was about fathers and sons. And Vincent agreed with that.

When you're doing a doco over such a long period of time, would you choose to do it differently, rather than being a one-man crew?

Essentially, no; for that sort of film, I love working alone. It frees you. It's not ideal and there's difficulty in dealing with white balance and adequate sound in noisy locations and so on. I won't skate over that. But you're not navigating, you're driving. And you're not directing, you're doing. Don Pennebaker once said, 'With these new cameras you know, I don't have to come out except to sleep.' You're so *inside* the situation. You're not thinking about instructing crew [sotto voce] 'Move over there – pan right – do this or that.' Whispering in a cinematographer's ear, touching them and indicating. I love the directness of the process

between the mind, the emotions and the results through the camera. For this kind of filmmaking, I wouldn't change it.

Do you think there were situations where a show was being put on to get a certain image or story across to you and people weren't being quite honest?

It's quite extraordinary, but no. Our process of getting permission worked very well – acting as though it's going to be okay – as though we HAD permission. Filming at that level of society, and with this subject matter, there is something going on that I found different from previous films. Here, both sides agree that the economic imperative is the *only* imperative. Despite the differences between the West and China, the collaboration in this process is so strong, that somebody filming it doesn't matter to them. I feel they take for granted that what they're doing is so extremely important and valuable for their societies and their superiors, that no one could doubt it, let alone be critical. A couple of times I was stopped. Once, while filming the men meeting with a Securities Commission executive, Vincent noticed that one man wasn't responding candidly. Vincent suddenly turned to me and gestured for me to cut. I did and moved away.

But in general I think China now feels that the media is part of it ... part of the new world.

Did you need permission in advance when you went into all those factories with a camera?

I never got permission in advance – always did it on the spot. China's changed so much ... I'd explain myself and be filming at the same time. Vincent would take the lead. He would say, 'He's making a film for the Australian ABC ... is it all right with you?' And they'd nod. I'd adopt a low profile, filming our own characters first. I think sometimes they thought 'Well, he's employed by them.' Basically, I film from a distance and focus on our characters for as long as it takes. At a certain point the event's momentum establishes strongly enough to move in closer. The *picture* might be all right on the long-end of the zoom, but the sound's not going to be good

enough from the camera microphone and the radio mic on one of the men, so when I must, I'll move in close and generally kneel to get close-ups. It's not difficult, it's a natural process when you're attuned to what's going on, not overstepping bounds, being aware, low profile and non-threatening.

I sensed in the film a lot of affection for the two main protagonists and that led me to wonder what you feel the strongest intentions of the film are for you personally. And how do you know what to shoot when you don't know what will happen next?

The motivation to make a film is probably the most important element in that question. It's crucial to know what the intellectual centre of the film is – what it will say, and how. That helps you decide the way you'll approach everything. It helps you decide when, for example, you'll shoot almost all of a scene in extreme close-up including all camera movements. I'll never film a scene 'for coverage' – I'll film it for what it will represent in the final film.

I started on this project when Mart Bakal said, 'Why don't you make a film about ME now...?' This was some time after completion of the previous film *To Get Rich Is Glorious – Deng Xiaoping*. Mart had appeared unexpectedly during this filming as Vincent's American partner. After that, I thought a lot about how a subsequent film with Mart could open all kinds of important possibilities, but I felt that if I requested this, our relationship could start off on the wrong foot, and I'd probably have all sorts of conditions put on. So I waited to see if Mart himself would suggest making the film – having a hunch that he might.

So when he did, I asked, 'What would it be about?' And he started telling me about his work, which was pretty amazing. He'd been very important in the early nineties in the Czech Republic and in Poland, advising prime ministers on what sectors of industry to privatize first and whether R.J. Reynolds ought to get the local cigarette company – that sort of thing. It was a strong backstory.

And then he said, 'But China's going to be the *most* important because it is the

future – for me.' So I thought, 'Okay, he's got a particular stake and a particular goal. He's not working for US AID – the US government – as he was in Eastern Europe; he's going to be working for himself. The profits will go to Mart, his family and his company, Crimson Capital. So we'll see how he does things, we'll see the differences between the Eastern bloc and China in the results he achieves ...

I thought this was a wonderful opportunity. We have one subject from the West and one from the East, dealing at the front line of global capitalism, collaborating with China's new direction. There's the cultural nexus between East and West *and* the fact that one power is dominant and the other is aiming for parity, if not eclipse, this century.

If I can observe for long enough, the eventual film will provide an inside look at the process – but more importantly, provoke consideration of the implications of the 'victory of capitalism', and challenge the thinking which says history has come to an end.

I hope it makes people concerned. It's not that Mart has to wear a universal mantle of capitalism, but he has certain North American attitudes, and essentially we're looking at capitalism at work at a relatively early stage in China. It's quite an important time to be looking at it.

With the four-year time span that it took to make the film, how significant was the conclusion to that narrative and what impact did that time span have on the film coming to fruition?

You know, Spike Milligan in the Q Series – whenever he ran out of script ideas he'd line up the cast and they'd chant, 'What are we going to do now? What are we going to do now?' I often felt like that. I'd think, 'Where is this going? The picture I want to present is everywhere. I'm bathing in it – the information, the shots of pollution that tell the sub-textual story of what is going to happen when China and everybody in China (a quarter of the world's population) has a car ... If we have cars, can't they?... There are so many things that you think about and try to capture *in shots*. But how does it end? I mean, all that's wonderful but

what's going to happen to the narrative? They're not getting *anywhere*!'

I was, of course, worried about it: how was this going to resolve? In story terms, one of two things had to happen: they had to achieve something, and what they achieved would tell its own story – because another sub-textual element is what sort of enterprises corporations seek and why.

The alternative resolution is that the tension, pressure and frustration builds to boiling point and they split up – have a big fight and separate. I preferred that ending ... it would have said a fair bit. But they continued and continue still, and the narrative ends – appropriately for this relationship – in ambiguity ... Have they succeeded? Who knows? They haven't yet made any money!

I put that information in the voice of Vincent's father because Mr Lee won't consider the venture a success until he sees the money coming in ...

And then the final text pays it off: There are three updates, for Vincent, Mart and China. Vincent's still doing well – he's getting more appointments and connections in the Chinese political system, which will lead to business success. He's thereby fulfilling his duty as a son within the family business strategy. But Mart is still waiting for Beijing permissions, so no financial success has yet arrived.

And China itself is attracting more and more foreign investment – but for the eight or nine hundred million people who are *not* benefiting from capitalism, their lives and conditions are being eroded by China's economic policies – and this is hidden – covered up.

In this way, there is no other end possible.

Martha Ansara is a documentary filmmaker and film historian. •

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