

Mondovino or The Wine World, Between Terroir and Industry

Jean-Michel Bertrand

*“A wine’s first name is its cépage,
its surname is its terroir”.*

Léonard Humbrecht

Mondovino is not “simply” (and that’s already something) a documentary on the world of wine, the players, the hidden depths, clear images and well-kept secrets, it is a major film, aesthetically and economically, in the way it manages to connect the form to the underlying meaning of the story. It must also be said that in the wine world, as shown in the film, plot twists are legion and that the story is not one that can be told simply. The story is told through the patient gathering of information provided by real-life players about what is revealed to be the daily struggle between two intractable visions of the world and of life itself. Indeed, wine is not just a product; it is the symptom and the result of a culture, a relationship with the world, and, *in fine*, an ethic. Jonathan Nossiter’s film gives a clear depiction of the frontal or indirect clash of interests and

ideas, using the tropes of fiction within the documentary form (the goodies against the baddies, conquests and obstacles, alliances, mistrust and betrayal, opposition of characters, convictions but also personal behaviour and scenarios). But the underlying dynamic of the film can not just be reduced to linking the investigation (documenting is a form of presenting the face of the Other, despite or beyond clichés) to the divergence of egos, “characters”, ambitions (fiction is about the “me”, small or big secrets, power struggles and money issues that blow up or hide behind the storytelling), by sketching that which gives rise to virtual fiction in the real. It eventually plants a nagging tune in our heads that shows the auteur’s ontological insistence on (what is the world about?) and obsession with great metaphysical and cinematographically meditations: thus, the questions that come up, “who are they?”, “what do they want?” are inevitably followed by those that reveal the whys as well as the hows (to live, to cultivate, to produce): “what motivates them?”, “what relationships to the world, to nature, to what is human and to life itself have those who devote themselves to vine and wine?”. The living, incarnated answers infallibly outline the shared relationships between the film’s characters. In other words, the film constantly emphasises, through the questions asked by the characters it depicts, that basis of cinema itself, by which we mean the tension between “scenario” films and “story” films. How does one define these notions, even summarily? Let’s just say, to keep things brief, that the scenario involves looping impulse, libido-dominandi, struggles and conquests while story films are more open, more complex and often propose a different relationship to time, to dramaturgy and the notion of event, because they depend on a non-linear and unpredictable causality where tension develops between stories and characters. Thus, this formal tension between story and scenario (that which marketing

professors, however pseudo-critical, will never understand) finds an echo in the characters in *Mondovino*. On the one hand we have winemakers who focus on profit, reproducible quality, expansion; they work in terms of short-term market perspectives and long-term strategic perspectives thus proving, by their omnipresence, that their “me” or their will is imposed on nature and that nature must bow to their demands. On the other hand, we have artisans who do not exploit the land but work it and respect it, knowing that theirs is the slow time-frame of overlapping worlds: soil, landscape, climate, tradition, and culture that must be expressed in a constant dialogue that works when one adapts, not when one tries to control. *Mondovino* is a complex film, a great film that explores and goes beyond its apparent subject matter (what applies to wine also applies to a number of other products) and intertwines three main themes.

The first theme compares singular wines, grown in an “artisanal” fashion, that express the terroir in which they are grown with partially “standardised” woody, vanilla-esque, flattering wines based on a taste norm that the wine critic Parker has contributed to building and that must be reproduced identically year after year. However, contrary to the criticism it sometimes gets, the theme-based film does not beat us over the head with its thesis; on the contrary, it lets that thesis emerge patiently. In other words, the filmmaker doesn’t develop his point of view by exposing his own convictions in an abrupt manner. He lets the different players speak, thus leaving the spectator to deduce what they want from what they glean and then edits and organises the ensemble so as to bring together points of view that complete, echo or totally oppose one another. Nossiter’s talent lies in the way he gains the trust of his interviewees, who inevitably end up admitting the opposite of the superficial and controlled party line with which they

begin and in the way he edits their testimonies to allow the truth to surface, crack and then break, weighed down by contradictory statements and the proclamations and imaginary projections that all storytelling requires. Mirrors and images. Of oneself or more to the point, of an in-between place, because unlike what we see later on in California, there is no room for narcissism and self-depiction in the introductory portraits : from the start of this film Nossiter insists on the intimate relationship between a winemaker, the “land” and the climate, giving a platform successively to Yvonne Heguburu and Batista Colombu, two extraordinary “characters” who produce wines that are both typical (Jurçon and Malvasia di Bosa) and of great quality. Both expound on their reasons for making wine and the intimate or humanist and social meaning it has in their eyes. Yvonne Heguburu who planted her vines after her husband died (a project they had together) tells us: “since then, the over-flowing love I feel is in the vines. I talk to them...” The intimate reasons are often based on principle. Battista Columbu, her faced bathed in the sublime Sardinian light declares she wants to continue a humanist tradition on her two hectares. The tradition of a community wine to be offered to friends and strangers allowing everyone to make their “own” wine (“the rich shouldn’t be the only ones to do this”, she says: “behind the fact of producing Malvasia, there is an ethical conviction, a “savoir-vivre” as the French say”). Thus, before letting a “thesis” about wine itself emerge, Nossiter lets us see and hear what motivates a winemaker who is in love with the land and its movements. He makes space for reasons and for identities, because these reasons are far from anecdotal and can be found in the characteristics of the “product”. Later on in the film, we understand that making wine means revealing a terroir one loves, its constancies and variations (soils, exposure, varieties, and grapes). The desire

to express what happens throughout a year is rooted in this connection, which presupposes a dialogue and permanent tie to the land and its signs.

A shot of a plane in the sky over Bordeaux, a permanent self-satisfied laugh, celebrity name-dropping, constant phone calls: the contrast is striking between the two initial portraits juxtaposed in the introduction and that of one of the essential players in the new wine market, the wine consultant and star oenologist, Michel Rolland. This contrast is perfectly symbolised by the shot of the plane landing in the Bordeaux region, shifting us into another world, that of global business and huge markets. So who is organising this shift? A taste manufacturer who is partially indifferent to the concept of the terroir and affirms, not without a sense of provocation that one day men will make wine on the moon. Michel Rolland defines himself as a “flying wine maker” as he works for over one hundred properties in twelve different countries. This obviously means he only comes into contact with the vine every now and again and he generally delivers his recipes and prescriptions remotely to owners, who at times know nothing about the subject and are happy to just apply the consultant’s methods. Rolland is a modernist who, on a number of occasions, shows his disdain for the “peasants” he considers to be retrograde as they are attached or connected to their land, the actual place a wine comes from and are hostile to the industrialisation of wine growing. Rolland couldn’t give a toss about the terroir. He emphasises his “imprint” or his signature (which is his brand image) as well as his methods that, we must admit, have at times helped in improving the standard quality of Bordeaux wines, but not their geographical typicality. Among his methods or recipes, one comes back again and again, like a recurring joke, throughout the film: “Oxygenize!” Here, the issue is not to discuss the advantages, inconveniences and

consequences of micro-oxygenation, a technique that was originally used to soften the tannins in Madiran and that has now spread to many other winemakers, in particular those owned by the industrial side of the profession, but it is important to know about some of its effects.

Micro-oxygenation or *microbullage* involves the continuous injection of very small quantities of oxygen during fermentation in order to imitate and accelerate the natural oxygenation process that happens through the wood. The actual benefit of this method is very controversial¹. It is used to accelerate the “ageing process”, to increase colour intensity thanks to the polymerisation of the anthocyanins and tannins, to give a feeling of full-bodied-ness and fruit, to soften the tannins and decrease the vegetal character of certain wines. But it also reinforces the sugar levels in wines, affecting their freshness, erasing their particularities and smoothing out their aromatic profiles. In other words, it modifies what makes a wine typical and what amounts to its expression – always different – of a terroir.

The film allows us to examine the issue of the disappearance of the terroir and the finality of these interventions that, under the cover of technical modernity, result in the production of standardised wines in an industrial manner². Of course, the notion of terroir is also mentioned by the Mondavis and their rich neighbours in Napa or by the rich owners of grand cru properties in Bordeaux, but it is just mentioned in passing. It is not so much a reality but a reference that is part of a structured system of storytelling. What appears progressively throughout the various interviews and testimonials is a perfectly run system that produces a certain type of wine, a marketing strategy and a quest for the blessing of the main opinion makers: in California, but also in Bordeaux – where it is finally admitted, after many convolutions and difficulties, that while remaining “themselves”,

the wines adapt to the new markets. It is a question of catering to a demand rather than supplying a market. A demand that is in no way “natural” or spontaneous but is totally manufactured by the producers themselves and by the quest for guarantees on the part of consumers (who have often been disappointed by low quality wines with complex labels and classifications that are hard to understand). Big industrial groups have thus developed brand name wines, sometimes “technically” well made, of a standard and constant quality and aimed them at a segmented clientele according to traditional marketing principles. The new classification has the merit of simplicity, so dear to English-speaking cultures according to Jacky Rigaux³: “*basic wines, popular premium wines, super premium, ultra premium wines and icon*”. This is intended to replace the more sophisticated classification according to terroir, that of Burgundy: appellations that include “*Régionale*”, “*Village*”, “*Premier Cru*” and “*Grand Cru*”! So industrial wine producers consider that they are on the right path. *Business Week*’s European edition in September 2001 read: “*Wine War: How American and Australian wines are stomping the French*”, promoting this new classification and predicting that these new technological wines would triumph in the five years to come⁴!

This is more of a perfect rather than virtuous circle, so dear to marketing experts. Wine culture and its lexicon are reworked into immediate references and simplified labels that highlight purported attributes and food matches with the end-game of aiding consumption rather than addressing wine-lovers that may wish to cultivate or deepen their taste and knowledge.

And this circle would be imperfect had the new producers and consumers not found their guide in the opinion leader and compass Robert Parker, who is also a very close friend of Michel Rolland’s whose choices and

opinions he shares. Parker has built an empire on the editorialisation of his taste, as he classifies and grades wines, without ever asking what the algebraic grading system means in fact, or saying what he tastes when he tastes a wine; and Parker loves, above all, a type of wine that Rolland and others know how to “manufacture”. It must have a dark colour, it must be concentrated⁵, be made with very ripe grapes (physiological maturity and, above all, phenological maturity), aged in new oak casks that add body and, among other things, it must have a strong taste of vanilla. Wines produced to this method are de facto wines that resemble one another to a certain extent (one does not look for minerality or flavour) and that one can thus compare and confront with a chemically determinable model. One of the most entertaining scenes in the film is the one where the head of Enologix, the biggest wine chemical company in the United States outlines that they can analyse a wine and predict the grade that the different critics will give the wine, as the said critics are so stuck on the same model (in particular the one that marked a *Screaming Eagle* graded between 97 and 100!⁶). We are now talking about wines made from varieties and brands, the result of a growing process in which chemicals and a number of other additives play an important role. Following a logic of extension that is common in the luxury market, we now have actual wine factories made up of properties that span hundreds of hectares producing wines for different price ranges (the main lines and the diffusion lines) and a few “iconic” wines that add to the visibility and prestige of the brand and as such to its global financial productivity level. Here, as in the contemporary luxury industry, the brand is what makes things sell with high profit margins without necessarily playing the rarity or quality card.

This is a globalised market in full expansion that allows companies to make colossal

profits. So it's not surprising when the film examines, in the later stages, the game of capitalism and development strategies: setting up joint ventures between American brands and Bordeaux and Tuscan brands, buyouts to spread presence, establishing trans-national empires, a desire for extension and conquest. In this scenario, the qualitative logic always seems a pretext for a logic that is quantitative and measurable.

This theme with all its plot twists, surprises, upswings, betrayal between divided Florentine families, plagued by exacerbated rivalry has all the elements of a drama about power and money. The second part of the film reveals the hidden secrets of rivalries that under very well policed covers and masks (we are in the aristocratic milieu of olden-day culture) evoke the most Machiavellian manoeuvres and intrigue of the Florentine palaces, with strings being pulled by the Mondavis in order to up their market penetration in Europe. On the surface the film becomes more confused or at least harder to follow as it juxtaposes testimonials that go into manoeuvres, buyouts and alliances about which we know nothing and that we need to reconstitute from the bits of information scattered throughout the narrative. In tandem with this complexity, it provides us with some extraordinary portraits of this landowning nobility that is constantly controlled and presenting a front that says little, except to admit to a hankering for the days of Mussolini and their close friendships with a few crowned heads. There are also a few portraits of some young and rich post-modern heirs that think of the world in terms of authority and brand universe and compare the pretention of Bordeaux, Paris, Hermès and French football to a new generational art de vivre associating Armani or Ferragamo clothing, Florence, Rome, Venice and wines from the Super-Tuscans, in particular those from the Ornellaia property that was bought out by the Mondavis then associated with the Frescobaldi and, more

cynically, ignoring the law and extolling the virtues of Berlusconi.

The film has a third theme that remains unspoken. This ghost theme has contributed to *Mondovino's* longevity, the way it has been received and at times caricatured by its adversaries and also used by its partisans to support convictions or strongly held prejudices. This is, in fact, one of the particularities of cinema, especially when the subject matter is current affairs, the way it allows the audience to project their own clichés. This absent theme, or should we say present in an underlying way and actualised in everyone's imagination, involves a dual, ill-defined comparison. In short, it compares technological wines and natural wines on the one hand, modern techniques that allow scientifically-based interference and those that let a wine live and finally, it compares the big guys with the small guys, the powerful capitalistic companies with independent, real winemakers. Curiously, the film that was shown in the cinema does not approach these questions head on, and in any case, doesn't put them in perspective or as part of the debate. The subject, the thread running through the film is definitely taste, its uniformisation due to marketing-based conformity or, taste as the expression of a terroir and its fascinating complexity. It is easy to understand, however, how both critics and partisans use the film to keep the discussion going into what isn't actually said. Some to protest against the way it simplifies the issues and to deny any form of comparison between wines and production methods (while, at the same time, knocking "natural" wines for their instability or varied levels of quality). According to them, *Mondovino* is wrong to compare the completely incomparable: structure and capitalistic vocation and quality or sincere respect for the terroir. But this means criticising the film for what it doesn't actually say. Nowhere does it say that a big property can not produce a great wine (Pontet Canet is proof of this). In

the same way, while it does criticise chemistry and questionable manipulations of wine by oenologists, it does not propose an orthodox or dogmatic definition of “natural” wines and cannot be used by the players in their own internal debates. As such, these different projections are used just as extensively as they are supported by what is not said, due mostly to the comparison between formatted wines and untouched wines from the terroir. What is unsaid concerns the profession of winemaker and all of the acts he or she is supposed to carry out to make the ground come to life, cutting, harvesting, pressing, ageing, and blending. It is all the more effective as the term “nature” is not without its own ambiguity. The word has a double value, whether it designates a way of growing that respects the soil, a way of harvesting, sorting, then ageing without any external additives or, on the contrary evoking a force that is superior and independent of man. That it is enough to passively obey. Does this then minimise or block out the notion that what matters is knowledge, “savoir-faire” and the complex decision-making process of each individual winemaker at every stage of its production?

However, while I have taken the opportunity to underline if not an ambiguity in the film at least its blind spot with which the controversial interpretations and representations can connect, in no way do I mean to criticise its opinions or its propos. These opinions mean in it can tackle some essential questions that may have been hidden with too much nuance. These questions are not in any way “insidiously” dissimulated in the body of the film. The filmmaker and the small film crew are actively present, visible in the shot, emphasising their dual position as interlocutor and witness. They do not make any comments on the voiceover avoiding the pronouncement of a definitive thesis or point of view. This makes the direct testimonials, none of which are forced or extorted, so powerful. *Mondovino*

tells its story with a feeling for framing and the correct distance that make cinema what it is: a way of showing faces and through them, the protagonists’ strength of emotions and inner struggles (the superb idea of depicting the Mondavis through the association of the verbose son and the super-human, emotionless father and godfather figure). If the potency of a piece of cinema relies at times on the presence of its characters, then *Mondovino* is a great piece of cinema. Throughout the film, the audience feels the mental and physical landscape that emanates from the face, the thinking and vibrating opposite of the exterior being presented. The link between the face and the words: the meaning of what is said is not a question of a command of the language in general, but, as Gilles Deleuze said “of a language whose significant traits are indexed on specific facial traits”. The feeling of harmony that comes from a sense of belonging to a world seems to be compared to the obsessive and neurotic coldness of those who wish to possess it. These faces burst through the screen and produce truth. They are the evidence for the prosecution in a game where no one is fooled as to the intentions, values and practices of others. So, just like in a Hollywood feature film but without the artifice of fiction, the film shows faces that seduce us and others that repulse us. Goodies and baddies? It’s up to each viewer to decide what garners their sympathy and what constitutes a founding ethic or what appears to be the confiscation of experience by interest. But while the film plays on this difference, it does so in good faith without attempting to zealously prove a point. In fact, the deciding factor in where our sympathies lie comes from the agreement that exists between cinema – that take its time and explores the side roads – and characters that are not calculating, while the others seem to come out of a audiovisual programme that merges party-line based communication where rallying to an opinion becomes a permanent

advert. Our sympathy is evidence also of cinema's revenge on the spectacle of that which only looks good on TV.

Mondovino, like many other open films, on the border between cinema and the real, plunges us into a universe that makes all of us citizens of a possible and liveable world rather than spectators fascinated by one scenario. And while it follows a very tense thread, it doesn't neglect the comic aside (a magnificent portrait of a landowner that buys work by the artists at the head of the "chart" of the moment with systematic enthusiasm and points out, afterwards, everything the domain owes to the skill of the Mexican workers who work there who are rewarded every year with t-shirts and baseball caps, or the capture of chance, the chance that gives, to those who know how to take it (light, colour, expression, landscape), a feeling of the intense and fragile beauty of reality.

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1. We can refer to the study carried out by M. Salmon, a researcher at the INRA, entitled: "L'oxygène au cours de la fermentation alcoolique, mécaniques d'actions, gestion des apports, et risques associés. (Oxygen during alcoholic fermentation, mechanics, managing supply and associated risks). http://www.oenologues-defrance.com/gestion/fichiers_contenu/79_JROE09_Jean_Mic.pdf

2. On this topic, the film is rich in revelations. The fraud office in the Finance Ministry explicitly mentions "traffic" aimed at corresponding to the Parker model. But above all, Alix de Montille who elaborates whites for prestigious brands announces that she is going to resign so as to avoid condoning the fact that brands that are supposed to produce terroir-based reds can claim they are the makers of a wine that is not aged in their cellars and fill their bottles with the same mass-produced wine. Bottles that are supposed to be different in fact contain the same product sold under different brands.

3. Jacky Rigaux is an engineer and a researcher at the université de Bourgogne, in charge of the "Vigne, Vin,

Terroirs" sector and the "Médico-Psycho-social" sector in executive education, two training and research sectors in psychoanalysis and knowledge of terroirs and wine tasting. Each year, he organises *Les Rencontres internationales Henri Jayer*, that take place in January or early February at the château de Gilly-les-Cîteaux, a centre of Cistercian wine growing. 30 to 40 wine growers passionate about the philosophy of the terroir take part.

4. The wine world by Jacky Rigaux : <http://gje.mabulle.com/index.php/2013/03/01/206202-le-monde-du-vin-par-jacky-rigaux-extrnment-long>

5. This quest for concentration happens at times to the detriment of laying down and ageing options. The 92 Bordeaux that tried to correspond to Parker's were often extracted at too high temperatures and lack the acidity and capacity needed to age well.

6. An imperial of the *Screaming Eagle* vintage was sold at auction in Napa Valley Association during a charity sale for the impressive sum of 500 000 dollars (400 000 euros).