

Review of *The Ice Rink* and Interview with Jean-Philippe Toussaint

by

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The Ice Rink (La patinoire) is the third film by Belgian filmmaker and author Jean-Philippe Toussaint. Toussaint's novel, innovative ideas make this film a worthwhile experience. To begin with, I watched *The Ice Rink* twice—the first time for enjoyment and the second time for an informed perspective, paying attention to detail. Later on, as I reviewed my notes, I began formatting possible questions related to *The Ice Rink* to ask Toussaint, so I would have more information to work with, for a more informed review. I then sent my questions via e-mail for an informal interview. The questions I asked explore Toussaint's creative process, his career as a filmmaker, and certain aspects of *The Ice Rink*. For the purpose of this essay, I present the questions in the order they will be implemented:

- Can you talk about the sources of inspiration for this film?
- Is there any particular reason why you made this film as a comedy?
- Is there any history behind the songs at the end of filming party?
Were they made up for the film or are they real?
- Why haven't you ventured into films lately?

In this essay, I will review *The Ice Rink* and talk about Toussaint's inspirations for making this film. Furthermore, I will also analyze certain aspects and scenes of the film, namely: the hockey "sudden death" game and how the film presents it as a metaphor for Europe's predicament, the directing and shooting of the game and the film within a film elements, and the end of filming party.

Overall, what transforms this movie and makes it a memorable experience is the ice rink. I am not completely sure, but there's a possibility that no other films have focused solely on an ice rink. This original concept ultimately serves as the backdrop to the movie, but also actively interacts with the actors. For example, consider the archetypal banana peel and its comedic effect when an actor slips on one. *The Ice Rink* presents a parallel, when, throughout the film, actors attempt to not slip on the ice. Toussaint successfully exploits this, and when asked about his reasons for making *The Ice Rink* a comedy, his reply: "More than a comedy, I wanted to make a slapstick comedy. In truth, I especially wanted to make a "comic" film. I looked for all the possible means to generate laughter: visual comedy, situational comedy, gags, plays of words, etc." (Toussaint Interview 2011). Therefore, that recurring element is at the heart of the comedy, but there are also other comedic elements in *The Ice Rink*.

These other elements include nonsensical scenes (e.g. waiting for an airplane to pass), quirky montages, witty plot twists (e.g. the lights melt the ice rink, leaving behind water over the base), and a somewhat absurd atmosphere throughout—this last element is highlighted by the fact that the producer is rushing the editing as the filming takes place. Lastly, the comedic elements create a lighthearted mood that make this film perfect for an evening of unwinding, or any other relaxing event.

Now, before presenting Toussaint's response to the questions about his inspirations for making this film and the songs, I will analyze the preliminary aspects of the film I mentioned, namely, the hockey game and the film within film, so as to place the scenes (the End of Filming Party), and his response, in better context.

The symbolism of the hockey game is somewhat alluded to in the film, and I will use it to guide my analysis. In a scene of *The Ice Rink*, the producer explains to the director of the Venice film festival that the hockey game, and its "sudden death" rules, serves as a metaphor for Europe's predicament. Later in the movie, the hockey coach gives a brief speech, in which he concludes (from his experience being part of the film) that hockey and filmmaking bring both groups equal enjoyment, but that filmmaking is more nerve-wracking. Hockey, being a contact sport, could thus symbolize war (and because there is no puck could even present war for war's sake or meaningless wars, whereas filmmaking and its procedures in a way symbolize politics).

However, the directing and shooting of the hockey game, because of the film-within-a-film elements, adds another dimension to this interpretation. This perspective could represent how politicians are always struggling to accomplish their duty while remaining on center stage, at which point even if they mess up, don't follow their lines, or go against popular opinion, not much will happen to them. This is similar to how an actor or performer is expected to do their best while on stage, but when they make mistakes, the audience tends to not mind, or they are focusing on how amazing the experience was to care much. Also, the film-within-a-film is at the center of Toussaint's inspirations for making this film:

The Ice Rink, which tells the story of the making of a film on ice, belongs to a cinematic genre as common as the Western or the musical: the film of the making of a film. This genre has generated several masterpieces in the past, from *8 and a Half* to *La Nuit américaine*, or *Passion and Le Mépris*, but it is another film, less known, that served as my principal source of inspiration: Pier Paolo Pasolini's *La Ricotta*. In *La Ricotta*, which tells the story of the making of a film on the passion of Christ and the adventures of an extra who is obsessed about eating this kind of white Italian cheese called ricotta, one finds at its highest level this mix of sacred and profanity that has always fascinated me (the same way that the tension of dialectic constraints, immobility and movement, metaphysics, and mambo-mambo always fascinated me). (Toussaint Interview 2011).

The final scene I will talk about is the end of filming party. When the director is at the podium, the hockey players ask him to sing songs from his student days. First he is reluctant, but eventually gives in. At this point, it seems that all possible deeper meaning is abandoned because of what the songs represent. According to Toussaint:

These [songs] are leftist (and even extreme left) political songs and slogans that I used to hear and even sang myself at times during street protests when I was studying at Sciences-Po (The Institute of Political Science in Paris) between 1975 and 1978. These may not be confused with "May 68" slogans (this is not exactly my generation, I was only 10 years old in May 68), even if they are probably pretty close. The fact that I used them in the film creates a complete, absurd, and unlikely discrepancy. It is very impertinent and totally provocative to make a film producer, an actress, an ice rink director or Lithuanian ice hockey players sing students' slogans. (Toussaint Interview 2011).

As I have demonstrated, *The Ice Rink* presents itself for analysis, but to what extent I correctly interpret this film remains somewhat ambiguous, and above all an opinion. However, someone can still enjoy *The Ice Rink* and its comedic burlesque on ice without delving into a search for deeper meaning. This film being relatively old, hence I felt it appropriate to ask Toussaint if he is still interested in making films, to which he replied:

I did not stop making films, I stopped making films following a traditional structure of production because these are heavy projects that require a minimum of two to three years of full-time work (I would even say four to five for *The Ice Rink*). I had other priorities, I preferred to spend my energy on my books, *Making Love*, *Running Away*, and *La Vérité sur Marie*. But this does not mean I stopped making films entirely. I now follow another approach that one could label more experimental (and that is not as time consuming). You can judge of my cinematic work from the last ten years on my web site:

<http://www.jptoussaint.com/films.html>