

The 1998 San Francisco International Film Festival: The intriguing, the disappointing and the rest

Part II

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Most of the films from the former Soviet Union still give one the impression, more than anything else, that their creators are simply overwhelmed by events and can make no sense of them. This finds expression in a massive disproportion between the catastrophic changes that have taken place in the past seven years or so and the banal or trivial conclusions the artists draw.

In That Land, directed by Lidia Bobrova, paints a horrific picture of life in a small, isolated Russian village. Poverty, drunkenness, violence, corruption. "Old men go on living," one character notes, "and the young men jump the queue to the next world." But all this becomes fodder for a genial comedy, seeking to demonstrate, one suspects, something about "the resilience of the human spirit." But the human spirit is not infinitely resilient, and, anyway, why should it be put to the test by entirely *avoidable* events, such as the restoration of market relations in the former USSR?

The human spirit in such films always has a distinctly national character. Yes, everything is misery and filth in Russia, Bobrova's film finally suggests, but it's *our* misery and filth. The villagers end up singing, "Let me live, let me live in that land where I was born." In the film's final exchange one character says to another: "Has it [Russia] brought you much happiness?" The other replies: "Yes, it has." So, things are not so bad after all—at least for some people.

Viatcheslav Krichtofovich's *A Friend of the Deceased*, from the Ukraine, is not appreciably better. Anatoli is an intellectual who does translation work in Kiev for the new capitalists. His wife, a former philologist, is now working for an ad agency, driving a shiny red car and seeing a much more up-and-coming man on the side. Everything here, too, is filthy. Anatoli's friend, who runs or owns a store and has contacts with the underworld, explains, "Today there are no friends, only business relations."

To make a little money, Anatoli gives false testimony in court to help force the wife of his friend's boss grant him a divorce. Once she sees the lengths to which he is prepared to go, she gives in. "It's useless, I agree to the divorce." This tone of capitulation and resignation permeates the film.

In despair, Anatoli hires a hit man, apparently as available as a plumber in the new Ukraine, to have himself rubbed out. He meets a girl, a prostitute, and decides not to die after all. Calling off the contract is impossible, so he hires a second hit man to get rid of the first hit man. Then he meets the first hit man's widow, and she falls for him. Her kid calls him, "Papa."

There are clever elements in the plot, but its rather insipid ironies seem almost indecent stacked up against the ghastliness of the situation. Is this the best that artists can do?

Season Five (Rafi Pitts, Iran) and *The Ark of the Desert* (Mohamed Chouikh, Algeria) examine internecine rivalries. *Season Five* treats the conflict between two families in a small Iranian village. A man, from one clan, insults his would-be bride, from the other, on their wedding day, reigniting the feud. He and the woman's brother begin operating rival buses, offering transportation to the nearest city. Things threaten to get out of hand. In the end, she makes a gesture of reconciliation. This would be a great country, the film suggests, if we didn't have these disputes.

Chouikh's film, by analogy, alludes to the ongoing bloody conflict in Algeria between Islamic fundamentalists and government forces. It is a *Romeo and Juliet* set in a stunning desert locale. Amin and Myriam, from different tribes, are found in each other's arms. Mayhem ensues, leading ultimately to a full-scale battle, which wipes out nearly every man, woman and child in the city. A boy who survives heads off to the desert. He tells onlookers, "I'm leaving for another land where children are not killed and houses burned. I leave to be in peace.... The grownups have gone crazy."

These are the types of films in whose credits one is not surprised to find the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of the Interior listed and thanked. What regime would find it objectionable for a film to point the finger of blame for bitter religious and ethnic conflicts, and the pain and suffering they bring with them, entirely on the population itself?

Many of the contemporary films from west Africa suffer from the same sort of weakness, manifested in a slightly different fashion. *Taafé Fanga* (*Skirt power*) from Mali and *Buud Yam* from Burkina Faso are both parables set in precolonial times. Adamo Drabo's *Taafé Fanga*, in which the sexes change places through magical intervention, advocates improvement in the condition of women. Gaston Kaboré's *Buud Yam* preaches tolerance and a willingness to accept differences.

While they display considerable visual elegance, there is something slightly evasive about these African films. Perhaps present-day conditions are too difficult to contemplate, much less artistically translate. Less charitably, perhaps films about contemporary life would not so easily receive financing or approval from the various governments. In any event, these efforts to instruct economically devastated peoples on how they should conduct themselves in daily life, set in some relatively idyllic past, strike me as off the mark.

In *Crossfire*, directed by Rituparno Ghosh, a young schoolteacher, Jhinuk, comes to the rescue of another woman, Romita, who is being molested by a group of young men outside a metro station in Calcutta. They've beaten up her husband, Palash. Jhinuk, who insists the couple file a complaint with the police, makes the headlines as a heroine. But Romita's upper class family wants the whole matter dropped; it embarrasses them. Her husband even accuses her of having encouraged

the incident. Jhinuk's fiancé wants her to drop the case too, especially as one of the attackers is the son of a wealthy businessman. The whole business becomes a case study in bourgeois hypocrisy, fear and complacency.

But set against the conditions of life in India? As the film drags on, toward the conclusion of its two and a half hours, one simply cares less and less about the fate of these people. Couldn't Ghosh find a story in Calcutta more compelling, more tragic than this?

I had a similar reaction to *Leila*, by Iranian director Dariush Mehrjui. The central character of the film is a young woman who discovers shortly after her marriage that she can't have a child. Her husband is the only son in his family. Leila's autocratic mother-in-law presses her relentlessly to allow her husband to take a second wife, so the family name can be carried on. She eventually agrees, against her husband's wishes. The consequence, of course, is unhappiness for everyone.

The film takes place in a remarkably affluent milieu, unlike anything I've seen before in an Iranian film. This is not the world of Kiarostami or Makhmalbaf. Houses, cars, businesses—money is no object to these people. Their troubles, or their life-and-death attitude to their troubles, struck me as out of proportion and ultimately irritating. What are these people playing at? Mehrjui's utter lack of irony or distancing in his treatment of the material suggests that he feels comfortable in these physical and mental surroundings.

Stories about rich people can be as compelling as those about poor people, or more so, but not when they are the product, one senses, of a deliberate trivialization; of a conscious process of reducing life and its problems to dimensions acceptable to an essentially self-satisfied social layer.

The Kid from Chaâba is the first feature film by French director Christophe Ruggia. It is a well-meant study of a young boy, the son of Algerian immigrants, growing up in a shantytown outside Lyon in the 1960s. Ruggia's film is sincere and occasionally moving, but there is nothing here that one hasn't seen before: the pressure applied by the immigrant father on the son to better himself; the conflict between a bookish boy and his school-hating friends; the sad, but inevitable leave-taking of the old slum and the departure for the wider world. More could be done with this subject than is done here.

The Boy Who Stopped Talking (Ben Sombogaart) is a film about immigrants too, intended for children. Memo, its protagonist, is a young Kurdish boy, forced, along with his family, to leave his home in Turkey because of war and move to Holland. In protest, Memo stops talking.

The film is about real problems, but I don't see any reason why a children's movie has to be so condescending in tone and attitude. Children can grasp all sorts of complex questions, if they are treated as intelligent beings. And that can be captured on film, as we know from certain recent Iranian works, among others.

Pedro Costa's *Ossos* (Bones) is a film that revels in the miseries of its protagonists more than can possibly be healthy. Laid in a creole and immigrant slum of Lisbon, Estrella d'Africa, the film follows the lives of a trio of poverty-stricken young people.

Ossos is so self-consciously despairing that one feels the director is continually trying to attract attention to his own "deep feelings," his own "remarkable lack of sentimentality and moralizing," and his own "audacity in bringing the story to the screen," i.e., one senses that he has less interest in the tragedy than in how impressed the spectator will be with him for having filmed it. The sights of Lisbon and the features of his performers, however, are remarkable. One remembers in particular the deeply wounded, somewhat cruel face and eyes of Vanda Duarte as Clotilde. There is not simply self-aggrandizement going on there.

Marcello Mastroianni made his last film appearance in Manoel de Oliveira's *Voyage to the Beginning of the World*. Unfortunately, as so often happened in the last 20 years of his life, Mastroianni, a marvelous

actor, appeared in a film that was less than inspiring.

Oliveira, nearly 90, has turned his thoughts about old age and memory into a film. His musings are interesting, but not overwhelmingly so. An aging film director (Mastroianni) and three of his actors are driving across Portugal. The father of one of the actors was born in Portugal, but emigrated to France; the actor would like to visit his father's native village and meet his aunt, whom he has never met. En route the director reminisces about his childhood and the places familiar to him, and bemoans his advancing age. In his father's village, the actor, after an initially ungracious reception, is able to break through to his aunt and find some genuine warmth.

In the course of their travels the group comes upon an obscure and isolated statue along the road: it is of a kneeling figure, a man, one arm missing, with a heavy log resting on his shoulder. Someone recites a poem associated with the statue. In it the statue speaks and complains that no one sets him free, none of the passersby help him. Presumably, this is man's fate.

At one point the director tells his companions, "I grew up in war and revolution, but I was hardly affected." If one assumes this is Oliveira speaking through his character, it is revealing and not necessarily something to boast about. The film gives one the feeling that it is the product of a life spent on a tributary, a side-road—pleasant and intriguing, but never the site of decisive confrontations.

The Acrobats is the story of an upper-middle-class Italian woman who comes into contact with an old, nearly destitute woman, and after the latter's death, sets out to discover the truth about her life. The film never convinces one of its seriousness or purposefulness. It is another indication of the debilitated state of Italian filmmaking. *A Brother* is another pointless French film. It involves a trendy photographer, his sister, a junkie friend, parties, vaguely incestuous goings-on. Everyone is attractive and dresses beautifully. Aside from that, I draw a blank.

TwentyFourSeven is a pretty amateurish British film about young people, *Edge City* an amateurish American film about young people. *Gummo* (US) and *Funny Games* (Austria) are simply offensive.

Going to see a film is more often a disappointment than not at present. Why are so many bad, or terribly mediocre, films being made? Or, rather, why are so many films being made that have *no right* to be so terribly mediocre? One expects the commercial film industry to produce a large proportion of empty-headed works, but why is the so-called art cinema, in general, so bland, so lacking in intensity, so unwilling to take on complex and challenging problems?

One would be accused of all sorts of unfashionable things, but it would be useful to consider the social position and outlook of those who currently have the resources and technical know-how to make films. Quite concretely, what is going through the heads of the individuals who have cameras and sound recording equipment at their disposal? What have they experienced, read, seen and thought about? Serious research ought to be conducted into the matter. Informative, objective answers to these questions might get us somewhere



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