

David Walsh reviews the 23rd Toronto International Film Festival

(First in a series of articles)

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*And now at the century's solemn end,
When reality itself becomes poetry...
Art, on its stage of shadows, may now
Attempt an even higher flight; indeed it must,
If the stage of life is not to shame it.*
Schiller

A large film festival is a peculiar affair. It is, inevitably, several events in one--an industrial marketplace, a popular showcase, an exhibition of artistic skill. The advantage of a festival as large as Toronto's, from my point of view, is that its size and heterogeneity permit the spectator or commentator to virtually organize his or her own event--within the definite limits, of course, of the contemporary film world.

One consequence of the festival's multifariousness is that the thousands of people physically in attendance are not necessarily present to each other in a truly significant manner. Indeed we coexist somewhat uneasily, passing in lobbies and hallways, specters to one other, representatives of different, perhaps alien worlds.

Each year I glance at accounts of the film festival in the daily papers, look at the photos of the stars in attendance, and, after the event is over, read the names of the films that have taken prizes--and wonder: was this the festival I attended? It's not an entirely comfortable sensation.

The Toronto festival screened more than 300 films this year. There is an upper limit to the number of works any one individual can take in. I saw all or part of 49 films, including a number of short subjects.

How does one select the films to see? I generally avoid the American studio pictures, not out of snobbery, but on the assumption that there will be ample opportunity to view them at a later date. I avoid--or sample cautiously--works from countries or regions that have not produced anything of interest in recent years or whose films have been, in my judgment, overrated. I avoid the efforts of those, nameless here, whom I consider to be artistic frauds. I avoid, in general, films that self-consciously advertise themselves as 'absurdist road movies,' 'erotic thrillers,' 'moody film noirs,' and the like.

I seek out films by directors who have done interesting work in the past: this year, for example, figures such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Eric Rohmer, Shohei Imamura, the Taviani brothers, Ken Loach, Tsai Ming-liang, John Waters and Darezhan Omirbaev, among others. The results vary. In some cases, talented directors equal or surpass their previous films; in others, they've run into problems that have temporarily or perhaps permanently stymied them.

Iran, Taiwan and certain other Asian countries have produced some of the most extraordinary films of the decade. I look for films from these countries. These results also vary. I thought highly of the three Iranian films (*The Apple*, *The Silence* and *Dance of Dust*) and two of the Taiwanese films (*The Hole* and *Flowers of Shanghai*), but less highly of some of the other Taiwanese works (*Love Go Go* and *Sweet*

Degeneration) and the sole Korean film, *Christmas in August*, which all seemed slight.

I look for films that appear to take people's difficulties--and the difficulties of the oppressed in particular--seriously. In such cases, the approach is everything. While Loach's *My Name is Joe*, Abolfazl Jalili's *Dance of Dust*, Florent Emilio Siri's *A Minute of Silence* and David Riker's *The City* are all sincere efforts to treat the lives of impoverished people, the first two films, with whatever limitations, ring true, whereas the latter pair strike one as contrived, pat and unconvincing.

I feel obligated to seek out films about contemporary world events, although I don't expect to agree with them. Nettie Wild's film about the Zapatista movement in Mexico, *A Place Called Chiapas*, is worth seeing, if one has one's critical faculties about one. Subcomandante Marcos, who signs autographs and poses for *Marie-Claire* magazine, has the air about him of a community college philosophy professor. He carries a lance apparently in honor of Don Quixote, the hero of his favorite book, and speaks amiably about death and the hopelessness of his cause, whose aim is, in any case, to 'push and push' the government in power. And this is the great hope of the international 'Left'!

Films exploring social and political conditions provide a grim picture of the world. *Megacities*, a quasi-documentary by Austrian Michael Glawogger, depicts unspeakable conditions in Bombay and Mexico City, in particular, as well as wretchedness in Moscow and New York City. In passing, Karen Shakhnazov's *Full Moon* --a series of overlapping vignettes à la Richard Linklater's *Slacker* --sheds further light on the Russian *misère*. Omirbaev's *Killer*, about a young man who becomes a hired killer faced with mounting debt to a loan shark, takes up the disastrous economic and moral state of the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan.

Walter Salles's *Central Station* touches upon the fate of street kids in Brazil and the thriving trade in human organs. *A Place Called Chiapas* exposes the conditions of the rural poor in Mexico and Abderrahmane Sissako's *Life on Earth*, from Mali, provides a sobering glimpse of life in sub-Saharan Africa. All three Iranian films (one takes place in Tadjikistan) describe conditions of almost unrelieved harshness. And there is more than simply economic misery. Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, set in Taipei, treats profound social alienation. As does a film like *Rosie: The Devil in My Head*, from Belgium, and, in its own way, *Tu Ridi*, from the Taviani brothers. The horrors of fratricidal/ethnic warfare--past and present--are represented in *West Beirut*, from Lebanon, *The Powder Keg*, from Yugoslavia and *Earth*, from India.

Arrange these partial views, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, into a whole and the result will be almost too much to bear. One would have to avert one's eyes. There is no danger of anyone doing this at the moment, of course. Or of suggesting that these unbearable circumstances be remedied. It's a peculiar situation. Let's say someone had woken from a

century-long sleep and been seated in the audience for some of the films I've mentioned. He or she would likely say, 'This is horrifying! Presumably humanity, and, in the first place, filmmakers, must be obsessed with improving life on earth.' We know this is not quite the case.

Hardly anyone demonstrates a trace of historical perspective. An independent and perhaps rewarding study could be made of the particular ways in which many of the films manifest this lack.

Everyone thinks his or her problems are unique. To the Russians, the problem is a Russian one. It's a Taiwanese affliction, to the Taiwanese. Or if there is a universal, it is one that is not very flattering to mankind. *The Powder Keg* and *Earth*, both honest efforts in their way, offer as explanation for the grisly details they depict the argument that 'We're all bastards,' animals eager to spring at one another's throat.

One of the most reprehensible responses to the state of the world is to be found in Glawogger's *Megacities*. His film is a kind of *Mondo Cane* of the world's poor, an almost pornographic sensationalizing of misery. He shows a man in Bombay squatting all day under a tarpaulin grating lumps of paint through a sieve, a man who turns entirely yellow or red, down to his pores, depending on the color of the paint. He shows young men wading through a sewage-filled waterway, again in Bombay, in search of items they can salvage from the refuse thrown out by the poor. He shows a woman in Mexico City who is groped and fondled for money during a wretched strip-tease. He shows garbage collectors in Mexico City, street kids in Moscow, hustlers in Times Square in New York--all in all, Glawogger has filmed the most demoralizing and debasing activities he could locate.

And his conclusion from all this?: 'The world is a horrendous place, but it's also a good place to live--that's what I want to get across.' Or as an interviewer sums up his views: 'You show people who eke out a miserable existence, who live in utter destitution--but not in utter hopelessness. On the contrary, they sing, dance, play soccer. They may be poor, but they're not necessarily unhappy. It's a less black-and-white approach than we're used to.' Am I the only one who finds this a bit repulsive?

This is an extreme example, but how many artists are prepared to probe the deeper social and psychic meanings of the age? At best so many remain satisfied with imitating the period's surface manifestations. We still seem to be confronted, perhaps more than ever, with the problem of rediscovering, as André Breton put it nearly 60 years ago, 'the thirst for a universal knowledge.'

Disappointments, or perhaps not

Concretely, one could chart one's responses to the festival's screenings, the various jolts one receives, on a graph. It would reveal a range of reaction, from disappointment, sometimes bitter disappointment, to ecstatic surprise. Of course, the majority of films, inevitably, simply leave one untouched.

One disappointment this year was Todd Solondz's *Happiness*. I thought his *Welcome to the Dollhouse* dealt sympathetically with the plight of a young girl growing up in New Jersey's direst suburbs. The new film, despite Solondz's stated intention 'to put on film certain characters that might be normally deemed repugnant or freakish, and to somehow whittle away at those surfaces, so that the audience could sympathize with the unsympathetic and see that there was a richness of life there,' simply tempts an audience to laugh condescendingly and complacently at his cast of unfortunates. One of the director's most unforgivable decisions was to turn the suicide of a minor character, rejected in love, into an opportunity to snigger at this 'loser.' Such moments reminded me of the comment of a genuinely--and not fashionably--compassionate filmmaker, the late German director R.W. Fassbinder, in response to an interviewer's suggestion that a scene in one of his early films, in which a chambermaid kills herself, had a comic effect: 'I'm against caricatures, I'm against

parodies ... if you say that this scene has the effect of a parody, then I have to take your word for it, but then I'm ashamed of myself and I apologize.'

I don't think, on the other hand, that I could classify my response to Bernardo Bertolucci's flabby and pointless *The Siege* as disappointment, because no one has expected much from this once-interesting director in the past 20 years. Nor was I disappointed by the group of Japanese films presented, because nothing has convinced me yet that there is much to the 'new wave' of filmmakers from that country--including the 'Back to Nature and the Simple Life' school represented by Hirokazu Kore-eda (*Maborosi*), Naomi Kawase (*Suzaku*) and Koji Hagiuda (*Paradise Sea*)--that isn't derivative of Taiwanese and other, more insightful work.

And Hungarian György Fehér's slow-moving and pretentious *Passion*, loosely based on James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, certainly could not qualify as a disappointment. First, because almost no filmmaker from the former Stalinist countries in eastern Europe apparently has anything to say. (*The Shoe*, from Latvia, is a useful look at Soviet heavy-handedness during the Cold War, but it might have the unfortunate side-effect of reminding an audience of a time when jobs, housing and some degree of social stability were taken for granted.) And, second, because the Hungarian directors seem to be the most lugubrious and longwinded in saying nothing.

In subsequent articles, I plan to write about films I liked, beginning with Imamura's *Dr. Akagi* and Abolfazl's *Dance of Dust*.

• Part 2:

Dr. Akagi ; Dance of Dust ; Flowers of Shanghai

• Part 3:

Killer ; 2000 seen by ; Life on Earth ; Book of Life ; The Hole ; Trans ; Pecker ; Autumn tale

• An interview with Tsai Ming-liang, director of *The Hole*

• Part 4:

The Apple ; The Silence ; The Terrorist ; My Name is Joe ; Eternity and a Day

• An interview with the director, Santosh Sivan, and leading actress, Ayesha Dharkar, of *The Terrorist*

See Also:

On what should the new cinema be based?

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