

David Walsh on the San Francisco International Film Festival--Part 1

The anatomy of melancholy

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I recently attended the first week of the San Francisco film festival, which ends May 6, and saw a good many films, some of them genuinely valuable and fascinating. When I was not watching a screen, I was walking up and down hills, or gazing out at the bay. We can't help ourselves; we are continually looking at new phenomena or trying to make sense, or more sense, of familiar ones.

As always, at such a festival, the question arises: what do people see, the filmmakers and the filmgoers, and what do they not see? Is there any objective source to the difficulty many have in seeing deeply? The eyes and brains we use are products of nature, but also of social and personal life. For entire historical periods people can be quite blind to what's right in front of them, because their attention has been directed elsewhere by powerful social tendencies, acting like the force of gravity that even bends light. The act of seeing is also an act of volition. One must want to see something. We must meet the truth of the world at least halfway.

Despite all the difficulties in the world, artists and filmmakers continue to do their work. But their work is not unaffected by those difficulties. It is perhaps inevitable or at least seemly that some of the best works shown at a film festival held as bombs were falling should have a melancholic air.

The 42nd San Francisco International Film Festival did a fine job in presenting 185 films, including 109 features, from 57 countries. The films I admired most were *Xiao Wu* from China, *The Power of Kangwon Province* from South Korea, *Aksuat* and *The Biography of a Young Accordion Player* from Kazakhstan, *The Little Thief* from France (as well as several films I had seen elsewhere and previously commented upon: *Killer* also from Kazakhstan, *The Silence* from Iran, *Autumn Tale* from France, *Life on Earth* from Mali and *Flowers of Shanghai* and *The Hole* from Taiwan). Two documentaries, *Divorce Iranian Style* and *Chief!* from Cameroon, contained some remarkable material.

Xiao Wu

Xiao Wu is directed by Jia Zhang Ke, born in 1970. We have written about this film before at the WSWs [see The absence of a moral compass in contemporary China, by Paul Bond at the London Film Festival in November 1998], but I think it is well worth briefly commenting on again.

Xiao Wu is a pickpocket in the provincial city of Fenyang. His former associate, Xiao Yong, has become a "model entrepreneur," engaged in some shady, but lucrative business. Embarrassed by his former life, Xiao Yong fails to invite his old friend to his wedding. This is only one of the blows *Xiao Wu* receives. His new girlfriend, a bar girl, Mei-Mei, disappears with a wealthy client, shortly after asking him to be her man. When he goes home to his peasant family it simply leads to more pain. After a quarrel triggered by his parents' money-grubbing, his father kicks him out, saying, "You're a rebel, I'm sorry you were ever born." To make matters worse, the police are cracking down. When his beeper goes off at the wrong moment, *Xiao Wu* finds himself under arrest. As a final image we are left with the young pickpocket handcuffed to a utility pole, surrounded by a gawking crowd.

The film *Pickpocket* (1959) Bresson's mind, series of humiliations suffered by its protagonist, it perhaps has more in common with Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961).

More than anything else, the film gives you the idea that life in China is harsh, harsh, unrelentingly harsh. When people are not shouting at each other, they simply stare mistrustfully. Everyone is up to something. The city is ugly. The traffic noise is constant. The rural family is as grasping as the businessman in the city. The television news reports some family massacre, along with the reunification with Hong Kong.

Relations are almost entirely without intimacy. *Xiao Wu* has managed to stifle his emotions. So has everyone else. In the bar, he refuses to sing or dance with Mei-Mei, then complains that she has not treated him properly. Diffident, awkward, repressed, behind his glasses and the smoke of his ever-present cigarette, *Xiao Wu* looks like someone hiding out in the open. His only form of contact is slipping his hands surreptitiously into people's pockets. The sexual implications of this act should be fairly clear.

People could be different. *Xiao Wu* is quite sensitive. He describes himself, not entirely ironically, as an artisan. "I earn a living with my hands," he tells Mei-Mei. She says, "People often said that I looked like a movie star." He asks her for a song, and she sings, "Why is my sky always weeping?" He listens to her love songs and when he's by himself, sings his heart out. Mei-Mei seems genuinely drawn to him, but when she sees her opportunity, presumably takes it.

And the style of the film--its patience and clarity, its elegance, its sensitivity--suggests another approach to life.

Jia Zhang Ke has written: "This is a film about our worries and our uneasiness. Valuable things are vanishing in our lives. Having to cope with a dysfunctional society, we take refuge in solitude which is a substitute for dignity. It is also a film about emotions. It doesn't deal with the destruction of emotions as such, but with the loss of the framework in which feelings are possible. People are trapped on the streets, in chaos, screams and shouts and short-lived relationships.

"It is finally a film about my native town and about contemporary China. It is also about the disparity between the surface of life and peoples' inner worlds, their hopes and desires. Above all, it is a film about some burning issues in our existence."

He's right, and has made a sad, beautiful film.

The Power of Kangwon Province

The Power of Kangwon Province by South Korean director Hong Sang-Soo (*The Day a Pig Fell into the Well*, 1996) is also a remarkable work. It is constructed like a novel and tells two stories. Three young women from Seoul spend a weekend in Kangwon province, by the sea, where Koreans apparently go for rest and rehabilitation, to "wash away everything tainted in our heart," as one character suggests. Jisook, one of the three women, has just ended a relationship with a married man. She takes up with a young policeman she meets on her holiday. They get very drunk and spend the night together.

She travels from Seoul to visit him a short time later. He is planning to quit the police force. "I think you're a good cop," she tells him. He plays video games. They discuss the case of a man who is accused of pushing a girl off a cliff. In a hotel room, again very drunk, he makes a pass for her, but she pushes him away. "Am I repulsive?" Then there is an extraordinary shot. Jisook passes out of the frame, into the bathroom to wash up, while the cop goes out on the balcony, climbs over the railing, hangs there above the street, pulls himself back up and returns to the room before she re-enters. In the morning, at the bus station, she says, "Good luck with your civil service exam." He: "Study hard." She sobs on the bus.

In the second part of the film, the man Jisook has been having an affair with, Sangkwon, a university professor, maneuvers to get tenure. He has a somewhat pushy wife. His friends have differing views as to whom he should butter up to get his desired position. On the advice of one, he goes to see a Professor Kim, bringing with him a bottle of whiskey as a bribe. It's a futile, humiliating visit.

He sets off for Kangwon too, with another friend, dull and cautious, who brags about the "anti-slip soles" on his new shoes. They try to pick up a girl, but she chooses someone else. She turns out to be the girl who jumps or is pushed off the cliff. The two men go to a club, where the manager informs them, "We even got chicks from Russia." They settle for the company of two Korean prostitutes. During sex Sangkwon's girl tells him, "Don't touch my hair. Hurry up, hurry."

Some months later Sangkwon has become a tenured professor. He is out for drinks with some of his colleagues. They talk coldly about sex. He meets Jisook again and attempts to get her into bed. She says, "I've had surgery ... an abortion. It wasn't yours. It was a mistake. I always make mistakes."

The characters are unsuccessful in their attempts to find happiness in Kangwon, because as director Hong Sang-Soo says, "There is no escape from Korea." That is to say, no escape from the conformism, opportunism and sterility of contemporary Korean society. The director, who uses an unmoving camera and long takes, seems indebted to the Taiwanese. Some of these stylistic tendencies are perhaps in danger of becoming clichés, but the film has enough emotional force to propel it beyond that difficulty.

Aksuat

Serik Apymov's *Aksuat* is about two Kazakh brothers: one, Aman, stoical and long-suffering, has remained in his native town, and works for the local boss in the wool trade; the other, Kanat, a womanizer and a sharp dresser, comes to visit him, on the run from the mafia in the city. Kanat brings his pregnant wife, a Russian, to this desolate place. "She's a poet. She brings light. We discussed art and money." Kanat goes off to try and settle his problems in the city, leaving his wife behind. She has her baby. Months go by. Eventually Aman gets in trouble with his boss, who is trying to corner the wool market. Aman loses his job, but takes up with his brother's apparently deserted wife.

Kanat returns, but is arrested. He is given permission to visit his wife and baby, with Aman and a guard. She shouts "Stay away from me," and he escapes out a window. Aman chases Kanat on horseback and when he catches up to him, the two fight. Kanat knows about his wife and his brother. He runs off. Aman goes back to the woman, who is watching *Last Tango in Paris* on television. A remarkable scene ensues.

Aman is sitting on the floor, beaten up, resentful, exhausted, anguished. She says, "I feel like my life's a movie." He replies, "Look at me, that's the movie." She becomes silent. Angry words--which are not really directed against her, but against his entire wretched existence--pour out of him, in bitter little portions, separated by long pauses. "They hate you here.... Do you think anyone wants your baby? Or you? ... They are all hypocrites.... I'm a double-dealer too.... You think Kanat loves you. The hell he does.... He's too selfish. He dumped you.... The son of a bitch.... You are not wanted here.... I just feel sorry for you.... Go back home. Mom and dad are waiting for you." In the final scene, the two wait for a bus by a

highway in the middle of nowhere. When it arrives, they get on together. Or do they? The shot is from such a distance, it is impossible to tell. What good would it do if they went away together?

Aside from whatever the film has to say about the relations between Russians and Kazakhs, city and country, crime and business, it portrays post-Soviet Kazakhstan as a great cold wasteland peopled by criminals and those willing to put up with criminals. The most disturbing thing is the air of resignation and fatalism that animates the film, as it does Darezhan Omirbaev's *Killer*. The films suggest: suffer noisily or in silence, as you like, you are not going to avoid suffering one way or the other.

The Little Thief

The Little Thief, a 65-minute film, is made by Erick Zonca, the director of *Dreamlife of Angels*, one of the better French films in recent years. A young kid loses his job as an apprentice baker and decides to take up a life of crime. He joins up with a group of thieves in Marseilles, but his new life contains all the evils of his previous existence in an even more concentrated and brutal form. The gang is a thoroughly bourgeois institution. The kid is low man on the totem pole and gets treated as worse than dirt. In the end, after nearly losing his life, he returns, for better or worse, to work in a bakery. Nicolas Duvauchelle is memorable as the youth, pale and thin, not as tough as he'd like to be, more innocent than he'd care to admit. He convinces.

Biography of a Young Accordion Player

Biography of a Young Accordion Player, directed by Satybaldy Narymbetov, is set in the Stalinist past in Kazakhstan, so it is naturally a more cheerful film. I'm being ironic, but what is one to make of the fact? The film is quasi-autobiographical and memories may be colored by nostalgia, but it remains a fact that the existence portrayed is more appealing than that depicted in any of the films about contemporary Kazakhstan. In part, this is due to the fact that the small town in *Biography* is more or less united in its hostility and contempt for the Stalinist officialdom. A certain solidarity prevails within the population, which consists of local people, radical political prisoners (including Jewish "cosmopolitans"), Japanese prisoners of war and assorted oddballs.

The "coming of age" story is nothing that we haven't seen before, but it takes place under interesting and unusual circumstances. The arrest of the central character's father by the NKVD for fraternizing with the Japanese soldiers is a tragic moment, as is the shooting of a young man for bucking the establishment.

Divorce Iranian Style

Divorce Iranian Style, co-directed by British-born Kim Longinotto and Iranian Ziba Mir-Hosseini, consists of footage shot primarily in a Tehran divorce court. The judicial system favors the men entirely, thus guaranteeing that the women, in self-defense, will turn into Furies. It is hard to say, after a viewing of the film, which sex in present-day Iran is more to be pitied.

Chief!

Chief! is a film from Cameroon, in west Africa, directed by Jean-Marie TÃ©no (see interview in one of the next installments). The first 15 minutes of the film are harrowing. In a voice-over, TÃ©no relates how, while filming a cultural event, he came across a brutal example of vigilante justice. A 16-year-old youth has been caught stealing a hen and four chicks. A crowd surrounds the kid, forces him to strip. TÃ©no reports that in such circumstances the perpetrators are often beaten to death. "Are you a human or an animal?" someone asks. He strikes the youth in the head. Another says, "A corpse is better than you." A third man, however, keeps repeating, "Don't beat him! Respect human rights."

TÃ©no explains that the incident and others like it are produced by a system based on "misery and violence." Out of a powerful frustration with an entirely failed society "violence is inflicted on the weak, the poor." He goes on to ask, why is there such a veneration of authority and

authoritarian figures in Cameroon? Unfortunately, the majority of the film, which starts out so well, is taken up by interviews with bourgeois opposition leaders who really have no alternative to offer.

These were some of the contemporary films I found most interesting. I won't apologize for the fact that most of them, in terms of their style, fall into the general category of Realism, more or less, albeit a poetic Realism. Under certain, specific conditions it requires the greatest imaginative powers, the greatest powers of abstraction, to do simple justice to a complex and confusing reality.

The generally somber quality of these films may have something to do with personal taste and sensibility, but I think it is more profoundly bound up with a difficult historical moment. Certain events or circumstances ought to sadden or frustrate or enrage one.

The more banal film today presents its characters with two choices: career or love, selfishness or nobility, a life of crime or one of respectability; one choice, we are led to believe, perhaps the more difficult one, poses the possibility of happiness or personal satisfaction. The more serious films, like some of those mentioned above, reveal all the choices offered by present circumstances to be equally impossible and mutilating. This can lead to despair ... but it doesn't need to. A melancholy film is not the same thing as a melancholy assessment or perspective.

Even should the artist's social views *be* confused or worse, if his or her work is aesthetically suggestive, poetic and sensuous, it can raise the urge in the filmgoer, at first perhaps on the unconscious level, to consider existence based on entirely different foundations, something that is available to most people today only in dreams. The spectator always retains the possibility of avoiding the fate of the figure on the screen.



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