

# The 1999 Toronto International Film Festival

First in a series of articles by David Walsh

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Cinema, good and bad, has an ever larger audience. Many factors account for this, but one fact of life struck me after ten days at the Toronto film festival: even the least developed figures in films are more appealing, as a rule, than the individuals who dominate political and social life. This has international application, but seems particularly true for the United States. It is positively painful, after having immersed oneself in 45 films or so from various countries, to be confronted once again by the coarseness, stupidity and general vileness of American politicians and media personalities.

The contrast between artistry and official public life may be especially acute today, but in the end it is merely an expression of the inherent conflict between culture, even in some of its less meaningful manifestations, and the existing social order. The reading or viewing of a single novel or film may not bring this conflict home, but it is impossible to give oneself up to an event that offers a substantial quantity of serious work and not be made aware of that reality. Art by its very nature criticizes certain conditions and proposes others. The genuine artist draws attention to brutality in human relations, to corruption, to hypocrisy. He or she is appalled by the absence of warmth between people, the harshness of their lives, the ugliness of their surroundings.

The depiction of repellent conditions and relationships inevitably raises the issue of another, more human reality. After all, consciously or not, one generally represents cruelty to argue for kindness and repression to argue for freedom. Furthermore, if the work is aesthetically pleasing, no matter the subject matter, then this question implicitly poses itself: if beauty and harmony are possible in artistic presentation, what is it stops them from prevailing more generally? Why can't life be made "artistic"?

Indeed the conflict between the artist and existing reality is already present in the process of creating the work, which is in part a means by which the individual artist, unconsciously as a general rule, summons up internal resources against an apparently hostile world.

None of this is to argue that the 45 films, because they collectively made one aware of the intellectual and moral poverty of contemporary political life, were each individually extraordinary works. In fact, only a handful were. Most artists remain mired in a crisis of perspective, not unrelated to the political and social crisis, that will not disappear overnight.

All in all, I had two quite contradictory responses to this year's festival. On the one hand, the viewing of dozens of films reminds one of the endless variety of human behavior, its complexity, its peculiarities, its mysteries; and of the endless desire that people have to study and make sense of each other. Insofar as the festival is about life, it is irresistible. Even a bad film may reveal a face, an expression, or the shape of a body that captivates. Indeed one might be *more likely* to take note of such things in bad films. Or there might be an extraordinary shot of a lake or the ocean or a forest, or a city street. There is so much to human life and life on this planet. Perhaps this was what Jean-Luc Godard meant when he said, decades ago: "The cinema is optimistic because everything is always possible, nothing is ever prohibited; all you need is to be in touch with life."

On the other hand, as an artistic event, the festival underscores the general shallowness and weakness of contemporary cinema. The majority of films are made by people who are intellectually at sea, who have time and means on their hands, but lack strong purpose and ideas. They understand little of the contemporary world in general, even less of the extraordinary transformations of the last decade or so. Films by and large lack intensity not because their creators are without talent, but because the works are not made about problems likely to arouse intense passions. Most disturbing, I suppose, is that virtually no one seems aware that anything is missing.

Culture is not passed on automatically and effortlessly from generation to generation. The blows dealt by free-market worship, philistinism, conformism have left their mark. When boldness, rebelliousness and genuine innovation have been missing for years their absence becomes less and less noticeable. Most commercial, independent and "art" filmmakers alike take the current state of affairs largely for granted.

At the Toronto festival, for example, a press conference on European filmmaking gathered a number of directors together, including Shane Meadows and Justin Kerrigan from Britain, Stéphane Brizé and Bruno Dumont from France, Ron Termaat from the Netherlands, Benito Zambrano from Spain, Caroline Link from Germany, Frédéric Fonteyne from Belgium and others. The filmmakers struck me as intelligent and likable individuals, but having seen a few of their works, the references to the need to make "personal" and "authentic" films startled me. By and large, the output of this group is pretty tame and tepid (Dumont is a slightly different case, deserving of special treatment), and no one, on the platform or in the crowd of journalists, seemed aware of it. The entire spectrum of filmmaking and criticism has shifted.

Unhappily, the typical contemporary filmmaker comes across as someone who would like to have a more fulfilling emotional and sexual life, who would like to attain greater recognition in his or her chosen field, and who would like, in general, to see a better world ... if it's at all possible. The element of protest and outrage is not absent, but it is distinctly muted.

At the same time, almost in passing, the social reality revealed by the filmmakers is a grim one. First, there are the wretched material conditions of life for masses of people. But even more ominous is the bleakness of the moral and psychological climate. Virtually no one, particularly among the young people, believes he or she has much of a future. There is little confidence in institutions or ideologies. Corruption is universal and contagious. Government, police, business and organized crime are assumed to form one colluding and hostile entity. The filmmakers themselves see no way out of the impasse. In the face of a difficult situation, however, they resort all too often to a posturing cynicism and coldness.

Given the perceived social blind-alley, it is not astonishing that there is a renewed emphasis on the physiological functions. This year's films contained an inordinate quantity of sexual activity. Some (*Lies* from South Korea and *Romance* from France) dealt with little else. In general,

I'm not sure how much can be learned or felt by watching people have sex on screen. If psychological insight is sought, it rarely makes itself apparent to me. Too many directors delude themselves with the notion that by showing people without clothes they are exposing something essential about the latter, that they are somehow getting to the unvarnished core of things. No one's essence, however, is stamped on his flesh and no one rids himself of his history, his defenses or his prejudices when he removes his outer garments. In the hands of a Fassbinder, a sexual scene means something, it reveals a social or psychological relation. In most cases, such sequences, from a dramatic point of view, are merely holding operations, or worse.

These are a few of the general problems one observes at a festival like Toronto. World filmmaking, however, is not one undifferentiated mass. There are individual artists who resist some of these trends.

Films from the economically advanced countries of North America, Europe and Japan, at least the ones that make it to film festivals and that I've had the opportunity to see, seem to me still weak in general. In these countries social polarization and the consequent enrichment (and corruption) of the intelligentsia, as well as the bourgeois triumphalism of the 1990s, have had their deepest impact.

The Toronto festival highlighted recent films from Spain, a legitimate undertaking, but nothing I've seen of the Spanish films this year and over the past few years convinces me that there is any important trend under way there. Zambrano's *Alone*, about a mother-daughter relationship, drew a lot of praise, but I found its efforts forced. Iciar Bollain's *Flowers from Another World*, about Caribbean women in a remote region of Spain, is slight and predictable, but Dominican Lissete Mejía and Cuban Marilín Torres are memorable. *Rapture* (Iván Rulueta), a "cult" film from 1979, struck me as silly.

A number of films by Japanese director Kiyoshi Kurosawa were screened. Those I saw (*Charisma*, *Cure*, *License to Live*) left me cold. They seemed too clever by half, condescending to their protagonists and primarily concerned with revealing quirks and oddities (endearing or repulsive, respectively) in human behavior. Takeshi Kitano (*Fireworks*, *Kikujiro*) is another big name in Japanese cinema who seems principally interested in trying to impress an audience. None of the Japanese filmmakers, of either the contemplative, "nature-loving" or the irritatingly eccentric variety, seem to have any great interest in contemporary life in their country, nine years into a deep economic malaise.

French films continue to make a generally bad impression, either rapidly self-important (Benoit Jacquot's *Pas de scandale*), wildly misguided (*Les amants criminels*) or trivial (*Le bleu des villes*, *Rien à faire*). Nothing much is being heard from Germany these days. Samira Gloor-Fadel's *Berlin-Cinéma (Titre Provisoire)* provides a vehicle for director Wim Wenders (and occasionally Jean-Luc Godard) to muse on this and that against a background of Berlin cityscapes. Some of Wenders' comments are insightful, some are clearly not. The enterprise is both labored and insubstantial, and almost unvaryingly gloomy.

In my view, Italian director Marco Bellocchio's *The Wet Nurse*, based on Pirandello, was the most impressive European film. Bellocchio, who has been making films since the mid-1960s, brings a good deal of intelligence and sensitivity to a story, set in the early years of the century, of an emotionally rigid doctor, his unhappy wife and the wet nurse who comes into their household. I would like to write about this separately.

The Dardenne brothers, Luc and Jean-Pierre, from Belgium are gaining a certain reputation with their films about working class life, *The Promise* (1996) and now *Rosetta*. I think they are sincere in their efforts, but the newer film, about a girl who lives in a trailer park with her alcoholic mother, irritates with its jittery, hand-held camera and its endless close-ups of the girl's anxious face. Why do the filmmakers have so little confidence in the spectator that they allow him or her virtually no opportunity to reflect on the goings-on?

The Netherlands seems to specialize in producing documentary filmmakers who, in the name of objectivity, refuse to draw any conclusions about the state of the world or encourage any opposition to it. Johann van der Keuken (*Amsterdam Global Village*) is one; Jos de Putter, whose *The Making of a New Empire* was screened in Toronto is another. De Putter's work, about the Chechen gangster and independence leader Khozh-Ahmed Noukhaev, is so passive and recessive in the face of its subject that it loses much of its purpose.

*The Junction* is an understated piece of realism about a girl stuck in a dead-end railway job in a Polish village. The film, directed by Urszula Urbaniak, is intelligent, but it seems content to skim the surface for the most part. The truth of the situation in eastern Europe is simply too catastrophic to be captured in such a mild-mannered work.

Amos Gitai's *Kadosh*, on the subject of Jewish fundamentalists in Israel, is no doubt a sincere attempt to attack the problem of religious fanaticism. Try as it might, however, the film never feels like much more than a fleshing out of a social conception, and a slow-moving and somewhat self-conscious fleshing out at that. Gitai's work is weakened in addition, I think, by his inability to challenge the underlying falsity of the Zionist arguments.

Canadian Atom Egoyan is no doubt a talented individual, but doesn't seem to have a great deal to say. I feel about *Felicia's Journey*, the story of repressed and psychotic catering manager and the young Irish girl whom he intends as his next victim, much as I did about *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997). These are slight, not very compelling works to which the director has tried much too hard to invest some psychological complexity.

Patricia Rozema, also from Canada, has made a dreadful feminized and "radicalized" version of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. (A reading of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* obviously did not help matters.) One of the few redeeming virtues here is playwright Harold Pinter's performance as Sir Thomas Bertram. Far worse is Quebec director Michel Brault's *Quand je serai parti ... vous vivrez encore* (*When I am gone... you will still be living*). Brault, who directed *Les Ordres* (1974), a moving film about the October Crisis of 1970 and the imposition of the War Measures Act, has produced a work dripping with Quebec chauvinism. The film tells the story of French-speaking "patriotes," heroic and loyal to the man, who put up resistance to the British oppressors in 1837-38. Clearly, sections of the Quebec intelligentsia are looking toward a communalist, Balkan-style solution to the crisis of the Canadian state.

A great many films from the US were screened, most of which I wasn't able to see. The large studio productions will be coming out in the next few weeks and months. Among the independents, Natasha Lyonne has the misfortune to star in two bad films: the repulsive *Freeway II: Confessions of a Trickbaby* (Matthew Bright) and *But I'm a Cheerleader*. The latter, directed by Jamie Babbit, is a satirical attack on the crusade to "straighten out" gays organized by fundamentalist Christians and such. Unfortunately, the film is done without an ounce of wit or style.

One of the more interesting American films was George Hickenlooper's *The Big Brass Ring*, a story about US politics and politicians, based on an original script by Orson Welles. A character observes near the film's outset that the Democratic and Republican parties form "a single-party system of the rich." The film's center lies elsewhere, in a tale of betrayal and forgiveness, but it sets about its work in a thoughtful manner.

The continent of Africa, with a population of nearly one billion people, was represented by a handful of films. Impoverishment and government repression have made conditions nearly impossible for African filmmakers. (*The Other*, by Egyptian Youssef Chahine, is an audacious work that deserves a separate discussion.) In South America, impoverishment and repression are no doubt also factors; political demoralization and cynicism seem stronger ones.

The majority of the most interesting films, in my view, continue to come

from Asia; this year, from Iran (Abbas Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us*), Taiwan (Chang Tso-chi's *Darkness and Light* and Hou Hsiao-hsien's 1986 *Dust in the Wind*), China ( *So Close to Paradise* by Wang Xiaoshuai), India (Pankaj Butalia's *Shadows in the Dark*) and Turkey ( *Journey to the Sun* by Yesim Ustaoglu). I would like to discuss these films, as well as the works by Bellocchio, Dumont and Chahine, in subsequent articles.



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