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Films about important subjects that don't explain enough

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To see deeply, however, one has to have a critical vantage point. What's the purpose of simply registering the accomplished fact? No one has ever gained very much from that. Perhaps, above all, the nonfiction filmmaker must have a sense of history and historical development. How many today possess such a sense? It would certainly assist artists in resisting the argument that contemporary society represents the final stage of human development.

We have the right to expect documentary films to be beautiful, critical and intense. Instead, too often they are bland and pallid readings of the surface of reality: events and names and dates without perspective. And documentary makers have fallen into their own clichés. The “advanced” filmmakers have gotten away from talking heads, voice-overs, captions and the like. One is thrown into the middle of things and obliged to make sense of them. The audience is called upon to exercise its mental faculties. This would be all to the good, if something substantial and rich were on offer. Now, however, doing away with facile explanations has become an excuse to do away with any explanations at all. In reality one is given no more than a snapshot and supposed to make something of it.

Take, for example, *Agujetas, Cantaor*, a film about a contemporary flamenco singer, directed by Dominique Abel (born 1962, France). Agujetas' father was a legendary *cantaor* in Jerez in southern Spain. The younger man worked as a blacksmith before becoming a full-time singer. His music is unearthly, distinctly non-melodic. He goes into a sort of trance and sings about pain, suffering, death, fate. His performance borders on madness.

Agujetas says: “Lyrics come out of life, depending on one's trials. The more you suffer, the better you sing. The man who hasn't suffered, can't sing. Such is life.” He sings, “I'm a painting filled with sadness.” And then: “What misfortune we have, we poor ones.”

It's fascinating, but couldn't something more be made of this? When an individual conveys such pathos, he represents more than himself. He or she is “speaking” for an entire people, or a social class, or a substantial portion of one. Something “world-historical” is at work. The film tells us nothing, about the region, about the tortured history of Spain, about the contemporary situation. There must be ways to introduce these sorts of considerations in an artistic manner. One is left unsatisfied. The filmmaker has not done her job. Such films, as momentarily intriguing as they may be, are all too forgettable.

The subject of *The Jazzman from the Gulag* (directed by Pierre-Henry Salfati, France, born 1953) is truly remarkable. Bandleader and trumpet player Eddie Rosner, born Adolf in Berlin in 1910 to a Polish Jewish family, was a renowned musician by 1930. He once came in second to Louis Armstrong in a vote on the world's leading trumpet player. Rosner made records in Germany that were denounced as “degenerate” when the Nazis came to power in 1933. During the 1930s he toured Europe and enjoyed immense success.

When the war broke out Rosner was in Poland. He and his wife (the daughter of famed Yiddish Art Theatre actress-director Ida Kaminska) fled east. Rosner became a favorite of the leader of the Byelorussian Communist Party, a jazz lover. He was provided with a train and toured extensively. Rosner later said, “My trumpet was in the front line against fascism.” His success spread to the entire Soviet Union, even as the war raged.

In a bizarre episode, Rosner was once asked to perform in a theater in the Crimea. When his band arrived, the hall was empty. Never mind, said the organizer, play, and play well! It turned out, of course, that Stalin was in the balcony, the sole spectator at the concert. Rosner apparently won his approval, for the time being. He performed before packed stadiums.

When the war ended, however, Rosner came under attack, as a “purveyor of vulgarity,” as a “cosmopolitan” (code word for “Jew”). He was arrested in November 1946 on absurd charges of espionage. He held out for seven and a half months against mental and physical torture in the infamous Lubyanka prison. Eventually he signed a “confession” and received a 10-year sentence. In Stalinist hard-labor camps, in Magadan and elsewhere, incredibly, Rosner again found himself at the helm of bands, this time on the orders of his jailers. He toured the camps, once more winning admirers and adherents.

After Stalin's death, Rosner returned to Moscow. Once again he filled stadiums with his fans. He played with Benny Goodman when the latter came to the USSR to play. Rosner wanted out; it took 15 years for his application to be approved. Eventually he returned to Berlin, to a distinctly unwelcoming response. Not many remembered him and his presence reminded others of the Nazi crimes against the Jews which they didn't want to remember. Rosner lived in isolation, without many resources. He died August 8, 1976; the following day a letter arrived from the German government stating that Rosner's claim for compensation as a victim of Nazism had been approved. A fascinating, tragic story.

Another film would have been fascinating if its director hadn't adopted a such a smirky and superior tone. British filmmaker James Marsh made *Wisconsin Death Trip* for the BBC Arena series. It treats an outbreak of mayhem and insanity that erupted in northern Wisconsin in the 1890s.

Unfortunately, relatively little is made of the material. The circumstances are only hinted at. The town of Black River Falls, Wisconsin had been founded in 1854 by Norwegians, Germans and other Europeans. In some cases immigrants had been told stories about cheap and abundant land that proved to be worthless. On top of that in the 1890s economic depression set in. Mines closed down, banks collapsed. People had little to eat or wear. An epidemic of diphtheria struck the area's children. Severe winter weather added to the misery.

The town and region seemed to suffer a nervous breakdown. The film

bases itself on newspaper accounts, read by Ian Holm. They describe a litany of desperate acts. An unemployed German man was found lying on the railroad tracks, determined to be run over by a train. Another man blew his head off with dynamite. A nine-year-old brother killed his younger sister. A naked woman was discovered frozen to death. Two boys shot a farmer and took over his house, living in outlaw fashion. A 15-year-old Polish girl, “lonesome and homesick,” burned down a house.

There were baby killings, wife killings, an outbreak of religious mania. A woman, imagining that devils are pursuing her, drowned three children. Another woman specialized in glass breaking, to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars worth of glass. A farmer hanged himself, after being refused by a woman. A husband discovered his wife with another man, and shot the two of them, plus another couple. A boy, rejected by a girl, shot her, then himself. The horrific stories go on and on.

Marsh intercuts his historical material with shots of banal goings-on in present-day Black River Falls, a town apparently peaceful and content. Whether he's saying that such events are inconceivable today or precisely the opposite, that beneath the calm surface madness lurks, the images simply come across as condescending. Mostly one has the sense that Marsh doesn't know what conclusions to draw and is satisfied, as many filmmakers are today, with pretty pictures.

The material cries out for some sort of historical illumination. Is it not suggestive that in an age and a nation that glorified individualism, where illusions were in abundant supply and political consciousness relatively low, difficult economic circumstances should help generate individual acts of violence and revenge, religious fantasies, even madness? (Marsh only mentions in passing that there was an outbreak of labor unrest as well.) Does this sound the slightest bit familiar? For Marsh any consideration of present-day America from the point of view of these problems is obviously a closed book. He's too busy trying to impress, to prove his cleverness. Too bad.

I found *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich* by Chris Marker genuinely appalling and irresponsible. Marker is a “left” French filmmaker, something of a cult figure, much admired for his collage-like films. Here he takes up the life and death of Soviet or Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. Most of the footage is taken from two video shoots: of Tarkovsky on the set of *Sacrifice* (1986), his last film, and of the director on his deathbed, in 1986.

Tarkovsky is an entirely legitimate subject for a film. He was an extraordinary artist, whose best efforts rank with the most compelling work done in the last half-century. But Marker is content to treat his subject entirely within the confines of a conventional, i.e., anticommunist, framework.

We are told that Tarkovsky was a Russian mystic, that he felt closest to the basic elements of earth, water, air and fire, that his shots generally angle downward because his films are meant to imitate God's view, and so forth. Dialogue from *Stalker* (1979) is cited, “They [the intellectuals] believe in nothing. The organ of faith has atrophied.” Of course, against the coarseness and vulgarity and stupidity of the Russian-Stalinist bureaucracy, a pantheistic and purified religious faith might appear attractive, more humane at least. But the reality, as surely Marker knows, is more complex than that.

After all, one has merely to look at Tarkovsky's films. Despite everything, the films he made in exile— *Nostalgia* (1983) and *The Sacrifice*—when he had the freedom to expound his own ideas, free from harassment and constraint, are without question his weakest, at times almost embarrassingly so. His “return to God and nature” conceptions turned out to be thin gruel indeed.

The Soviet Union was not simply a monstrous police regime. It had a history. A revolution was carried out, on the basis of the noblest social ideals. That revolution was betrayed in the most cynical fashion. Terrible crimes were carried out in the name of “socialism.” But the Soviet population defended their country with immense sacrifices against Nazism. Many intellectuals, even those abused and persecuted, remained publicly loyal to the USSR. This was not simply spinelessness. For decades the worst possible fate was to be branded an “enemy of the Soviet Union.” There was something about the origins of the USSR and its social accomplishments that retained their attractive power for decades after the ideals of social equality had ceased to govern life there.

Tarkovsky may have imagined that all this had nothing to do with him, but his films indicate otherwise. One does not want to pretend that Tarkovsky ever was or should have been a “loyal Soviet citizen.” But it's impossible to view *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) or *The Mirror* (1975) without being made aware of a far more contradictory response to Soviet history than Tarkovsky later cared to admit, or Marker seems to have taken into account. Tarkovsky's life certainly suggests that opposition to Stalinism, if it was to be artistically fruitful in the long-run, had to come from the left, not the right.

In any event, one would have thought that Marker might produce a critical work. Nothing of the sort. For me, this was a low point.

Then there are the films to which one objects because of their mealy-mouthed liberalism or reformism (or worse), such as *Stranger with a Camera*, *Well-Founded Fear* and *Long Night's Journey into Day*.

Stranger with a Camera could only be made in our “multicultural” day. In 1967 Canadian documentary filmmaker Hugh O'Connor was murdered in cold blood in eastern Kentucky by Hobart Ison, who owned a number of shacks that coal miners were obliged to live in. O'Connor, with the permission of the miner who lived there, had stopped to film one of these shacks. Ison, a semi-demented and aging reactionary, drove up and shot O'Connor at point-blank range.

Incredibly filmmaker Elizabeth Barret, from a middle class background in Hazard, Kentucky, has turned this into a meditation on “the media's responsibility toward its subjects.” Is it possible, the film asks at one point, to “show poverty without shaming people”? O'Connor, it seems, was guilty of a lack of sensitivity toward local residents, i.e., slum landlords, by filming the conditions in which miners lived. Barret discovers guilt on both sides. Someone says of Ison, who was never convicted of murder, “I could understand where his rage was coming from.” The film left me speechless.

Well-Founded Fear, directed by Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini, is about the process by which immigration officers in the US decide the fate of asylum-seekers. Naively one might assume such a film would take as its standpoint an exposé, or at least a criticism, of American immigration policy, with all its hypocrisy and vindictiveness. No such luck. The film is primarily a sympathetic look at the immigration officers themselves. These people are not monsters, and some of them do come across sympathetically, but is this really the critical point that needs to be made?

The focus of the film is on the effort made by the immigration officers to determine whether or not asylum-seekers' stories of abuse and torture are true. Some seem less credible than others. But so what? The desperation, whether political or economic, is real enough. The film never raises as a possibility that US immigration policy is fundamentally flawed, indeed that the entire system of national boundaries is outdated and reactionary, much less does it hint at the notion that human beings ought to have the right to live and work in any country they choose.

Long Night's Journey into Day, by Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffman, is this year's look at the new South Africa. Post-apartheid South Africa is an entirely safe subject for liberal-minded filmmakers. The transformation that has taken place there is approved of by official society from “left” to right.

The Reid-Hoffman film takes a look at a number of hearings carried out by the famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the effort by the new regime to provide a means of harmlessly venting the population's

rage at its former tormentors. We see four cases under consideration: the murder of Amy Biehl, a white American student and opponent of the racist regime, by a black crowd; the murder of the Cradock Four, black political activists murdered by the security police; the killing of the Guguletu 7, a group infiltrated and ambushed by the police; and the bombing of a bar, frequented by white policemen, carried out by the African National Congress's military wing.

The film has revealing and moving moments. The Biehl case is tragic and complicated. Her killers had no idea she was an opponent of the regime. She was simply a white girl in the wrong place, an unwitting symbol of everything they hated. Biehl's parents meet with the mother of one of their daughter's killers. The parents end up appealing to the TRC for leniency for Amy's murderers. When one of the men is in fact released and returns to his family, his mother says, referring to Mrs. Biehl, “I think about that poor woman. She's not going to get her child anymore.”

The revelations about the techniques of the old South African secret police come as no surprise, but they are still instructive. Police forces around the world, including those in many “democratic” regimes, use similar methods to deal with political opposition. The Guguletu 7 were a group of young men in an impoverished township, filled with anger and determined to fight the apartheid system. A black undercover agent penetrated the group, egged its members on, played on their political naiveté and inexperience. A secret police death squad lay in wait for the young men one night in March 1986 and murdered all of them. Their funeral attracted tens of thousands.

The TRC has also, in the name of “evenhandedness,” sought to sit in judgment on actions carried out by opponents of the old regime. Robert McBride was a member of the ANC's military unit. He masterminded the bombing of the bar frequented by security police. He expresses regret that innocent people were killed in the incident, but none for his general course of action. McBride makes the point to the filmmakers that no Allied veteran of the Second World War would want to be compared to a Nazi. There is no equality of “crimes.”

What none of the slew of films about the transformation in South Africa can ever do is take a sharp look at the present-day conditions in that country. An exposure of the continuing and indeed deepening poverty and misery of broad layers of the population, as well as the enrichment of the new black bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, would raise certain uncomfortable social issues that the filmmakers, as well of course as their friends in the ANC regime, would rather not see discussed.

Live Nude Girls Unite!, directed by Julia Query and Vicky Funari, treats the efforts to unionize a strip joint in San Francisco. After a great deal of effort and sacrifice, the dancers of the Lusty Lady peepshow manage to become members of the SEIU, AFL-CIO chief John Sweeney's own union. Strippers deserve decent conditions of work like everyone else, but whether paying dues to the SEIU was worth the considerable effort only time will tell. We, for our part, have our doubts. In any event, the film itself is a tribute, more than anything else, to the silliness and general obsolescence of Bay area radicalism.