2000 Toronto International Film Festival - Part 1

Who makes up the artistic vanguard today?

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This year's Toronto film festival presented a considerable variety of works among its 330 short and feature films. As always there was a divide between the commercial and art cinema and, within the latter, between the serious filmmaker and the poseur. East Asian and Iranian films continued to be strongest, but there was remarkable European and American work too.

The films we admired most included *Little Cheung* (Fruit Chan, Hong Kong), *Platform* (Jia Zhang-ke, China), *The House of Mirth* (Terence Davies, UK), *A Time for Drunken Horses* (Bahman Ghobadi, Iran), *The Circle* (Jafar Panahi, Iran), *Bye Bye Africa* (Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, Chad) and, with some reservations, *Yi Yi* (Edward Yang, Taiwan). These films will be discussed in subsequent articles; interviews with four directors (Jia, Ghobadi, Panahi and Haroun) and the contents of a press conference attended by a fifth (Davies) will also be posted, as well as an interview with well-known film critic Robin Wood.

Other films deserve mention. Both *The Day I Became a Woman* (Marziyeh Meshkini, Iran) and *Blackboards* (Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran) contain some remarkable sequences. The former film consists of three parts. In the first and most memorable, a girl turns nine, at which age she legally becomes a woman in Iran. “I woke up a woman today, is it true?” she asks a little boy, with whom she's now forbidden to play. Her mother and grandmother, robed from head to foot, measure her for a *chador*, like prisoners fitting a new inmate. She begs to be allowed to go and play with her friends. The two older women calculate the girl was born around noon, so she has one more hour of childhood, one more hour of freedom.

Blackboards follow a pair of itinerant teachers in the Kurdish area of Iran, near the Iraqi border. They carry blackboards on their backs and go in search of pupils. The harshness of the conditions, both for the teachers and those they encounter, is unrelenting. Samira Makhmalbaf (*The Apple*), born in 1979, has worthy ambitions in this film, but it falls apart under their weight, despite some striking early scenes. She takes on the Kurdish question, the condition of women, the consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, illiteracy, education and several other enormous problems, and the film is simply stretched too thin.

Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine, also from Iran, is an intriguing film. Director Bahman Farmanara has been banned from making movies for twenty years. Here, in this semi-autobiography, he portrays a director preparing to make a film about his own funeral. A picture of a repressive and, beneath the official piety, essentially corrupt society emerges in an honest, unself-pitying work.

Djomeh (Hassan Yektapanah), yet another Iranian work, is a sweet film about a young worker from Afghanistan forced by his family to emigrate for the crime of loving an older woman. Now in Iran he falls in love with the heavily veiled daughter of the local general store owner; she never says a word to him. In the film's best scene, the young man compresses all the passion of desperation and idealism into a monologue and proposes to the girl while she goes about filling his order as though he didn't exist. In fact, the girl's silence is not of her own choice and ever present in the situation are the social barriers to pure love—religion, nationality, custom and, above all, class—ensuring that love's labor is lost. Overall, a gentle film, but lacking in depth and originality.

George Washington (David Gordon Green, US) is a film about a small town in North Carolina. Although it suffers from occasional “poetic” self-consciousness, it has personality and manages to treat its characters with respect and sympathy. An interview with the youthful director will appear in a later article.

Angels of the Universe, directed by Fridrik Thor Fridriksson of Iceland, treats emotional difficulties with some sensitivity and apparent accuracy. It begins with a lovely quote from Hegel who, when told that his theories were at odds with reality, responded, “Poor reality, it must feel bad.” The most moving figures in the film were the parents of the young man who descends into madness.

In *Adanggaman*, Roger Gnoan M'bala of the Ivory Coast deals with a taboo subject, the African role in the slave trade. However, he does so in a relatively conventional and predictable fashion.

We've already commented on *No Place to Go* (Oskar Roehler, Germany) on the *WSWS* [http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/may2000/unto-m29.shtml]. It is the story of a novelist—based on the filmmaker's mother—with sympathies for the East German Stalinist regime, who suffers a breakdown at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The film is not overly subtle in the manner it makes its points, but Roehler conveys a definite sincerity and Hannelore Elsner gives a fine performance.

Another German film, *alaska.de* (Esther Gronenborn), concerns itself with the unhappy spiritual and economic state of young people in the suburbs of former East Berlin. There are moments that have the ring of truth, but, as a whole, the film says nothing terribly new or penetrating. The filmmaker previously directed music videos, and it shows.

Clouds of May (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Turkey) is a Kiarostami-like look at filmmaking and its impact on ordinary people, but without enough of the Iranian director's precision and depth. *Flower of Manila* (Joel Lamangan) is a Filipino melodrama, about residents of a shanty-town and their battle with a local slumlord and gangster. It depicts the dreadful social conditions painstakingly, but one's heartstrings are tugged in a consistently manipulative manner. This is a film for those who hate their lives, but whose idea of a way out is winning the lottery ... or perhaps pursuing a successful film career.

Ali Zaoua (Nabil Ayouch), from Morocco, is also unsparing in its treatment of social reality, in this case, the reality of street kids in Casablanca. In countries where the necessity of social revolution stares one directly in the face, yet there seems no immediate prospect for such a transformation, contemporary filmmakers often seek consolation, it seems, in creating small triumphs and celebrating the “resilience of the human spirit.” This is another film that hasn't managed to avoid that.

British director Ken Loach has a long history of making films about working class characters and their struggles. For his principled work over

a number of decades he has deservedly won a following around the world. His ability to create memorable drama, however, has always been less certain. *Bread and Roses* is not likely to enhance his reputation on that score.

Set in Los Angeles, the film takes up the situation of an undocumented woman worker from Mexico who winds up as a cleaner in a large office building. The efforts by the Service Employees International Union to organize the cleaning workers, the "Janitors for Justice" campaign, forms the center of the film. There are convincing sequences, but, taken as a whole, the work is predictable and somewhat patronizing. Perhaps one of Loach's difficulties is the "political" scripts he works with. It may be that he is a potentially more audacious artist than the narrow and too often pat confines of his scenarios permit him to be.

In any event, the premise of the film—that the AFL-CIO's rotten and corrupt organizations in any way offer a progressive solution to workers' problems—is not going to contribute to the Realism that Loach generally strives for. It's not that the filmmaker is an "agent of the union bureaucracy," one feels, but that he simply can't imagine working class life that doesn't revolve around the trade unions. One pays a heavy price under contemporary conditions for clinging onto that sort of conception.

April Captains (directed by actress Maria de Medeîros) dramatizes a critical moment in recent history, the overthrow of the Portuguese semi-fascist regime by dissatisfied layers of the military in April 1974. The ability of the bourgeoisie to effect the transformation of the Portuguese and Spanish regimes from "dictatorship to democracy" in 1974-75 without the intervention of the working class and without social upheaval played a major role in bringing the last period of international radicalization to an end. Medeîros' film, unfortunately, is artistically weak for the most part, hamfisted and obvious. Nonetheless, despite its flaws, the film does, in the end, provide some sense of the hopes and illusions of the time and the tragic loss of an opportunity for genuine revolutionary change.

Like many similar efforts, *Eisenstein* (directed by Canadian-born director Renny Bartlett) tends to drive home the unpleasant reality that one needs to be something of a master artist to make a film about a master artist. The work has its heart in the right place. It suggests that something remarkable was going on in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, at least in the arts. It depicts Eisenstein, on orders from the regime, editing Trotsky out of his *October* [*Ten Days That Shook the World*] in 1927. It has a character who faces persecution for raising "permanent revolution" at a party meeting. It treats the purges and terror of the late 1930s. But this is the sort of film biography in which one knows for sure that the sight of an orange bouncing down a set of stairs will help inspire Eisenstein to create a certain famous film sequence. Everything is simplified, too "B follows A, C follows B."

Films from France shown at festivals continue to be weak on the whole. They tend to be pretentious, pleased with themselves and generally engaged in a tedious game of one-upmanship as to which can be the most sexually daring. Inevitably, a French director has made a film about the Marquis de Sade: *Sade*, directed by Benoît Jacquot. It is not nearly as bad as it might have been. But the treatment of the French Revolution is superficial (a cold, virtuous Robespierre at the head of a pack of cold, hypocritical revolutionaries out of touch with their own needs and desires) and Sade is created, one senses, in the image of a contemporary Parisian philosophy professor who seduces young girls by telling them to "Follow your instinct" and "Listen to the inner voice." In general, the notorious Marquis gets all the best lines. Daniel Auteuil and Isild Le Besco perform admirably.

Olivier Assayas continues to make intelligent films that leave some spectators quite cold . *Les destinées sentimentales* (Emotional Destinies), based on a novel by Jacques Chardon, follows a Protestant minister who becomes a factory owner in the first few decades of the 20th century. He ferociously fights with competitors, his family and with his workers. In the end, it turns out that it doesn't really matter whether you are a factory owner or a factory worker, because "There is nothing else in life but love." The lack of spontaneity and genuine feeling in this work is positively painful.

The films of Chilean exile, now Paris resident, Raoul Ruiz (here it was *Comedy of Innocence*), seem to gather themselves ineluctably under the general heading: Much ado about nothing. One senses, more generally, that many of the fashionable directors of the day have assumed a certain stature primarily by default, as the congealed expression of the stagnation and uncertainty reigning within the filmmaking and filmgoing classes. At a certain point a great many reputations will simply evaporate.

Aïe (directed by Sophie Fillières) is an odd little film from France. One of its aims seems to be to oppose the portentousness of so many other French films. It even has a joke about Heidegger. Before it loses its way completely, the film is quite funny, with a wonderful performance from André Dussolier, one of those actors who was apparently placed on earth to make one laugh.

One avoids most Japanese films at this point, because they tend to be self-conscious, clever and contemptuous of people and their difficulties.

Israeli-born Amos Kollek has now directed Anna Thomson in three films (*Sue*, *Fiona* and the latest, *Fast Food, Fast Women*). Thomson is remarkable, but the most recent film reminds one more than anything else of a particularly daring television situation comedy, filled with quirky New Yorkers.

Unhappily for filmgoers, Robert Altman, in *Dr. T and the Women*, shows further signs of exhaustion. Whatever there is here about women who are dependent on men and have too much time on their hands was said better by Charlotte Brontë and others more than a century and a half ago. The film lacks bite and complexity.

Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors (the title refers to a well-known work by Marcel Duchamp) is a disappointment. South Korean director Hong Sangsoo's previous work, *The Power of Kangwon Province*, made a strong impression. Sangsoo has decided to study modern relationships as things in themselves, outside of the implications of society and history, and that rarely keeps interest alive for long.

There were a number of dreadful films at the festival, but the only one probably worth embarrassing anyone about is *Une vraie jeune fille* (A Real Young Lady), directed by Catherine Breillat. This 1975 film is circulating solely due to the recent success of Breillat's sexually explicit *Romance*. The earlier work, about a teenage girl home on vacation in the provinces, is misanthropic, crude and pointless. A ludicrous effort.

While it's necessary for obvious reasons to discuss a wide range of films, the real interest of a festival lies in the extraordinary experiences one undergoes with the richest and most suggestive films, i.e., the ones we'll be looking at in future articles. There is a recurring pattern to the film festival experience. One is a little depressed at first by the encounter with inadequate or mediocre works, which inevitably predominate. The presence of certain "industry types" doesn't help matters. Dissatisfaction, unfulfilled longings linger until a breathtaking sequence or series of sequences, from which there can be no turning back on the filmmaker's part, gives evidence of the first truly remarkable film. A sigh of relief: "Ah, here we go. I wasn't mistaken. This is all still possible—in fact, more powerful than ever." And then they seem to come in a rush, the few beautiful ones, the ones that make everything or almost everything worthwhile. The discussions with the creators of such works are generally heartening as well. One leaves such an event with renewed confidence in the ability of human beings to interpret their world and, ultimately, transform it.

But this perception—that there are artists today, under extremely difficult ideological conditions, capable of cognizing reality at a profound level—and the changed social and intellectual conditions—revealed or at

least “alluded to” in the best films at the recent festival—lead us on to ask: is there such a thing as an artistic vanguard today and, if so, how would it be constituted?

According to historians the first use of the term “avant-garde” in reference to artistic movements of an advanced character occurred in the writings of the French Utopian socialist, Henri de Saint-Simon, in the 1820s. Saint-Simon assigned a leading role (“avant-garde” = “vanguard”) to the artist, in alliance with the industrialist and the scientist, in transforming society and combating reaction. “Avant-garde” had at the time, and for decades afterward, a dual meaning: artistically and socially progressive. In the 20th century, particularly in its second half as disillusionment with the Soviet Union and the prospect of radical social change (falsely associated with Stalinism) took serious hold among artists and critics, “avant-garde” came to be identified almost exclusively with technical and formal innovation. This is largely where we stand today.

It would appear to us that a concern for the fate of humanity—including how and under what physical and mental conditions masses of people live—must be a precondition for advanced art today. It seems clear, in fact, that the social question is once again pushing into the foreground in cinema. The sort of social disaster that has been created in Africa, much of Asia and Latin America, eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union simply cannot be kept a secret. Moreover, stagnation and decay, if not worse, make themselves felt, although far less consistently, in work from Europe, Japan, Australia and North America too.

One of the ways in which the new conditions express themselves is the fact that it becomes increasingly difficult to discuss the Toronto film festival without discussing the situation in the host city itself. Toronto shows many signs of growing social polarization. Travel outside the various posh and built-up districts, pockets where extraordinary wealth flaunts itself, and the city is a far grimmer and more tense place than it used to be. Years of brutal cuts in social spending in particular have taken their toll. The increase in the number of homeless people is the sharpest expression of a general social trend. (To this point, unhappily, none of this has registered itself, directly or indirectly, in any significant fashion in Canadian cinema.)

Art involves much more than a simple description of reality at the surface level; in fact, it is the opposite of such a description. A significant feature of the films we most admired was what we considered the seriousness and complexity of their treatment of social and psychological life, their rejection of the vulgar-radical approach, with its simplifying of social processes and prettifying of the oppressed. Honesty is another precondition for significant work.

And so is the element of protest, even if it be only a protest against the circumstances under which the most elementary human relations take place, or against the conditions under which intellectual creation itself takes place.

Above all, however, advanced art under today's specific conditions seems to us to imply the need for something which has perhaps always been an indispensable quality in the modern age, but which has never been so urgently called for. The extraordinary artist today is the one whose depth of sympathy for humanity and devotion to art creates a work that does something more, *no matter what its style*, than mirror the given state of things. A film, for example, may depict harsh and even impossible conditions, but do the feelings of the filmmaker for his or her characters materialized in the drama and the disturbing beauty of the work combine to produce in the mind of the viewer, if only at this point on the level of the unconscious, the possibility of an alternate reality, something less harsh and “more forgiving,” as Chinese director Jia Zhang-ke suggested in a conversation?

A great deal depends on the degree to which the image and the artistic space into which the viewer enters are built up through deep feeling and thought. Generosity, kindness, solidarity, self-sacrifice—qualities largely absent from everyday life and officially scoffed at—make themselves felt through the seriousness with which the filmmaker approaches his or her task. The aesthetic quality of the artistic work itself—script, selection of images and sound, direction of actors, editing—implies a certain moral-intellectual stance. This is why we return, again and again, to the comments of André Breton that “Lyricism is the beginning of a protest” and Oscar Wilde that “In the mere loveliness of the materials employed there are latent elements of culture,” and, we would add, criticism.

This is also why we think the term “avant-garde” means something more today than a particular relation to technical and formal innovation, as important as that may be, but signifies an intense commitment to human and artistic problems, perceived as inseparable. The filmmakers whose work we admired seemed to embody this commitment.