2000 Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 1

Drama, protest, sensuality

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"But with the true artist, the social formula that he recommends is a matter of secondary importance; the source of his art, its animating spirit, is decisive"—Rosa Luxemburg, 1918

The recent Vancouver International Film Festival presented some two hundred films. One of the festival's strengths is East Asian works. I had the opportunity to see 16 films from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia, along with another 15 or so from other parts of the world. The festival also screened a number of interesting works I had seen elsewhere, including *Bariwali—The Lady of the House*, *Bye Bye Africa*, *The Circle*, *The Day I Became a Woman*, *George Washington*, *The Legends of Rita*, *Platform*, *The Thief of St. Lubin* and *Yi Yi*.

It is difficult, but continually necessary, to pinpoint those qualities that one finds appealing in a work of art. After reading passages in a number of novels sitting on a bookstore shelf, why do we select one work as opposed to another? We reject this because the author is merely showing off, that due to his or her sneering tone, another because the characters or circumstances hold no interest for us, a fourth because the language is banal, a fifth out of impatience, and so forth.

And there are combinations of words that inevitably catch our eye. I know, for example, that I could never resist a novel one of whose chapters opens in the following manner: "Cytherea entered her bedroom, and flung herself on the bed, bewildered by a whirl of thought" (Thomas Hardy's *Desperate Remedies*). There is something about the girl's absurd name, the bedroom, the "whirl of thought," the implication perhaps of a response to an oppressed condition (which, in fact, it turns out to be) that has a magic effect on me: drama, protest, sensuality.

A film begins, and within a few seconds one knows a good deal, often too much. A crucial element established very quickly is whether or not the filmmaker is going to make demands on the spectator's brain. Establishing shots (the exterior of a house or building, a street, the skyline of a city, etc.), although not necessarily fatal, make me nervous about the filmmaker's intentions. I would prefer to be plunged into the midst of things in a dizzying fashion and disoriented momentarily. It's best, all things considered, to work problems out for oneself. Of course the film that is inaccessible to even the most attentive viewer is also a failure.

It seems to me the filmmaker has to assume a state of *utter receptivity* in the spectator, even though this is a considerable assumption given the pressures of everyday life and the general state of culture. The filmmaker, at least the one not solely concerned with immediate popular or financial success, is obliged to approach the spectator at the highest level, within the given intellectual boundaries of the day. The viewer has the right to be taken seriously, as someone capable—providing an effort is made—of recognizing the essence of any situation. A work produced on such a basis always criticizes and improves prevailing consciousness.

Naturally, the spectator is not an empty vessel. He or she is always on the look-out for something. I freely acknowledge that I operate at a film festival like a detective, stalking certain kinds of pictures and words. I'm looking first of all for a work possessing all the qualities I find in Hardy's sentence: the drawing together in images of what seem to me to be the most intriguing and urgent elements in life in such a manner that these elements take on a spontaneous life of their own and lead the way to unexpected conclusions. That drawing together can take an infinite variety of shapes, although we all no doubt have our personal predilections. Given a choice, I suppose, I would prefer a work whose form had something cool and reserved about it, driven from within by white-hot intensity.

I'm searching first of all for a formal rigor that speaks presumably to an intellectual or moral rigor in the artistic personalities creating it. Above all, *the image of a human being*, in whatever surroundings and framed in whatever manner, *taken seriously*, which is to say both sympathetically and critically. Having adopted that stance—which in reality cannot be separated out from the production of the work as a whole—the director, writer and performers, it seems to me, would have a difficult time entirely avoiding making genuine discoveries.

As this is not a perfect world, works through which currents of heat and cold, grandeur and simplicity, universality and the everyday continuously flow are not that numerous. At the Vancouver festival I was struck by a number of films and a number of individual images. The works that seemed most serious and poetic to me were Akihiro Suzuki's *Looking for Angel* from Japan and *Bundled*, directed by Singing Chen, from Taiwan. Lee Chang-Dong's *Peppermint Candy* from South Korea is a disturbing film about a onetime secret policeman. Kim Sang-Jin's *Attack the Gas Station* and Bong Joon-Ho's *Barking Dogs Never Bite* —also from South Korea—have their remarkable moments.

Looking for Angel, which I'll write about separately, appealed to me because of its casual, informal feel, combined with an intense protest against brutality and repression. As I suggested above in relation to Hardy's lines, we all succumb to certain sentences or pictures and thereby to the work as a whole. In the case of *Looking for Angel*, the surrender took place at the moment when the three principal characters (two male and one female) have faced a variety of desires and difficulties in the course of an evening and the narrator's voice—over shots of wet city streets, streetcars and umbrellas—says: "It was raining the next morning. We had breakfast in a café and talked of many unimportant things. Takachi and Reiko spoke of a boy that I'd never met. I saw him weeping a little." A remarkable combination of artistic sensibility, tact and emotional precision is at work here.

In some films a single moment may impress itself on the viewer. In a Japanese short, oddly named *The Idiotic Scooter Girl: Sad Radios* (Obitani Yuri), we see a girl, who's been trying to sell cheap plastic radios, sitting despondently or blankly on a set of stairs leading down to the basement of an apartment building, illuminated by yellow light. In Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I*, there is a conversation conducted by the filmmaker with a homeless ex-truck driver who lives by picking through garbage.

Not every work has a primarily aesthetic appeal. Some things need to be

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said no matter how. A film that deserves to be seen everywhere is John Pilger's *Paying the Price*, a documentary about the atrocities perpetrated against the Iraqi population, particularly its children, by the Western powers through UN sanctions. Pilger, a British journalist, points out that the sanctions, strenuously supported by the US and Britain in particular, have killed more than the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan combined. Denis Halliday, the former Assistant UN Secretary General—who resigned his post in protest against the anti-Iraqi policy—comments that Washington and London will be "slaughtered" in history books for their murderous role. Robin Cook, British foreign secretary, refused to be interviewed by Pilger. He apparently didn't want to appear in a film "with dying babies." An unrepentant James Rubin, the US State Department official, permitted himself to be questioned. He explains blandly that the pursuit of sanctions is one of those "real decisions that has real consequences" which governments must make.

A Poet (Unconcealed Poetry) is remarkable for its frank treatment of the 1965 massacre carried out by the Indonesian military and reactionary forces—with the full support of the CIA and the US government—against members of the Communist Party and all opponents of the Indonesian elite. Garin Nugroho directed the film, which is based on the memories of Ibrahim Kadir, a poet from the province of Aceh, who was imprisoned in October 1965, but survived. Kadir, now 56, plays himself 35 years ago. The film takes place in two cells, one for men and one for women, in Takengon prison. Prisoners whose names are called out are led away and executed, beheaded, "like goats."

"Life is for the brave ... history is the record of the winners," says one detainee. The film, although it contains no scenes of the carnage, is chilling. A title at the end notes that the prosecutor in charge at Takengon shot himself. It further notes that five hundred thousand, and by certain estimates two million people, were killed in the massacre. It must be of some significance that such a film can now be made in Indonesia.

Film history may eventually determine that the phase of Iranian cinema history that began in the wake of the 1979 revolution reached its peak, or a peak, in any case, in the middle of the 1990s, with films like *Through the Olive Trees* and *A Moment of Innocence*. Time will tell. In any event, as a national cinema Iran continues to produce a stream of generally substantial and sometimes beautiful works. If they are secondary works in comparison to those mentioned, they at least tower above, by and large, the most "hard-hitting" and "insightful" products of Hollywood.

Daughters of the Sun (Mariam Shahriar) treats the deplorable status of women in Iran and adds to it a deep sense of social injustice. Amangol is one of six daughters. Her father, desperate for money, shaves her head and sends her off, in men's clothing, to work as an apprentice weaver. She's employed by a brutal carpet dealer, who beats his employees when they cause problems. "Aman," as the young woman is now called, arouses the love of a fellow female employee, who urges marriage.

An earthquake killed one female employee's family. "All that was left was me and a cow. I'd tell myself 'This is a dream.'" Unfortunately, this is no dream, but life, or some awful version of life. Aman's crushed, numbed face dominates the film. One hardship after another befalls her. The death of her beloved mother is a particularly severe blow. She only learns about it later. "They didn't have money for her operation. She suffered so much till she died." In the end, she sets fire to the weaving shed and walks off into the barren countryside in women's clothing. The film is spare and severe, unforgiving. I'm not certain it provides enough opportunity for a spectator to mobilize his or her own emotions fully, but it is a serious work.

Rassul Sadr Ameli's *The Girl in the Sneakers* is an intelligent film and it managed to hold the attention of several hundred Vancouver high school students at the showing I attended, which one would think is no mean feat. A teenage couple is taking a stroll in the park in broad daylight. Incredibly, a policeman stops them and takes them into custody, simply because they're unmarried and unrelated! The girl is subjected to a medical examination, to ascertain whether she's still a virgin. Her parents are outraged ... at their daughter. The girl, reasonably enough, runs away from the whole stinking lot of them. Her boyfriend doesn't turn out to be much help either. Anyway, she spends the night wandering around Tehran, encountering the rougher side of the city. Ameli's film not an earthshaking work, but it has its moments.

A young Afghan laborer is the central figure in *Djomeh*, directed by Hassan Yektapanah. He's working on a dairy farm in Iran. Djomeh embarrassed his family by falling in love with an older woman, a widow, in Afghanistan and they sent him away. Now he's stuck on this isolated farm, with another Afghan laborer, who's supposed to look out for him, and the owner, a brusque man with a pickup truck. On their way to and from town Djomeh and his boss discuss life and love.

The Afghan develops feelings for the daughter of the local store owner and keeps going back for cans of food he doesn't need. Custom and everything else prevent her from speaking to him. In the end he asks his boss to act as his negotiator with the girl's father, with predictable results.

Yektapanah has worked for Abbas Kiarostami as an assistant director (on *Taste of Cherry*, among other films) and the influence is obvious (the story even bears similarities to *Through the Olive Trees*). Why should we assume there's anything wrong with that? The presence of major artists elevates the thinking and the work of everyone around them. It's doubtful that this film would have been made, or that it would have been made with the degree of sensitivity and intelligence that it possesses, without Kiarostami's influence.

The director of *Djomeh*, a very pleasant and gentle man, was present at the Vancouver film festival and I spoke to him.

David Walsh: Could you briefly explain something about your history and how you came to make this film?

Hassan Yektapanah: As a child I was always interested in photography. I grew up in Tehran. I came from a poor family and didn't have my own camera. We had a few guests over one time and I stole a camera from one of them. Which is not very nice, but I have to be honest. This camera was one of those really old ones. It was square. It had four sides. You have to open it, you have to hold the camera and you have to look down from above. It was a summer's day and we had guests over. That was the first thing I took note of when they arrived. They were going to take a nap around noon. And after they woke up, there was no camera. It was curiosity that made me steal the camera.

I was 11 at the time. We were sleeping in different bedrooms. They had put all their things in an empty room. So I went to the room and I opened one of the suitcases and took the camera. I remember I was terrified and I was sweating. However, we were poor at the time. But my family had such a good name. I was so scared because I thought someone might walk in while I was searching for the camera and that would be really, really embarrassing. I finally found the camera and I hit this button because I didn't know how to use the camera. And all of a sudden, all the covers went in different directions. I was so scared. While I was looking at the camera I heard some noise, so I was really scared. I was trying to get this camera into the way it was before. I couldn't get it right so I put the camera back in the suitcase and I left.

That's how it started basically, my interest in cinema. I realized that I could take pictures perhaps with a hidden camera. What's really interesting is that the first movie I made was basically made in that fashion. The authorities and the government did not know about this movie. Which reminded of this memory about when I was a kid. These two different stories are related, I think. It started with a stolen camera and it ended up to be a really big story. How it started and how it ended.

DW: What did or does your father do?

H: My dad had his own business at the time. He was doing fine financially. His store had a fire and he went bankrupt. That's how are

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family started going down and down. We started moving to different parts, perhaps from north to south. Which meant financially they were doing not like they used to.

DW: Why did you decide to make this particular story?

H: I was a teenager when the revolution happened in Iran. My political activities during the revolutionary time in Iran really helped me out. That guided my future activities regarding cinema and everything. I was really sensitive toward what was happening in Iran, what was going on during those years. When I see things that aren't supposed to be happening, that gets my attention. It could be regarding anything. Injustices. We have approximately four millions Afghans in Iran right now. Based on Iranian rules, they are not allowed to marry Iranians.

DW: Legally or unofficially?

H: Legally, they are not allowed to marry Iranian girls. There used to be a different law regarding immigrants from Afghanistan, which was quite fair. Then they started marrying Persian girls and having two, three, four kids, then leaving the girls go back to their country, which I find very unfair.

After this went on for years, that made the government think about what was going on. Finally, they changed the law. They said that you're not allowed to marry Iranians. There was still one unsolved problem. That was the emotional part of the story. For example, we're talking about this young guy who's an immigrant who moved to this country and had all these hopes and everything. Obviously as a human being he has all these emotions and feelings. Any human being—he could be 40 years old, he could be 20 years old—has feelings and emotions and you have to be able to express your feelings.

It could be anywhere in the world, no matter what nationality or what religion you are. Like a really hungry person, who has a big bowl of honey and is not allowed to have some. That's what made me interested in what was going on. Did the government ever think about the Afghans' emotions or feelings? What happened to that part? The first part was solved, but what about the second part?

Perhaps if you see my movie, I use a scale, which we have in courts in Iran, as a symbol of justice. We make all these rules and scales for justice. We put up all the borders which we have on a map, which really don't exist. We put all these limitations and restrictions. All different flags from different countries, different religions, different accents, different languages. And this is what makes us separate from each other. This is something about us, this is not about different governments. This is about human beings, it's not about governments. This is the subject of my film.

DW: But the film shows another side to the problem you mention. It shows that the local people are not very friendly to the immigrants either, at least it suggests that. That is a problem, that's not just the government.

H: This has been going on in Iran for years. It is part of our tradition, which is not good. The first thing, when you come to this earth, people relate you to your background, your dad and your mom. If this baby has a good background, has a really good reputation and good finances, he's lucky. And the opposite: if this baby doesn't come from a good family with a good reputation, he is really innocent, but he will be victimized because of his family. And I don't think this belongs to any specific government or country. This is about us. I was trying in my film to find a way to deal with this kind of stuff, that will make a big difference in our relation with different countries.

DW: The girl in the film, does she have any response, or are we supposed to read any response, or is that the problem, that she can't give any response to the boy?

H: I don't understand.

DW: That fact she does not respond, or is it that she cannot respond because of social pressure?

H: She was not allowed to speak. She could have spoken for herself, but since her father was there she was not allowed to talk for herself.

DW: But we see her in the background. Does that indicate her interest?

H: There are two such moments, when she is seen in the background and also when the boy comes to the store and does not have enough money, but she's willing to give him everything.

DW: I'm curious, what do you feel you learned from Abbas Kiarostami?

H: I worked in a more professional cinema for 13 years—

DW: More commercial cinema?

H: I'm talking about classical movies, that use a lot of people and very expensive equipment. Big budget movies, basically. And they were some of the most expensive films in Iran because I had the option to choose. Once I met Mr. Kiarostami, he made my perspective change and gave me a different outlook on cinema. After I met Mr. Kiarostami, we talked and I got to know him better, I realized that I'm really close to what he thinks.

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