2000 Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 2

Less and more interesting films

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"What do you do if I make an unintelligible utterance to you? You question me, is that not so? Why should we not do the same thing to the dreamer—question him as to what his dream means *?"-Sigmund Freud, c. 1916*

Some dreams are more interesting than others. Europeans' "dreams" seem pretty thin at the moment, by and large, if one is to judge by their films.

How many truly memorable Italian films, for example, have been made in the past decade? Of course it's no easy matter to follow in the footsteps of Visconti, Pasolini, Rossellini, Fellini, Antonioni and a host of others who illuminated the skies of postwar Europe. Any great movement creates difficulties for those who follow in its wake. However, any serious reflection on the Italian situation, it seems to me, will lead one to the conclusion that this is not a crisis whose source lies entirely or even principally within the realm of art and the "problem of succession." The virtual collapse of the enormous social expectations aroused in a previous period, thanks principally to the treachery of the Stalinist Communist Party, along with economic processes universal in the advanced countries, has helped reduce the "filmmaking classes" to a state of apparent prostration. Nearly everything about Italian films is a triviality.

Mimmo Calopresti has directed an intelligent film in *I Prefer the Sound of the Sea*, but, frankly, it too has that air about it of something secondary, something almost beside the point. The film tells the story of a Northern Italian businessman, with roots in Sicily, who becomes involved in the life of a young man who has been victimized by the Mafia. He brings the youth to Turin and introduces him to his own unhappy son. Inevitably, conflicts and disasters develop. The coldness, sophistication and corruption of the North versus the warmth, backwardness and simplicity of the South—these sound like precisely the sort of opposites that need to be gone beyond in Italy. Calopresti hasn't managed to do it.

Northern Skirts, directed by Barbara Albert, is about immigrants, from Eastern Europe, in Austria. And the coldness and harshness of their lives. Again, it's an intelligent film, but, in this case, distant. A socially well-intentioned film in which the characters are on a fairly short leash. "So far, and no farther!"—is the general approach.

Nina Proll plays Jasmin, who sleeps around a lot. It doesn't make her happy, and it probably wouldn't in real life, but one can sense all too insistently the director's disapproval. Jasmin is made to suffer for her sins. In a film that sets out to criticize Austrian society, we mostly remember this young woman with an untidy sex life. This is what often happens to artists who imagine they have political matters firmly in hand and think their unconscious is not an issue in their work.

Loners (David Ondricek) is a film from the Czech Republic. It's about youngish, middle class people in Prague, apparently with a lot of time on their hands. They fall in and out of relationships, and are generally nasty to each other. I try to avoid such people, in life and on screen.

Russian director Pavel Lounguine says he set out to answer certain questions in his film *The Wedding*: "How are the Russian people surviving in the year 2000? I'm not talking about the rampant afflictions of war, gangsterism and corruption, but about everyday life. What has become of the family? Love? Childhood? Friendship? What remains of the old certainties, the old values? Have people changed? Can they change?"

The problem is that it's difficult to answer those "everyday" questions without asking the "universal" ones, the ones Lounguine deliberately sets aside, questions about the general direction of Russian society. The end result is almost inevitable, given the framework the filmmaker has established for himself. In his film, about a wedding in a mining town near Moscow, Lounguine presents some unpleasant circumstances: wages unpaid, poverty, new capitalist-gangster bosses running everything, rampant alcoholism, etc. But it's all so charmingly, amusingly and, in the end, complacently done. It's hard to believe there's much that Russian audiences would find original or fresh in this. Indeed one senses, discomfortingly, that the director has an international audience (and critics and distributors and producers and money men) in mind, somewhat like a Russian government official carrying out policy always with an eye to what the IMF will think.

It turns out, more or less as we expected, that despite the catastrophes of the recent past the "eternal" Russian values have not disappeared. "We're just a crazy, emotional and illogical people—and you have to love us for that!" the film seems to say. Not good enough, not good enough by half.

Leos Carax, from France, is taken very seriously by some people. It's safe to assume that the director himself is one of those people. The two of his films that I've seen seem to me extremely foolish— *Les Amants du Pont-Neuf* (1991), and his newest, *Pola X*. In the latter Guillaume Depardieu plays a young man living with his mother (Catherine Deneuve) in a castle. One day a young woman with an Eastern European accent, claiming to be his half-sister, jumps out of the woods at him, and he gives up his old life and goes to live in a factory building, or something, and spends his time writing a novel, and suffering. Carax has based his film loosely on Melville's *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*. Various things are probably going on here, including, one fears, a parable about the present state of Europe, but I had an impossible time trying to get past the vast silliness of the thing.

François Ozon is another "name" in French cinema. I didn't like his

Criminal Lovers (1999) and I don't like his rendering of a script by the late German director R. W. Fassbinder, *Water Drops on Burning Rocks*, written when the latter was 19. This has little to do with Fassbinder and a great deal to do with Ozon's desire to impress. The story of a young man and his older lover, the young man's girlfriend and the older man's ex-lover, who's had a sex-change operation, adds up to very little under the present circumstances. Fassbinder himself went beyond the material in works like *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972).

In any event, whereas Fassbinder's purpose, at least in his early work, was to criticize society and himself and the people around him, out of a desire to improve life, Ozon's work mostly exudes cynicism and cruelty. Fassbinder could be cruel, because he wanted to blow up the existing state of affairs. Ozon simply wants to show how clever he is, and how superior he is to everyone in his film.

Danish director Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*, which closed the festival, is a terrible film that probably needs to be written about separately.

Denys Arcand, the French-Canadian director, has been interesting and disturbing before, in *Rejeanne Padovani* (1973), *The Decline of the American Empire* (1986) and *Jesus of Montreal* (1989). With *Stardom*, he decided to make a film about modeling and celebrity. “Supermodels are the most empty celebrities.... You can learn the technique of modeling in about 22 seconds. It's walking. And not falling down,” he says.

Unhappily, his film—the story of a hockey-playing girl from Cornwall, Ontario who rises to the top of the modeling profession—is thin too. In an effort to accurately describe a stupid and corrupt phenomenon, Arcand has structured his film to mimic tabloid television. There may be a lesson here. Some of that shallow world seems to have rubbed off on the director. Perhaps celebrity too not only conquers, but convinces.

Asian filmmakers seem prepared to dream and fantasize along more insightful and productive lines at the moment. In *Attack the Gas Station*, directed by Kim Sang-Jin [interview posted separately], four young guys in Seoul have robbed a gas station. One night they decide to do it again. The owner-manager says, do you think I'd keep money sitting around here again? So they take over the station, smashing things up in the process, and decide to pump gas and take the proceeds. They take the manager and his employees hostage, and anybody else who wanders in. The night proceeds. In flashbacks we learn something about the four, and why they're so disaffected. They have grievances against society. In the end, a stalemate between police and a local gang allows them to escape into the night.

The four are rather glamorized. And the film is not as quite as funny as it would like to be. But in some of its mundane details it comes alive. I thought the gas station's young employees were the most interesting figures in the film, caught between their stupid boss and the sometimes violent intruders. One in particular, a kid in a bright yellow shirt, captures something truthful about young people all over the world, a little lost and lazy, well-meaning, sly, full of life.

Attack the Gas Station has a definitely anti-authoritarian edge to it. One of the four is responding directly to the mindless discipline of school authorities. “I tried to show, in a funny way, the attempts of alienated young people to overturn the existing order of the world,” Kim told one interviewer. His film expresses distaste for businessmen, politicians, rich matrons, gangsters, cops. It's not the final word in filmmaking, but it's lively and colorful and willing to be rude. It's a fantasy, which points to something real.

Bundled, from Taiwan, is an unusual and moving film about people on the margin of society. A young woman, a news reporter in Taipei, sets out to do a report on the homeless. She meets Ah Ming, an old man who lives on the streets. He says, time and time again: “I've bundled it up, it's time to leave, but I don't know where to go.” There's Chun, who lives in cars and robs banks, and Yong, who wore himself out as a laborer and now supports himself singing on the street, and Whippersnapper, a one-time essay contest winner who's working on a novel that will never be published. “The more you think about it, the less fair it seems,” says one. That's true about most things.

Director Singing Chen [interview posted separately] and her crew interviewed and spent time with Taipei's homeless before making the film. There's always the danger in such a case that characters are written according to the results of the research, as types. There's some of that here, but at its best the film is genuinely compelling and the characters take on lives of their own. Whippersnapper, the tormented novelist, is the most disturbing figure in the film. His anger is authentic and legitimate. He's the one who says: “If we all die, no one will think about it,” and later, in response to the television reporter's comment that he should “learn to forget” and “move forward”: “Why should I forget? Why should I move forward? Why keep going on for some phony reason?” The sight of him at the end, lying on the pavement, is tragic.

There's a good deal of talk about dreams and reality, some of it predictable, some of it insightful. For example, the film begins: “I don't know whose dream it is. Truth and fiction are indistinguishable. I wake up in somebody else's dream. I see myself, but I can't get away.” I'm not certain whether Chen has determined if these individuals became homeless because they existed on a different plane to begin with, incompatible with everyday bourgeois norms, or if they've entered into a dreamlike state in response to their desperate state. Perhaps there's some truth to both propositions.

In her notes, Chen writes: “The lives of vagabonds are rarely ever devoid of religious belief, but they don't go to Heaven, because the rich have reserved all the beds in Heaven. Drifters search for an exit from life, but this city doesn't seem to offer such a commodity. And even if it did it would be too expensive for them, leaving them to their dreams and reverie, searching for a better place in their dreams, or quietly wandering about this hopeless city...”

There is something to this film and to this director.