2000 Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 3

The difference between feeling and playing at feeling

David Walsh
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So many art and independent filmmakers seem to be reaching out of the screen and telling you why you should like their films and think well of them. You can feel them straining to be the toughest, the coldest, the most matter of fact—or, alternately, the simplest, the most understated. The sense of strain, at any rate, is all too common.

How do you judge the authenticity of a single image or an entire work? There is no "sincerometer" in art any more than there is in politics. You judge a work based on your understanding of the world and art. It's important to have an empirical body of knowledge with which to work—to have seen a good many films, in this case. But there are people who see hundreds and hundreds of films a year and, as far as I can see, learn nothing in the process. What you see also depends on what you are looking for. I'm continually surprised by how easily certain critics and audience members are fooled by "Potemkin villages," by works that have nothing to them.

But there are a great many people in "the arts" at the moment who have nothing or not much to them. They've never engaged in a struggle over a single artistic or social problem, never thought or felt deeply about anything. You see these unlined faces everywhere. They direct or write or act in or write about films that go an inch deep. I don't know that much can be done about this, except to point out the phenomenon and wait patiently (or impatiently) for historical and artistic processes to bring about a change. Still, it's painful sometimes to see essentially empty works, works that may entirely miss the point about the contemporary human situation, praised and their creators celebrated.

Other films have more to them. South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-Dong's *Peppermint Candy* tells its story in reverse. During a party in 1999 reuniting a group of old friends, a man in a business suit, Yongho, climbs up on a railway bridge and lets a train hit him. The next scene takes place three days earlier. Yongho buys a gun. "Which one to pick? Which one should I shoot?" he asks himself, going through the list of those, mostly in business, who have helped destroy him. A stranger appears. He's the husband of Yongho's first love, Sunim, now gravely ill. He goes to see her in the hospital. "It's too late."

Yongho's history now rewinds five years, to 1994. He's on his car phone a great deal. It seems he's hired a detective to spy on his wife, who's having an affair. We learn he's an ex-policeman, now in business. Another seven years in reverse: 1987. Yongho, the policeman, tortures a young man suspected of being involved with student protests. After the latter's confession, Yongho asks him: "Do you really think life is beautiful?" At night, in the rain, he goes in search of his first love, finding a prostitute instead.

In 1984 Yongho is a rookie cop. The other cops learn that he once worked in a factory. "In the union?" they ask. "You want to try this one?" He tortures his first prisoner, a worker. His victim defecates on Yongho's hands. Then he goes to have lunch with Sunim, his girlfriend at the time. She praises his sensitive hands. He's sickened by himself, by everything. He crudely breaks up with her.

Four years earlier Yongho, a scared kid, is in the army. Sunim comes to visit him. The soldiers are treated like dogs. Mindless discipline and brutality. Each pledges to give "my life to the nation." Major protests have broken out. The soldiers, including Yongho, are called on to put down the demonstrations. By accident, Yongho shoots and kills a girl student, someone not involved in the protest. A year earlier, at the picnic in 1979 whose twentieth anniversary is being celebrated in the film's opening scene, Yongho and Sunim talk and flirt. She works in a candy factory. He has dreams. "I hope your dream is a good one." He wanders off, a train roars by.

The film is quite powerful. The transformation of a human being into a monster, thanks to the social order and its requirements. A film that takes history and *an historical approach* seriously. In some ways it is a little too neatly done, everything in Yongho's psyche and subsequent conduct thoroughly explained and accounted for. But, all in all, this is a devastating work. In *Green Fish* (1997) ["Dirt in the soul" 19 May 1998 http://www.wsws.org/arts/1998/may1998/fish-m19.shtml] and this, Lee has created two major works.

Another South Korean film, *Memento Mori* (Min Kyu-Dong, Kim Tae-Yong)—a lesbian schoolgirl ghost story—seemed to have less going for it. A showy and pretty work. One has the sneaking suspicion that titillation was a consideration. *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (Bong Joon-Ho) is also South Korean, a film about a lazy and selfish university lecturer, with his eye on a professorship. He needs the bribe money that will buy him the position. The film's social perceptions are relatively acute, although it seems to spend too much time on secondary matters. *Happy Funeral Director* (Chang Moon-Il) is South Korean too, a film about running a funeral parlor in a town where hardly anyone dies. There are amusing moments and a satirical edge: "You need skills to make money with dead bodies." But the film seems slight.

From Singapore, *Eating Air* (Kelvin Tong Weng-Kian, Jasmine Ng Kin-Kia), a film about young people playing video games and riding around on motorbikes, tries too hard. The results are clever and flashy. *Fa Talai Jone* (Wisit Sasantieng), from Thailand, is a tour de force, a recreation of Thai stage and screen melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s. Not having seen any of the originals, I'm in no position to judge the accuracy of the director's effort. You would think that it was the emotional power of the melodramas that appealed to him; none of that has been reproduced. The film leaves you pretty cold. This seems a misguided project to me.

Dead or Alive, directed by Takashi Miike, and *A Chance to Die*, by Chen Yiwen, are Japanese and Taiwanese gangster movies, respectively. They're watchable, occasionally exciting, but I don't think too much

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should be made of them. The day when a B picture director could make, with considerable art and feeling, some unassuming crime/action film in the margins of the film industry has long since passed. These are self-consciously made films, passing themselves off as throwaways. I don't entirely buy it.

Another Japanese film, *Not Forgotten* (Makoto Shinozaki), is also self-conscious, self-consciously sensitive. It concerns a group of war veterans, their spouses and relatives. Is this a response to *Saving Private Ryan*? Like its American counterpart, the film leaves out of account the character of Japanese participation in World War II, choosing simply to extol the stoic virtues of the ex-soldiers. The actors, Japanese film veterans, all perform admirably, but I found the film rather uninspiring and not as moving as it ought to have been. Another Japanese director, Junko Wada, is an "avant-garde filmmaker." These days, that's enough to put one on one's guard. Sure enough, her *Body Drop Asphalt*, about a romance novelist whose heroine comes to life, is principally irritating, with its computer graphics and pop art-like imagery.

Love/Juice (Shindo Kaze) and *Looking for Angel* (Akihiro Suzuki) provide a revealing contrast. Both are Japanese films, both have "gay themes," both are relatively low-key.

In *Love/Juice* Kyoko and Chinatsu are roommates; the latter is a lesbian. Kyoko develops a crush on a boy who works in a fish store and doesn't give her the time of day. The two become cocktail waitresses, in Playboy bunny-type outfits. They talk a lot about "the head and the body." Much is made of bodily fluids and functions. "When I'm dead, I wish to be eaten," says one of the two. Kyoko rejects Chinatsu, who says, "Kill me!" and cuts her wrists with a knife. There are some dramatics. In the end, they agree to separate. Chinatsu says, "I wish we'd melt into one person. Why were we born separately?"

The film is too precious. The two women are both attractive, they pout nicely. They look good in bed together. The harshness of some of the dialogue is put on, artificial. Things are done for effect. It doesn't feel genuine. There's no element of protest. The emphasis is not on the truth of their relationship, but on capturing its externals. The problems are "universal" in a complacent sort of way. The boy in the fish store, the club owner are easy caricatures. The filmmaker (the granddaughter of filmmaker Kaneto Shindo) is only playing at treating serious matters. *Love/Juice* will no doubt make a splash.

Looking for Angel, at only 61 minutes, is a different type of film. Shinpei is a boy living alone in Tokyo. A girl he knows, Reiko, invites him to a party. While he waits for her, he has sex in a public toilet with a strange man. The party, it turns out, is a kind of wake for another young guy, Takachi, who has been murdered. In flashbacks, we learn something about Takachi. He was in love with Sorao, a boy that Reiko had taken in. Eventually, Sorao goes back to his family. "He'll never come back," Reiko tells Takachi, much to the latter's sorrow.

Later, Reiko and Shinpei take a trip to visit Takachi, who's now back with his family in Kochi, a city on the southern island of Shikoku. This is a beautiful sequence, which captures that feeling of a summer holiday/idyll perfectly. At night, at Takachi's parents' house, the three are sleeping in the same room together, Reiko between the two guys. "How's Kochi?" Takachi is asked. "It's really wonderful here," he replies. "All the boys look like angels. They smile like sunshine." "Do your mom and dad know you're gay?" "I don't know. But they don't say anything. My dad is gay, I'm sure of it. He got married late. But he never did it with a guy. Maybe he'll never do it."

Eventually, Takachi returns to Tokyo, as he must. Things don't go right for him. Meanwhile, Reiko and Shinpei, who both care for Takachi, try to make it together. There's a scene of them kissing and caressing one another. It seems a little difficult. Is Takachi between them? In the final scene, we see only Takachi's face, beaten up, as he talks to someone off-screen. It's a remarkable sequence: "The homophobes got me—look! I'm all black and blue. They took all my stuff too. I lost everything I cared for. It's always been like that. Whatever I care for, I always lose. Whatever I want, I'll never get. Whoever I love, I can never have. Wherever I want to be, I can never stay. It's always been like that for me. I don't want to go anywhere anymore. There's nowhere to go, anyway." He pleads for tenderness. "I always want people to be gentle." The other individual is apparently his murderer.

The film is poetic, informal, moving. The concentration here is on life and truth, not on "cinema" and not on leaving the spectator with a favorable impression of the director. Despite the somewhat exotic influences Akihiro Suzuki referred to in the interview that follows (Jack Smith, Jonas Mekas, "gay porn"), the film proceeds quite patiently and almost classically. It is generous, despite its brief length. Suzuki cares about people, and the way they live disturbs him. The difference between *Looking for Angel* and *Love/Juice* is the difference between feeling and playing at feeling.

Just before he left Vancouver to return to Tokyo, I had the opportunity to speak to Akihiro Suzuki, with the help of a translator.

David Walsh: First of all I liked the film very much—I thought it was one of the best films here. Tell about your history, your life.

Akihiro Suzuki: I started by making super 8 films, for myself. Then I worked as an assistant in television, and a project coordinator for a film festival. Many part-time jobs. Then I worked for a distribution company. I worked for many film festivals doing subtitles. The first Gay Film Festival took place in 1992. Next year I was one of the directors of the festival. Then I did distribution for foreign films in Japan, mainly gay films. I produced films for a Japanese independent filmmaker. I produced his first feature film. And I co-produced some films with Germany and Canada. Last year I directed this film.

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

AS: I used to produce other independent directors' films, but I always felt that it was their movie, not mine. So I decided to make my own film.

DW: But why this particular film?

AS: It's a gay film, there's the sexuality. My experience with art films come through porn films. Japanese porn films are sexual, but not hard core. There is always a story, very artistic. My first experience with art films came through porn films, so I always think about sexuality in a movie.

DW: Obviously the sexuality is important, but the biggest thing that I got from the film was the compassion and sympathy for the people. Here it was not principally the question of gay or not gay—it was the depth of feeling.

AS: It's not a simple thing for me. I don't any care about any particular kind of sexuality, but people, including me, want honesty regarding sexuality. People want to live honestly, but it's very difficult because of the pressure from society.

DW: I agree that it's a specific problem, but it's also a general problem.

AS: I've already screened this film in Tokyo. Many women have a good reaction to the film because women feel the difficulties of living, it's a daily feeling. We have very different cultures. In Japan, it's difficult for women to have freedom and sexual freedom as well. I think women like this film more than straight men.

DW: I understand, but I think there is another element too. I'm not dismissing what you're saying, but I think the film also advances a general feeling of freedom, a general desire for freedom. And a general feeling that society is not happy, very wrong and very oppressive on everybody.

AS: I agree.

DW: That's why I respond. Because, frankly, I see many Japanese films that are very cool, very clever, cold. Not just Japan, but everywhere—in France and Europe too. Films that say: "Look how sensitive I am, how clever I am, how cool I am." But no real feeling. Do you know what I mean? What do you think about that problem? How do you see the film

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situation today, the general situation in cinema?

AS: I agree with you. The recent movies have no freedom.

DW: Freedom of subject, of form?

AS: Everything. The form, the style, the budget—everything is not so free.

DW: Which filmmakers do you admire?

AS: In Japan, many porn film directors. Western filmmakers—Jonas Mekas, Jack Smith. Many, many underground directors who are friends of mine. Chantal Akerman, Jean Eustache and John Cassavettes, and many others like that. [R.W.] Fassbinder too.

DW: I saw two films. I saw yours just after I saw another. The first film, which was also Japanese, was a nice film, sensitive film. But again, it was telling me: "Look how sensitive I am." Do you know what I'm saying?

AS: Yes.

DW: That's what I see in many films today: they are telling you about themselves, they're reaching out. Your film expressed compassion, it expressed sympathy. Do you see that problem in other people's films?

AS: I am trying not to make a perfect movie. I am trying to make a more natural one. Like a movie that is developing by itself, not one that I'm making.

DW: Not imposing something from the top?

AS: I like to see these actors in real life. No separation between life and film. There was no scenario for this movie. I wanted to have the feelings emerge from the inside. I let the actors play.

DW: Did you communicate something to them before?

AS: I had discussions with all of them, but I did not tell them what to do: "You don't need to be that character." I wanted them to be actors and also to be themselves.

DW: But that's not so easy. That requires artistry.

AS: Many of the actors were confused, because actors want to act. They didn't know what they were doing.

DW: The last speech—what does that mean to you?

AS: The last scene is very important. But it's connected to the scene before, between Reiko and Shinpei. They want to have sex. They seem to be very close, but inside they are more distant.

DW: A distance between the two or the three of them?

AS: Everybody. Reiko and Shinpei are very sad, so they help each other. Maybe they have sex, but there is a distance between them. Because they're thinking about Takachi, they love Takachi. They have a nice time, but they can't do anything for him. There's a connection between these things.

DW: His last words speak for many people. They are the situation for many, many people.

AS: Yes.

DW: That's why we respond. There is the specific situation, the specific relations. But there's also a universal problem. Universal pain, suffering. Is that your hope? Is that your wish to communicate that?

AS: It seems a little sad, but it's a fact for all people living in society.

DW: What is the situation of young people in Japan?

AS: Empty. Young people have a big emptiness inside. They don't know what they want, how to live. This is the refrain in my movie. All the questions. All the time they are asking questions.

DW: It recurs—it comes again and again.

AS: You see it all the time—what can I do?

DW: It's not only Japan, young people everywhere feel the same emptiness. The US, Canada—what do we do?

AS: I don't think it's good simply to say that emptiness is bad. The most important thing is that people live as they like.

DW: I agree. But society says something different.

AS: Yes

DW: So do we change society?

AS: Not change society, but ignore its pressure. And if one's friends say: "You are OK the way you are—it's a little change."

DW: What qualities do you admire in other people's films and art in general? What qualities do you admire or look for?

AS: Everyday life. Naked things.

DW: Like raw?

AS: Naked life.

DW: What are you doing next?

AS: I have many ideas, but my big project is six-part drama on a family without a father. There's a mother, two sons and a daughter. It's also about sexuality. They describe their own sexuality outside of the house.

DW: Is it about teenagers?

AS: Second brother and sister are in high school. The other brother is 20 years old. The older brother does not want to leave the house. Most of the time, he lives in his own room, uses the Internet and plays TV games. This is very common among young people. They spend all their time in their rooms. Sometimes he goes to the store and buys cigarettes and then goes back to his room. In the daytime, most of them are asleep and in the middle of the night, they go to the kitchen and eat something. Are there many people like this in the United States?

DW: Yes, for two reasons. One for economic reasons and also because of isolation, many people feel very separate and alienated. In Vancouver, drugs—heroin especially—are a big problem too.

AS: In Japan, it's also a problem for young people.

"It is a little sentimental, but it is important to live."

Following the Vancouver festival, I asked Akihiro Suzuki in an e-mail if he could explain further what he meant by the connection between the second-to-last scene (between Reiko and Shinpei) and the final one (Takachi's monologue). This is how he replied. I edited his English slightly; I hope I understood him correctly:

To my mind, the last scene is very ironic and ambivalent. The man who is off-screen and to whom Takachi is speaking is myself. This has a double meaning. Because I play the man who had sex in the public toilet with Shinpei at the beginning of the film, and the same man kills Takachi. It means the man who kills Takachi is still not in jail. And the man is a homosexual, but he is not a good person. A gay killing another gay person is not politically correct. Takachi hopes to find a man who will show him tenderness, but this selfish gay man kills him. I think that sexuality alone does not make a good relationship.

On the other hand, the connection of the sex scene between Shinpei and Reiko and the last scene: no one is able to save another person, even if he or she thinks about that person. People need to help themselves. It is very difficult to live well, but I think we must believe it is possible. I think that in my film one scene has a number of meanings, but the connections of the scenes makes every situation even more complicated. But at the same time I hope to show through these connections that memory and remembering are tender things. It is a little sentimental, but it is important to live. Some one will recognize what you are.

Akihiro Suzuki

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