Buenos Aires 3rd International Festival of Independent Cinema-Part 2

Intuition and consciousness in filmmaking

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This is the second in a series of articles on the third annual independent film festival held in Buenos Aires, Argentina from April 19 to April 29.

In both fiction and nonfiction cinema there has been a general and fierce denigration of knowledge and conscious thought. This has had serious and negative consequences. An artist works with his intuition, but not simply that. However the filmmaker organizes his imagery, he must have formed certain conscious conceptions in his head before beginning to work. Serious art does not result from the transference of immediate sense perceptions directly on to paper or canvas or film. In any event, such a process is not possible. Every artist has a conception of the world and his place in it, whether that is fully worked out and made conscious or not. Much of what we are seeing today is merely the product of uncriticized, unconsidered *prevailing* consciousness.

In any event, an artist's intuition is also formed by historical and social conditions. The surrealists, of course, insisted that art be produced by the undiluted pouring forth of the unconscious. Today this must seem naïve, to say the least. But, in any event, the "intuition" of the artist in Paris, Berlin, Moscow and elsewhere in the 1920s, a decade pregnant with the possibility of social revolution, was considerably different from that possessed by the majority of contemporary filmmakers and artists.

Hostility to patriotism, militarism, religion and existing society as a whole was "natural" to many artists of the 1920s. Is this the case today? Hardly. Our contemporary artists' consciousness and unconsciousness have been formed under extremely unfavorable and reactionary conditions: the last 20 years in which every strand of progressive social thought has come under attack. That reality will have to be *consciously* grasped by a significant layer of artists, and the nostrums of the past period (the cult of the market, the worship of greed, the criminalization of the poor, etc.) *consciously* rejected, before any substantial change in the cultural atmosphere will take place.

In this context, it is worth taking note of Canadian Peter Wintonick's *Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment*. The film traces out, fairly superficially, the history of the documentary style known as *cinéma vérité* from the 1950s to the present day. The significant element of the film comes in the comments of certain of the documentary filmmakers. Karel Reisz, from Britain's "Free Cinema" movement (and later a feature director) explains that the strength of the films produced by this trend was that there were "no conclusions, no themes." Richard Leacock, the renowned American documentarian, echoes Reisz, suggesting that the new documentary style provided no analysis, it was "no virtuous social act," but merely aimed at giving a sense of "what it's like to be there."

These comments make an easy and legitimate target, particularly from our current vantage point. It should be borne in mind that the "free documentarians" were presumably reacting against various heavy-handed approaches to nonfiction work (often complete with moralizing voice-overs), whether of the official state-run film board or Stalinist varieties. In the mid-1950s a rebellion in the direction of more flexible and spontaneous methods, which was accompanied by newer, more lightweight equipment, was probably in order. (The French New Wave itself is obviously associated with this process.) However, that rebellion became something else when, in the name of rejecting didactic or "Socialist Realist" art, it merged with the growing trend toward indifference to social problems and a generally anti-theoretical approach.

In any event, Reisz, Leacock, Frederick Wiseman and others had certain preconceptions, whether they liked to admit it or not, of a generally progressive character. Today's documentarians have neither the social intuition and instincts of those pioneering *cinéma vérité* figures, nor the structural and formal virtues of the "classical" documentary filmmakers of an earlier day. Contemporary nonfiction works, by and large, are accumulations of relatively meaningless images, with the filmmaker having abdicated his or her responsibility to draw any conclusions or enlighten the viewer in any serious manner.

Since most filmmakers and critics lack a firm objective grasp of social life and art, and therefore have little by which to guide themselves, a considerable amount of film work (and writing about films) is reduced to guesswork, figuring out, perhaps by looking over others' shoulders, what might be "cutting edge" and so forth. This helps explain why so many continue to confuse *playing at* feeling and thinking with *genuine* feeling and thinking, and why so many films seem to have been made from recipe books ("If I borrow the long take and the unmoving camera from this one, and the serious tone from that one, and the *film noir* matter-of-factness about sex and violence from so-and-so...")

Some filmmakers make eclecticism (or perhaps taking shots in the dark) into a principle.

French director François Ozon made *Criminal Lovers* (1999), about two youthful killers on the run, and *Water Drops on Burning Rocks* (2000), based on a R.W. Fassbinder play about quarreling gay lovers, before *Under the Sand* (also 2000); the last two films were screened in Buenos Aires. *Criminal Lovers* and *Water Drops*, each in its own unpleasant way, make humanity out to be rather nasty and vile. The director seemed to be straining for effect. One had the feeling that he was trying to corner the misanthropic market, for which he has a good deal of competition.

Under the Sand, on the other hand, is set in a respectable professional milieu. A middle-aged, middle class woman (Charlotte Rampling) refuses to accept the death of her somewhat older husband by drowning and keeps him alive in her imagination—a defense against loss and against approaching death? Again, however, the film has the air of something simply made for effect, to enhance the reputation of the director. We are meant to be awed by his radical change of course. In fact, the same extreme subjectivism is at work in each of the films, opening the door in the most recent for flirtations with the supernatural.

Signs and Wonders, directed by American Jonathan Nossiter, is a

particularly silly example of the same sort of subjectivism and toying with the preternatural. It concerns the break-up of a marriage (Stellan Skarsgard and again the talented, but unfortunate Rampling) of a Swedish-born “voluntary American” businessman and his British wife. After she is dumped, the wife takes up with a Greek leftist. The confident would-be American husband begins to lose it. Things turn violent and spooky. Somehow or other the husband's rationalism—identified with NATO, transnational corporations, shopping malls and commodity trading—proves his undoing. Everyone has the right to create an empty-headed and preposterous work, but *Signs and Wonders* becomes downright unpleasant when it proceeds to make a young girl (the couple's daughter) into a mastermind of evil.

One senses with so many filmmakers that they feel no particular obligation to get things right. They say whatever foolish thing is on the top of their head.

Other tendencies are also thankfully at work in filmmaking. *Peppermint Candy* by South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-Dong is a highly unusual work. The film tells its story, the transformation of a human being into a monster, in reverse. In 1999 a man in a business suit, Yongho, climbs up on a railroad trestle and allows a train to hit him. The film then proceeds to backtrack, showing that the businessman was formerly a policeman and a torturer of political prisoners, and that the policeman was originally a frightened kid, a member of the armed forces involved in the Kwangju massacre of May 1980 (when the army opened fire at point-blank range at student and worker protesters, killing hundreds). [See the review: 2000 Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 3: *The difference between feeling and playing at feeling*]

The film is not flawless. As I suggested in the original review: “In some ways it is a little too neatly done, everything in Yongho's psyche and subsequent conduct thoroughly explained and accounted for.” Nonetheless, *Peppermint Candy* is in many ways a devastating work, the more remarkable the more one thinks about it.

Lee Chang-Dong believes in the significance of history and social life. A discussion with him is a breath of fresh air. Although in his case too a lack of perspective on the crisis of the workers movement leads him to draw some rather pessimistic conclusions. This is often the case today with sensitive artists (as we shall also see in the third part of this series), who see the brutality of the present system without having a confidence that much can be done to change the situation.

We spoke in Buenos Aires.

David Walsh: What was the origin of the idea for the film?

Lee Chang-Dong: It's a bit difficult to say, but one morning I was shaving and I came up with the idea. I looked in the mirror, I saw myself and I realized that my face had changed a great deal; I didn't feel like it was me.

I thought about the times that had changed me and I wanted to go back, travel through the past to find out what had done this. This is not possible in reality. In a film it is possible.

DW: Why the specific figure of a policeman?

LC: The main character in the film is not an ordinary Korean, he is not typical, but what I wanted to do was to embody the changes in Korean society through 20 years that I experienced myself and other Koreans of my generation also experienced. The character is a symbol of the time, of the entire social change in Korea.

He's not a special case. He goes through experiences that are not ordinary, but at the same time, this also expresses the common feeling and experiences of Korean people who went through those times.

DW: If that is so, it is a pretty dark picture. Not everyone was a secret policeman. There were also victims. If that character *embodies* the society, it is a fairly harsh indictment.

LC: I thought there were two ways to express those social changes. Through the eyes of those who harmed other people, or the victims. It interested me more to express this through those who harmed others, in this case, the policeman. He's harming other people, but he is actually a victim, he is harming himself.

DW: Presumably, by implication, the society was harming itself.

LC: Yes.

Of course, society harmed him, corrupted him to become what he became, but, on the other hand, the fact that he ended up being that person was also his own responsibility.

In the beginning he was a soldier in the army [during the Kwangju massacre] and he happened to kill an innocent girl by mistake and that wasn't his fault. He wasn't conscious of what he was doing. There were circumstances that forced him to do it, he had no power to resist it. But after that, he had a choice.

DW: Why was he vulnerable to becoming that?

LC: That is the question I intended to ask the audience.

He could have gone the other way, he could have washed the blood of that girl off his hands and become a better person and tried to make up for his error.

If you consider the bigger historical picture, as the main character chose the route he did, the Korean people did the same after the Kwangju massacre in 1980. The Korean people accepted the government that carried it out. Or, I should say, these same forces, who carried out the massacre, came to power after that. The people, by not resisting it, accepted the new government.

This applies to your first question. When the Kwangju massacre happened, I was in my senior year of university. I was in another city, which is quite far from Kwangju. Watching this terrible injustice taking place, this military group taking power, I was seized by despair. That is one of the reasons I wanted to make a film about it.

To further define the despair I felt, I was in my twenties at the time; I was quite innocent. My basic belief about society turned out to be false. In my country this sort of injustice occurred and life went on as though nothing had happened. People accepted these military types as their government. It shattered my entire belief system about society, about the relations between people, and life itself. This despair was so profound I knew it was going to affect the rest of my life.

I realized that what I felt was not just my personal sentiment, that many people felt the same way. This collective psychological status of the Korean people at that time, this despair, has poured itself into the 20 years since then and this society will never be the same. This feeling is embedded in the time, it makes up what we are now.

DW: I understand and sympathize with the deep feelings, but there is also a danger in blaming the people for “accepting” the situation. One could say, for that matter, that you “accepted” it too. What political choice, what alternatives did the South Korean people have at the time? You would have to consider the history of Korea and the general political situation in 1980. Were they supposed to join the North? People were confused politically. They were told that socialism or communism was represented by North Korea or Maoist China, and those were repugnant regimes—what was the working class supposed to do? I'm sure that people in 1980 did not want the military, they were not happy, but what alternatives were open to them?

LC: There is one problem that has always bothered me writing novels or making films. How does one work to change society and overcome its problems?

I didn't direct this film toward the people of my generation who wrongly accepted this government, I'm not talking to them, I'm directing questions toward young people in the audience. The main character goes back in time until he's 20 and we see the tragedy. I wanted to appeal to the audience members who are also that age and didn't experience this tragedy.

As I said at the beginning I wanted to make a film about this period of time. If you look at it objectively, only the present exists. The past is gone, the future doesn't yet exist. But this present is built up out of the past and this present will be the basis of the future.

DW: The film is unusual in that regard. It deals with history and the consequences of the past. So many films proceed as though nothing happened before 1990. How can you explain the present without explaining its roots in the past?

LC: In the same sense, you cannot even explore the purely personal side of an individual unless you show the environment, the social situation that has built up his character. It appears to be a contradiction, but it is true that unless you explore what is around him, you cannot really get to what's inside.

DW: Thank you for this idea! But why is it so rare today in films?

LC: I cannot answer about the state of contemporary films. The question I was asked by producers, investors and distributors in Korea when I was planning the film was: would people in their 20s, the main film audience in Korea, identify with what I was talking about, the 1970s and 80s? Was this a story only for my generation?

My answer was that I was making a film for young people, they would identify with it, but, to tell you the truth, I wasn't sure myself. It was difficult to obtain distribution for the film. But once we did the box office was remarkable. In 2000 it was the third most successful film at the box office in Korea. Half a million people saw it. That's not the usual audience for an art film, or a film about social issues. There were many people who saw it twice. People in their twenties and teenagers.

As a filmmaker I want to communicate with audiences, I want to get my ideas to them. At the same time I have doubts, I wonder if the message will get through. The response to this film has made me believe such things are possible. This film confirmed my belief in the ability to communicate with audiences. I might not be so lucky the next time, but at least through this experience I will always have this belief and it gives me courage to work harder.

DW: I want to return to the problems you didn't want to discuss, the problems of contemporary cinema. Why are there so few films that discuss what everyone knows are the enormous problems, of history, injustice, poverty?

LC: Because of the commercial aspect of the film industry. One purpose of making a film is to make money. It costs too much to make it as a hobby. It's easy to make a film according to what we think the audience wants. As the producers and distributors in Korea thought, we should make a film about what people are already interested in. I rejected that. I believed that people's taste can be created. As *Peppermint Candy* overcame the limits, contemporary filmmakers need to have the courage to go beyond that limit to create new interests for the audience, instead of feeding them what they want. The filmmaker has to be an agitator, has to make the audience see a bigger picture.

At the same time I understand it is not easy to do this. When I was writing novels, before becoming a filmmaker, I wasn't writing bestsellers. And I was satisfied with that, because writing a book doesn't cost that much money. But making a film is different. The people with power are those with money because it costs too much. I felt enormous pressure and it caused a great inner conflict because I had to make a film which would be seen by many people. It is really, really hard, but for that very reason it is challenging for me and it's worth doing because it is a hard job.

DW: Money is not the only problem. There are independent filmmakers in the US at least who are not making films for a lot of money, who don't have people standing over them and they still make bad films. There's a problem in thinking, in consciousness, not just money.

LC: The problem you mention is not simply a problem in films, it exists in many fields. Literature and contemporary culture in general have the same problem. So what this phenomenon proves is that people have a confused or unclear picture about the new millennium and the future.

DW: At some point we have to consider: what is the source of that confusion? What are the problems of the twentieth century that have caused this confusion?

LC: I ask myself that too.

DW: We can discuss it further, but not today.