

Buenos Aires 3rd International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 1

Filmmaking needs a new perspective

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16 May 2001

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

Buenos Aires is a remarkable city, but the recent film festival in the Argentine capital revealed the same general problems one encounters in Toronto, Berlin, San Francisco, London, Singapore and everywhere else. The very seriousness of the selection of films in Buenos Aires served to underscore the reality that cinema on an international scale has reached something of an impasse. This does not mean that no film artist is doing serious and honest work (for example, Jia Zhang-ke's *Platform* from China, Lee Chang-Dong's *Peppermint Candy* from South Korea, Fruit Chan's *Durian Durian* from Hong Kong and Jafar Panahi's *The Circle* from Iran), but it must be said that even the latter suffer from definite limitations that are perhaps *most* revealing about the current difficulties.

One can only arrive at the source of the present impasse, and perhaps indicate a way out, by considering a number of related social and historical issues.

There are those who suggest, somewhat superficially, that the current stagnation in cinema is principally the product of the domination of commercial filmmaking by large conglomerates with their specific social and ideological agendas. No doubt the age of the \$150 million budget is not conducive to genuine experimentation and iconoclasm. It is too easy, however, to make Hollywood into a straw man.

If the American “independent” and European and Japanese art cinemas were producing a stream of challenging and oppositional works, if one truly felt that these cinemas were at war with the dead hand of commercial filmmaking, that would be one thing. But that is by no means the case. If anything, the products of the so-called independent cinema in the US, for instance, are weaker than those turned out by the major studios. At least the latter demonstrate some technical and (occasionally) storytelling abilities. In fact, a great many individuals have had the resources and means in recent years to make films independent of the studios; however, they have had precious little to say.

There is nothing more painful than watching the amateurish effort of a 30-year-old middle class North American, who has never had a serious thought or participated in a serious struggle. The situation is not much more promising in Europe. A number of French directors have taken self-absorption to new heights (Assayas, Ozon, Carax, Jacquot, Kahn, etc.). Others, having nothing whatsoever to say, film sex scenes (*Romance*, *Baise-moi*, *Intimacy* and so forth). The latter work is apparently known as the “cinema of the body.” The Italian and German cinemas are largely silent and the Spanish and Scandinavian (*Dogma* group, Icelandic, Finnish) are over-praised.

The former Soviet and eastern European filmmakers continue to be disoriented and confused (or merely gloomy) at best. The Japanese, in the face of a worsening economy and growing political instability, go on making mannered and self-conscious or merely trivial films in a number

of genres, which, in my view, will not endure. Argentine cinema (which we will discuss separately), which was naturally on display in Buenos Aires, demonstrates the same general tendencies as its international counterparts.

It does not even appear before the consciousness of most of those involved in the film industry that there is a large and growing gap between the subject matter of their works—principally the not very intriguing dilemmas of middle-class and upper-middle-class layers—and the extraordinary events of the last decade or the convulsive reality facing much of the world's population.

Filmmakers have largely ignored many of the critical events of our time—for example, the collapse of the Soviet Union, war in the Persian Gulf, the historical roots of the Balkan conflict (and not simply impressionistic accounts of the barbarism), the social catastrophe in Africa, Latin America and much of Asia, the decline of the traditional labor movements, the explosive growth of social inequality, the consequences of a globally-integrated economy—and shown remarkably little interest in the human problems associated with them.

No artist escapes his or her era in any meaningful sense. The “spirit” of an epoch, as Trotsky suggested, manifests itself in everyone, in those who consciously seek to grasp and embody its realities and those who struggle against or seek to evade them. That the dominant trend in filmmaking makes no effort in the direction of a probing examination of social life tells us a good deal about our day and about sections of the population that have benefited, for example, from the boom in the entertainment industry and the stock market in recent years.

A considerable portion of the intelligentsia has swung to the right. There are increasing numbers of intellectuals and artists “thinking the unthinkable,” accommodating or preparing to accommodate themselves to the present system. The dampening of the spirit of opposition within certain layers has been a protracted process, extended over several decades. It is now bearing malignant fruit.

A truly reprehensible example is Werner Schroeter's *The Queen*. Schroeter, a veteran of the German counterculture, although never a political radical, has made a documentary on the life and work of German actress Marianne Hoppe. Hoppe stayed in Germany under the Nazis and carried on with her career, apparently making nationalist and pro-war films, among others. She barely apologizes for her behavior. “One was not brave ... I reproach myself,” is the limit of her explanation. She says: “I stayed, but at least I wasn't nice to them [the Nazis].”

Throughout the film, Hoppe and others keep referring to “dear Gustaf,” and a shot of an old theater program reveals this to be none other than Gustaf Gründgens, the inspiration for Klaus Mann's 1936 novel *Mephisto* (and Istvan Szabo's 1981 film). Gründgens, once a member of the Communist Party, had a triumphant career in Nazi Germany under the auspices of Field Marshal Herman Göring. He has come to epitomize the

artist or intellectual who, to further his career, collaborated with fascism. Hoppe “wasn’t nice” to the Nazis, she was only nice to those *who were* nice to the Nazis. I doubt that Schroeter’s thoroughly disgraceful work will provoke much outrage. Outrage and protest are out of fashion. “Live and let live, and let’s get on with our careers,” seems to be the motto of the day.

This must have a special significance in Argentina, where the military dictatorship murdered some 30,000 people between 1976 and 1983. Would a film that whitewashed an actor who selfishly pursued his or her career in Buenos Aires while thousands were being abducted and tortured arouse hostility? One would like to think so.

Anne-Marie Miéville’s *Après la réconciliation* (*After the Reconciliation*), while not reprehensible like Schroeter’s work, is significant in its own right. Miéville has been working with French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, to whom she is married, since the mid-1970s. The film is a long-winded and pretentious four-handed conversation, at the center of which is a married couple, played by Miéville and Godard.

It is a film filled with epigrammatic gems like these: “Don’t trust the storyteller, trust the story,” “Speaking about talking can only be an interview,” “It’s best to stop when you know what will happen next” and so on. It’s a miserable effort, pompous and boring. The film may have personal reconciliation as its subject matter, but the title is too suggestive to ignore. At one point, somebody says, “We anticipated something...” Indeed.

Much of this generation has reconciled itself to the status quo, and not only recently. As I understand it, Godard—who made some extraordinary films in the 1960s, but has done little of consistent value since—(and many others) signed a contract with God or the Devil on the following terms: they would be “extreme leftists” for five years or so, and then, if things did not work out, they would be allowed to pout and feel sorry for themselves for the rest of their lives and explain how everyone and everything (history, the working class) had let them down. Not much can be done with such people!

Veteran Japanese filmmaker Nagisa Oshima (*In The Realm of the Senses*, 1976) has made a dubious work as well. *Taboo*, a story of homoeroticism and repression, treats the *samurai* universe with great attentiveness. I will be told, no doubt, that the film represents a criticism. When an artist displays such an obsessive and reverent attitude toward a fascistic-militaristic milieu, I think one has the right to be skeptical.

I by no means wish to leave the impression that there are no socially critical or oppositional tendencies among film writers and directors. I referred above to a number of valuable works, and there were others (*La fe del volcán* from Argentina, perhaps *The State I’m In* from Germany, surprisingly *Il Prezzo* from Italy).

Because it sets itself the most ambitious goals and extends itself the most, however, this serious work most graphically illustrates some of the current problems.

The best filmmakers are capable of recreating with astonishing accuracy particular environments, historical moments and social ills. One encounters individual moments of breathtaking beauty and extraordinary truth. When it comes to the larger historical picture, however, and this is the level at which the most critical work needs to be done, even the finest contemporary filmmakers are at sea. And this markedly impairs their efforts.

Platform, for example, deals with the transformation of China in the 1980s. At the beginning, Maoist rhetoric and a more or less equally shared poverty predominate. By the end, the process of privatization and the creation of a new layer of small and not so small entrepreneurs are well under way. The director shows some of the consequences of this process in the lives of his four major characters, two men and two women.

The film contains extraordinary sequences, particularly those dealing

with the impoverished coal miner cousin of one of the male protagonists. The scene in which the former presents himself at the mine, to be barked at by a brutal manager, who tells him that he must sign a document waiving management’s responsibility for any accidents and that his family will receive \$500 if he is killed, has the unmistakable ring of truth.

One must note, however, that *Platform* as a whole tends to remain a series of remarkable tableaux. The fact that the film has appeared in different versions of varying lengths points to a problem: Jia Zhang-ke, the youthful director, identifies many social problems and contradictions, but he has difficulty separating the essential from the inessential and providing the work with an overall coherence.

Durian Durian, from Fruit Chan, follows up on the director’s *Little Cheung*. The latter takes place in Hong Kong, most of the former on the mainland. *Durian Durian* (the name of a bitter-tasting fruit) principally chronicles the activities of a young woman, a graduate of a classical dance school in provincial China, who is obliged to prostitute herself in Hong Kong for three months to make some money. With this “primitively accumulated” capital she may open a small business, or if it is not enough, return to Hong Kong. The film is remarkable in many ways, but one gets the sense that Chan is repeating himself to a certain extent.

The sincerity of the filmmakers is not in question. But one must ask: do these filmmakers consider themselves to be “left-wing” and, if so, what would they mean by it? What is their view of the Chinese regime? Do they consider it “communist”? If so, from what point of view do they oppose it? If not, do they see any genuinely socialist alternative?

In the most immediate and concrete sense, how can the Chinese, Taiwanese or Hong Kong film directors who consider themselves opponents in one way or another of the status quo proceed much farther without a concrete understanding of the social nature of the Chinese state, without an examination of Maoist Stalinism and its pretensions, without an evaluation of the Chinese Revolution and its contradictions going back at least to 1925-27?

One could direct the same general type of questions toward the Iranian filmmakers, Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf and others, whose “humanist” approach has also reached a certain limit. Can they proceed without grasping how the great mass upsurge of 1979 brought to power a thoroughly reactionary regime? Why was there such a vacuum of progressive political forces at that time? What is the history of the Tudeh party and Stalinism in Iran? What was the impact of the Russian Revolution on Iranian intellectuals and artists?

And this does not apply simply to films that deal explicitly with historical or social themes. How can one draw an accurate psychological profile of anyone without confronting the past? Suppose an Argentine filmmaker, for example, sets out to make a work about a 55-year-old banker or lawyer. Was he or she a leftist 25 years ago, subsequently disillusioned or cowed by reaction? Or was he or she a collaborator of the military dictatorship or someone who kept silent?

History cannot be left out of account. Insofar as it is, we witness the result: superficial and insubstantial films. *Peppermint Candy*, from South Korea’s Lee Chang-Dong, although it perhaps carries out its work too neatly, is one of the few films that attempts to analyze personality from the point of view of history.

The crisis in perspective, the general historical disorientation, has various elements. The factor of material corruption enters into it in some cases. There are those who willfully remain blind to the plight of suffering humanity. These we will leave to their fate. It is the intellectual condition of the honest and compassionate artists that concerns us, although the pressures generated by class interest and caste narrowness can never be entirely discounted.

In the final analysis, even the most serious of contemporary artists lack a politically and scientifically informed confidence in the prospect of a struggle to change things for the better. This results chiefly from having

failed to work through the great experiences of the twentieth century, above all, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the rise of Stalinism and its crimes against the international working class, the socialist and internationalist opposition to Stalinism whose chief partisan and theoretician was Leon Trotsky.

Insofar as those critical experiences are not grasped *consciously*, the official version of events, based on the great falsehood that Stalinism was the genuine expression of Marxism—in fact, it was its opposite—holds sway, leading to the most pessimistic conclusions: i.e., that social revolution is at best a hopeless utopia and at worst a recipe for social disaster. It then becomes impossible to view the present social circumstances in the most critical and truthful manner, that is, from the point of view of their transitory character, as a set of conditions that must give way to higher social principles.

A genuine renaissance in cinema will not occur, in my view, until a strong revolutionary and pro-socialist tendency begins to manifest itself.

Speaking generally, the “union of art and the bourgeoisie” in the nineteenth century, which, as Trotsky observed, was “stable, even if not happy,” was possible as long as the ruling classes maintained regimes “both politically and morally ‘democratic.’” In the first third or so of the convulsive twentieth century, art found much of its sustenance in opposition to the bourgeois order and its artistic institutions.

The weakness of art in the past several decades stems, in the broadest sense, from the fact that Stalinism undermined the socialist workers movement and the culture of principled opposition which it fostered, while the decline of capitalist society made a serious rebirth of art and intellectual life dependent on a world view informed by anti-capitalist opposition and struggle. Out of these peculiar circumstances arose the unnatural notion of an “avant-garde” without advanced social views, a vanguard simply in “visual style,” as though the substance of the phenomena to be treated “visually,” and the artist's attitude toward those phenomena, were no longer of significance. This hollowed out notion of an avant-garde has helped produce an insular, cynical and socially indifferent atmosphere in many artistic circles.

The development of art, which, in turn, has such a bearing on the development of society, demands a conscious turn to questions of history and social life by an entire layer of artists and intellectuals. This is not an imposed or arbitrary demand, it is a most elemental and pressing fact of contemporary life.

Art is one of the means at our disposal for cognizing reality. There is no absolute barrier between art and science. Without an infusion of objective understanding as to how human society has reached its present state, and therefore a conception of what might be done to fundamentally change things for the better, art will not advance. Art is about essential human problems, including centrally the problem of freedom from oppression and exploitation, although art has its own means of approaching these questions. How absurd and self-defeating it would be to argue that artists should or can continue to grope blindly, trusting to accident or mere intuition.



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