

Buenos Aires 3rd International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 4

Some Argentine films

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The Buenos Aires film festival screened a considerable number of new Argentine films. We had the opportunity to see several of them.

Whether or not *Sólo por hoy* (*Only for Today*), directed and co-written by Ariel Rotter, is typical of Argentine films, it certainly is representative of a certain genre of international cinema. Its subject, a contemporary favorite, is the alienation or restlessness of the younger generation.

The film follows five young people who share an apartment in Buenos Aires. Toro wants to be an actor, although he lacks the glamorous looks. Equis, working in a restaurant, dreams of love and leaving Buenos Aires. Fer, the oldest, has the most difficult time finding a place for himself. Morón, shy and awkward, wants to be a filmmaker. The only woman, Ailí, born in China and living apart from her family, is an aspiring painter.

The film follows the five over the course of a number of days and through a number of mundane activities. Certain elements of the film ring true: particularly those involving part-time or temporary jobs and the humiliations and frustrations of work (looking for it, holding onto it). Although we notice something interesting here. The work scenes (house cleaning, house painting, cooking, message delivery, etc.) are essentially decorative or humorous. “Real” life is identified with personal relationships or professional opportunities. The character with neither, Fer, is portrayed (sympathetically) as something of a misfit and a loser.

The film depicts a society in which middle class young people have a difficult time fitting in. They do not see any genuine or enduring space for themselves, they survive on illusions and fragments of possibilities. They seem at loose ends, ill at ease, largely estranged from family and other institutions. Morón has a well-to-do father who subsidizes him, but without any warmth. Ailí seems to have chosen a path that leads her away from her immediate family.

Rotter (born in 1973) has made a number of short films. *Sólo por hoy*, his first feature, is done with a certain degree of intelligence and sensitivity. And it must be said that independent Argentine films tend to be more socially aware and less empty-headed than their US counterparts.

There is nothing strongly to be said against Rotter's film, but, unhappily, there is nothing strongly to be said *for* it either. It is a little innocuous. When we learn that the work was “entirely made by students of the Universidad del Cine in Buenos Aires,” we are not shocked. It probably reflects the average sentiment and outlook of film students or film school graduates today, and not only in Buenos Aires: they are individuals concerned about the lack of opportunity and the uncertainty they face in their professional endeavors, vaguely but not burningly socially conscious, knowledgeable about cinema history (or perhaps only contemporary trends in cinema), but indifferent to larger world-historical problems—in general, somewhat self-absorbed.

Is it unfair to suggest that such limitations must have artistic/dramatic consequences? Does it matter whether or not an artist has profound insight into society and history, or even cares about such things?

Sólo por hoy is at sea. ~~Every~~ source of the five characters' anxiety is largely a mystery to them and they do not know what to do about it. It seems most likely that they will either run away from their difficulties (and carry the pain and longing with them) or continue to fool themselves. So far Rotter has a point, if not a terribly original one. This is the state of many 25-year-olds at the moment.

The film narrows its focus to Morón and Ailí. They share certain interests and instincts in common, their feelings for one another grow. They make contact, slowly, tentatively. The spectator is encouraged to wonder: will it work out between them? Will love offer some relief?

Of course love and human contact do offer relief from the difficulties of the world, but not wholly or permanently. Economic and social reality does not vanish with the first embrace, or the second, or even the third. Relationships often founder because love, it turns out, does not conquer all. It is a little embarrassing to have to explain these things at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It seems doubtful to us that the conclusion of *Sólo por hoy* will satisfy or persuade anyone. In this case, a superficial social outlook is certainly in part responsible for an unconvincing drama.

In the most general sense, the source of these young people's depression and disaffection lies in changed economic conditions—including the shake-up of all nationally-based and relatively insular industries and professions in a country like Argentina under the impact of globalization—as well as in the widely-shared lack of confidence that things might improve in the future. The latter is obviously a function of political and historical difficulties. In Argentina, these conditions are overlaid with the continuing social and psychological consequences of the military dictatorship and its bloody crimes as recently as the early 1980s.

It is not the responsibility of the filmmaker to spell all this out, or to propose point by point what might be done to change the situation. Art operates in its own, sometimes subterranean fashion, and by its own laws. However, as we have endeavored to argue in this series, the artist does not do justice to his or her work by functioning with utter disregard to clearly discernible historical and social realities. It is difficult to imagine a deeply provocative and affecting film or book appearing at present that did not shed light, *in some manner or other*, on the larger experiences of the last century and their implications for humanity in the next one.

Taxi, un encuentro (*Taxi, an encounter*), directed and co-written by Gabriela David, leans on the same, rather slim reed as *Sólo por hoy*. A petty thief, who has stolen a taxi cab, picks up a distraught and injured girl. Against his better judgment perhaps, he helps her out. One thing leads to another. The thief, whose conditions are wretched, is somehow humanized by the process, the girl realizes she is not alone in the world. In a harsher, more deprived social milieu this time, the lesson seems to be similar: the only glimmer of hope lies in individual human contact, however tenuous.

The unstated, but almost universally accepted assumption in these filmmaking circles is that political and social action is impossible or lands people in an even worse condition. Since concerted opposition to the social order is out of the question, individual acts of kindness or recognition fill up the vacuum. And that, in the end, makes for pretty insipid filmmaking.

Bonanza is a more direct confrontation with Argentine social conditions, in this case, the conditions outside Buenos Aires. A huge fat man, Bonanza, with a white beard, operates a tire shop, a junkyard and who knows what else in the countryside. He catches animals and birds, he traffics in legal and illegal products. The family lives in and around a garbage heap. The rain turns everything to mud. Somehow they try to carry on in the midst of chaos, poverty, chicanery. Like any father, he worries about his children.

The film contains some remarkable footage, but not enough of a perspective. It is unfashionable to criticize one's subject. Nobody gets truly angry about misery; in fact, contemporary subjectivist ideology holds that every social position has its legitimacy. To suggest otherwise is to set up a "hierarchy," to prefer or rate one existence over another. That sort of argument comes close to apologetics for the status quo. In any case, it tends, like this film, to make poverty and backwardness picturesque, and that is not helpful.

Ilusión de movimiento (Illusion of Movement), written and directed by Héctor Molina, takes up a serious theme, but inadequately, in our view. In 1986 a man returns to the city of Rosario to meet his son whom he has never seen. His wife died at the hands of the military torturers. He tries to find a place for himself with old friends and within old surroundings. The emphasis in the film is on the readjustment and the awkwardness, not on the original tragedy. The dialogue and the acting are strained and unconvincing, and far too complacent considering the events under consideration.

Of the Argentine films we saw in Buenos Aires, the one that interested and moved us the most was *La fe del volcán (The Faith of the Volcano)*, directed and co-written by Ana Poliak (see accompanying interview).

The film has no story to speak of. It begins with an introductory monologue by a woman, perhaps the filmmaker, in deep distress. We do not see her, simply images of a high-rise apartment, of a steamed-up window. "I'm on a very high floor, surrounded by emptiness, I know that I have to jump, but I don't know whether I need to jump outward or inward." She talks about her depression as an adolescent. Later on she says: "My teacher was murdered. When I was 14 I wrote to my teacher not knowing she was being tortured."

The scene shifts outdoors, scenes of evangelists speaking to crowds, odd sights of Buenos Aires. The two principal characters, a knife-sharpener, Danilo, and a teenage girl, appear. He tells her, "There's no money, not a penny on the streets." He mimics, for her amusement, the different types who turn him away at their doors.

The knife-sharpener is haunted by the events 30 years before. He talks about his friend whose face lit up when "he talked about Man and the Future." Nothing has been heard from him. Pretending not to care, Danilo talks about the mothers of the Disappeared (the thousands of political prisoners killed by the military), "just crazy old ladies walking around the Plaza de Mayo." Of the victims: "They don't exist. They vanished. They must have done something wrong." He screams.

The girl gets fired from her low-paid job at a hair salon, she was always late. She walks around the city. They talk some more. She shows up at Danilo's place one day, in a wig, and sits on his lap. He is pretending to be someone else too, or, rather, twins. Every sequence has an unsettling, ominous, unresolved quality.

The final scene is a traveling shot of the girl walking along a highway. It lasts several minutes. We hear Danilo's voice: "How can I breathe? Where is the air? The stench suffocates me." Finally, this quote, which comes

from Nietzsche: "I know there is something invulnerable in me, something that may blast through stones."

The film is painful to watch, almost unbearably intimate. This is history interpreted in the most personal fashion.

Poliak has succeeded in transforming her own revulsion into artistic imagery. The spectator, at one level or another, is permitted to participate in that revulsion. Many of the other Argentine filmmakers skirted around the issue. Poliak sails into the eye of the storm.

The film asks, what has Argentine history produced? Danilo is a kind of cripple, lonely and walled off from others. The girl is poor; she has nothing, she knows nothing about history or culture. In her own way, although she is energetic and willing, she too has difficulty functioning. A society that is morally and psychologically dysfunctional, where oppression and injustice still reign.

Poliak deeply feels the tragedies of the past. To all those who want to forget, who want to compromise, who want to "get on with their lives," Poliak's film stands as a rebuke. It is a kind of conscience.

There are opportunists and careerists in Argentina, as everywhere, but there are also young people who want to struggle against the existing system. They need a perspective on history and society. In that regard, however, *La fe del volcán* is not successful.

Poliak enters into the eye of the storm, but without the confidence that people and things can change and be changed. Like Lee Chang-Dong, the South Korean director, she tends to blame the population for accepting atrocities. She openly admits to a terrible depression. This is the state of some of the most sensitive artists at present.

But it is wrong. The defeats of the past were not the fault of "the people," but the fault of those who claimed falsely to represent its interests, particularly within the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. All those responsible and their false solutions have to be exposed and rejected. This can be accomplished.

Even something as painful and genuine as despair can be a way of taking the line of least resistance. Studying and making sense of things is difficult. Enormous events have come down on people's heads, events they have hardly begun to understand. But masses of people will develop that understanding, and the most serious artists will participate in that process, delving into every aspect of the human situation, shedding light on some of its most complex features. Out of her anguish and her artistry, Poliak has contributed to that, and that is no small thing.



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