2001 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

Six films

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7 June 2001

The 44th edition of the San Francisco International Film Festival (April 19 to May 3) screened some 200 feature, short and documentary films. Certain films we have commented upon before, such as *The Circle* (Jafar Panahi), *Platform* (Jia Zhang-ke), *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-Dong), *Djomeh* (Hassan Yektapanah), *The Gleaners and I* (Agnès Varda), *Clouds of May* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan) and *Virgin Stripped Bare by her Bachelors* (Hong Sang-Soo).

In our minds the San Francisco festival posed the same essential questions of artistic and historical perspective as every other such recent event: What grasp do filmmakers have of the present historical moment and its immense contradictions? Have they found artistic means of confronting and embodying that reality?

These are some of the films that seemed most worth discussing, for better or worse.

***The Road Home**, directed by Zhang Yimou (China).* Zhang Yimou is one of China's most celebrated filmmakers (*Red Sorghum*, *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, *To live*, *Not One Less*). His early films represented in part a critique of the past and the ways in which current Chinese society bore traces of semi-feudal, hierarchical and repressive traditions. His analysis of contemporary Chinese society has been less persuasive. It is not clear whether he considers himself an opponent of the status quo, and if so, from which point of view he opposes it.

The Road Home, like *Not One Less*, his previous film, centers on a rural schoolhouse. Businessman Luo Yusheng learns of his father's death and returns, in the dead of winter, to his family's village. He wants a quick funeral, but his mother wants all the traditions respected, including a procession of pallbearers carrying the dead man's coffin from the hospital to the village "so he won't forget the road home."

Luo, obliged to remain in the small town, learns the history of his parents' early struggles from his mother. In flashback, we see her as a young girl who falls in love with the newly arrived village teacher. When he is taken away for political reasons, this is during the so-called "Anti-Rightist Movement" of 1956, she waits patiently. When he fails to return as scheduled, she sets off in the snow—"I'm going to the city to find him"—before collapsing. In the end, her dogged determination and devotion pay off, and the two are united. Luo presumably comes to understand the depth of his parents' commitment and organizes the funeral procession.

Zhang has described the film as showing "the attitude of country people towards learning—essentially, an attitude of respect and veneration." He has in mind two different periods, several decades ago when for "purely political reasons, learning was cruelly devalued. Intellectuals suffered physical abuse and were made to 'disappear.' The second of these is today. Everyone now understands the principle that knowledge equals power, and yet so many of us are ultra-materialistic and obsessed with money. Learning is once again being devalued."

The filmmaker is no doubt sincere. However, these are quite abstract conceptions, taken out of historical and social context. Zhang's films are increasingly taking on the quality of national-moral exhortations, which, in their own way, mimic some of the regime's. One of his previous films was entitled *Keep Cool*. This one (and *Not One Less*) might be called, *Appreciate Learning*. Unable or unwilling to probe the roots of either the bureaucratic repression of the 1950s nor the "ultra-materialistic" moods of the present day, the filmmaker, unhappily, falls back on close-ups of the pretty, anxious face of performer Zhang Ziyi (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) to fill up the space. The film is naive, sentimental and envisions a benign, almost idyllic peasant existence which one has a difficult time believing ever existed.

***Devils on the Doorstep**, directed by Jiang Wen (China).* Jiang Wen played the leading role in Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*. In *Devils on the Doorstep* he directs and plays the part of Ma Dasan, a Chinese villager during the Japanese occupation, who suddenly has two prisoners dumped in his lap by Chinese forces. He is told to hold on to them for a week's "safekeeping." One is a racist Japanese, the other is a Chinese/Japanese interpreter in the service of the occupation forces. After a week, no one comes to collect the two and the villagers face the problem of what to do with them.

The Chinese rebels eventually reappear and order the reluctant captors to kill the prisoners. Unable to do it themselves, the villagers first hire a hit-man in town, but realize that gunshots will alert the Japanese. They turn next to an executioner, a swordsman, but he cannot do the job. They conclude: "This village is not a place for murder." In the end, they attempt to trade their prisoners to the Japanese, with catastrophic consequences.

The film is quite odd, at times somewhat disoriented. In its attempts to find humor amid horrors, it seems at times to be borrowing a page from Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*. There are some genuinely amusing moments in the film's early sections. The Japanese foaming-at-the-mouth prisoner screams "Die, Chinese scum" at his baffled captors and the interpreter, who wants to get out of the situation alive, translates this as "Happy New Year, Uncle."

The portrait of the Japanese is troubling. The Japanese military acted with indescribable cruelty during its occupation of China. However, again, some historical perspective is required. What sort of society produced that violence? The filmmaker makes a brief effort to humanize the maniacal Japanese soldier, who turns out to be a peasant

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like the villagers. The orgy of violence that erupts, however, simply leaves one with the distinct impression that the Japanese are a nation of homicidal killers. The film feeds into Chinese nationalism in a manner that cannot be healthy.

***Brother**, directed by Takeshi Kitano (Japan).* Takeshi Kitano is a very fashionable director at present. He makes violent films in which he stars, usually as a policeman or a gangster. In *Brother*, he is a Tokyo gangster underling exiled to Los Angeles. He teams up with his drug dealer half-brother and his smalltime gang. He leads them to the big time, murdering dozens along en route. He befriends and "bonds" with a black gangster (Omar Epps.)

Kitano is known for his matter of fact violence and his twitching smile. He seems enormously pleased with these two traits, and, in general, with himself. Guess who graces the first frame of the film? And many thereafter. *Brother* is cold and violent and pointless, indicating along the way no feeling whatsoever for American life and society. Kitano's popularity is one of the more obvious signs of intellectual decline.

A number of films dealt with directly political or social themes.

***Khiam**, directed by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (Lebanon).* Six men and women describe their experiences as political prisoners in the Khiam detention camp, operated by the now-disbanded South Lebanon Army (SLA), the Israeli surrogate in the area. Each was imprisoned for years, some for a decade or more. They recount being beaten, in some cases, tortured and interrogated for months. One woman spent six years in solitary confinement. A man describes cramped conditions in which six prisoners sleep side by side and have to roll over in unison, reminiscent of the Nazi concentration camps. The prisoners hid scraps of everyday objects and created remarkable works of art, which are shown in the film's final images.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige previously co-directed *Around the Pink House*. Their new film is spare (52 minutes) and intelligent, but it deliberately shies away from consideration of the political and historical issues involved. The six were presumably arrested for activities against the SLA or the Israeli military, but there is never any discussion of their current or past views. This is remarkable, and telling.

The film becomes a kind of tour de force, a purely structural analysis of prison survival, with hints of Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* and Don Siegel's *Escape from Alcatraz*. The obsession with the rituals of prison life and escape in those two fictional works flowed from the directors' respective world outlooks. In the case of *Khiam*, however, the concentration on the immediate facts of prison life, whatever the filmmakers' intentions, takes on the character of an avoidance of the more difficult ideological and historical problems.

***The State I Am In (Die innere Sicherheit)**, directed by Christian Petzold (Germany).* This film, co-written by leftist Harun Farocki, shares some of the same problems as *Khiam*. It concerns the fate of two German radical terrorists, on the run for years, and their 15-year-old daughter. When a robbery in Portugal dashes their plan for escape and exile in Brazil, the threesome are obliged to return to Germany to raise the cash for tickets to freedom. When their efforts to contact old comrades come to nothing, they plan a bank robbery. The girl's desire to lead a normal teenage life proves their undoing.

The film seems accurate in many of its details. It convinces, by and large, as a portrait of people on the run. But, again, there is not a single indication, first of all, of the couple's ideas, and, second, what the filmmakers think of these ideas. Was terrorism a correct policy or was it not? What were its roots, and what were its consequences? Volker Schlöndorff's *The Legends of Rita* is in many ways a less successful artistic venture, but at least it attempted to say something about terrorism and German society and politics.

***The Storm**, directed by Khaled Youssef (Egypt).* Khaled Youssef is the long-time assistant of well-known Egyptian director Youssef Chahine. *The Storm* is cited as the first big-budget Arab film to deal with the Persian Gulf War.

The film begins in Cairo in 1989. A widowed schoolteacher, Hoda (Youssra), does not earn enough to provide either of her two sons the means needed to marry their respective sweethearts. After losing his fiancée to a wealthier suitor, the older son, Nagui (Mohamed Nagati), decides to seek his fortune in Iraq and spare his younger brother, Ali (Hani Salama), the same heartbreak. Ali is in love with the feisty Hayat (Hanan Tork), whose father is a wealthy businessman determined to see his daughter take her place in the class into which he has so fiercely clawed his way.

Although officially considered a widow by the state, Hoda believes her husband—a maimed 1973 Yom Kippur War hero who went mad and disappeared after Egypt signed the Camp David Agreement with the US and Israel—is still alive. The film's central premise is that the 1979 capitulation of the Egyptian bourgeoisie set the stage for Arab governments to force brothers to fight each other (Nagui in the Iraqi army and Ali in the Egyptian army)—a mother's most devastating nightmare—during the Persian Gulf War. No amount of emotional venting can quell Hoda's pain. The film ends with a demonstration outside Cairo University protesting the US-led alliance's bombing of Baghdad. Mother and fiancée are burning a half-Israeli, half-United States flag.

The Storm, named one of the best films at the Cairo International Film Festival in November, has proven popular in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan and been banned in Iraq and Kuwait. An unsympathetic Cairo film reviewer claimed that the film is "bound to benefit from current politics. It's filled with noisy, hostile statements against the United States and Israel, feeding into popular Arab sentiment."

The film's attacks on the American, Israeli and Egyptian regimes and the cruelties of imperialism are entirely legitimate and welcome. But the Arab "sentiment" being fanned by the film is essentially bourgeois nationalism. Presumably the filmmaker laments the passing of Nasserism; he fails to recognize that the latter ideology proved hollow and bankrupt and paved the way for the present-day Egyptian regime's cynical *realpolitik*.

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