

2001 Toronto International Film Festival—Part 1

The success and failure of the international "Style of Quality" in cinema

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The devastating attacks in New York City and Washington occurred midway through the Toronto film festival. After a one-day interruption the festival's activities proceeded, somewhat curtailed and obviously on a far more somber note. Inevitably the attacks did more than simply alter the mood of those on hand. While the course of political developments, even the most traumatic, cannot by itself determine the evaluation of works of art, it is impossible to regard the films screened in Toronto entirely outside the context created by the tragic events and the threat of more to come, as well as the larger set of historical and political circumstances from which they sprang.

The idea has been cultivated in recent years, in both the commercial and art cinemas, that filmmaking forms a universe apart, a magic kingdom of image and sound with its own history and rules, that film, in fact, transcends or even replaces life. This is a tedious notion, a stupid one, and a sign of intellectual disorientation. Much nonsense has been said and done in its name. In reality, filmmaking, like all art, has no other material at its disposal other than that which is given it by the world of three dimensions and the narrower world of class society, as Trotsky observed, and its efforts have no significance apart from their ability to illuminate and make sense of those spheres. Cinema, in short, is bound up with the lives of those who create it and those who watch it.

There were, as always, good, bad and indifferent works among the feature films (250 in all) presented at the festival, including numerous commercial productions. The latter films will no doubt appear in movie theaters over the coming months (*Hearts in Atlantis*, *Training Day*, *Novocaine*, *Life as a House*, *Last Orders*, *From Hell*, *Serendipity*, *Hotel*, *Buffalo Soldiers*, *Prozac Nation*, *Focus* and *Enigma*, among others). There will be remarkable individual moments in some of the larger-budget productions, as well as performances of value, but on the whole these will not be challenging or complex works. Some will be hazardous to one's mental health. Other categories of contemporary cinema—American and Canadian “independent” films, European social realism of a type presently found in Germany, Austria and The Netherlands in particular, Scandinavian family drama, etc.—were also represented in Toronto.

More promisingly, a number of films attempted, with varying degrees of success, to combine artistic and social seriousness. At least two facts about this group are noteworthy. In the first place, there were more of them than in recent years, perhaps 15 to 20 worthwhile films from a number of countries. Second, virtually none of the better films broke any genuinely new ground; if anything, they exhibited a tendency toward the formulaic, toward stagnation.

Included in this loosely-defined group are works by veterans like Paul Cox (*The Diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky*), Shohei Imamura (*Warm Water Under a Red Bridge*), Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*The Sun Behind the Moon*), Ken Loach (*The Navigators*), Stanley Kwan (*Lan Yu*), István Szabó

(*Taking Sides*), Ermanno Olmi (*The Profession of Arms*) and Jean-Luc Godard (*Éloge de l'amour*). Some of these will be discussed in future articles.

Aside from these relatively idiosyncratic works, another grouping of art films is identifiable. It seems possible to argue, speaking very broadly, that since the early 1990s certain tendencies in international filmmaking have come to be thought of as the most advanced and have been emulated. These tendencies have been most generally associated with films from Asia: Taiwan, Iran, China and elsewhere. The films in question are characterized by seriousness about their human subjects, who are often disadvantaged economically or socially marginalized. In deliberate contrast to the bombast of the commercial cinema, such works unfold slowly, without fanfare, often with considerable understatement. They are reserved and dialogue is sparse. Elaborate camera movement is avoided—in some cases, all camera movement. Climactic, dramatic confrontations are largely dispensed with. Life is never painted as it should be. Relations between people are generally harsh, sometimes brutal. A relatively bleak picture is drawn of alienated and sometimes destroyed human beings.

The artists' original motives in producing work of this type were, generally speaking, healthy ones: the rejection of Hollywood emptiness, as well as didactic and simplistic political filmmaking; the desire for an honest, intimate and intense picturing of human relationships; a reawakened interest in the poetic and aesthetically pleasing in cinema.

The success of the new trend is undeniable. On the whole, there has been a rise in the sophistication and intelligence of art filmmaking; a global equalization, quite roughly speaking, has taken place. However, like all other social phenomena, trends in cinema do not float freely in the ether. A decade of unprecedented political confusion and ideological backsliding could not leave anyone untouched. A certain plateau has been reached, and the trend associated with Taiwanese, Iranian and Chinese filmmaking now threatens to deteriorate into merely an international “Style of Quality.”

A number of films at the recent festival seem to fit, with varying degrees of appropriateness, into this general category. They include: *The Road* (from Kazakhstan), *The Orphan of Anyang* (from China), *What Time Is It There?* (from Taiwan), *Beijing Bicycle* (from China), *Delbaran* (from Iran) and *Millennium Mambo* (from Taiwan). Some of these works are more successful than others, some are even quite admirable, but as a group they seem limited to me, stuck at a certain point, passive, socially amorphous, resigned, unsatisfying.

It is correct for filmmakers to reject moralizing and lecturing, to abstain from concocting works out of even the most politically unassailable recipe books. This is not the same thing, however, as deliberately refusing to analyze and draw conclusions about social life and the great problems of

one's time. On the basis of such a refusal, reticence will turn into evasion and accommodation and even the most attractive aesthetic qualities will tend to become, over time, mere mannerisms. This is most strikingly apparent, in my view, in the work of Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien, director of some of the finest films of the 1990s. His newest work, *Millennium Mambo* (about young people in Taipei), is a poor film, weak and uninvolved. His most ardent admirers may convince themselves that it is a masterpiece, but this tedious film and the sharp decline it reveals are among the clearest indications that some process has exhausted itself. It is difficult to proceed when one has a limited grasp of what is up or down, Left or Right, in one's own society and history.

The lack of historical consciousness breeds skepticism and fatalism. Hardly any of the current filmmakers can imagine a different world other than the present one, or a mass social movement, or much of any movement at all. Human beings are imprisoned by circumstances, continually reinforced on all sides. Progress appears possible only on the basis of individual moral decisions, a viewpoint not so terribly different from the one promoted on television talk shows.

There is a danger that the art-film world will become increasingly inbred. Few, if any, of the films just listed will make their way to North American movie theaters, or to any movie theaters in great numbers. And one must ask, with as little cynicism as possible, to what extent certain works are even intended to reach and affect a large audience. Of course, the domination of the world's movie screens by Hollywood products is not the fault of the independent filmmaker. The question, however, arises: is there a type of cinema emerging that adapts itself to that domination and principally addresses itself to—in fact, principally seeks to impress—critics, festival directors and programmers and others in the global film festival circuit and its periphery, which constitute, after all, not an insignificant economic arena?

This is not to suggest that the process is the result of a conscious plan. Not at all. It results rather from a limited social outlook, on the one hand—a vague, although deeply felt humanism—encountering, on the other, a variety of financial and logistical obstacles. “There is no way to reach masses of people? Well, brutish and inarticulate as they are, they're probably not interested anyway. We'll speak to those refined enough to listen.”

The Orphan of Anyang is perhaps representative of recent trends. The film is written and directed by Wang Chao (born 1964), a graduate of the Beijing Film Academy, a former assistant to director Chen Kaige (*The Emperor and the Assassin*) and the author of several short stories and a novel (on which the film's screenplay is based.) It tells the story, virtually dialogue-free, of a young woman who works as a prostitute in the provincial city of Anyang. Unable to provide for a child, she hands off her baby to an unemployed factory worker in exchange for the child support money she receives (200 Yuan a month, \$25 or so). He becomes attached to the baby and to the young woman, eventually allowing her to use his apartment to conduct her business. Her former pimp and apparently the biological father of her child, dying of leukemia and desiring a legitimate heir, comes back into the picture. Violence erupts between the pimp and his thugs and the unemployed man; the latter lands in jail. “If I die,” he says, “don't dump the baby, he's my descendant.” Chased by the police in a raid, the prostitute hands off her baby to a passing stranger. Later she can't locate him. A policeman, however, finds her and beats her on the street.

Delbaran from Iran is another fairly typical work. Directed by Abolfazl Jalili (*A True Story, Dance of Dust*), it concerns the fate of a 14-year-old Afghan refugee, Kaim, in a small Iranian community near the border with Afghanistan. Kaim's life is largely a torment: constantly running to perform one errand or another for his employer, Khan, who owns an isolated café and filling station. A policeman is perpetually looking for illegal Afghans. Kaim's mother has died in Afghanistan in a bombing, his

father is off fighting somewhere, his sister is still in Afghanistan. Cars, trucks, every piece of machinery are continually breaking down. In the end, Khan dies and the border road, on which any meager business activity and all work depend, is closed by the Iranian authorities. Conditions are nearly inhuman.

Both films are severe, intelligent, sensitive ... and lacking. Even, let's be honest, a little monotonous. Silence, simplicity, stillness—these can become clichés like anything else. One feels that one has seen much of this before. And with more commitment and feeling. One line of reasoning, advanced in a number of quarters, has it that a slow-moving, nearly wordless film is preferable in principle, because it is more conducive to thinking. If the only alternative to such a work were a noisy, pointless studio product, that might be a legitimate argument. But presumably there is a third possibility: the use of words, dialogue, conversation to advance understanding and thinking. (Even inadequate films in which people speak about their situations and the world, like Kwan's *Lan Yu* and Szabó's *Taking Sides*, seem a breath of fresh air.) Thinking also needs nourishment. Portraits of psychologically mutilated human beings gazing at one another across an abyss of pain and alienation only go so far. If it was proper at one stage to encourage a serious attitude toward human difficulties, in the face of commercial cinema's flippancy and cynicism, it is necessary now to go beyond this, to the insistence on a serious attitude toward social and historical realities.

Middle class intellectuals are also attracted to certain social and psychological types for definite reasons. The choice of the inarticulate peasant, the brutalized youth making his way in the city or the numbed prostitute no doubt expresses a humane impulse, but it also corresponds to the intellectual's vision of the “oppressed” as mute, trapped, unresisting. Such an individual cannot speak for him- or herself, he or she needs to be represented. The destroyed human being is easier to handle and can even be treated like something of a blank slate. The worker, on the other hand, is not nearly so poetical or malleable, with his or her opinions, history, difficulties. *Under the Skin of the City* (directed by Rakhshan Bani Etemad) was perhaps the most interesting film in Toronto because it dealt artistically and honestly with a working family in Iran and was not simply another story of the socially and emotionally pulverized. (Etemad's film will be discussed separately.)

Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The Sun Behind the Moon* is also an unusual film, with an obvious topical, as well as aesthetic and sociological, appeal. It concerns the present conditions in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. A young woman, Nafas, born in Afghanistan and raised in Canada, receives a letter from her sister in Afghanistan. Unable to endure the conditions, the sister will commit suicide at the time of the last eclipse of the twentieth century. Nafas has only a few days to reach Kandahar, where her sister lives. Kandahar—the Iranian title of the film—is the spiritual home of the Taliban, those responsible for bringing about a human eclipse.

The film follows Nafas on her journey from the Iranian side of the border into Afghanistan. She pays \$100 to a man so she can travel with his family as a fourth wife. When thieves take everything and the man turns back to Iran, she adopts a young boy as her guide. He has just been expelled from a school for mullahs, where boys chant the Koran aloud in a nearly demented fashion. (The film makes clear they are sent there primarily for economic reasons. Their families have nothing eat and presumably the school feeds them.) Subsequently, Nafas encounters a black American who had originally gone to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet forces. Now he seems entirely disillusioned and at a loss. Although he has had no formal medical training, he acts as a doctor in some desolate community.

Nafas comes across a Red Cross camp in the desert where the staff fits amputees, victims of land mines, with prosthetic limbs. The limbs are dropped from helicopters attached to parachutes. In the most startling

sequence, the assembled men, on crutches, race each other across the barren landscape to reach the limbs. Nafas asks the American pseudo-doctor, who has helped her, to “say something about hope” into her tape recorder. There doesn’t seem to be much of that about. In the final scenes, Nafas meets up with a wedding procession, women entirely enveloped from head to toe in their “burkas,” gowns which cover the entire body, including the face. The women are searched; everything is taken from them—books, musical instruments, etc.

Niloufar Pazira, an Afghan woman living in Canada, plays Nafas. She approached Makhmalbaf some time ago about the situation in Afghanistan; indeed it was a friend of hers who had written a letter threatening to commit suicide. Pazira told the audience at a public screening of the film in Toronto that Makhmalbaf asked her what he could do. His eventual response was to make this film. Pazira said that the conditions in Iran near the border with Afghanistan, where the film was shot, were atrocious. (The Taliban regime refused permission to make the film in Afghanistan. They have banned cinema and television; even newspapers do not print photographs.) Most of those in the border village where they wanted to film were suffering from tuberculosis. Medicine was brought in by the filmmakers and distributed. Then it was discovered that many of the villagers were on the verge of starvation, some of them would not make it to the beginning of filming. The filmmakers went and got bread.

The Sun Behind the Moon is notable for its subject matter and its seriousness. Makhmalbaf is one of the more substantial filmmakers currently working. He approaches problems head-on, without fear or hesitation, and in a lyrical manner. He makes films about the most devastating conditions, but here too the current limitations make themselves felt. The film about Afghanistan reveals almost nothing about the circumstances that produced the present nightmare. In an interview, Makhmalbaf comes close to blaming the Afghan people themselves. While acknowledging the role of the US and the Saudis in building up the Taliban (“an army of ignorance”), he says, “The Afghans have got stuck in their ancientness.... One could say that the country has been vaccinated against modern civilization!” This evades the complicated questions of historical development over the last several decades, during which the impoverished Afghan population became the victim of imperialist machination and manipulation.

The film’s rather abstract humanism wears thin, as does the central characterization. Films about complex problems cannot be simply improvised on the spot, as Makhmalbaf seems to have done.



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