

2001 Toronto International Film Festival—Part 3: Struggling, alive, contradictory...

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4 October 2001

Under the Skin of the City is the seventh feature film directed by leading female Iranian filmmaker, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad. The treatment of social issues in her films, including several documentaries, has run her afoul of the Iranian government. Set at the time of the parliamentary elections of 1997, her latest film is a dramatic and complex portrayal of the travails of a family in a working class suburb of Tehran.

In the film's opening sequence, Tooba, an older factory worker, is being videoed on the role of women in the upcoming elections. Unable to deliver what is apparently a scripted, sanitized speech, Tooba walks away from the camera. She is employed in an all-female textile plant and it is made clear that she is the Mother Courage of the factory. Despite their lethal working conditions (lung disease is prevalent as a result of the fiber-drenched air), the women, always buttressed by Tooba, seize each opportunity for camaraderie offered by the communal quality of factory life, opportunities unavailable elsewhere. They share their food at lunch and comfort each other throughout a series of personal problems.

Tooba's oldest son, Abbas, is putting all his efforts into obtaining a visa to work in Japan in the hopes of improving the family's fortunes. A younger son is becoming increasingly involved in anti-government activity, threatening his education and his career. Tooba's disabled husband lectures the boy, after an arrest, about the futility of political activity, a road taken in the former's youth. The oldest daughter is the constant victim of spousal abuse triggered by poverty. The battered daughter seeks shelter in her mother's home only to be heartbreakingly returned to her husband. Tooba cannot feed her pregnant daughter or her beloved grandchild.

Abbas sells the family home to speed up the buying of his visa and is swindled by the visa sellers. In a desperate attempt to obtain money to buy back the house, Abbas goes to a wealthy, crooked businessman who gets him to smuggle

drugs. His younger brother thwarts the operation, sending Abbas into hiding and the family out into the street.

Under the Skin of the City is a valuable work because its subjects are recognizable human beings who have not been destroyed by adversity. They navigate an inhuman social system with varying degrees of consciousness, disarmed by confusion and illusions, but never by resignation. Albeit the uniqueness of locale and attire, the problems and circumstances of Tooba's family are universal in their content and spirit. In this vein, the critique of the veil is very striking: women and girls going about their daily lives encumbered by a ridiculous apparatus. They eat in pizza parlors, talk on cell phones, do sports, looking harassed by their attire.

The characters are not presented simply as victims of an irrational and harsh society. They are real people, who battle everything, who make mistakes and hopefully learn something for the next battle. Although the film does not paint a way out, it is not beset by gloom. In each circumstance, the film draws out something of the strengths and problems of the Iranian working class, and more widely, something of the strengths and problems of its international counterparts. The movie is not case specific to the Iranian working class. Ms. Bani-Etemad in a recent interview spoke of the "palpable commonalities" of different cultures and that she "considered cinema as a social commitment" and "catalyst" for a world audience.

The patient tempo and documentary-like style of *Under the Skin of the City* allows deep reservoirs of restlessness and discontent to surface in a population that took part in toppling the Shah, in a population whose aspirations have been systematically crushed by the reactionary semi-feudal clerics who replaced him. Speaking about another film involving the same suburb of Tehran as *Under the Skin of the City*, Bani-Etemad comments: "One of the film's features was that it was different from TV reports that show people as being always thankful and satisfied with

everything. They did not have the same conservatism that is imposed on them by the TV. They therefore said what they expected of the revolution and what they had actually gotten.”

In the final scene, Tooba is again being filmed. She speaks directly to the camera: “There was a time when we complained, but you said we were fighting a war. It was the truth, so we accepted it. After the war you asked us for patience, because the country was in ruins. So once again we put up with it all. Now there is someone who wants to save us, so I’m here to vote...”

Voice: “Sorry, Ma’am, we’re having technical difficulties. Please start over.”

Tooba: “Just forget about it! I lost my house, my son ran away and people are filming all the time. I wish someone would come and film what’s going on right here!” (She points to her heart.) “Right here! Who the hell do you show these films to anyway?!” This was perhaps the best moment in any film at the film festival.

The Pinochet Case

Patricio Guzman’s *El Caso Pinochet* (The Pinochet Case) is a documentary concerning the events that led to the arrest of Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet in October 1998 in London. Pinochet was arrested on an extradition warrant issued by Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon for the “disappearance” of more than 3,100 Chileans and foreigners during the military coup he led in 1973 and his subsequent 17-year dictatorship. Guzman, who has made several documentaries concerning the Pinochet coup and dictatorship [*The Battle of Chile I, II, III* (1973-79); *Chile, The Obstinate Memory* (1997)], focuses his latest film on the details of the Spanish case and Judge Garzon’s 50 to 60 direct witnesses—survivors of torture and relatives of the victims. Interviews with the witnesses, scattered throughout the documentary, provide horrifying and emotional testimony of the heinous crimes of a dictatorship aided and abetted by the American CIA.

Guzman follows the case to London where Pinochet was under house arrest for 503 days. There is footage of an extraordinary visit to his palatial quarters by former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who had described the general at a Conservative Party conference as “the only political prisoner in Britain.” The film shows her greeting Pinochet as a great friend “who had brought democracy to Chile,” adding “How much we owe you for the Falklands campaign!” It was a chilling moment.

Also shown is Pinochet’s return to Chile, welcomed as a hero by his supporters and sections of the army at the airport, where he rose out of his wheelchair gesticulating defiantly. Finally, Guzman documents the halting of the

proceedings against Pinochet after three years of international efforts to place him on trial. The film ends with a lingering shot of a statue of Salvador Allende, the president killed by Pinochet’s forces during the coup. Allende’s memory, the film implies, will inspire a future reckoning with the dictator. This may be the case but not in the way envisioned by Guzman. It was the political treachery of Allende’s Socialist Party in collusion with the Communist Party that disarmed the working class and permitted the Chilean and American bourgeoisie to drown a revolutionary opportunity in blood.

Another indictment of the French Revolution

Veteran French filmmaker Eric Rohmer has joined the chorus of intellectuals and filmmakers who take for granted that the French Revolution of 1789 was one of history’s bloody abominations (*Quills*, *Sade*, most recently). *L’Anglaise et le duc* (*The Lady and the Duke*) launches Rohmer into his fourth decade of filmmaking. Perhaps he’s been at it too long. The new film is a departure from his normal preoccupation, more or less insightful explorations into the relations among the articulate French middle class (*My Night at Maude’s*, *Claire’s Knee*, etc.).

Rohmer’s new film is based on the memoirs of Grace Elliot, a Scottish aristocrat whose personal relationship with the monarchy found her trapped in Paris when the revolution broke out. She is a vicious anti-Jacobin, who has a close friendship with Philippe “Egalité,” Duke of Orléans and cousin of Louis XVI, King of France. The duke is a middle-of-the-road supporter of the initial stages of the revolution, in no small measure because it will help him save his neck. Even though Orléans votes for the beheading of the king, his efforts to secure Grace’s safety send them both to the guillotine. Conversations between the two main characters constitute the film’s core. As in all of Rohmer’s work, the revelation and discovery of character occur through bouts of intense dialogue. *L’Anglaise et le duc* is more of a revelation about its creator’s ideological bankruptcy than anything else. However masterfully Rohmer has digitally recreated eighteenth century Paris, his artistry is subordinated to a very reactionary and stupid goal.



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