2001 Toronto International Film Festival—Part 4

Films by Godard, Cox, Imamura and others

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8 October 2001

Veteran French director Jean-Luc Godard's *Éloge de l'amour* (*Eulogy of Love*) is a cold and uninvolving work and largely incoherent. Largely, but not entirely. What comes though the irritating collage of disjointed moments are self-pity, demoralization and French (or European) chauvinism.

In the first part of the film, shot in black and white in present-day Paris, a film director, Edgar, is attempting to put some project together. He is also searching for a woman he knows. He finds her, but can't convince her to join him. There are comments on art, aging, memory, love. There are references to Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil.

The second part of the film, which takes place two years earlier and is shot in color, concerns a couple who fought in the Resistance during World War II and who are now selling their story to Hollywood. We also witness the initial encounter of Edgar and the woman.

This is the sort of film that publicists and certain critics are apt to describe as "a meditation on love, memory and history." Such glib phrases enable the commentator to avoid specifying precisely *what* the film says about either love, memory or history. I derived almost nothing from the film except that Godard is at sea, pessimistic about life and society and feels vaguely sorry for himself. The first part of the work is simply gloomy, the second dominated by cheap anti-Americanism ("Spielberg Associates" is purchasing the Resistance fighters' story; a group of little girls in local costume show up at the door petitioning to have *Matrix* dubbed into the Breton language. Earlier we have been told, the Americans have no memories, so "they buy others'").

Really, enough is enough. Godard was a leftist for a few years some decades ago. He was disappointed by the difficulties and abandoned the political struggle. That was his right. On the basis of his disenchantment, however, Godard has now taken it upon himself to judge the human race. Incredibly, someone in the film declares: "It's not a question of whether man will continue, but whether he has a right to." Even in this day and age, presumption and self-importance have their limits! One thinks of the poet Heine's reply to a similarly empty-headed and philistine "question": "And the fool expects an answer..."

The Toronto festival screened new films by two other filmmakers of considerable reputation, Dutch-Australian Paul Cox and Shohei Imamura from Japan. The two films, *The Diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky* (Cox) and *Warm Water Under a Red Bridge* (Imamura), are considerably more appealing than Godard's, but problematic in their own right.

Cox has long been an admirer of Nijinsky (1889-1950), the great Polish-Russian dancer. His new film takes as its starting-point the diary that Nijinsky kept in 1919 after he had fled St. Moritz to escape his overbearing mentor (and lover), Ballets Russes director Serge Diaghilev. The dancer moved into a Swiss villa with his wife and three-year-old daughter in the six weeks before his permanent confinement to an insane asylum. He kept a record of the onset of his psychosis in a diary.

In the journal he described his alienation from his family, his fear of insanity and his mental preoccupations: God, nature, art. "I am God," he wrote at one point. At another: "God said to me, 'Go home and tell your wife you are mad.'" And so forth.

Cox's film is unusual. Derek Jacobi reads passages from Nijinsky's diaries over a variety of images: dramatized scenes of family life (with everyone but Nijinsky), shots of nature, fragments of dance. There are exquisite sequences. The recreation in a forest setting of a few minutes of Nijinsky's version of Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun* is superb and unforgettable.

Cox has described himself as a great admirer or Nijinsky, as an artist and as a spiritual being. The diaries reveal a complex and tormented individual. They also contain a good deal of nonsense.

Here are other selected passages: "I love nature. I feel the earth. I am an unthinking philosopher. ... I don't like war. Wars start because of commerce. Commerce is a terrible thing for mankind. ... [I believe in] airplanes in moderation, technology in moderation. ... I am a madman who loves mankind. ... I love everyone. I want happiness. ... I am feeling in the flesh, not intellect in the flesh. ... Darwin is false. He did not feel nature. Man comes from God, not monkeys. ... I dislike revolution. I am not an anarchist. ... Everything is not horror, there is also joy." And so forth.

To be honest, it's not all that profound. In any event, Cox is obviously not implying that he agrees with Nijinsky's every thought, about Darwin, for example. But one gets the definite impression that the filmmaker is consciously advancing a certain sensibility in opposition to the materialistic, coldhearted, technocratic outlook he associates with contemporary globalized capitalism. And this sensibility is rooted in the anti-rational, the intuitive, the nature-loving. This will no doubt strike a chord with certain layers of the population, but it is not much to go on. In fact, it is naïve and wrongheaded.

Intriguingly, Imamura in *Warm Water Under a Red Bridge*, criticizes contemporary life in something of the same manner. A laid-off businessman in Tokyo, Yosuke, on the advice of a tramp-philosopher, travels to a far-off town in search of a golden Buddha that was stolen from a temple and hidden in a house by a red bridge. Yosuke discovers the house is owned by a woman, Saeko, with a unique physiological capacity: when excited, water wells up inside her and gushes out. So much so that it runs into the river and attracts fish, much to the satisfaction of local fishermen. Yosuke and Saeko fall for each other, he stays in the town, a number of eccentric local characters are introduced, various secrets get revealed.

Imamura makes clear his view of the Japanese corporate ethos. Yosuke says at one point: "I never expected more than boring predictability. ... I expected the twenty-first century to be different, but nothing's changed." In a flashback the tramp tells him: "Corporations want fools who'll work all their lives without complaining."

One of the film's earliest sequences is its finest. Yosuke is waiting to be interviewed for a job. When the interviewer, an elderly corporate executive shows up, late, Yosuke is obsequious and uncertain. The man off-handedly asks him a question about his situation. Yosuke explains that

his company's president disappeared, that he had to sell his house for half its value. "I'll take a job at a lower salary," he offers, and the other man walks out, without replying. Interview over. It's a devastating scene and, frankly, one wishes the film had followed up on the themes and emotions touched on here.

Unfortunately, Imamura does not trust that there are social forces in the city that can alter the present dire state of things. Or, in any event, he turns away from such a possibility. He devotes himself and his film instead to nature, to female sexuality as the source of all human warmth and health and to countless images of water. It's all well and good, but it feels as though Imamura is taking the line of least resistance. The transformation of Yosuke from a selfish "salary-man" to a self-sacrificing lover is effectively evoked, but it almost seems beside the point.

That having been said, the 75-year-old Imamura's last two films—*Dr. Akagi* and this one—are far superior to anything else being produced in Japan at present. The job interview scene cited above is the first serious, albeit brief, reference to the current economic malaise I have seen in a Japanese film. Most Japanese filmmakers are too busy showing off to concern themselves with the new and troubling circumstances in which wide layers of the population find themselves.

American independent filmmaker Richard Linklater has directed two new films. The first, *Waking Life*, is an animated work; the other, *Tape*, is based on a one-act play.

Waking Life somewhat resembles Linklater's earlier *Slackers* (1990) in structure. A young man (Wiley Wiggins) gets off a train and encounters a series of individuals who one after the other offer their opinions about life and reality. Much of the discussion here centers on the relationship between dreams and waking life. Here are some typical comments:

"Dream is destiny."

"I believe reincarnation is just a poetic expression of what collective memory really is."

"They say that dreams are only real as long as they last. Couldn't you say the same thing about life?"

"The worst mistake that you can make is to think you're alive when really you're asleep in life's waiting room."

"You can have so much damn fun in your dreams. And, of course, everyone knows, fun rules."

"Doesn't it make sense that death too would be wrapped in dream? That after death, your conscious life would continue in what might be called a dream body?"

All in all, not very promising. Or enlightening. Nor is the rather vague exhorting of the audience to dream and to value unconscious life terribly helpful under the present circumstances. Particularly when delivered by college philosophy professors, left-over flower children and generally unattractive subjectivists of various stripes. These people simply do not impress in any shape or fashion. It all feels like something that might have been fresh and even daring in the latter days of the Reagan administration.

Linklater has made a number of honest and valuable works (*Slackers*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Before Sunrise*, *The Newton Boys*). In the last several years a number of projects have fallen through for him. As a radical filmmaker outside the Hollywood orbit he no doubt finds himself in a somewhat isolated position. Nonetheless, one has to say what is. This film is a turning inward, a step backward.

Tape, unhappily, is also weak. The action involves two old friends—one a drug dealer and party animal, the other an up-and-coming filmmaker—meeting in a motel room in the Midwest. It turns out that one committed "date rape" years before. The woman in question also shows up. Characters shout and morally challenge one another. There is more heat than light. Again, above all, the staleness and slightness of the work strike one. We expect more from Linklater.

We have commented elsewhere about Tsai Ming-liang's *What Time Is It There?* [A director treading water] and Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* [Asian films at the Berlin Film Festival].

Honey for Oshún, directed by Cuba's Humberto Solas, is an ineffective political drama about a Cuban-American, who has lived most of his life in Miami, returning to his native land in search of his mother. He has an identity crisis in the middle of a remote village: "Cuban? American? I'm torn. I'm nothing." It's rather too convenient, and unconvincing. The film doesn't encourage a truly critical appraisal of either Cuban or American social life and history.

Brainstorm from Brazil (Laís Bodanzky) is a work apparently designed to please the anti-psychiatry movement. Neto, a teenager in São Paulo, has troubles with his father and with authority in general, but nothing out of the ordinary. When his father finds marijuana in the boy's sweatshirt pocket, he decides to have his son committed temporarily to a psychiatric institution. Once there Neto is systematically driven insane by overmedication, electroshock, brutal guards, insensitive doctors and the rest. No doubt there is something to be gotten at here, but the simplistic and outraged tone spoils the film. Anyone not already convinced that such institutions are monstrous will legitimately dismiss the work as intemperate propaganda.

It was long ago pointed out to Lewis Carroll's Alice, I believe, that a stopped clock is more accurate than a functioning one, because it is guaranteed to be absolutely accurate twice a day. Does British director Ken Loach operate on the same principle? There is something to be said for digging in one's heels and continuing to make films in the same manner and on the same themes as one has for a quarter-century, but not all that much. Not when the world has changed so dramatically. Not when the methods and themes were limited and inadequate to begin with.

The Navigators, Loach's latest effort, concerns privatization of Britain's railroads and its damaging consequences for a group of rail workers in South Yorkshire. There are legitimate points made and the occasional dramatic moment, but the film as a whole never comes to life. It feels like a work constructed according to a blueprint, a worthy blueprint perhaps, but a blueprint nonetheless.

Loach is not a great artist. The success of one of his (all too) low-keyed, naturalistic works depends on the presence of a remarkable personality, a performer who transcends the director's inordinate modesty, a modesty which has, frankly, political implications. Peter Mullan represented such a figure in *My Name is Joe* (1998). There is no one in *The Navigators* who offers a spark to the goings-on. The drama is neatly and democratically divided up among half a dozen roles, which merge smoothly and unmemorably into one another.

This is the last of a four-part series.