

Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 1

Once again on the problem of perspective

David Walsh
24 October 2001

“Artistic truth is obtained through tortuous searching.” — Aleksandr Voronsky

There were a number of intelligent and honest films presented at the recent 20th Vancouver film festival. In that very general category I would place Evans Chan’s *The Map of Sex and Love* (Hong Kong), Huang Min-Chen’s *Birdland* (Taiwan), Thomas Arslan’s *A Fine Day* (Germany), Lisandro Alonso’s *La Libertad* (Argentina), *Don’t Make Trouble—Everyday Racism* (12 short films from France, produced by director Bertrand Tavernier), Philippe Le Guay’s *Night Shift* (France), Maria Ramos’ *Desi* (Netherlands), Dover Kosashvili’s *Late Marriage* (Israel) and Petr Václav’s *Parallel Worlds* (Czech Republic). There were probably others. The festival organizers make a serious effort. In addition, the festival screened new films from veteran directors Jacques Rivette (*Va Savoir*), Manoel de Oliveira (*I’m Going Home*) and David Lynch (*Mulholland Drive*), works which present their own distinct issues.

Intelligent and honest, even sensitive and perceptive, yet unsatisfying. Something is missing. Film festival programmers, as far as one can tell, assiduously do their work. I don’t believe there is a body of ground-breaking work that is being hidden from public view. These are objective intellectual problems, bound up with the specific difficulties of our time. The great benefit of a film festival is that it brings one’s concerns to a head.

Contemporary filmmakers can do many things, and not simply in the field of the technological tour de force. Particular milieus and moments are recreated with great skill. And the filmmakers say certain things ... but only certain things. They hold back on so many important ones. No work engages you entirely, convinces you of its genuine and unmistakable truth, presses itself on you with urgency, demands to be seen and heard. The best films are restrained, modest. There is a fear of generalizing. Nothing can be said about life or society as a whole.

Certain European filmmakers and the French in particular, thanks to the prevalence in Paris of faddish and reactionary ideological trends, are perhaps most severely affected in the latter department. The “great narratives” have been replaced by innumerable little ones. Each film has its particular subject, some more significant than others—the conditions of immigrants, children who have lost a parent, the sex lives of college professors, single women with pets—but each treated as a distinct phenomenon, from whose study no broader conclusions are permitted to be drawn. The attempt to ban the “macrocosmic” is of course doomed to failure. As Hegel pointed out a long time ago, even the simplest proposition (Chloé is a woman with a cat, Ponette is a little girl, Martin is a philosophy lecturer) reveals that the individual exists only in the connection that leads to the universal. Universalizing

inevitably takes place in every artistic work (as it does in every thought and every utterance); under attack has been consciously *critical and oppositional* universalizing. We are left for the most part with those generalizations that do not conflict with prevailing consciousness, i.e., bourgeois public opinion in one form or another.

Passivity holds sway. And relativism. Rivette’s *Va Savoir*, charming as it is, apparently seeks to turn those qualities into a way of life. The directors have their hands on their hips. Their attitude is, “Let’s wait and see.” They will find beauty in this and that, somewhat arbitrarily. The spectator should be patient, perhaps something might come of this, perhaps it might not. One can’t be certain ... of anything. Anyway, does it matter terribly?

As a matter of fact, it does. Insofar as the artists don’t take themselves and their work seriously enough, that is already an objective problem. It strengthens the status quo. The generally accepted view that art these days has no social consequences is, in the first place, untrue, and, in reality, a means of accommodating oneself to the production of art with as few social consequences as possible. We should be impatient with this entire line of reasoning.

Without a doubt filmmakers are *beginning* to take life more seriously. Recent events will only deepen that process. (It is telling that even Lynch, whose work embodied an unpleasant brand of marketable and light-minded cynicism in the 1990s, is obliged to at least play at taking a more critical stance in his latest film.) There is a growing recognition that the flippancy and self-absorption of recent years produced nothing of lasting value.

So, there is a desire to look at life. This is all to the good. But one must have the right mental equipment to investigate life deeply.

We assert here quite often that art needs a new perspective. What does that mean?

Perspective involves making a proper evaluation from a given vantage point of the relationship or proportion of the parts of a whole. Filmmaking, whether anyone likes it or not, inevitably entails the analysis of social life. It is not possible to measure or estimate accurately developments in this sphere without a grasp of social and historical dynamics. It is necessary to trace out processes, to study them from beginning to end, to find the roots of one relationship in more general and decisive relationships, to counterpose the essential to the less essential, and so forth.

It will be assumed by some that we simply mean films should be more “political” and more “ideological.” To a certain extent, we plead guilty. The movie-going public is hardly drowning in a flood of exacting social commentary or historical analysis. More of that would be a start. Beyond that, however, lies the trickier problem of artistic objectivity and truthfulness in any kind of work, intimate, lyrical or

otherwise. The question is: how to develop aesthetic means of accurately reflecting social and psychological processes. (Of course this is not an issue for those who deny in advance that such a thing is either desirable or possible.) We come up against the hoary argument that “objectivity” is incompatible with partisanship. Trotsky answered this philistine argument very well 70 years ago, in regard to the “common sense” historian: “He sincerely takes his blindness regarding the working of historical forces for the height of impartiality, just as he is used to considering himself the normal measure of all things.”

All the films cited above deal with social problems, in one fashion or another: family life, poverty, racism, alienation and loneliness, conditions of work. These questions seem to me to be tackled superficially in general, i.e., both the evaluation and the vantage point are inadequate.

The artists by and large possess neither a strong sense of history nor any apparent inkling that the future might be in any way different from the present. It is not possible, however, to treat existence accurately and richly if one takes the present, ephemeral facts of social life (including temporary political conjunctures, the moods of various social layers, collective psychological states, etc.) to be eternal and inevitable, to be “natural.” They have to be seen as the products of historical conditioning, which under changed circumstances, will give way to quite different facts. In that sense—and here is where partisanship comes into the picture—the revival of cinematic depth and truthfulness that is required will not take place without an entire layer of filmmakers seeing *beyond the limits* of the existing social order.

Laziness, of course, also plays a role, the unwillingness to take on complex intellectual problems, to work things through. Some social positions and outlooks lend themselves to sloth more easily than others. If one is pleased with the immediate products of one’s intuition (and a comfortable income), then why strain oneself? But nothing great is accomplished without exerting oneself to one’s limits and beyond.

All too often, to use an unflattering simile, the artists resemble a colony of ants on the trunk of a large tree who claim to be in a position to make an assessment of the state of the entire forest. All the sensitivity and intuitiveness in the world cannot overcome the lack of perspective.

In some cases, the lack of perspective itself has a quite specific source, often the damage inflicted directly or indirectly by Stalinism on the consciousness of generations of intellectuals.

Petr Vaclav from the Czech Republic is obviously a sharp-eyed and intelligent artist. In his *Parallel Worlds*, an architect and his girl-friend experience disappointment and disillusionment as their relationship breaks apart under various pressures. He faces professional compromise and corruption, she has a breakdown after concealing an abortion from him.

Why does someone so obviously bright and capable as Vaclav produce a work so slight and familiar? Would his artistic counterpart in Czechoslovakia have done so in the first third of the last century? One can’t explain the limitations of this film without understanding the situation of the East European intelligentsia after decades of Stalinist rule, the discrediting of any left-wing critique of bourgeois social relations, the discrediting of any attempt to trace psychological problems to their social roots.

In *Don’t Make Trouble—Everyday Racism* a number of young directors tackle the problems faced by immigrants or the children of immigrants in France. Some of the short films are more successful

than others. The directors are obviously in favor of universal solidarity of all peoples. Universal solidarity is a fine thing. Why doesn’t it exist in France? Because human beings are naturally inclined to racism? The filmmakers probably don’t hold that view. Then why? These directors can’t be the first, after all, to argue against racism. Why do the underlying economic tensions and fears lead to an increase in attacks on immigrants? Why is there no political party in France capable of opposing this on a principled and progressive basis, showing the way out of the present impasse?

Without a deeper insight into the course of French history, and particularly the role of the parties that claimed to represent the working class and have proven worthless, such efforts remain fairly hollow and abstract. They run the risk of falling on deaf ears, with all the best intentions.

The same familiar grooves tend to be worked over and over. Writers and directors make films about family life, which prove that family life is no paradise anywhere. They make films about marriages and other relationships breaking up, which show that people hurt each other badly, sometimes deliberately. They make films about sexual desire and relations, purporting to demonstrate that desire knows “no law but its own.” They make films about alienated youth, which rarely go beyond the level of understanding of the youth themselves that contemporary life is bleak and that the future holds out little hope for them. They occasionally make films about immigrants and low-paid workers, establishing beyond the shadow of a doubt that immigrants and low-paid workers are treated unfairly.

How much of this have we not already known for some time?

There isn’t enough to go on in contemporary films, even the more serious. Mostly one confronts the summation of the more or less intelligent, more or less coherent impressions accumulated by a generally self-indulgent and retreating intelligentsia over the past couple of decades.

Hardly anyone ventures into truly dangerous and unexplored territory, which these days is not sexual behavior. Any and every sex act is bound to show up on the screen sooner or later. We are well and truly instructed in all that. Venturing into dangerous and unexplored territory today would mean, first of all, cutting through the lies and mystifications of those in power. Lies about the past, about the attempts to revolutionize society in the 20th century, for example, and the reasons for their failure. And lies about the present, about the inevitability of inequality and exploitation and misery.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact