

Vancouver International Film Festival—Part 2

Too modest by half

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Is it really such a daunting task for film writers and directors to depict present-day life more richly and truthfully? There are those who think so, who argue against demanding any more from contemporary filmmaking than that which it currently has to offer. One hears this refrain quite often, “What more can you expect?” To imagine that the present meager offerings of the “entertainment industry” or even the “independent cinema” were the limits of the possible would truly be a discouraging prospect. Fortunately, it’s a mistaken and misguided notion.

Aside from the obvious fact that artists in the past, including filmmakers, have delved into matters in a more complex fashion, we see glimpses of such efforts in present work, so it can’t be a superhuman task. It’s true that a filmmaker doesn’t choose the conditions under which he or she works. Some generations are more fortunate than others: social and intellectual circumstances can be more or less inspiring. Artistic genius is not something that can be simply sucked out of one’s thumb. It has to be admitted that official society in the US over the past two decades, for example, has not held out much that might tempt or sustain the artist. What is he or she supposed to have made of this “best of all possible worlds,” a barren culture geared to share values and protected by cruise missiles? But this only underscores the fact that an artistic rebirth will take only place in opposition to the existing social order all along the line.

What is most disturbing is that one gets the feeling with so many filmmakers (and artists generally) that something has been beaten out of them, or, worse, that they never possessed much stuffing to begin with. The radical or “left” artists of the 1968 generation, even those who have not grasped conformism with both hands, are pretty much a spent force. Others—including all too many younger artists—seem honest enough, but resigned to what they imagine to be their own impotence (and, in fact, their resignation takes them more than halfway there). Unfortunately, it tends to be principally the charlatans at present who are in any way presumptuous. All in all, it’s time for a change in atmosphere.

Here are some of the other films screened at the Vancouver festival:

Late Marriage from Israel, written and directed by Dover Koshashvili, has a wonderful, funny opening scene. The Georgian-Jewish parents of a 32-year-old PhD candidate at Tel Aviv University, Zaza, set up a meeting with the family of a 17-year-old girl in hopes that a marriage might result. Zaza and the girl are left alone in her bedroom to get to know one another while the various relatives discuss the details of the potential match elsewhere. Ilana is a gimlet-eyed, no-nonsense girl. She sizes up the philosophy student pretty quickly and finds him wanting. “I want a rich man,” she tells him. That doesn’t stop her from making out with him on her bed while the two sets of parents trade pleasantries in the next room.

The film, unhappily, goes downhill from there. Zaza is in love with a passionate Moroccan divorcee, Judith, who has a six-year-old girl. He spends his nights there. His overbearing parents and assorted relations trail him and find out about Judith. They break in on the pair like a gang of thugs and threaten the unfortunate woman with bodily harm if she doesn’t leave their precious Zaza alone. He doesn’t have enough gumption to tell

his parents to go to hell. Seeing that he cares about his mother and father more than her, Judith later breaks off the relationship. Zaza is pushed into a marriage with a young woman he hardly knows. Future unhappiness seems guaranteed.

The problem is, the film falls into that category of a critique that really isn’t a critique. It lacks savagery. Despite the unflattering portrayal of Zaza’s parents and assorted relatives, the filmmaker still has a soft spot for them. It’s not that they need to be painted as villains personally. Not at all, that’s precisely the point. They are operating with of the best of intentions, with all the love they can muster. This makes their actions all the more *objectively* monstrous and Zaza’s cowardice all the more repugnant. One can’t help but feel that this sort of half-hearted appraisal, done with a shrug of the shoulders and an “Everyone has his reasons,” is a partial accommodation to a deeply conformist climate. Such disgusting, destructive behavior needs to be submitted to a far more biting assault.

La Libertad (Freedom) from Argentina’s Lisandro Alonso falls into the same general category of the toothless critique. The film follows the activity of a woodcutter during the course of a single day. Working on his own, Misael Saavedra marks trees, cuts them down, removes the bark and delivers them to a buyer of fence-posts who pays a pittance. With his money, Misael buys cigarettes, sodas and gasoline. On his way home he kills an armadillo and eats it for dinner. The film has a handful of lines of dialogue.

The director’s motives may be the noblest, but *La Libertad* is muddleheaded from at least two points of view. On the one hand, director Alonso maintains he decided to make the film after seeing the solitary wood-cutter in a field and thinking, “This is how I feel in the city.” How silly, and condescending. A middle class city-dweller compares himself to a rural laborer because they both work in conditions of isolation.

On the other hand, the film’s title, one fears, is only half-ironic. Out of some combination of misguided “multicultural” sensitivity and political timidity, the filmmaker seems afraid to condemn Misael’s conditions. After all, one existence is as good as another. One can only account for this holding back from stating the obvious—these are wretched, backward circumstances that need to be abolished!—by considering the decades of political confusion and backsliding and the erosion of confidence in a revolutionary perspective that make it up. Hardly anyone these days dares suggest that something needs changing. (*Bonanza* from Argentina suffers from something of the same malady.)

As much as anything else, it is passivity that is doing the most damage to film art. Artists have not always been this modest in the face of existing institutions and morals. Where is Byron’s “sworn, downright detestation/Of every despotism in every nation”? Or Mayakovsky’s “slap in the face of public opinion”?

A Fine Day (Thomas Arslan, Germany) is another example of uncalled for modesty, in my view. It is an intelligently and delicately made film about one day in the life of a would-be actress, of Turkish descent, living in Berlin. Twenty-one-year-old Deniz goes about her daily life. She

breaks up with her boyfriend, does dubbing work on French filmmaker Eric Rohmer's *A Summer's Tale* (Rohmer is an obvious influence on this film), auditions for a director, plays hide and seek with a potential new boyfriend, meets her sister—who is pregnant—at the train station, talks with her mother, and so forth.

In the final scene Deniz encounters a professor of “everyday life” who is working on “the history of love.” She asserts that unlike people of the eighteenth century, who were dominated by a romantic ideal, “we have more possibilities.” There are “work relations” and “love relations” and perhaps love should be viewed “as a means of communication.” The final note of the film: “life is complicated.” My complaint would be, however, that the film is not.

The work is flawlessly performed and filmed, but too restricted, and self-restricted at that. I'm not certain that Rohmer's “quietism” is a healthy guide either. He has revealed himself to be a garden-variety reactionary in his latest work (*L'Anglaise et le duc*), a diatribe against the French Revolution. Underneath his “discreet charm” something quite unpleasant has apparently been lurking.

In *A Fine Day* the argument is once again being made that it is impossible to show the whole, only details. Of course the banal can be imbued with the universal; much of the greatest fictional art of the last 150 years attests to that. But for that to be true, the artist has to *consciously* invest his or her material with profound insights. They don't appear by themselves, like unwanted guests. Everyday life doesn't surrender its truth without an intense struggle. As the Soviet critic Voronsky noted, “To understand one's impressions is not easy in general, but to understand one's immediate impressions is a hundred times more difficult.... [I]n order to find what is most valuable in his perceptions, in order to purify and then condense them, he [the artist] must be a sharp analyst.” There isn't enough evidence in *A Fine Day* that impressions gathered from daily life have really been worked over for their essential content, which will always be discovered to have a social component, i.e., roots in class society. As well documented as they are, the details presented don't add up to enough, in my opinion.

A Map of Sex and Love (Evans Chan, Hong Kong) is about secrets that “will haunt your life.” It has a despondent air about it. A young American-Chinese filmmaker returns to Hong Kong to make a documentary film about the imminent opening of a new Disney theme park. He has two neighbors: a gay dancer, perpetually cruising, and a young woman who was traumatized during a visit to Belgrade. In the end, the two join the filmmaker on an expedition to Macau to find out whether the latter's father laundered Nazi gold during World War II.

The film is observant. There is a side of Hong Kong here that is not generally on display, unglamorous, vaguely suburban. There are numerous pointed comments about culture, or the lack of it, in the contemporary world. And about the growing alienation. The earth seems to be getting smaller and people “more alone.” As for the Chinese, they are “the Jews of Asia,” diasporic, oppressed. One protagonist is a manic depressive, another had a nervous breakdown, the third had shattering experiences in a Catholic school. The characters' estrangement from parents, from official society, their general marginalization, their sense that they are without home or orientation—all this is legitimate. And no doubt accurate, as far as it goes.

But, again, how much of this comes as a startling revelation? Disney's operations seem a somewhat large and all too tempting target. *The Map of Sex and Love* was one of the most interesting works at the festival, but the radical melancholy that pervades the film, while more seductive than many contemporary tones, wears thin in the end.

Hi, Tereska from Poland (Robert Gliniski) is about a teenage girl who lives in a grim Warsaw housing project. Her mother works in a factory, her father is an alcoholic and unemployed, her sister is a little “princess,” who likes to inform on Tereska. At design school the girl meets a

rebellious fellow classmate, Renata, and the pair plunge into various situations, perhaps biting off more than they can chew. The bleakness never lets up, but to what end? I don't see the point of such passive social realism, particularly in Poland (or eastern Europe generally), where the last thing the filmmaker is likely to suggest is that the whole rotten society needs to be overthrown.

Passivity or worse extends to the field of documentary filmmaking.

Jung (War): In the Land of the Mujaheddin (directed by Alberto Vendemmia and Fabrizio Lazzaretti), about Afghanistan and its woes, has an obvious topical interest. This Italian-made documentary records the efforts of a team of doctors and others to build a hospital in the town of Charikar, outside of Taliban-controlled territory. Much of the footage is horrific, as are the facts recounted: 1.5 million dead in 20 years of war, 4 million refugees, 1 million maimed through landmines and other means. There are scenes of amputees (“My life is over,” says one), Taliban prisoners, discussions of the heroin trade, the poverty. One woman tells the camera, “Not even death wants the people of Afghanistan.” Another woman, unveiled, jokes bitterly about the *burka*—the head-to-toe covering women are forced to wear—“In any other country why would I wear a tent on my head?”

Incredibly, however, the film contains not a single reference to the history of the Taliban. There is not a mention of the role of the Saudis, Pakistanis and Americans in financing, training and supporting the Islamic fundamentalists against the Soviet Union, not a single mention of the tacit support given the Taliban when it conquered power in 1996, not a word about Unocal and its negotiations with the Kabul regime. All is silence. The film essentially functions as propaganda for the Northern Alliance, and beyond that, for the governments who manipulate that collection of warlords and drug dealers. By this means *In the Land of the Mujaheddin*, deliberately or not, becomes another weapon in the arsenal of those advocating intervention in Afghanistan and seeking a rearrangement of political forces in the region in the interests of the US and other imperialist powers.

The Belgian-made *Working Women of the World* (Marie France Collard) records the closure of Levis' factories in Belgium and France and the increasing relocation of the company's operations to countries such as Turkey and Indonesia. The filmmakers interview long-time Levis' workers in Europe, including a CGT union representative, Marie-Therese, at the French plant. She has been infected by nationalism, probably introduced by the ultra-chauvinist French Communist Party. Along with legitimate comments, she makes the sneering remark that workers in the underdeveloped countries “might be prepared to work for a bowl of rice.” When a group of Indonesian workers are shown the video footage from France and Belgium, a young woman responds, “I don't want to work for a bowl of rice either.”

There is certainly interesting material here. A Belgian woman reports that speed-up at Levis' made it “the worst factory I'd ever been in.” In Turkey the filmmakers discover that there are now some 250 factories northwest of Istanbul to which workers are bused each morning by the thousands. In Indonesia, at Levis', there are five toilets for 2,000 women workers, who must work 80 hours a week (including overtime) to earn enough to survive. The scene of the factory closures in Belgium and France are moving. “We don't need psychologists,” says one woman, “we can find the door on our own.” Another observes, “It's always us who have to give things up.” Marie-Therese, as she leaves the plant for the last time, remarks sincerely, “I will miss the machine, I'll miss the factory.”

The perspective of the filmmakers is that of Attac, the reformist-nationalist anti-globalization movement, and other such groups. The film extends sympathy to the workers and obviously opposes the grossest injustices of the present system, but nothing more. The feminist echo of Marx in the film's title is telling, this is the middle class protester's view

of the world. There is no specter here that will haunt anyone in power.



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