Buenos Aires 4th International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 2

Films of Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien, and a number of documentaries

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This is the second part in a series on the recent Buenos Aires independent film festival (April 18-28).

Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien is a celebrated figure in the independent cinema, and justly so. His body of work over the past two decades compares with anyone's. The Buenos Aires film festival presented the eleven feature films (1983-2001) that are considered his mature works.

Through quasi-autobiographical works, historical pieces and dramas of contemporary life Hou (born in China in 1947) has attempted to build up a picture of a society and an epoch: postwar Taiwan. One cannot easily bring to mind the name of another film director in any part of the world who has created in recent decades such a comparably full and complex picture.

Hou is a serious artist, which is to say he mobilizes both objective and subjective resources. He has said that social questions interest him less than the fate of families and individuals, and there is no reason to doubt him, but as an honest and sincere artist he obviously found it necessary to trace the roots of individual dysfunction to their broader historical sources.

He was the first Taiwanese filmmaker to examine the anticommunist terror launched by the US-supported Chiang Kai-shek regime in 1947 and the ensuing forty years of martial law and repression, as well as their psychological and emotional consequences. He has sympathetically considered the lives and fates of left-wing opponents of the government's Cold War-driven policies.

If one were to use the adjective "Shakespearean" simply to describe an artistic type: someone who accepts reality, does not shrink from it or moralize about it, pictures it as fully and objectively as he or she can—without of course suggesting that the given artist possesses Shakespeare's genius—then the term might apply to Hou.

Gifted with extraordinary powers of observation, Hou has attempted to integrate his examination of large social and historical questions with stories of the lives of ordinary people, of people of his own and subsequent generations, of people struggling with the problems of love, sex, youth, age and death. One could say that Hou possesses that feeling for life, that interest in its unchanging and dynamic elements, which is so vital for the artist and so lacking in many of our contemporaries.

If his most recent work (*Flowers of Shanghai*, *Millennium Mambo*) is less interesting, this is only proof that powers of observation are not the only prerequisites for the serious filmmaker: in this difficult and complicated age, extraordinary powers of social analysis are also needed. His lack of interest in social questions has perhaps caught up with him. Hou seems as bewildered and overwhelmed by the present state of society in Taiwan, and presumably in China as well, as his relatively unsympathetic youthful characters in *Millennium Mambo*.

Of the four Hou films I saw in Buenos Aires, two belonged to the autobiographical category, generally speaking, and two to the historical.

The Boys from Fengkuei (1983) is one of Hou's most remarkable works, one of his finest, in my view. A group of boys in a seaside town idle their time away playing practical jokes, showing off for girls and fighting rivals. When things get a bit more complicated, they move to a bigger city, Kaohsiung (Taiwan's largest industrial center, in the south of the island), prior to serving in the army.

They find jobs in a factory; a sister of one of them is a prostitute. One boy, Ah-Ching, falls in love with the neighbor's girlfriend. When the neighbor goes away to sea, he thinks love has fallen into his lap. But the girl departs for Taipei instead, leaving him brokenhearted. He'll get over it, but these first devastating emotions will become part of what he is.

The spontaneity and feeling for life in this film are remarkable. Its viewpoint (and its own sensibility) is that of the working class or lower middle class youth: angry, vulnerable, rough-edged, perennially at odds with and abused by authority, bubbling with desire and ambition, eager to get on with things. The kid who plays Ah-Ching conveys the crudity and naiveté of someone capable of being cheated on the street about a nonexistent showing of a porno film ("In color, big screen!"), and the slyness and sensitivity of a youth who is already plotting against the world to gain the simplest things, like affection and warmth.

What do we find in the film? The drama of adolescence and maturity, the consequences of urbanization, the reality of class relations.

A Summer at Grandpa's (1984), scripted again by Chu T'ien-wen, is a more polished work, about a young boy and his little sister who spend their vacation with their grandparents in the country when their mother falls ill. The grandfather, rather stern, is a doctor. The social milieu is more elevated in this film, and the work as a whole a little softer, almost idyllic. The brother and sister make friends, have adventures over the course of a summer. Meanwhile other dramas are taking place: the grandfather forbids the kids' uncle, who is something of a black sheep, to marry his girlfriend. The local "madwoman," Han-tzu, who saves the little girl at one point, is raped and miscarries.

The film threatens to end somewhat too neatly and benignly, with the mother healthy again, the children returning to the city and the uncle's dramas more or less resolved, but Hou demonstrates at the last moment his depth and humanity. We see Han-tzu, the impoverished and tormented, walking down the road in the distance with a parasol. When the little girl calls out to her, she fails to respond. It is a moving and tragic conclusion.

One thinks of Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* from Iran (scripted by Abbas Kiarostami), also a story about children, which runs the risk too of

coming to an overly tidy conclusion. That film's final image, however, is of the poor Afghan balloon-seller, a peripheral character to that point, whose situation is fairly desperate. The director is aware and makes the spectator aware in an instant that there are circumstances more tragic and compelling than those faced by the central characters.

A City of Sadness (1989) represented Hou's international breakthrough—it won recognition at the Venice film festival—and, more importantly, it broke the silence on the tragic events of the post-war era. The February 28, 1947 massacre—during which Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist troops massacred between 18,000 and 28,000 native-born Taiwanese (according to a 1992 government task force report)—features prominently, if obliquely, in the film.

Hou's film, which follows the Lin family's story, is an ambitious attempt to dissolve history into dramatic and poetic terms. As such, it deserves special study. There are remarkable sequences. Hou depicts the activities of left-wing opponents of the Nationalist regime, doomed to fall under the heel of the regime. As always, he draws indelible portraits of gangsters and lowlifes. The scenes of political repression are chilling.

However, this film and *The Puppetmaster* (1993)—which treats the life and work of Li Tienlu, a Taiwanese master puppeteer, in the first half of the twentieth century—seem less successful than the more spontaneous, autobiographical works (*Boys from Fengkuei*, *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* [1985] and *Dust in the Wind* [1987]).

In the first place, when Hou turns to history and particularly to the left-wingers who suffered in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he becomes rather reverential and "correct." These scenes, while scrupulously and meticulously prepared and executed, simply do not come to life. They are not memorable, by and large.

It has been long understood by Marxists that whenever the imaginative artist turns from what he or she knows best, which tends to be the sphere of personal relations and the emotional atmosphere bound up with it, to the arena of objective historical and political problems, there is almost inevitably an artistic falling off, at least initially. The artist, as a rational being, is ahead of him or herself on the plane of the unconsciously felt and perceived. This is not of course an argument against such efforts, which are more than ever needed, but a recognition of the inherent pitfalls and contradictions of the process.

And there is another tendency, which makes its presence felt in the case of Hou Hsiao-hsien. How often does one find that once an artist hits his technical and formal stride, there is a lessening of the spontaneous and vital element in his work? Lines representing the two phenomena—technique and artistic vitality—should be plotted on a graph, to see at which point they intersect and then move away from one another in the careers of so many artists.

This is not a problem whose solution lies principally in the domain of aesthetics. It is bound up, for the most part, with social processes. The individual artist's trajectory within bourgeois society resembles that often followed by the artistic school or trend: first, rebellion, childish habits, excess, roughness, sincerity; next, official recognition, the discovery of a "classical" style, absorption by the cultural apparatus, loss of energy, harmlessness. Only the truly exceptional figure avoids this evolution.

With Hou, however, in addition to these virtually inevitable "occupational hazards," there are additional, historical factors one needs to take into consideration. The form this takes is his apparent difficulty in making a bridge between his contemporary "everyday" characters, who are lively and ready for anything, and his "historical" Taiwanese, who are either austerely leftist or all too willing to conform, to submit to any and all authority. Here is where the missing ingredient—political and historical perspective—comes into play. Hou's view of Taiwanese history is essentially tragic and pessimistic (and consequently, dramatically laborious and visually static). He cannot make sense of the "white terror" of the 1950s, except by holding the population responsible for putting up with it, and he cannot make sense of the present materialistic and empty culture, except by blaming the young people for absorbing it. (Hou's uncritical admirers may delude themselves, but *Millennium Mambo* is quite hostile to its central characters, perhaps deservedly so.)

To grasp the ideological and moral difficulties of the Taiwanese one would have to begin at the very least to make a study of the Chinese revolution and the Maoist regime, piercing their "communist" pretensions, exposing the role of Stalinism in betraying, disappointing and confusing masses of people in the region. If one were convinced that the only alternatives were American-style, predatory capitalism, on the one hand, and repressive state-bureaucratic "communism," on the other, that would be demoralizing indeed.

Some enlightening, some not so enlightening.

Le profit et rien d'autre! [*Profit and nothing but!*], directed by Raoul Peck (*Lumumba*) seems more or less a byproduct of the anti-globalization movement, as are a number of the other documentaries (*Suits and Savages*, *Life and Debt*, *Not for Sale*, *Women Workers of the World*, *T-shirt Travels*). Peck examines the misery of his home country, Haiti, and interviews a series of left French academics, along with American radical Immanuel Wallerstein, in an effort to establish the injustice and inequality of contemporary capitalist society.

The images of Haiti and some of the material Peck presents are valuable, but the overall tone and thrust of the work is extremely weak and wrong-headed. "Capital has won out, it has managed to convince us that it alone is the truth, it alone is morality, it alone knew how to do politics. Better still, it has convinced us that politics is no longer necessary," intones the director in a voice-over. Convinced who?

To a man, the academics presented believe firmly in the near omnipotence of the existing order, its ability to regulate itself and suppress or integrate opposition. Wallerstein declares that "class struggle has not disappeared," but that the mistake of opponents of capitalism over the past "200 years" has been their belief in the "certainty of history." In fact, Marxists have never relied on the certainty of the historical process and insisted on the decisive role of consciousness, but neither have they made a fetish of "uncertainty," in the manner of intellectual observers of the class struggle who are fortifying themselves against further "disappointments."

Peck wonders to himself, "Why make images? We've done everything, and the world hasn't changed.... Why make films?" The film ends, more or less, on this demoralized, and somewhat self-pitying note. Valuable images aside, the film is essentially made up of banalities and truisms, dominated by a moralizing tone that will not encourage anyone to take up a struggle against the conditions so strenuously denounced.

Suits and Savages (Dylan Howitt, Zoe Young) is an exposé of a World Bank project in a remote region of India, ostensibly aimed at preserving the environment and the endangered tiger. The filmmakers demonstrate, easily enough, that the program, administered by the Global Environment Facility, does nothing for the environment, the local residents or the animals. "Only the powerful in the village benefit," one resident explains. "They say they will do things for us, they never do." Some official or other says, "The World Bank needs to be more accountable," and that, unhappily, seems to be the film's general message.

L'Affaire Sofri (Jean-Louis Comolli, formerly of the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*) is a useful and intelligent work. In 1988 a witness suddenly appeared claiming that three leaders of the Italian leftist Lotta Continua group, including Adriano Sofri, had been responsible for the murder in 1972 of a Milan police inspector. The inspector had been accused by the left of responsibility or complicity in the death of the anarchist, Giuseppe Pinelli, who "jumped" from a window in police headquarters to his death in 1969.

The film essentially records a monologue by left academic Carlo Ginzburg, who has scrupulously exposed the case against Sofri. The

former left-wing leader's sentence of 22 years in prison was upheld by a court in Venice in October 2000. Ginzburg, who knew Sofri, declares, "I was convinced of his innocence." He explains that the prosecution of the former Lotta Continua leaders was a witch-hunt, a vendetta originating at the highest levels of the Italian state. He compares the conduct of the "repentant" witness, Leonardo Marino, a former Lotta Continua member, to the reactions of prisoners and witnesses during the Inquisition.

Ginzburg demonstrates that far from Marino having suddenly appeared in police headquarters one day to deliver his surprise confession in 1988 (as was claimed), he had had relations with police officials for weeks, including nighttime discussions. The authorities had sought Marion, not vice versa. It becomes obvious from the discrepancies in the testimony of Marino and eyewitnesses that the former was not even on the scene at the time of the killing. Why had he lied? Ginzburg has no definite answer. Marino obviously had experienced a "moral and religious crisis," turning his back on the left and his past.

There are other facts: much of the evidence, including the fatal bullet, has disappeared or been destroyed in police custody. Everything stinks of a frame-up.

Sofri himself, in a video clip from one of his trials, dismisses the idea of a high-level plot. Ginzburg is not so sure. "Conspiracies exist," he notes. He points out, intriguingly, that *La Repubblica*, a daily newspaper, has just run an interview with one Maletti, a key man in the Italian secret service in the 1970s, who claims that behind the bombings of the time were American intelligence forces. Faced with the radicalization of students and increasing numbers of workers in 1969, the Italian ruling elite and its US allies were attempting to create the conditions for a "Greek" solution, i.e., a coup d'état by elements within the military.

One does not learn a great deal from *August: a moment before eruption* (Avi Mograbi), but what one does learn is not flattering to Israeli society. Mograbi has an irritating style, perhaps patterned on that of Italy's Nanni Moretti (*Dear Diary*, *April*), which involves setting the filmmaker's not so terribly remarkable personality and observations at the center of his documentaries.

Mograbi takes his camera around Israel in the sweltering month of August and discovers a society perpetually on the verge of violence. Football crowds, onlookers at an arrest, crowds in a mall are tense, angry and often racist. A group of Jewish schoolchildren in a well-to-do neighborhood tell him that the "Arabs should burn." Mograbi interviews a group of Arab workers and they, in turn, blame their joblessness on immigrants, "niggers who take the jobs." No one comes off well.

"This is Israel," he says, "wherever you go, in public or private life everything is charged with violence, as though we faced an imminent disaster, a disaster with no forewarning." The disaster has indeed come, although there was plenty of forewarning.

Blind spot: Hitler's secretary (André Heller, Othmar Schmiderer) is one of those bizarre films about which one does not know quite what to say. It consists of interviews conducted with Traudl Junge, who was indeed Hitler's secretary between 1942 and the end of the war.

Junge, after 56 years of silence, decided to tell her story in 2001 (she has since died). What she has to say is enlightening in certain regards, but her own comprehension of the events remained limited and the filmmakers prove incapable of going beyond those limits. It is perhaps in the interest of "cinema verité" that they confine themselves to her words and her words only, but such self-imposed restrictions are counterproductive. The film would have been far more illuminating if its makers had offered an analysis of their own both of Nazism and those who went along with it.

Junge came to work for Hitler by accident, because, believe it or not, she won a typing competition in the offices of the German government where she was working. She describes herself at the time as "so ignorant." She defends herself at first, saying that she was only one of "millions who didn't see." She was "very subservient to a father figure." Her own father was "completely apolitical," but her grandfather was a general. One wants to know more about this family, whose atmosphere she refers to as "incredibly conformist."

Junge observes that Hitler believed himself to be guided by "great goals, great ideas," which she now considers "primitive." He never spoke in anti-Semitic terms, she asserts, but declared that "without him the West would not be able to resist Bolshevism." Hitler returned to this theme, his secretary explains, citing him: "It is impossible for Bolshevism to triumph, I am the only one who can prevent that." When one female visitor complained about seeing Jews in Austria being packed on a train, Hitler angrily dismissed the concern.

The latter half of the film is concerned with Hitler's last days in the bunker, where Junge was present. It is simply nightmarish, the ignominious collapse of the most filthy and barbaric regime the world has yet known.

Junge says that for years she justified her behavior on the grounds of her youth and ignorance. One day, she explains, she came across a monument to a girl who was martyred in the anti-fascist cause, a girl who was the same age as Junge when the latter went to work for Hitler. Obviously burdened by immense feelings of guilt, "It's no excuse to be young," she tells the camera.

To be continued