

Buenos Aires 4th International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 3

Drama, ideas and life

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

In his new film, *Time Out* (*L'emploi du temps*), French director Laurent Cantet (*Human Resources*) tells the story of a middle-aged man, Vincent (Aurélien Recoing), who has lost his job, but pretends to his wife and family that he has taken a new position with a United Nations agency in Switzerland. His lies become more complex, more difficult to sustain. He borrows money from his father, cons friends for more and hooks up briefly with a smuggler of illegal goods.

The film is loosely based on the case of Jean-Claude Romand, who fooled his family for 18 years, claiming to be a researcher for the World Health Organization, before his world collapsed and he murdered his wife and parents. Nothing so violent happens here.

Cantet is successful at establishing the reality of a man who spends his days essentially killing time, pretending to be going to meetings, conferences, (inevitably) talking on his cell phone, sleeping in his car, wandering around the corridors of office buildings. He is an observer in the world of work. In his deceptions, however, there is a psychotic element. One feels that from such an elaborate structure of lies (and swindling) to violence or suicide would not be an enormous jump. There is something a little disingenuous about the director's claim that he wanted to "erase the character's monstrous, pathological aspect. We wanted him to have a disconcerting banality."

In fact, the filmmaker's attitude to the central figure and his situation is not clear. One supposes that Cantet wishes to indicate the emptiness of so many people's working lives. In a sense, Vincent, doing nothing, "accomplishes" as much (earns money or appears to, satisfies his friends and family, gains prestige, sustains a certain lifestyle) as those spending their days engaged in alienating and relatively meaningless labor. He derives a certain nervous pleasure from his deception. Vincent is a man looking for a place in the world, yet the film criticizes that to which he seeks to belong. There is no obvious solution to his dilemma, nor need there be.

However, is the world of work simply a "busy diversion from a bottomless void of our own making," as a reviewer in the *Guardian* suggests, in praising Cantet's *Time Out*? Is all labor, even in the alienating conditions of modern capitalism, meaningless, a "busy diversion"?

Cantet paints his landscape of offices, motels, highway rest stops as though "we all know" and all agreed how cold and hellish such places are. His views seem shallow. If the present economic relations are simply absurd and nonsensical, hollow at their center, something to be rejected, then what is the prospect for a different life emerging?

One cannot but help hear echoes of the arguments of the anti-globalization movement in this work. That Vincent claims to be employed by an impersonal, probably ineffective and even sinister international development agency seems hardly coincidental. One feels a longing here

for the "good old days" of the national economy, small business, the life of the artisan.

The artist who can find no points of departure within the complexity of modern industry and life for another, more humane society has surely missed the point. As Engels noted, many years ago, "Active social forces work exactly like natural forces: blindly, forcibly, destructively, so long as we do not understand, and reckon with, them. But when once we understand them, when once we grasp their action, their direction, their effects, it depends only upon ourselves to subject them more and more to our own will, and by means of them to reach our own ends. And this holds quite especially of the mighty productive forces of today." Such conceptions, which many artists too once considered elementary, have largely been forgotten or rejected in intellectual circles, with harmful consequences.

The shallowness of the social analysis inevitably encourages taking the easy way out in the construction of the drama. Cantet has carefully and intelligently arranged certain details of his film, but he has failed to answer certain critical questions. What happened to Vincent at his last position? Under what circumstances did he leave? How did he decide to perpetrate this fraud? Did it cause him no internal crisis? The film begins after many of the decisive moments have already taken place. It is as though Dostoyevsky had begun *Crime and Punishment* after the "Crime" had already been committed, and one simply observed the working out of the "Punishment." Without the filmmaker having motivated Vincent's unusual actions or truly represented his dilemma in a compelling fashion, we watch his degeneration with little emotion.

The entire piece does not hold together. Cantet wants to remove the "monstrous, pathological" element, but that cannot really be done effectively. Vincent does not come across as the average white-collar employee, his actions are not in keeping with the social or psychological type. Cantet wants to have his cake and eat it too, to maintain a "disconcerting" atmosphere, in which almost anything is possible, and to insist on his character's "banality."

To a certain extent, from the fact of Jean-Claude Romand's ability to deceive his family for 18 years (!), we are being asked to accept that a Vincent would be a perfect deceiver, entirely comfortable and convincing at home, while engaged in increasingly bizarre and criminal activities "on the job." The Romand case is less fascinating for what it reveals about its central figure's pathology than for what it reveals about the ability of a wife to fool herself, for example, and about how two people can live under the same roof for years and know nothing about one another. Vincent's wife, naturally, is made to be attractive, smart and sensitive, yet she cannot see through a ridiculous tissue of lies that any perceptive woman, any woman truly in touch with her husband, could penetrate in five minutes.

Again, as with so many recent films (*Storytelling*, *In the Bedroom*,

Ghost World, *Monster's Ball*), the drama in *Time Out* simply does not stand up to analysis, it has not been thought through. It serves to illustrate an idea, and not necessarily a profound one. Cantet's film does not begin with life, but with a schema.

Workers, Peasants (Operai, contadini), directed by the well-known team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, is an absurdity. A group of performers, non-professional presumably, stands in the woods and reads monologues for two hours. The material comes from the pen of Elio Vittorini (*Le donne di Messina*), a left-wing Italian writer (1908-66). It recounts the story of a group of Italians who, at the end of the Second World War, decide to build together a new social life in the ruins of an abandoned village in northern Italy. Various dramas ensue, which will be incomprehensible to all but the most masochistic viewer. The piece is uninvolved, finally excruciating, pure charlatanism.

Straub and Huillet have represented a certain tendency, of artistic asceticism and the refusal to adapt to popular tastes, for several decades in European filmmaking.

I noted in 1998: "Straub-Huillet's first film, *Machorka-Muff* (1963), was based on a novel by Heinrich Böll. The film for which they are best known, even to this day, is *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), a love story about Bach and his second wife, as Straub described it. Straub-Huillet have made films based on Corneille's *Othon*, Schönberg's *Moses and Aaron*, Brecht's *The Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar* and Franz Kafka's *Amerika*. No one has challenged their intellectual seriousness or their commitment. Some, however, including the late R.W. Fassbinder, the German director who worked with Straub as an actor in the late 1960s, have criticized their unwillingness to make their material accessible to wider audiences."

In commenting on *From Today Until Tomorrow* (1997), based on a relatively obscure Schönberg opera composed in 1929, I wrote: "Still, it is difficult to be entirely enthusiastic about a project whose production one feels is permeated by rigidity, self-seriousness and a nearly religious attitude toward art. The work is remarkable for what it is, a film of a Schönberg opera, but there is something disturbing about left-wing artists so frightened of chaos, emotion and confusion, and finding it so difficult to reach, rather than intimidate, an audience."

These comments, as it turns out, were all too generous. To a certain extent, *From Today Until Tomorrow* and *Sicilia!* (1999, also based on the writings of Vittorini) deceived us. They were both relatively short, to the point, even accessible. Now with *Workers, peasants* (no less!) Straub-Huillet have inflicted on us their "maximum program." Two hours of flatly delivered, unintelligible nonsense. And people politely sit through this at film festivals.

This passes for "dialectical" art, for "communist" art, as the film's presenter described it in Buenos Aires. Well, Straub-Huillet have certainly perfected the "alienation effect"; the new work is indeed alienating. They have not, however, after some decades of work, proven able to dramatize even the *most elementary* human emotions or situations. Or to convince anyone of anything. If such a thing as "sectarianism" in art exists, Straub and Huillet belong in that category.

The pair are possessed by a messianism. They believe they are the only true filmmakers on earth. But a messianism toward what end? This is a quote: "We must make specific films, for specific languages, dealing with specific questions. We must reinvent borders, destroy the Europe of Dr. Goebbels. We are the only European filmmakers, filmmakers of European nations." Long live borders! Long live the European nation-state! This is fairly dire.

Little more needs to be said about Straub and Huillet. To those who continue to be deceived, so much the worse.

The films of Youssef Chahine represent something of an antidote to Straub-Huillet. Chahine (born in 1926), whose most recent film, *Silence... on tourne* (*Silence ... We're Rolling*), was screened in Buenos Aires, is a

veteran Egyptian filmmaker. He makes audacious, extravagant films. One does not easily forget the scene in *The Other* (1999) in which the hero's sexy mother and some scheming Islamic fundamentalist hold a "virtual meeting" at the top of the Eiffel Tower. About *The Other* I commented: "Corruption, fundamentalism, globalization, mother-love, computers, 'virtual reality'—this film has it all! It ends tragically, but by that time one's head is spinning. One of the characters, I can't remember which one, says at one point, 'Technology is really something!' Yes, and so is this film."

Silence ... on tourne is a musical comedy set in present-day Cairo, in which a famous singer, Malak (the Tunisian performer Latifa), whose artistry has isolated her, becomes prey to a penniless fortune-hunter. She has a communist driver and a Nasserite daughter (her husband has left her). When someone says, "The price of success is solitude," the reply comes, "But even Lenin was married." And so on. Most memorable perhaps is a musical number set in the subway, something out of *West Side Story*. Or perhaps the scene in which jet-skis start flying over an island. In the end the adventurer is exposed and love more or less conquers all. The film is not the be all and end all, but its subversive attitude toward almost everything is infectious.

In an interview published in *Libération*, Chahine remarked, "We live in a veritable hysteria about money in Egypt. We have laws that encourage immorality and corruption. The most admired people are businessmen.... There is also this rise in fundamentalism.... Today we are reaching the heights of religiosity, with all the girls who are demanding to take the veil, who ask to become slaves.... I am not trying to shock. But when there is an excess of religiosity, it is necessary to fight to the end." Good for him.

Camel(s) is an intelligently made film from South Korea. Directed by Park Ki-yong, producer of *To the Starry Island* (Park Kwangsu) and director of *Motel Cactus* (1997), the film follows a couple conducting an affair over the course of the weekend. He at least is married. The two are "camels" presumably in the sense that they can get by on very little sustenance. The film is filled with silences. The lines are few and far between and deliberately banal. About the town they visit: "Were you here before? Once, when I was in college." Later, improbably: "I see we have a lot in common."

They go to a karaoke joint, where they finally kiss. They sleep together, and later eat. "Do you like noodles? Yes, all kinds of noodles." They wonder what would have happened if they had met earlier. In the penultimate sequence the silences grow even longer. "I don't like boiled fish much." Finally, he asks, "Can I call you again?" She never answers.

As a picture of decent, ordinary, highly repressed and stifled people the film is useful. However, one remains a little suspicious of such exaggerated portraits, which always convey an air of superiority. The task of the artist is not to accept what appears on the surface. It should be assumed that every human being has hidden depths; everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt.

Flower Island is also from South Korea, by first-time feature director Song Il-gon. It concerns three women—a singer with throat cancer, a girl who has just self-aborted in a public toilet and a prostitute—who escape the harsh city and meet accidentally in the snow-filled countryside. The prostitute is bound for Flower Island, where "all pain and sorrow disappears," and the other two decide to accompany her.

At first the film threatens to be merely irritating, as the circumstances of the three are pushed in the spectator's face. "Flower Island" turns out to be more a state of mind than anything else, and that is rather weak, but the three women turn out to be relatively appealing, as do some of the characters they encounter en route.

In *Mirror Image*, by the Taiwanese director Hsiao Ya-chuan (his first feature as well), the son of a pawn-shop owner runs the store while his father is in hospital. His girlfriend reads palms, but his were scraped clean in a motor scooter accident. "You've escaped your fate," she tells him.

Apparently not. Aside from running the store rather ruthlessly, he becomes secretly involved with a woman who sells goods on the subway. The young man is selfish and unappealing, the film rather cold and passive; further evidence of the impasse in Taiwanese cinema (the film was produced by Hou Hsiao-hsien).

A Place on Earth (Artur Aristakisyan) is further proof, if further proof be needed, that life in post-Soviet Russia is a nightmare. A group of vagabonds and derelicts inhabit a shelter in Moscow, presided over by a fanatical leader who preaches the love of everyone for everyone. The residents live in filth, with all their offspring around them. This is the "Temple of Love." Periodically, a brutal squad of policemen come through and rough everyone up, looking for drugs. The film consists of one horror after another. The leader castrates himself; his one remaining follower says, "I will stay with you to the end of the world." One of the disillusioned, however, tells him, "You use your weakness to squeeze love out of people."

Later, we learn that he has been seen lining up for his pension and that he mostly watches television. "Did he need to go through all that to become an ordinary person?" one of his former followers asks. The filmmaker is apparently overwhelmed by the present situation, and incapable of making sense of it. This is the latest in a series of Russian films conveying this general sentiment.

Recent "Neapolitan cinema" was highlighted at the Buenos Aires festival. It is impossible to judge the entire trend on the basis of seeing only two of the films, but they were not impressive. *L'Uomo in più* (Paolo Sorrentino) is a silly film about two men who have the same name: a fading, ridiculous crooner and a would-be soccer coach. The director has chosen to make nearly everything and everyone grotesque and unsympathetic, and the result is a caricature.

Estranei alla massa (Vincenzo Marra) is a study of seven fanatical followers of the Naples football club over the course of one day. As a travelogue the film has some interest, and there are amusing moments, but as a whole it is not penetrating or critical enough. One learns all too little about the implications of its subject matter. The connection between the decline of the left-wing parties, the political alienation felt by wide layers of the Italian population and the devotion to a football team might have been a starting point.

Kwik Stop (Michael Gilio) is an "American independent film," a "road movie" which aims to be different. It isn't, at least sufficiently. Its concerns largely remain small and secondary. Although not the most self-absorbed of such films, the filmmaker fails to convince the spectator that he has really thought about what is going on in the US or at least made that the basis of rejecting worn-out genres.

To be continued



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