

Buenos Aires 4th International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 1

Changed conditions and some of the same problems

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This is the first in a series of articles on the Buenos Aires 4th International Festival of Independent Cinema.

The fourth Buenos Aires independent film festival held April 18-28 took place under the transformed economic and social conditions that prevail in Argentina. In December, in response to the effort by the government of Fernando de la Rúa to impose austerity measures, a popular revolt erupted. The looting of supermarkets and stores and confrontations with police took place throughout the country. At least 26 people died in the street fighting and following a mass demonstration in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, De la Rúa was forced to flee the presidential palace.

After three efforts to form a government failed within only hours or days, Peronist Eduardo Duhalde was appointed president in early January. The new government announced the devaluation of the peso by nearly 30 percent on January 7, opening a new round of attacks on the living standards of workers and middle class people.

The peso has now fallen 70 percent in relation to the US dollar; prices have risen by more than 40 percent, devastating wages and pensions. During the first week of April alone, the cost of goods and services rose by 3.5 percent. Three million people are officially unemployed, more than 20 percent of the workforce. More than 200,000 workers have lost their jobs since January 1. Thirty thousand shops in the Buenos Aires area have closed. A government survey indicates that 49 percent of the population is living beneath the poverty line, 56 percent of its children. The International Monetary Fund, as a condition of new loans, is demanding further severe cuts in social spending.

In April, at the time of the resignation of yet another economic minister, Duhalde declared that if his proposals were rejected by parliament, only God knew what would happen. This was a confession by the ruling elite and its political spokesmen of political and moral bankruptcy; they have no progressive solutions to Argentina's crisis.

Duhalde will not submit to an election, but instead intends to serve out the last two years of De la Rúa's terms, without any popular vote.

The slogan of the anti-government demonstrations in December was, "Throw them [the politicians] all out," and indeed none of the Argentine political parties has any serious credibility or base of mass support. At the same time, however, the crisis of perspective and leadership that afflicts the working class everywhere has prevented Argentine workers from intervening in an independent fashion to this point.

The difference in the physical appearance of Buenos Aires from 2001 to 2002 was palpable. There are far more homeless people on the streets, and street vendors selling trinkets are everywhere. Many shops, particularly those dealing in imported goods, are closed. Lines form around currency-changing outlets, as people change pesos to dollars and dollars to pesos.

Desperate looking people hold up signs offering to stand on line for you outside the National Bank, where the exchange rate is the best. Parking valets, one is told, now carry truncheons.

The intellectual and psychological change is even more palpable. The more privileged sections of the youth are leaving the country in droves, for Europe or America. That is one response. There are also many sad and depressed faces. None of this is surprising. However, there are also those who are struggling seriously with the implications of the crisis. It was possible to hold discussions this year not simply on the Argentine crisis, but on a year of upheavals—the September 11 terrorist attack and its aftermath, the Bush administration's predatory and reckless policies around the world—as well as the state of international filmmaking and the implications of the global crisis of capitalism for artists and intellectuals.

The Buenos Aires independent film festival itself was nearly a victim of the economic crisis, having lost at one point 80 percent of its funding. Only a last-minute rescue effort, assistance from the Rotterdam film festival and some generous contributions of time and money saved this year's edition of the Buenos Aires event. Organizers are not at all certain that they can duplicate that effort next year. That would be a blow.

Included in this year's material on the Buenos Aires film festival, therefore, will be not only comments on a number of films, but the record of some discussions on the political and social state of affairs.

How have Argentine filmmakers and intellectuals generally responded to the crisis? None of the Argentine films screened had been made since the December events, but the processes of social polarization and economic devastation for masses of people have long been at work. The popular explosion was the inevitable result of increasingly intolerable conditions. Why should it have taken anyone by surprise, as it appears to have done?

We noted last year that the new Argentine directors, by and large, suffered from the same afflictions as their counterparts in other parts of the world: a certain superficiality, a considerable dose of self-involvement, a lack of urgency, a concern with the secondary, even the trivial. Even when these new films touch on social questions or conditions they tend to be somewhat complacent, indicating that the real interests of the filmmakers lie somewhere else. One does not feel that the artists are engaged in a life-and-death struggle with reality and themselves, committed to get at the truth at all costs. If the alienation of the youth, or sections of the working class, is a recurring theme such subject matter does not constitute astonishingly new territory. The historical context, no matter how it might be imbedded in the work, which would make the feelings of alienation comprehensible is almost universally absent.

There is no reason to change one's opinion after seeing films like *Un día*

de suerte ([*A Lucky Day*] Sandra Gugliotta) or *Cabeza de palo* ([*Stickhead*] Ernesto Baca), as opposed to last year's *Sólo por hoy* (Ariel Rotter), or *Vagón fumador* (Véronica Chen), or *Taxi, un encuentro* (Gabriela David), or *La Libertad* (Lisandro Alonso).

Again, the films, even if they represent different ideological points on the map, share some of the same characteristics: they are intelligently done, with a degree of sensitivity and compassion (and artistry), but they tend to skim the surface, taking the immediate forms of appearance of social life for granted and failing to investigate or go beneath them. In the end, they tend to be somewhat shallow and schematic takes on the condition of disaffected young people. There is little here that we do not already know, that does not appear in journalistic accounts of the Argentine malaise. In other words, these films tend to be further expressions of the confusion—the “at sea-ness”—that they are examining, rather than a coming to terms with the phenomenon. They lack truly serious purchase on the subject matter.

In *A Lucky Day*, Elsa (Valentina Bassi) earns a living by doing odd (and humiliating) jobs: handing out flyers for “anti-stress” tablets to extremely stressed out motorists and pedestrians, dressing up in ridiculous outfits for fast-food restaurants and so on. What does she want? “To be happy, to do the things I like, to have a little money, to be with someone I like.” Entirely reasonable demands.

Having had a brief affair with an Italian, Elsa determines to remove herself from the succession of dead-end jobs, a drug-dealing boyfriend and the Argentine crisis, by setting off for Italy. In so doing, she is ironically reversing the route of her grandfather, who came to Argentina from Italy to escape poverty and make a new life.

The grandfather is an old anarchist or some such, who has maintained his anti-establishment views. Protests are going on in Buenos Aires. Elsa ignores all that. The filmmaker is perhaps critical of her lack of interest in protest and politics. But the approach is too narrow, leaving only two choices: moralizing and pointing fingers at the girl, or adapting to her stance. Involved in her dilemma is the *objective* problem of a generation, and an international generation. And one is not convinced that joining this or that protest, militant or not, tires burning or not, necessarily offers a way out. Again, without being given some sense of the historical circumstances which account for the present state of mind, one cannot go very far. The film lacks the “pathos of distance.”

A Lucky Day raises interesting questions, but does not go terribly deeply into them. The scenes of the working class kids strike one as a bit false and stereotyped, a middle class notion of what such young people are like. The drug-dealing and so on are entirely predictable.

The film has that feel of a sociological analysis being “fleshed out,” and even if the analysis is a worthy one, this is not the same thing as advanced art. Its strength lies primarily in the presence of Valentina Bassi, who is a magnetic performer. When she is left more or less alone, without contrived dialogue, the film comes to life. (Bassi has the opportunity to become a movie star; one only hopes she will not take advantage of it.) In the contrast between the spontaneity of her performance and the somewhat lifeless structure of the work lies the essence of the problem: how to work over and transform *aesthetically* the current situation in all its complexity, tragedy and potential. This is a challenge that confronts film artists everywhere, not simply in Argentina.

Cabeza de palo [*Stickhead*], directed by Ernesto Baca, is a self-conscious and essentially silly Argentine film about a bus driver who seems to end up doing pornographic films. Various unconvincing “erotic” and disoriented interludes take place, which only convince one that the filmmaker is trying much too hard. This is also an international tendency.

To respond to the immediate social crisis is perhaps a simpler task for the documentary filmmaker. He or she may have an advantage at the moment in Argentina, as elsewhere. For the creators of fiction, it will take time for the implications of the enormous changes that have taken place in

world affairs to seep into the unconscious and enter the artist's “bone and marrow.”

Las Palmas, Chaco (Alejandro Fernández Mouján) was one of the more accomplished works. It examines the consequences of the closure of a sugar mill in 1991, the only major employer in a remote region of Argentina. The story is familiar, in one sense. We see footage of the factory and its assets being auctioned off in 1993. The auctioneer announces this is the “new Argentina,” blessed with deregulation and privatization. The consequences for the workers are dire.

The angry and frustrated voices are clear enough: “We distrust even our own shadow.” “I’ve been unemployed since the mill closed down.” One worker explains that he began cutting cane at nine years of age and that he had received a letter from “the social security people” informing him that they had no records of his employment, “as if I’d never worked.” The politicians are scorned: “The people at the top get educated. Those who have the money will never give you a chance.”

One former mill worker, who owns a small plot of land, is being harassed by a local policeman, who wants to drive him off his property: “If this is really a democracy, I don’t know why the law sides with these thugs in uniform.” A woman tells the filmmaker: “The governor thinks we’re ants. Because you throw them some sugar and bread and that’s it. But we’re human beings.” Another says, “We have the right to live like the governor lives, like the president lives. They have everything.” The filmmaker was obviously moved, and so are we.

H.I.J.O.S. (Carmen Guarini, Marcelo Céspedes) is a documentary recording the activities of the organization with that acronym for a name—Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Children for Identity and Justice and Against Forgetting and Silence). The group brings together some of the children of those who were taken away and murdered, 30,000 or more, by the US-backed military dictatorship in Argentina between 1976 and 1983.

One of the main activities of the group is to organize exposés, “escraches,” of surviving members of the military regime, military and naval officers, those who carried out torture. The young people go to the individual’s neighborhood, put up posters describing the crimes and then assemble outside his house. “Murderer! Prison for murderers! Prison for torture! We’ll follow you, like the Nazis, everywhere!” they shout.

We hear different, tragic accounts of children whose parents were in different left-wing and guerrilla groups, the Montoneros, the ERP (People’s Revolutionary Army) and others. Children who never saw their parents again.

In one of the most moving moments, a young woman goes to her father’s grave. There is already a message there: “For you could never bear misery, exploitation and injustice, you fought with others and decided to die on your feet and not live on your knees, we’re proud of you—Your daughters.”

Many of those involved in torture and murder, including the “death flights,” in which prisoners were thrown into the sea from helicopters, continued in the post-dictatorship governments of Alfonsín and Menem. One is De la Rúa’s brother-in-law.

The filmmakers perhaps have pretensions of investigating problems of identity, the relations between the generations, past and present. One does not sense much that is profound or innovative in that somewhat strained effort, but the film’s straightforward presentation of the historical tragedy and its consequences is more than justification enough for its existence.

Matanza (Grupo Documental 1° de Mayo), a film about the struggle of some of the most impoverished in the province of Buenos Aires, will be dealt with separately, along with an interview with its makers. A short comment on *Ciudad de María* ([Mary’s City] Enrique Bellande), another documentary, is posted today (May 15).

Two Argentine films, the products of another generation, are worthy of discussion, well beyond the limits of this article. *Palo y hueso* ([Stick and

bone, 1968] Nicolás Sarquis), based on a story by Juan José Saer, involves the relations between three people, an older man, his son and a young woman, in some desolate rural location. The old man essentially obtains the woman as part of business deal. He means to make her his domestic slave. She and the son, however, had previously gone around together. A conflict arises. The young couple try to run away, but a flood prevents their leaving. The old man comes and pleads with them; his son agrees that they will return, but adds, "Don't put your hands on her again."

The film contains a number of memorable moments. One remembers the beautiful black-and-white shots of the couple walking down the road and their waiting, patiently, in a doorway in the rain for a bus. One assumes that the intensity present in the film and many of its images had something to do with the times, and the spirit of revolt that was so widespread.

An even more remarkable film is Manuel Antin's *La cifra impar* ([Odd number, 1962]. Based on a short story, "Letters From Mother," by the great Argentine author, Julio Cortázar, the film recounts the story of a love triangle in which the third party imposes himself even beyond death.

Luis and Laura are living in Paris, leading a boring, conventional existence. One day they receive a letter from his mother in Buenos Aires, informing them that his brother Nicko is arriving soon in Europe. Nicko, however, has been dead for some time. In flashback, we learn that Luis and Nicko were both in love with Laura. She was engaged to Nicko, the sickly, delicate one, the "real artist." Luis stole her away. When she broke the news to Nicko, he said, "I'll remain stuck to you all."

In the present, Laura tells her husband, "We made him suffer, we killed him, Luis." Neither apparently take the mother's crazy letter seriously, but they each go surreptitiously to see if the dead man arrives at the train station. "He's everywhere, a third in bed. Him, so insignificant, everywhere, impossible to exterminate."

There are various sides to the story, including the purely psychological one. But there is more to it than that. The film, a rich, dark melodrama, is all atmosphere, tension, semi-Gothic overtone. Everything—including the décor, the furniture—speaks of the suffocating bourgeois existence these people live, a way of living that killed off the only one with sensitivity—but in reality failed to kill him off. Some things are unkillable. *La cifra impar* contains as much protest and insight (and optimism, in a peculiar fashion) as any film I have seen in a long time.

To be continued



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