

San Francisco International Film Festival 2002—Part 1

Rewards, disappointments and surprises

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This is the first in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival (April 18-May 2)

The recent San Francisco International Film Festival (April 18 to May 2) screened some 180 films (112 features and 68 shorts) from 46 countries. As always, such an event, or the portion of it that any individual critic is able to experience, provides rewards, disappointments and surprises. It might be useful to set out briefly once again the premises from which one begins in making such determinations.

A Marxist criticism includes the understanding that filmmakers attempt to make sense of the world and their own lives, but not under conditions of their own choosing, nor, in that sense, with ideological and aesthetic instruments entirely of their own choosing.

To sort out the groundbreaking artistic effort from the honest but limited—or worse, from the obviously fraudulent—is one of the tasks of the critic. Another is to interpret the work as part of an historical and social whole, to see it as a response by definite social layers and tendencies—in the form of affirmation, criticism, open opposition—to the existing state of things. The overall purpose is to offer some “critical illumination of the road,” as Trotsky termed it.

We live at a time of rapid and breathtaking changes, which have not yet been understood or even properly registered by masses of people. It is no libel against mankind to observe that the gap between human consciousness and objective reality inevitably grows *larger*, to begin with, under such conditions. If in the field of art this tendency is even more pronounced today, one has to take into account the character of the relatively privileged social layers concerned and the filthy moral and cultural atmosphere that has prevailed in recent decades. At present art, by and large, is indeed “lagging behind.”

For the contemporary filmmaker, more specifically, it is no mean feat to penetrate the official mystification of harsh class realities, on the one hand, and resist the enormous, sometimes seductive, pressures of the media-entertainment apparatus, on the other. Nonetheless, this is what must be undertaken by the film artist who wishes his or her work to strike deeply and to endure.

Zhang Yimou (born in 1951) is probably the Chinese filmmaker most familiar to international audiences. He came to prominence in the early 1990s, with films such as *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) and *To Live* (1994). In retrospect, his earliest works, *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Ju Dou* (1990), may be among his best. A number of these films were harshly critical of a patriarchal, repressive Chinese society, with its almost semi-feudal residues of conformism and submission. Although the films were often historical pieces, the implications for modern Chinese society were obvious. Zhang ran into difficulties with the censor as a result.

His most recent work, *Happy Times*, is his second in a contemporary urban setting (*Keep Cool* [1997] is the other). A middle-aged bachelor, Zhao (played by well-known comedian Zhao Benshan), is wooing a rotund divorcee who has an unpleasant, lazy son and a blind stepdaughter,

a masseuse. The girl, Wu, is waiting for her father to return and pay for an operation to repair her vision.

To impress the woman, Zhao claims to be the owner of the Happy Times Hotel. In fact, Zhao and a friend have outfitted an abandoned bus as a trysting place for young lovers. When the bus is hauled away, Zhao is without an income or a “position.” Pressed by the stepmother to take Wu off her hands, Zhao ends up more or less as the blind girl’s guardian. To maintain the fiction that he runs a hotel, Zhao and his former workmates fix up a corner of an abandoned factory as a massage room and pretend to come to Wu as customers. In the end, she sees through the fakery, but has developed respect and love for those trying to help her.

Happy Times has attractive qualities. As always, Zhang has presided over a carefully and beautifully crafted production. Pictorial clarity and accuracy are his watchwords. Zhao Benshan is charming as the slightly baffled, well-meaning “bachelor father.”

Nonetheless, one is far from satisfied. The fable is a fragile one to begin with, and becomes more tenuous and more strained as it proceeds. There is something slightly unreal about the work, and internally inconsistent. It feels as though it had been run through a cheese-cloth, or some kind of filter.

The characters themselves present problems. Zhao is kindly and benevolent, if mischievous and a little deceitful, the friends are all kindness and bumbling concern, the girl saintly, all too saintly. The wicked stepmother and her wretched son are caricatures.

On the one hand, Zhang indicates a condition of economic distress and devastation—an empty factory with rusting equipment, laid-off workers scrambling to get by, everyone generally desperate for funds—and, on the other, he paints a picture of friendly and benign relations reigning within the population, at least its “lower orders.” However, the opposite of cynically or insensitively dismissing people’s difficulties is not prettifying their behavior. There is something patronizing about the approach to the group of laid-off workers. They are “amusing,” ineffectual and a bit clownish.

Of course when considering the weaknesses of Zhang’s work and that of any other serious Chinese filmmaker in regard to critical social problems, it has to be acknowledged, in all fairness, that historical events have conspired to place immense ideological obstacles in the artists’ path. There is obviously great confusion over the nature of the 1949 revolution, its subsequent development and the present regime in Beijing, over “communism,” capitalism and democracy, over which road shows a way forward out of poverty and backwardness.

This, however, does not excuse what is by now a genuinely complacent streak in Zhang’s films. How much of that has been imposed or encouraged, so to speak, by external pressure (official public opinion in China, the threat of censorship, intimidation of various types, etc.) and how much is “organic” (Zhang’s own absorption into the international film industry) is difficult to say. In any event, the films have the air of someone who has reconciled himself to the status quo and has only

relatively cheap advice to give to his audience: keep cool, use your head, be kind to one another, don't become absorbed by the pursuit of money, etc.

In *Happy Times* Zhang seems to be arguing for the values of solidarity and community versus greed and commercialization. But not powerfully or persuasively, rather in the manner of someone who has relatively little confidence in his cause. After all, the question would inevitably arise: what would be the social basis and perspective of such a cause? His moral remonstrations seem weak and ineffective when counterposed to the potentially vast dimensions of the social tragedy unfolding in China with the introduction of "free market" conditions.

In a question and answer period following the screening of his film in San Francisco, Zhang commented: "It is difficult to deal with certain social issues. We still have censorship in China. You can't go too deep." He was asked about the presence of advertising signs and billboards in virtually every scene. "There are so many advertisements [in China] you can't get away from them," he replied.

In response to a direct question about social inequality in China, Zhang responded, "The disparity between rich and poor is very wide. It makes you angry when you read about [official] corruption. Most of the population is living a very elementary life. Over time this disparity will decrease, that's what I hope for." To say the least, such vague hopes and illusions are not the firmest basis for art—or anything else, for that matter.

Another Chinese film, circling around some of the same issues, *Go for Broke* (Wang Guangli), is a fictional reenactment of the efforts of six laid-off state employees to establish their own enterprise, a property renovation company. The leading figures clearly have a good deal of capital put aside, accumulated how one does not know. In any event, we watch the trials and tribulations of starting a new business, including dealings with crooked contractors, money woes, family problems.

In one scene that stands out a demanding client/businessman screams abuse at the workers renovating his home, complaining about wasted nails and what not. For a moment the brutish social picture comes into focus, but only for a moment.

In the end a winning lottery ticket may help save the day. This is appropriate at least, the prospects for a small business appearing not too bright without some sort of divine intervention.

It is not clear what director Wang Guangli wanted to prove, other than that determination and pluck pay off in the end. Since, in reality, they often do not, the film's message would seem to be of limited value to the spectator.

Failan, from South Korea, is in many ways a fine film. It recounts the sad story, or stories, of a hapless smalltime hood, Kangjae, and Failan, a mainland Chinese girl trying to stay in Korea, with whom he enters into a paper marriage for money. They never actually meet, the only thing she receives from him is a red scarf.

After the phony marriage Failan is taken to a club where she sees her future, as a bar-girl. When she coughs up blood, the club-owner wants nothing to do with her and she is given instead a job in a laundry, where she works like a demon. The old Korean woman with whom she works comments, "You're a walking washing machine."

Meanwhile Kangjae's life is falling apart. His boss is a petty despot, who beats the members of his gang when anything goes wrong. "You're not even human," he tells Kangjae, as he thrashes him. Later they get drunk together, and when the boss sees his rival, ends up killing him. Kangjae agrees to take the rap.

Failan is getting sicker. She asks the employment agency owner to whom she owes a good deal of money if she can have five months off from the laundry, to get healthy. He replies, "I can't even wait a month." She speaks to Kangjae's photo, which was given her: "Do you know how scared I am right now?" At one point she goes to see her "husband," but he is just in the process of being arrested.

Failan does not enter into Kangjae's consciousness until she dies. As her husband, he is notified by the authorities and given her ashes. He beats up the agency owner who worked Failan like a slave. The laundress berates him, "How could you show up now? She waited for you. She worked so hard." He has two letters from her. In the first she thanks him for the scarf. In the second, written from the hospital, she writes, "I am dying. Would you come visit me when I am dead?" He weeps on reading the letter. Earlier he has said, "There are so many bastards in the world." Now he decides to no longer be one of the "bastards," to go back to his fishing village. When he tells the boss that he will not go to prison for him, the tragic denouement is set in motion.

Choi Min-Shik, a popular Korean actor apparently, is remarkable as Kangjae. The sadness of the girl's condition is painful. She has nothing, and expects very little. The only thing she asks is for a favor to be performed after she is dead. She dies utterly alone.

The film reminds one a little of South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-dong's *Green Fish* and *Peppermint Candy*, in its being a trifle too neatly sewn up, a trifle sentimental, but above all in its emotional force and strong sense of protest.

The majority of Japanese art films continue to make little or no impression on me, including the efforts of Hirokazu Kore-eda (*Maborosi*, *After Life*), which are much admired in critical circles. His latest film, *Distance*, concerns the aftermath of a terrorist attack carried out by a religious sect calling itself the Ark of Truth. Presumably Kore-eda was inspired by the 1995 incident in which members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult released sarin, a nerve gas, in the Tokyo subway system, killing 11 people and injuring more than 5,000.

In *Distance*, family members of the dead perpetrators, on their annual memorial pilgrimage to the remote cabin where the cult used to live, have their van stolen. They are obliged to spend the night in the place, with one dissident member of the group who has also turned up. In flashbacks the film attempts to trace the paths of the cult members to their fateful and fatal decision. *Distance* provides some sense of the cult members' alienation from society, as well as their personal pathologies.

However, the film offers no insight into the circumstances which produced either the alienation or the pathology. It remains largely on the surface, and if one subtracted the relatively meaningless silences, its insights could be compressed into half the time. One still has the overriding sense that Kore-eda is attempting to be impressive, rather than to illuminate. He is obviously gifted, but there is no clear sign that he has a grasp of contemporary society. His insights are scattered, inflated. The result is something cold and abstract.

Somewhere on Earth (Kiseki Hamada) is a considerably weaker work. Silly and pretentious, the film follows the activities of a reporter on some dreadful "info" magazine, who quits his job and opens a peculiar shop, stocked with odds and ends which no one is expected to buy. "It's not that kind of a shop," he tells a potential customer. This "End of the world" store attracts Koma, a high school girl. The pair eventually flee the city. The film is self-involved, complacent, lazy. Again, alienation, particularly of the youth. Again, little insight.

French writer Marguerite Duras (1914-96) may not have been one of the literary giants of the twentieth century, but she deserves a better fate than the dreadful *Cet amour-là* (Josée Dayan). The fiction film recounts her relationship with Yann Andréa Steiner, the man 38 years her junior with whom she lived from 1980 until her death in 1996. He worked as her secretary and also acted in her films. Duras (*Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour*; *India Song*, *Moderato Cantabile*) was a representative of the *nouveau roman* and a leftist. According to a biographer, "After the May 1968 students' revolt Duras's writing grew increasingly abstract." There's much more to be said on that score, but one would not know that from Dayan's film.

Cet amour-là is the sort of film that begs for parody. Duras (Jeanne

Moreau) is presented as continually contradictory and spiteful, largely for their own sake. A few examples: “People who don’t like leeks mystify me.” (Surely, a line to remember!) “I love poplars. I love to dance. People who can’t dance are disturbing.” “I say fascinating things and you don’t listen.” “Writing makes you savage, it’s unrelenting.” “We need money. Let’s write a book: ‘The Book That Never Was.’” “Let’s find words to talk about our love, maybe there aren’t any.” She drives Steiner out of the apartment once in a while, shouting, “I don’t know who you are,” but he always comes back, it’s not entirely clear why. There obviously was something to Duras, at least at one point. One looks in vain for what that was in this film.

Stalin, Red God is one more (minor) contribution to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the October Revolution and the former Soviet Union. This cynical documentary, by Frederick Baker, is an incoherent amalgam of material, purporting to examine the quasi-religious devotion that Joseph Stalin has generated. In contemporary Georgia a nationalist cult reveres Stalin’s image; Stalin’s grandson, who is banned from political life, chooses his favorite “Socialist Realist” portrait of his grandfather. Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, the artists and former Soviet “dissidents,” who have made a lucrative career for themselves out of camp and kitsch, are trotted out. Boris Yefimov, the Pravda cartoonist, now 100 years old, expresses mixed feelings about the man who had his brother executed, but spared his life.

It is impossible to see what argument or analysis is being made here. Everything is reduced to the level of a sneer. The filmmaker obviously has no idea what to make of Stalin, his historical role as gravedigger of the revolution, the degeneration and eventual demise of the USSR or any other pertinent matter.

To be continued



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