San Francisco International Film Festival 2002—Part 3

Pasolini and other questions

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This is the third and final part of a series on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival (April 18-May 2).

The remarkable Italian poet, novelist and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini was murdered under peculiar circumstances in 1975 at the age of 53. Pasolini considered himself a Marxist and possessed one of the most penetrating minds of his generation. His legacy is a contradictory one, but his finest literary and cinema work is among the most acute and lyrical of the postwar era.

Pasolini first came to prominence in the 1950s as a poet and then a novelist. His great love and the subject of so many of his works was the slum youth of Rome, mostly of peasant background. After writing film scripts for Federico Fellini, Mauro Bolognini and others, Pasolini made his first and possibly his best film, *Accattone*, in 1961.

He directed Laura Betti (born 1934) in five films. She played a leading role in *Teorema* (1968)—screened at the San Francisco film festival—another of Pasolini's most extraordinary works. A young man shows up at the home of a prominent Milanese businessman and seduces everyone: father, mother, daughter, son, maid (Betti). He leaves as mysteriously as he arrived. After his departure every member of this bourgeois household, having been touched by something pure and absolute, undergoes remarkable changes—the maid most dramatically.

Once in a letter Pasolini, who was gay, called Betti his "non-carnal wife." She, in turn, took on the role of keeper of the flame after his death, and has operated the Pasolini Fund, which archives and preserves his work, since 1980. Now, decades after his murder, Betti has directed a documentary expressing her feelings and thoughts about her dead friend: *Pier Paolo Pasolini* (the full translation of the Italian title is *Pier Paolo Pasolini and the reason of a dream*), also presented in San Francisco.

"This is the poet that I loved, whether consciously or not. Certainly more, far more than I thought. But one finds these things out later. During, everything is more difficult, often you don't want to know," declares Betti in the opening of the film.

The documentary contains footage of Pasolini being interviewed, clips from his film, comments by his contemporaries, shots of his funeral. He tells a group of Communist youth "never to accept anything without questioning." He criticizes consumerism, the "new fascism," and advocates "progress" rather than "development." Pasolini speaks of the "desperate and tense relationship between poetry and reality." He declares, "I choose opposition," but demands "not merely a superficial social denunciation" in art and poetry, "but a profound, total ideology, a true vision of the world."

A number of Pasolini's well-known views on art and cinema are presented: "Man's first language is that of his actions, his presence. Poetry is in life. Cinema doesn't need symbols." (To represent "woman" in written language, for example, one makes use of certain arbitrary signs, whereas in the cinema a woman is represented by a woman.)

The filmmaker and various commentators have tried to make a case for Pasolini's political prescience, as a critic of consumerism and globalization. A passing comment in the film is closer to the mark: he "saw capitalism like a poet, not a politician." Indeed it would be a serious error to advance Pasolini as a political prophet. This is his weakest side.

While genuinely opposed to bourgeois rule, Pasolini's political instincts were not good. Indeed, in terms of the political problems that faced his generation of left-wing intellectuals, he got almost everything wrong. Above all, he refused to break with or make a serious analysis of Stalinism, despite the disastrous, counterrevolutionary role of the Italian Communist Party. Furthermore, he lamented the demise of the peasantry and the growth of the working class (he once sided with the police versus student protesters on the grounds that the former were the sons of peasants). The growth of modern capitalism, with its attendant "consumerism," simply drove him to a state of morbid despair, which can be glimpsed in the film *Salo* (1975).

What made Pasolini stand out was his extraordinary personal and moral courage, his honesty, his lacerating self-criticism, his poetic insight into the beauty and terror of life. He was under continual attack from the Catholic Church, the Italian state, the Stalinists themselves, and he never capitulated to the forces of reaction and their venomous attacks. Of this Betti's film provides some sense. It is valuable in that regard, as a reminder of his ferocious commitment to artistic truth. Pasolini's example puts virtually every contemporary filmmaker and poet to shame.

It is a sign of the complexity and importance of the problems he examined that he continues to haunt the imagination of filmmakers and other artists. Pasolini, like an Oscar Wilde, is one of those figures who will never go away. On the other hand, it is somewhat disturbing that Betti, nearly 27 years after Pasolini's death, has so little to say of a truly illuminating character. She treats his work and life more or less uncritically. Betti says, "I made a film because I certainly wanted to see where he really is." Unhappily, this is precisely what she has not done, provided a picture of where Pasolini's work stands today, either aesthetically or ideologically. We are left with her deep feeling for the filmmaker and her sense of loss, suspended in time. The film is worth seeing, but there is so much more to be said on this subject.

Fernando Birri (born 1925) has been called the "father" of the New Latin America Cinema. Such phrases have a limited value in the best

of circumstances, and these may not be the best of circumstances. Born in the provincial city of Santa Fe in Argentina, Birri studied filmmaking in Italy during the Neorealist period. In 1956 he founded the first documentary film school in Latin America at the university in Santa Fe.

In 1960, coinciding with the release of *Tire Dié*, a documentary about the lives of the poor in Argentina, he wrote his first manifesto, "For a National, Realist and Critical Cinema." Birri defines the New Latin American Cinema as "a nationalist, realist, critical and popular cinema which tried to interpret, express and communicate with the people. It's a cinema for and of liberation, for economic, political and cultural liberation, and also the liberation of the imagination."

This is not the place to enter into a lengthy polemic against such conceptions, which reflect the views and interests of sections of the Latin American nationalist petty bourgeoisie. One does not know Birri's precise attitude toward Peron and Peronism, although one can make a guess, but his view of Castro and Castroism is clear enough. In 1985 he directed a film entitled *My Son Che*. In 1986 he helped found the School of Film and Television in San Antonio de los Baños, near Havana.

Birri's manifesto is one of many, which argued for cinema, or theater, or art of the "people" or the "oppressed" in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. While the motives of many who advocated and supported these projects were no doubt sincere, it is necessary to distinguish this type of populist-nationalist approach (and demagogy) from the revolutionary socialist conception.

The latter takes as its point of departure the need to assimilate all that is valuable in international bourgeois culture as part of the process of educating and elevating the working class. The populist insists that only what is understood and of immediate value to the "people," as he of course defines it, has cultural significance. He turns his back on the task of educating the population in the highest realms of art and culture. Here one can invoke a Pasolini, who insisted that "the people must arrive at poetry."

The populist essentially strives to keep his audience trapped within certain aesthetic and political boundaries, boundaries shaped, in the end, by the needs of layers of the national middle class. Again, all of this can be cloaked in the most militant and "anti-imperialist" phraseology. As Trotsky insisted—writing of the prescriptions of the Stalinist bureaucracy—such phrases as Birri introduces ("interpret, express and communicate with the people," "a cinema that expresses a continent in all the diversity of its cultural-historical connotations," and so forth) "give little more to the creative imagination than does the price list of a hardware store, or a railroad timetable."

Birri's first feature, *Los Inundados* (*The Flooded*), tends to confirm one's fears. It tells the story of a group of villagers, who are moved to an encampment in Santa Fe when their coastal town is flooded. It is election time and the various camps, governmental and official opposition, promise assistance to the flood victims, none of which, of course, is forthcoming. One family is living in a boxcar. When the car mistakenly gets attached to a freight train, the family ends up wandering around the province, shunted from station to station.

The film has certain insights, but it suffers from the populist aesthetic. It does not penetrate very deeply, it circles around its subjects without ever seizing hold of them in a serious fashion. The director seems to believe the way to "get close" to the people is to flatter them, to extol their humble virtues. It is questionable whether such a film tells anyone anything he or she does not already know. One has only to compare *Los Inundados* to *Accattone*, made one year later. Pasolini also has the deepest feelings for the poor, but his standpoint is a restless and *critical* one, truthful, painful, unrelenting.

Many of the Cuban films have the same "feel" to them as Birri's work. They seem sincere, their heart in the right place, but they tend toward simplification and caricature, in the interests of the so-called "popular." They deal in "types" of a rather generalized variety. Even *Nights of Constantinople* (by Cuban director Orlando Rojas), screened in San Francisco, although it is peopled by rather exotic "types," including the members of a transvestite ballet, suffers from this affliction. The characters lack spontaneity, they seem to be the personification of certain social and psychological categories.

25 Watts is an amusing film from Uruguay, directed by Juan Pablo Rebella and Pablo Stoll (both born in 1974). The film follows the non-adventures of three Montevideo adolescents. One is obsessed with passing an Italian exam, which stands between him and high school graduation. He also happens to have a crush on his Italian tutor. The second has a wretched job driving around town with loudspeakers on the roof of his car blasting advertisements. The third simply loiters.

A girlfriend appears and disappears, much to one of our heroes' dismay. The intelligence of hamsters is discussed. The fact that only one Uruguayan is in the Guinness Book of World Records, for clapping for five days straight, is taken note of. *25 Watts* is not the final word in cinema, but it has moments of genuine wit and its casual and genial manner is endearing, almost to the end.

A House with a View of the Sea (Alberto Arvelo, Venezuela), *To the Left of the Father* (Luiz Fernando Carvalho, Brazil) and *Smokers Only* (Veronica Chen, Argentina) are films that are trying much too hard, with limited results.

Arvelo's film is a sentimental work, set in 1948, about the harsh conditions facing small farmers and their families in Venezuela. A brutal landowner and his sons torment Tomas, who has just lost his wife, and his son, Santiago. At first passive in the face of abuse, Tomas eventually responds with violence. With the help of a traveling photographer, father and son make their way to the sea. It is not clear how a change of scenery will improve their lives.

The film from Brazil (based on a novel by Raduan Nassar) opens at a shrill, self-pitying, self-aggrandizing pitch and never lets up. A son returns to his well-to-do family after years abroad. A trauma propelled him away from home, and it takes nearly three hours to discover its nature, something to do with his "beguiling sister." One's interest, however, has long since flagged.

Smokers Only concerns Reni and Andrés, two young people drifting aimlessly in Buenos Aires. They are decidedly disaffected. But not much else. The filmmaker wants to say something about the unhappy young people around her, but her work is too self-conscious and too shallow. To say something one needs a coherent conception of the world, as well as the ability to swim against the current. Contemporary filmmakers who have the first and are willing to do the second are few and far between.

Concluded