

The Toronto International Film Festival 2002: A conversation about cinema

David Walsh

20 September 2002

This is the first of a series of articles on the Toronto International Film Festival 2002, held September 5-14.

A restaurant in a Midwestern American city in late summer. A Marxist film critic, a teacher and a painter are eating lunch.

Painter: You've been to Toronto for the film festival.

Critic: Yes, once again. This makes nine times.

Painter: How was the experience?

Critic: Mixed, as always. The event is growing larger and larger. Three hundred forty-five films, thousands of people from the media and film industry. Someone said that it may soon be larger than Cannes. The US studios are more and more present. This year there were three films from Disney, two from Paramount, two from Universal, three from Warner Bros., two from 20th Century Fox and one from Columbia.

Teacher: That seems ominous.

Critic: Possibly. In any event, the various trends—commercial, “independent,” art—continue to coexist at the festival, at least for the moment.

Teacher: The “thousands” from the media and film industry, what sort of a crowd is that?

Critic: By and large, well-heeled and self-absorbed, and not very smart. To see two of these types, in their twelve-hundred-dollar suits, walking down the street together, but each talking into his cell phone, well...

Teacher: More or less what I would have expected. Not very appealing. So is it like being dropped behind enemy lines?

Critic: At times. Although the staff at the festival, including those running the screenings, the publicists and so on, are very helpful and know their jobs.

Painter: I'm more interested in the artists and the artistic level of the films. In any event, inadequate people sometimes make beautiful objects.

Critic: No doubt. And there were some remarkable films, as there always are. I wouldn't want to leave the wrong impression. I invariably leave a major film festival encouraged.

Teacher: That's a surprise. I can't imagine why.

Critic: Despite the nature of the film industry, despite the generally confused intellectual climate, despite everything, there are serious and honest people at work.

Teacher: Aren't you being too generous? I only see rubbish.

Painter: You see a few commercial films a year, what do you expect? In a city like this, hardly anything serious is shown.

Critic: It's true. It's a form of censorship by the large studios. US audiences are prevented for the most part from seeing the most intelligent and critical films. The studios justify this on the basis that audiences are being given what they want.

Painter: Unhappily, they're right. No one in a city like this would come to watch a film from Iran or China or Egypt. Americans are largely content with the garbage they're offered.

Teacher: I don't know about that. Why should people be happy with what they're seeing?

Critic: I'm not naïve. It is not easy to get anyone to change his or her diet, but I agree, I don't think most people derive much pleasure from the current films. Audiences go through the motions, it's a ritual, but I sense widespread dissatisfaction.

Painter: In any event, what impressed you at the film festival?

Critic: Well...

Painter: What's wrong?

Critic: You won't be happy, but I can't simply leap into discussing the films one by one like that. After all, the event took place in a definite context.

Painter: Here we go! Now we'll get the long-winded introduction, with the usual “historical setting” and digressions about the “degraded state of culture,” and so forth. For once, why can't you get straight to the point, the filmmaking itself?

Critic: I try to. But we may have a different “point” in mind. The past twelve months have been eventful and the next twelve promise to be as well. I think a great anxiety about what the US government and military are going to do next, for example, was one of the principal features of the film festival.

Teacher: Even with this self-absorbed crowd? I hardly thought they would have noticed.

Critic: Oh, there may be a concerted effort to deny the reality of the situation. But my general impression is that nearly everyone expects the Bush administration to do something terrible. The film festival had this “on the eve” quality.

Teacher: You're speaking of the atmosphere at the event itself, was that quality expressed in the films?

Critic: Hardly at all, at least consciously. There was an omnibus film entitled *11'09"01*, which consisted of responses from eleven international directors to the events, and Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* touched on September 11. Filmmaking lags behind terribly. Appallingly.

Painter: You want art to be up to date? As always, your focus is too narrow. The political and the “timely” work inevitably prove ephemeral. Art ought to address universal matters, pompous as that may sound.

Critic: I think so too, but people often have a misplaced sense of the universal. To be blunt, they take what are essentially the concerns of a narrow, relatively selfish social layer and label them “universal.” I'm not convinced.

Painter: That's unfair. Love, death, fate, relations within the family, the problem of identity, the individual's sense of his own isolation in the universe, the nature of art itself—these are universal themes. Artists continue to treat them, successfully or not.

Critic: Even if I fully accepted your list, I don't see a single one of those being worked over seriously by the contemporary cinema. In any case, I don't know that I agree with this notion of particular themes, “universal” or otherwise. The question is, does the artist embrace life and reality unconditionally? If so, then I am convinced that both love *and* social life, for example, will be treated.

Painter: I don't necessarily reject the treatment of social problems, at least in films, but you have to acknowledge there are intimate subjects that need to be approached differently, more lyrically.

Teacher: There are some things that don't interest me. I'm tired of watching stories about love affairs between young professionals living in the lap of luxury. I'm also tired of filmmakers who wallow in their own neuroses. I don't care about the problems of the upper middle class. That's all we've been fed for years. Enough is enough.

Critic: I think the treatment of any subject, intimate or otherwise, has to be carried out with urgency, beauty and a sense of protest.

Painter: Not everyone combines love and anger.

Critic: No, but they should. If we take filmmakers as representative, then the so-called intelligentsia is in a bad way. In a period of reaction nearly a century ago, a great Marxist described the intelligentsia in these terms: "Never before had it indulged in such self-congratulation, narcissism and pretension. It studied itself from head to foot, and there was not one gesture, nor wrinkle of the soul, which it would not record about itself with narcissistic thoroughness. I am religion! I am culture! I am the past, present and future!" Thus it is today, although probably with considerably less intelligence and skill.

Painter: That's rather sweeping. You admit yourself there are serious figures. How do you explain that? This is a recurring problem: these grand generalizations. Life and art always prove to be far more complicated, fortunately. There are things beyond reason, beyond our power to comprehend. The "dark side of the earth" needs to be explored. You run the risk of missing out on what is valuable in order to confirm your pronouncements.

Critic: I hope not. You may not believe it, but I attend every film, even those by familiar figures, with a relatively open mind. I'm always hoping to be surprised and pleased.

Teacher: Frankly, I'd rather read a newspaper or a business journal. There's more honest information in that, at least if you read between the lines. You're not going to come upon a new Tolstoy or Balzac at one of these affairs. These are movies made by self-indulgent and self-important little nothings. Let's be honest, it's a bit tiring to read one review after another pointing out that such and such a film is worthless, many of them for the same reasons and more or less in the same manner.

Critic: And it's a little tiring sometimes to write them. But what do you suggest?

Teacher: Wait until things improve. All in all, it would be better to steer clear of that swamp for the moment. Let the filmmakers first give us a compelling reason to pay attention to their work.

Painter: Ideally the criticism should help bring about an improvement. I'm not sure that this kind of socio-historical approach will do that. Artists work at another level, for better or worse.

Critic: You give them too little credit, they work at many levels. Artists are living people, not "empty machines" who create form. They live and breathe in the same world as you and me. Whatever else may concern them, how can any group of thinking beings turn a blind eye to the desperate conditions that the vast majority of humanity endure and the terrible dangers represented by the continued existence of capitalism? And, moreover, what would it say about them if they could?

Painter: I can agree with that general viewpoint and still not be convinced that it inevitably enters into the production of a work of art.

Critic: How can it not? The desire for the betterment of the world was present in every one of Courbet's paintings, even if it was a landscape, a picture of a fish or a nude.

Painter: We've learned one or two things since his day. We're not doing pictures of fish any more.

Teacher: That's not necessarily progress. There are a good many charlatans around.

Critic: Most films are so weak, so anemic. People expect so little at this

point, that's what's disturbing. If a film provides a slight jolt to the nervous system, or titillates in an unusual manner, or possesses a single clever plot twist—that is, one that has been used less than a dozen times in recent years—critics convince themselves that the work is "complex" or "dizzying" or "sensual." When it isn't any of those things, and they know it.

In other cases, critics and others come up to me and ask my opinion about a work and I can tell they haven't a clue how they feel themselves, they're simply groping for an acceptable response. They have no objective yardstick of any kind. There's a terrible conformism, a desire above all to have the names of the fashionable directors on the tip of one's tongue. And there are so many overrated figures, whose reputations are largely the result of confusion or inertia.

And in regard to the economic and social shocks and upheavals to come, the degree of unpreparedness in this milieu is almost absolute...

Teacher: You're working yourself up into a state. It's not worth it, believe me.

Painter: I repeat: what impressed you at the film festival?

Critic: I see you want to pin me down. All right. I found a number of works to admire, as a whole or in part. For example, Mike Leigh's *All or Nothing*, set in a London housing estate. It has enormously moving moments. I was also very struck by *Les Diabes (The Devils)* from France's Christophe Ruggia, about some "monstrous" children and how they got to be that way. And a film that has stayed away with me, somewhat to my surprise, is *Waiting for Happiness* by Abderrahmane Sissako, a Mauritanian-born filmmaker, whose *Life on Earth* I also admired. It's quiet and haunting, one of the few films that grapples honestly with Africa's desperation, without itself falling prey to despair.

Oasis from South Korean director Lee Chang-dong, about a pair of society's "rejects," and *Letters in the Wind* from Iran's Ali Reza Amini, about new recruits from the countryside, are imperfect films, but both have remarkable qualities. *The Magdalene Sisters*, directed by Peter Mullan, is a welcome attack on the Catholic Church in Ireland and its history of brutalities.

Frederick Wiseman, the documentary filmmaker, has forcefully dramatized a sequence from Vasili Grossman's *Life and Fate*, the Second World War Soviet novel about Stalinism and fascism, entitled *The Last Letter*. Jia Zhang-ke's *Unknown Pleasures* from China, although it doesn't advance his work much past his other feature films, *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*, is a valuable work. And Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, despite irritating and wrongheaded sections, has moments that US and world audiences ought to see.

A Peck on the Cheek, directed by India's Mani Ratnam, about the impact of the Sri Lankan civil war on people's lives, is an insightful work. I was pleased to see *The Cuckoo*, directed by Alexander Rogozhkin, set in Finland near the end of World War II, if only because it's one of the few Russian films made in recent years not dominated by misanthropy or hysteria.

There were documentary films worth seeing, such as Travis Wilkerson's *An Injury to One*, about the murder of left-wing labor organizer Frank Little in Butte, Montana in 1917, and *Cul de Sac: A Suburban War Story*, which examines the life and death of Shawn Nelson, the man who stole a tank from an armory in suburban San Diego in 1995 and drove it through city streets.

There! Those are the films I preferred. I plan to write about them and the issues they raise.

Painter: You sound very definite about your preferences, but I have an unpleasant feeling you dismiss any work that doesn't fit into your scheme of things.

Critic: What is it you're after? Something beyond or "above" life. I leave you to it. My "scheme of things," if I can do it justice, involves examining everything about human beings, their society and their lives,

including their innermost feelings, desires, intuitions, “spirituality” and many things that are not immediately explainable. I stand by that process. In any case, let’s get the check.

They stand up.

Teacher: Incidentally, will any of the films you mentioned play here?

Critic: One or two at most.

Teacher: It seems like a bit of a waste of time then.

Critic: I don’t think so. I don’t think so at all.

They pay the bill and leave.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact