

Toronto International Film Festival 2002: Why are there so many disappointing films?

Part 2

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

A number of films at the recent Toronto film festival were distinctly disappointing; that is, they failed to live up to the expectation generated by their creators' earlier work. In the general sense, encountering disappointing works is an inevitability in cinema as it is in every other field. Not every artist is destined to progress; some filmmakers, in fact, have only one serious work in them. And even those who are fated to make further contributions may need time to find their footing. After a promising beginning, a film director or writer might take a wrong turn or falter in the face of a more ambitious and demanding project.

If, however, disappointment becomes a quite noticeable phenomenon, this may point to a more generalized problem. Why is it at present that the work of so few young filmmakers becomes deeper, ripper, more mature as their careers evolve? Why is regression, often revealing itself almost immediately, the rule rather than the exception?

A possibility, of course, is that the critic or the spectator was insufficiently critical from the outset, that he or she indulged in wishful thinking and made more out of the filmmaker or the film than was ever there. Such things do happen, especially when the cultural landscape is relatively bleak. If we term this "giving the filmmaker the benefit of the doubt" or "offering encouragement," instead of the more loaded "wishful thinking," and note that the artist very rarely rewards the critic or spectator with a new work or series of works that justify the initial extension of moral support, then we once again confront the phenomenon we need to explain: a widespread and persistent falling off.

The most notably disappointing films at this year's film festival included Michael Almereyda's *Happy Here and Now*, Lynne Ramsay's *Morvern Callar*, Fruit Chan's *Public Toilet* and Mahamet Saleh Haroun's *Abouna*. All of these filmmakers have previously done promising work.

Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) was a remarkable effort, which may yet prove to be the single bright spot in his career. *Happy Here and Now* is a self-indulgent and self-conscious work about the search for a missing woman in New Orleans, which leaves virtually no impression at all.

Ratcatcher (1999), Ramsay's first film, was widely praised. Considered to be part of the "new Scottish cinema," a phrase that should make anyone uneasy, the director has made a second feature which is unconvincing and uninvolved. A young woman wakes up on Christmas morning to find that her boyfriend has committed suicide. She proceeds to cut up his body and bury it, and claim his unpublished novel as her own. In the end, apparently dissatisfied with working class life in Glasgow and having pocketed a publisher's check for 100,000 pounds, Morvern heads off on her own. How is this preferable to the last-minute selfishness celebrated in *Good Will Hunting* or *Erin Brockovich*?

Hong Kong filmmaker Fruit Chan produced two intelligent and sensitive

films in *Little Cheung* and *Durian Durian* (2000). Who could have predicted the profoundly tasteless and pointless *Public Toilet*? Mahamet Saleh Haroun's *Bye Bye Africa* (1999) from Chad had feeling and a self-critical bite to it; his *Abouna* has neither.

10, directed by Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, falls into a slightly different category. The film, which consists of ten conversations in a car, mostly between a mother and son, is tame and weak. The woman has separated from her husband, much to the boy's dismay, in an effort to win some degree of independence. Her son will have none of it, and presumably Kiarostami intends to explain the continued weight of patriarchal and repressive social relations in Iran through his situation and behavior. For the most part, however, the mother and son are merely irritating, spoiled, in the one case, self-involved, in the other.

The film is not "disappointing" only because one has been expecting Kiarostami to encounter this sort of difficulty, based on the trajectory of his most recent work. The continued refusal of the major Iranian directors to make a serious appraisal of the Iranian revolution, the Islamic regime and other historical and social problems has inevitably led them into something of a blind alley. The Iranians have specialized in intense, intimate and humane dramas, in the particulars of social life. They drew on the democratic impulses which nourished the struggle against the Shah, but which have been brutally suppressed by the reactionary regime in Tehran.

In the long run, to portray the particular (the specific human relationship or dilemma) in any depth one must be drawing on some degree of understanding of the universal (the state of society and its development as a whole)—or the portrayal, undernourished, loses strength and purpose. The enduring artist sees the relationship of the immediate experience to the experiences of humanity as a whole, grasps both what is unique and what is universal. It is critical that the Iranian filmmakers address the larger issues. The artistic decline is already evident. The same holds true for the Taiwanese and Chinese directors in particular.

Unhappily, veteran Swiss-French director Jean-Luc Godard continues to make himself look foolish. His is one of the contributions to an omnibus film, *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello*, in which eight international filmmakers consider the phenomenon of time. In Godard's segment, which takes place "In the Darkness," a voice intones, "I only see what has disappeared." "Thought," "History," "Love" are in their "last minutes." How do we know? Godard tells us so. The director expresses in one of its sharpest forms the disorientation and dire pessimism of sections of the European intelligentsia in the post-Soviet world. Their little world has come to the end, so the entire world must be coming to an end.

The name of Canadian director David Cronenberg (*The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*) never belonged alongside those of Godard and Kiarostami, but his continued and precipitous decline should be at least noted. *Spider*, with

Ralph Fiennes, while not as disastrous as *eXistenZ* (1999), is essentially an empty and misanthropic work. The story concerns a boy whose Oedipal feelings, for no plausible reason, take a murderous turn.

The latest effort by Chinese director Chen Kaige (*Yellow Earth*, *Farewell My Concubine*), *Together*, is a sentimental piece about a 13-year-old boy, a talented violinist, who leaves his provincial town for the music world in Beijing. There is nothing groundbreaking or exceptional here. The so-called Fifth Generation of Chinese directors (Chen, Zhang Yimou and others) seems fairly well worn out, for some of the same reasons referred to above: principally an inability, not entirely their own fault, to confront critical questions of perspective.

While some directors may be running out of things to say, some never had much to say to begin with. *Dolls*, directed by Takeshi Kitano, confirms one's suspicion that if the guns were ever to stop firing in the Japanese director's films, not much would go on at all. The story of a young middle class man who, on the eve of marrying to comply with his family's wishes, rescues his true love, now suffering from a mental breakdown, is tedious and trite in the extreme.

Alexandr Sokurov (*Mother and Son*, *Moloch*), the Russian filmmaker, is continually referred to as the spiritual offspring of the late Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky (1932-86). Hardly anyone in the current critical or cinema world would dare to suggest that there might be something problematic about such a legacy. In fact, Tarkovsky's last two films, made in emigration, were quite poor and confused (*Nostalgia*, *The Sacrifice*). They revealed that while, in the face of Stalinist tyranny and heavy-handedness, his Christian or pantheistic humanism had a kind of oppositional and even truth-bearing character, this outlook proved thoroughly inadequate for making sense of the modern world. Tarkovsky seemed entirely out of his element in those last works.

Sokurov's new film, *Russian Ark*, is composed of one extended take, done with a Steadicam, lasting 96 minutes. A nineteenth century French diplomat and an unseen filmmaker take a tour of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, encountering scenes from Russian history along the way. Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and Nicholas I and II, with their courtiers and hangers-on, all make appearances in the art museum's galleries. There are a number of inevitably hostile references to the October Revolution. The film is a technical tour de force (the cast includes almost 900 actors and extras and three live orchestras), but not much more.

The language of Sokurov's characters reminds one of Godard's: "I open my eyes and I see nothing.... I can't remember what happened to me," someone says. The unseen director comments, as an explanation of Russia's supposedly tragic history, "Asians love tyrants.... The worse the tyrant, the more cherished the memory." The general tone of the piece is cynical, morbid and unpleasantly other-worldly.

"Why is regression the rule rather than the exception?" It seems reasonable to suggest that the failure of filmmakers to have reached or conquered some essential intellectual and artistic height makes it all too easy for them to slip backward. What would that "height" be?

A war has been waged in artistic circles over the past number of decades against ideas in general and a socialist critique of capitalism in particular. As long ago as 1964, Susan Sontag argued in her famous essay, *Against Interpretation*, that modernist art had been overloaded with content and meaning. "Interpretation," she complained, "takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted What is important now is to recover our senses." One might suggest that the senses, along with intuition and impressionism, have won out in art, at least temporarily, but that this has proven a Pyrrhic victory.

Many of the seemingly or genuinely promising contemporary filmmakers exhibit the ability to reproduce certain individual experiences and memories or even historical settings in astonishing sensory detail. One thinks first and foremost of the Chinese and Taiwanese film directors,

including a number of the younger ones, but this is truly a global phenomenon (Sokurov's film has some extraordinary historical recreations; Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* had that aspect to it.)

In certain cases, the reproduction of detail may be so thorough that it extends even to the social, i.e., to the identification of class issues and oppression, for instance in certain works of Fruit Chan and others. However, the subsequent evolution of too many film artists demonstrates that they consider this social detail merely one of the elements that form the background to their dramas, not the latter's mainspring. Thus, after doing interesting and even insightful work, they can go off in the most misguided and even disastrous directions. They have not drawn any clear-cut conceptions about social life that might assist or guide them.

The ability to recreate a given milieu has something of the quality of a technical achievement (akin, for example, to the extraordinary advances that have been made in the art of translation). Such an accomplishment can flow semi-automatically from the application of the acutely sensitive artistic personality to individual experience. It is not the same as grasping the essence of the human situation in our day. That would inevitably involve grappling with the crisis confronting humanity as a result of the continued existence of capitalism and the vast implications of that crisis. For that, science, consciousness, systematic rational analysis must intervene.

It is precisely the conscious "purchase" of many films and filmmakers on the deeper social processes that is far too slight. The works tend only to catch at certain elements, sensations, memories. By and large, they deliver merely glancing blows to reality. Filmmakers make a fetish out of rejecting an historical approach to any problem or situation. Everything is surface and immediacy. Marxists understand, however, that detached from its roots in the past the "present" is mere façade, an appearance without depth and without truth.

Some may argue that the evolution of so many filmmakers proves disappointing because of the immense pressure created by money and celebrity. No doubt these pressures play a role in accelerating the process. The novelist or poet in the nineteenth century faced nothing like this; he or she might have been left more or less alone for decades. But references to these pressures does not explain why the present generation of filmmakers shows so much promise and yet falls back so rapidly.

The key, in my opinion, is the lack of ideas, and, in particular, the lack of historical understanding and socially critical consciousness. Most film artists at present are endowed with too narrow an intellectual base from which to persist in and widen their explorations. Hence their regression and the spectator's disappointment.



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