

Toronto International Film Festival 2002: Even in success, problems

Part 3

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

The most successful films screened at the recent Toronto film festival, as imperfect as they may have been, were those that made some attempt to account for present conditions, both social and psychological, in a truthful and aesthetically pleasing fashion. Mike Leigh's *All or Nothing* (Britain), Christophe Ruggia's *Les Diables* (France), Abderrahmane Sissako's *Waiting for Happiness* (Mauritania) and Lee Chang-dong's *Oasis* (South Korea) have this much in common: they all treat the circumstances of oppressed or excluded people with considerable sympathy and insight, and without painting pretty pictures of anyone.

Leigh's film pays most of its attention to a family of four dwelling in a London housing estate. The father is a car service driver, resigned and beaten down. "It's fate ... kismet," is his response to every blow he or the family receives. His wife is a supermarket cashier, increasingly dissatisfied and angry with her lot. The daughter, overweight and timid, works cleaning an old people's home. Her only suitor is a middle-aged man, as alone and stifled as she. The son, also enormous, does nothing but lie on the couch and eat and watch television and curse everyone around him. His heart attack sets off a chain of events that produces a change in the family's internal relations.

As always with Leigh, sections of the film and individual characters teeter on the edge of caricature. Indeed the characters are so unrelentingly harsh to one another in the first portion of *All or Nothing* that the painful quality of their lives seems almost more than anyone could bear. When they later demonstrate sympathy or tentative kindness toward one another at moments of crisis, the spectator will naturally be greatly moved—and relieved, so much so that one feels that perhaps the director has emotionally stacked the deck.

Leigh seems to be attempting here, as he did so unsuccessfully in *Secrets & Lies*, to work out for himself and his audience a basis for optimism in the face of the extremely bleak circumstances he presents. The denouement is far better prepared and motivated in this work, but it still retains a somewhat contrived character. One difficulty, of course, is that the filmmaker—and he is hardly alone in this, as we shall discuss—seems to conceive of an alternative to the present only in the form of acts of personal reconciliation. The notion that the conditions which are damaging people might be combated in a collective fashion is not even hinted at. Naturally, the director is not called upon to invent resistance that does not yet exist, but even underscoring the current (temporary) *absence* of conscious resistance on a wide scale (and the historical reasons for it) would make the critical point.

In any event, the great strength of Leigh's best work is the sensitivity and utter seriousness with which he approaches the external and internal lives of his characters. He does not shy away from their sufferings and

humiliations, or their pleasures, nor does he operate as a voyeur, in the manner of an entire school of contemporary filmmakers, making a career out of sneering at the downtrodden for the benefit of a tittering middle class audience.

It is worth noting as well that until now Leigh has probably been best known for his depictions of "Thatcher's Britain," or its aftermath under Major, in films like *High Hopes* (1988) and *Naked* (1993). One must now say that he has contributed a fairly devastating portrait of "Blair's Britain."

Les Diables (*The Devils*), directed by Christophe Ruggia (*The Kid from Chaâba*, 1998), is the story of a boy and a girl, apparently brother and sister, abandoned at birth by their mother on the streets of Marseilles. The girl is autistic, off in her own world, she cannot bear to be touched. Her companion is ferocious in her defense, he loves her madly. They dream of a house where they might find some kind of happiness. The boy wages a relentless, unequal battle with authorities and institutions to be left alone with the girl, so that they can find their sacred home. Such a quest is almost inevitably doomed.

Again, the positively defining characteristic here is the rigor and honesty of Ruggia's approach to his material. He has attempted, with a considerable degree of success, to tell the story from "within." The title refers to the manner in which the boy and girl are viewed by official society. The film demonstrates the ineluctable logic of their actions, no matter how drastic or violent, from their own point of view, from the point of view of their perceived needs.

In interviews, Ruggia makes clear his hostility to the treatment of troubled kids, those termed "delinquents" or even "trash" by society and the mass media. He explains, "It is not by locking children up in prison that one helps them. These children are suffering from a lack of love, if we respond to them with violence we should not be surprised [by what happens]." And furthermore: "I wanted to enter the interior of the child's mind and not make a film which treats children like little animals." An unusual and compassionate work.

There are things to object to in *Les Diables*, particularly in regard to the "mad love" between its two protagonists. This is one aspect that seems somewhat forced, introduced from without and, frankly, inessential. It is not clear that the story would be that much altered without this supposedly insane passion. One wonders if this is perhaps an unconscious concession to the current fixation with sexual sensationalism in the French cinema.

Abderrahmane Sissako makes understated, even delicate films. One has to pay attention. In *Waiting for Happiness*, a young man, Abdallah, returns after a considerable absence to a desolate town in Mauritania. His mother wants him to fit in, to learn the local language, to wear traditional clothes. We see a young girl taught beautiful Koranic songs by her mother. An electrician, a former fisherman, struggles with the primitive

conditions—even the installation of a single light bulb proves a daunting task. People come and go, trying to get places where life is better. A Chinese-speaking man is forced to leave his African girlfriend behind. Another man, a Mauritanian, attempts to make his way to Spain illegally by boat and drowns. In the end, Abdallah sets out to leave again.

The film depicts the economic desperation in an objective and honest fashion. Our heartstrings are not plucked, nor are the intractable conditions minimized. *Waiting for Happiness* poses questions about tradition and modernity, staying and leaving, progress and backwardness. More than anything else perhaps it reveals the irrationality of a world system that marginalizes and oppresses vast numbers of people, effectively excluding them from participation in modern society.

Oasis, from South Korean filmmaker Lee Chang-dong, treats people who have been excluded in a different fashion: a woman with cerebral palsy, essentially abandoned by her family, and an ex-convict, a psychically wounded individual who finds it almost impossible to act “acceptably.” Both have dreadful families, whose prime concerns are money and appearance. These two wounded souls conduct a strange, exhilarating, pitiful love affair, with a tragic outcome.

With this film, following upon *Green Fish* (1997) and *Peppermint Candy* (2000), Lee confirms his position as one of the most intelligent and humane directors currently working. He has gone to great lengths in *Oasis* to portray realistically and painfully the relations between his two principal characters. None of that effort goes to waste, but at times the film concentrates so precisely and intensely on the physical difficulties of the woman, for instance, that the larger picture, of a society geared only to financial success and brutally indifferent to its victims, is somewhat lost sight of.

There were numerous other works with valuable elements or sequences. *The Magdalene Sisters* (directed by Scottish director and actor Peter Mullan) depicts conditions in the 1960s in Irish convents that took in unwed mothers, whose babies were given up for adoption, as well as girls who had “flirtatious personalities” or whose parents feared for their sexual virtue. Mullan’s film centers on the fate of three girls essentially locked up in this fashion. The fanatical and sadistic nuns humiliate and beat the girls, making use of them as cheap labor. One is driven insane.

Vatican radio has attacked the film, which won the best picture award at the Venice film festival, for allegedly comparing the Church to the Taliban! A clear-cut case of protesting too much. Mullan commented to the press: “I’m disappointed at the announcement that they have made ... [claiming] that it never happened. That’s something I’m very, very surprised at—I really thought they would have at least the courage to own up to the fact that these things did go on. I’m not a good enough dramatist to make this stuff up.”

Unknown Pleasures by Jia Zhang-ke continues the director’s explorations of the conditions of young people in contemporary, free-market China (*Xiao Wu* [1997], *Platform* [2000]). In Datong, a decaying industrial city in northern China, two jobless and aimless youths try to make something of their lives, without the least success. One of the two falls for a small-time pop singer, the girlfriend of a small-time gangster. The other has a relationship with a girl who is going off to Beijing to study “international trade.” They end up robbing a bank, for which the penalty in China is capital punishment.

The references to the WTO and the power of the US dollar, to commercialism and corruption, to failing state enterprises and deteriorating conditions (an explosion in a textile mill kills 46) are sufficient to make clear that Jia is concerned with the impact of encroaching global capitalism on these young people’s lives. They themselves are largely fatalistic and expect nothing. One says, “What’s so great about a long life?” And when his girlfriend tells him, “You can call me in the future,” replies, “What f—— future?”

It is precisely this resignation, this matter of factness about the state of

things, that weakens the film, makes it, despite the care that has gone into it and the sensitivity of the treatment, somewhat forgettable. There is truth to the conception that a particular kind of realism or naturalism falls down precisely because it makes events “natural,” i.e., inevitable. There is not a hint in the film, either in the narrative or the formal approach to the narrative, of an alternative outcome. The lyricism, such as it is, is of a static variety.

And this leads us to the subject of the difficulties found in even the most successful films.

The best films take a sharp and critical look at the circumstances in which the vast majority of the population are forced to live and the psychological impact of those circumstances. In that sense, they raise a protest and a significant one. Very few, if any, of these works, however, even hint at the possibility that those who are being exploited and abused might assert their own independent interests, oppose and transform these conditions.

(There is, of course, a small international trend of “radical” or “left” filmmakers, but by and large their efforts do not convincingly draw out opposition and revolt from present-day conditions. They either present a reality largely existing in their heads or create characters who are little more than the pat fleshing out of certain social types, or both. The refusal or inability to grapple meaningfully with the actual state of things, as opposed to the way one would like the world to be, suggests that beneath a certain bravado a deep pessimism reigns in such circles.)

Again, this is not to suggest that filmmakers or any other artists ought to portray political realities that do not yet exist. However, and this is the critical question, the artist should not be entirely prey to the mere surface of events. Filmmakers certainly have the capability of studying history, as well as the social process. *What is* at present is not the sum total of reality. If it is that, nonetheless, to the overwhelming majority of artists, this can only be explained by the current political and ideological confusion. So much for the artist as prophet!

One of the more troubling features of the current situation is that filmmakers of an apparently “left” or at least socially critical bent, on the one hand, who clearly recognize the existence of class oppression, and those, on the other, who obviously regard society as nothing more than a collection of freely floating human atoms—but have some artistic depth to them—tend to make similar aesthetic decisions.

There is a kind of sameness, in certain key respects, between, say, *Unknown Pleasures* and Chang Tso-chi’s *The Best of Times* from Taiwan, the story of two aimless youth in a Taipei suburb. The two films are carefully and thoughtfully made, with quite exquisite sequences. They both describe what are, in one way or another, inhuman social conditions. And both films, whatever the filmmakers’ intentions, exude an air of resignation. Jia, however, seemingly wishes to place his characters’ dilemma in the context of free-market capitalism, whereas Chang makes clear his lack of interest in social problems and openly acknowledges his fatalism, declaring helpfully that “It occurs to me that each of us lives in ... the best of times.” The neo-realistic impulse, so to speak, that both share to some extent does not imply or carry with it any particular conclusions as to the possibility of shattering the status quo.

If there is opposition to this fatalism in the current cinema it tends to take the form, as noted above, of proposing an individual gesture or personal reconciliation. One finds this in *All or Nothing*, in *Les Diabes* and *Oasis*, although the consequences are not happy ones, in the Dardenne brothers’ claustrophobic *Le Fils* (*The Son*), and in a hundred lesser works at the moment. In apparently impossible circumstances, where nothing but harshness and unkindness prevail, two human beings make contact, or at least one reaches out a hand to another.

At a time when selfishness and ruthlessness, and beyond them, greed and militarism, are officially celebrated, there is no reason to denigrate reconciliation or acts of human kindness and elemental sympathy, what

the Dardennes call “the capacity to put oneself in the place of another.” The creation of a different social atmosphere, at least among the exploited, in which selflessness and solidarity prevail is a necessary precondition for profound social change. For this, however, the individual act has to be seen as a link in a larger chain of social being, not an end in itself, as it tends to be treated in the aforementioned films. The latter treatment can become the basis for new forms of self-involvement and social evasiveness, even complacency.

The great difficulty, it would seem, is that any systematically scientific conception of society and history has been largely knocked out of artistic thought and sensibility. Specifically, we see the almost universal failure to apprehend *determinism* in the historical and social process, among both those who recognize the existence of an unjust social structure and its consequences and those who are oblivious to such questions.

It never seems to occur even to the more socially critical artists that the intolerable state of affairs confronted by wide layers of the population will inevitably provoke a mass response, despite all the current ideological and political difficulties. Even for those who acknowledge the social roots of their characters’ difficulties, this acknowledgement is largely passive. Even in these cases, the real fate of the individual, it will be found, is generally played out in the arena of purely personal and emotional relations.

It is clear that for all *practical purposes* the filmmakers referred to, whether “left” or politically indifferent, construct society in their works as a mere sum-total of the actions of individuals. Chang Tso-chi makes his view quite explicit: “Maybe what we call ‘humanity’ is just an aggregation of countless numbed individuals. Maybe what we call ‘the times’ are just aggregated memories of countless brief lives.” Christophe Ruggia comments, a little defensively: “I wanted to show the course of two individual lives. When one generalizes too much, one does not find an answer.” One can generalize too much, but the problem today is that artists generalize far too little.

A serious analysis of society reveals that classes exist which operate *independently* of and often contrary to the consciousness and wishes of individuals. Contemporary artists treat the motives of individuals, but rarely ask themselves, what are the driving forces behind these motives? For this, one has to have a conception of history and society as *law-governed* processes. One thinks of Marx’s comment in *The Holy Family*, “It is not a matter of what this or that proletariat or even the proletariat as a whole present as its goal. It is a matter of what the proletariat is in actuality and what in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do.”

Naturally, even if the artist agrees with this notion, he or she is not charged, in confronting a contradictory and complex reality, with merely illustrating or confirming it. Art arrives at its truths by considerably more circuitous routes. And yet the nearly utter absence of this understanding, that social classes are “compelled to do” certain things, in accordance with historical necessity, has had the most harmful effect on artistic production in our time.

In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky argued quite brilliantly against the conception that life simply meanders on, without purpose, like a river. Responding to a certain Lezhnev, who put forward such a view, Trotsky asked: “In fact, what does it mean that life ‘in itself’ is not teleological [without ultimate purpose], and that it is created just as a river flows?” He observes that even in relation to his physiology, man corrects the spontaneity of life by means “of the culinary art, of hygiene, of medicine, etc.”

And he continues: “But life consists also of something which is higher than physiology. Human labor, that very thing which distinguishes man from the animal, is thoroughly teleological; outside of the rationally directed expenditures of energy there is no labor. And labor occupies a place in human life. Art, even the ‘purest,’ is thoroughly teleological,

because if it breaks with great aims, no matter how unconsciously felt by the artist, it degenerates into a mere rattle.”

These sentences constitute a telling critique of the approach of so many in contemporary art and cinema.



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