

Toronto International Film Festival 2002:

Eight films

Part 4

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

Attending an international film festival can be an eye-opening experience. Viewing films from every corner of the globe sensitizes one to the state of humanity as a whole at a time when the ruling elite everywhere is feverishly pushing a national-chauvinist agenda.

Films help put features on the previously faceless, whether they be peoples with whom one may have little serious interaction in daily life, even in a large metropolitan center; peoples from regions that are largely excluded from media coverage; or even the inhabitants of countries now branded as centers of “evil” by the US administration and media. We see real people with real feelings and real problems, like ourselves, not “ethnic minorities” or “aliens,” much less potential “terrorists.” Stereotypes and preconceptions inevitably fall by the wayside.

As the American media in particular practices greater and greater self-censorship, excluding images of the victims of great power policies and generally encouraging insularity and selfishness, the glimpses that world cinema provides of other lives is necessary and even heartening.

Moreover, the sight of tens of thousands of people lining up, not to see the latest bombast from Hollywood, but independent and artistic efforts, whether entirely successful or not, is welcome. The experience is an antidote to the worship of the only god that the US entertainment industry today knows—the noxious and ever-present box office gross.

Civil war-torn northern Sri Lanka is the background for *Kannathil Muthamittal* (*A Peck on the Cheek*), the latest film by veteran Indian filmmaker Mani Ratnam. The marital bliss of an arranged marriage between Madhavan, a shy girl from the country, and Dileep, a Tamil guerrilla, is shattered when the Sri Lanka military invades their village seeking to rout the Tamil resistance. The groom rushes off to battle, leaving his bride to undertake a perilous boat journey to an Indian refugee camp. In the camp’s harsh conditions, Madhavan delivers a baby girl and then runs off to fight in Sri Lanka, abandoning her child.

The film jumps forward nine years. Bollywood-style musical numbers pay tribute to the love between nine-year-old Amudha (Madhavan’s daughter) and the middle-class Indian family that has adopted her. After learning of her adoption, the wild-of-heart Amudha cannot be assuaged until she finds her biological parents. A harrowing odyssey through villages where Tamils are being expelled by government forces takes the family, led by a jocular Sinhala guide, to the heart of one of the Tamil guerrilla camps. Amudha and her biological mother are reunited in the midst of a battle between Tamil fighters and the invading Sri Lankan army. The reunification takes place with near loss of life and much psychological trauma for both of Amudha’s mothers. Madhavan then leaves for battle, much in the same way that she had been left nine years earlier, telling Amudha, “I’ll come back to you when the fight ends.” Her

departure is agonizing.

The film was a long time in the making because of its subject matter, director Mani Ratnam told the audience at a festival post-screening session. Responding to a question, Ratnam stated: “Why shy away from history? I took a conscious decision to take a window look at the situation today, a battle that has been going on for some twenty years and that has affected all of our lives. What you see in the film is happening all around the North and the East [of Sri Lanka].”

Politically, Ratnam’s movie has an anti-communist perspective. Although clearly the film’s sympathies lie with the struggles of the Tamil minority against the Sri Lankan government and its murderous military activities, the work is also at odds with Tamil nationalism. Notable on this score is the film’s depiction of the guide, a Sinhala physician, who with considerable panache and at great personal risk, journeys with the Indian-Tamil family from Colombo to the war zones in the north. Caught in the jungle by Tamil guerrillas, both guide and father narrowly escape death as Sinhala “intruders” when a guerrilla leader recognizes the father as a famous Tamil author and poet.

The film alludes to the commercial interests bound up with the war and it refers to the day when combatants can throw their weapons into the sea. Mr. Ratnam made clear to the audience in Toronto that he considers his film to be a contribution to this “optimistic future.”

Stylistically, the film is described in the festival catalogue as being an example of the “current, somewhat uneasy coalition between Bollywood and alternative or art-house cinema.” Indeed, the musical interludes, although in some cases quite extraordinary, generally appear to be grafted on as a concession made to the commercial market. The scenes in India are a mixed bag. The film’s dramatic framework for depicting the war, a nine-year-old’s relentless and at times terroristic quest to meet her biological mother, is not always convincing or well-structured.

Poverty and oppression dominate in both countries. Communalism is whipped up by the elite of every nationality in the region to divert attention from the desperate social situation. The crucial class question is only introduced to the movie in the form of the contrast, presented without comment, between the relatively comfortable Indian Tamil family and its counterpart in Sri Lanka. The more complex political questions are not touched upon by Ratnam and the spectator might draw the conclusion that the war is simply fueled by age-old and inexplicable national sentiments. In spite of this, *Kannathil Muthamittal* is an intensely human look at the destructive byproducts of the civil war and the irrationality of communalist hatreds.

Namehay Bad (*Letters in the Wind*), the first feature film by Iranian director Ali Reza Amini, concerns itself with the mood and environment in an Iranian military boot camp. A band of conscripts from small villages have joined the army exclusively because they have been promised the

opportunity to visit Tehran.

"I want to get ahead even if it costs me my life," says one recruit. Another quips, "We're okay if there is no war." In fact, these "innocents" will not be "okay." Made to stand at attention for long periods of time in harsh weather conditions, drill in the freezing mountain ranges and crawl on their bellies for any act of insubordination, the youth find consolation in the random recordings of a woman's voice, the "other" to this brutal atmosphere, on a tape recorder smuggled in by one of the shyest of the group.

When the boy is given leave to go to Tehran, the tape recorder is passed around and messages recorded. In a moving scene at a phone booth in Tehran, the earnest youth plays back message after message to the various families. He then walks around recording sounds of the city: snippets of traffic noises, music, advertisements, private conversations. Back in the barracks upon his return, all crowd around, riveted by the sounds emanating from the tape. Officers move in brutally rousting the boys as the recorder plays on.

Due to censorship by the Iranian government, which withheld the original 35mm color version of the film, *Nomehay Bad* was screened at the festival in gray-tone digital format. Elaborating further about the censorship at the post-screening session, Ali Reza Amini informed the audience that no Iranian film had ever been made about "the belly of the army." He talked about his own experience in the Iran-Iraq war, when as a soldier in the trenches his only solace came from a small transistor radio. A woman's voice, even an anonymous one, is particularly comforting, explained translator and Iranian filmmaker Mamad Ghassemi, because it is the first sound heard by a human being. Commenting on the film's censorship, Ghassemi said: "Iran's government is a police military regime which uses religion to muzzle the people."

British film director Ken Loach, who has had a life-long dedication to artistically chronicling working class life, has not broken any new ground with his latest effort, *Sweet Sixteen*. Set in Greenock, a defunct shipbuilding town on the outskirts of Glasgow, the movie centers on the doomed struggle of 15-year-old Liam to create a home for his unwed sister, her son and an imprisoned mother who will be released on his sixteenth birthday.

In *Sweet Sixteen*, Loach's passive, documentary-style realism too frequently rounds off the edges, muting or distorting the drama in a scenario that objectively should elicit revulsion and pain. Heartbreaking social ills barely register on the emotional Richter scale.

A commitment by Loach to the "inner life" of his characters is markedly lacking in *Sweet Sixteen*. Any degree of depth depends largely on individual performances or apparently accidental moments. Liam's obsession with his dead-beat mother, the main impulse for his embracing a life of extreme criminality that involves slaying his best friend, is never psychologically established. The "devotion to mother" plot device, lazily inserted to portray Liam's core humanity, is essentially unconvincing. It also greatly detracts from the sympathy that Liam's condition should evoke.

A deep pessimism seems woven into the fabric of the movie. Have the mass of social evils, documented monochromatically by Loach over the years, finally worn down his resistance to the point that he conceives of the working class as merely atomized, albeit possessed of certain crafty and endearing character traits? *Sweet Sixteen* leaves a bad aftertaste.

Unmediated and unvarnished social realism, or rather "social sensationalism," combined with a fatal dose of misanthropy, make this film by Swedish director Lukas Moodysson largely unwatchable. In a bleak, unspecified place in the former Soviet Union, as well as a bleak apartment in Sweden, a sweet 13-year-old girl is set upon, abused and finally destroyed by every adult that crosses her path.

If the influence of the Dogme group (the collective of filmmakers founded in Copenhagen in 1995), who are the leading contemporary

specialists in hysterical "realism," is present here, it is a purely baleful influence.

Fuehrer Ex is based on the experiences of former neo-Nazi Ingo Hasselbach. It tells the story of two youths, Heiko and Tommy, who come under the influence of racist toughs while in a brutal Stalinist prison in East Berlin. By the time they get out of jail the Wall has fallen, but one of the youths becomes a leading neo-Nazi in the newly reunited Germany. A tragedy involving his friend throws him into a crisis and brings about a break with the fascists.

Despite the benefit of Hasselbach's first-hand experience, the film is incapable of mounting a serious explanation of the attraction of neo-Nazism for a layer of deeply disaffected youth. The filmmakers' viewpoint of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Berlin is essentially ahistorical.

The brutality of the GDR regime and something of the hopelessness it obviously engendered in many young people are captured in the sharply realistic prison scenes. However, the film's apparent acceptance of the idea that this police-state represented the "Socialist Motherland" is thoroughly disorienting. And equating the methods of the Stalinists and the Nazis, without any reference to the different social origins of the regimes, does not help reveal the essence of fascism.

The utter inadequacy of this outlook was highlighted during the post-screening question and answer session, when Hasselbach and one of the film's producers opined complacently that since the election of a social-democratic government neo-fascism had been on the wane in Germany. In an attempt to further enlighten the audience as to the nature of fascism, the film's representatives asserted that the more psychologically hardened character in the film, Tommy, was able to use the Nazis opportunistically for his own immediate purpose while in prison, whereas Heiko, based on Hasselbach, was susceptible to sincerely embracing Nazism because of his "more sensitive" make-up. What are the implications of that comment!

The creators of *Fuehrer Ex*, including the ex-neo-Nazi Hasselbach, for all their obvious sincerity, are very far away from understanding the phenomenon against which they are proselytizing.

The Filipino movie *Hubog (Wretched Lives)*, by director Joel Lamangan, is a confused and simplistic attempt to parallel the corrupt and brutal manipulation of the poor by the political elite with personal relations within the working class that follow the same patterns. Set in the beginning of 2001 when President Joseph Estrada was ousted and replaced by Vice President Gloria Arroyo, escalating protests at Edsa—the site of mass demonstrations in 1986 against the dictator Ferdinand Marcos—find their mechanical reflection in the lives of shantytown youth.

The savage crimes committed against Vanessa and her mentally-retarded sister, especially by their most promising benefactor, reach an unbearable crescendo as the fury of the masses peaks against the entire panoply of politicians, including the populist Estrada. As Vanessa plunges a knife into her and her sister's tormentor, a protester blows himself up, shouting: "Down with all corrupt systems!"

Having learnt the hard way about falling for a false facade and false promises, Vanessa is carted away by police. Simultaneously at the site of the protests, someone shouts, "The poor have always been used by politicians... Don't let us be fooled again!" Given the overall heavy-handedness of the film, its gratuitous violence and extraneous sex scene with Vanessa and her grifter true-love boyfriend, director Lamangan employs more formulaic manipulation than he does artistry or social insight.

Steve James, who co-directed *Hoop Dreams* (1994,) follows the troubled life of Stevie Fielding in his new documentary, *Stevie*. While attending Southern Illinois a decade ago, director James was a "Big Brother" to then 11-year-old Stevie. Having grown up and been sexually abused in the foster care system, an older Stevie, now drowning in a backward social environment, is reunited with James. Unlike *Hoop Dreams* where the documentary team tried to maintain a policy of

noninterference with its subjects, James's personal relations with Stevie create a totally different dynamic in *Stevie*.

During the course of filming, Stevie was facing indictment for sexually molesting his cousin. Throughout the process of the indictment, James was forced to continually redefine the boundaries between filmmaker and subject. Involved was the risk that the project's final form would be viewed by Stevie as yet another of life's perpetual betrayals.

Despite these efforts, the problem with *Stevie* is that it does not really grasp the truth of Stevie Fielding's life. The festival's catalogue correctly describes the film's underlying premise: "The seeds of Stevie's crimes are clearly seen to be rooted in his family history." That is only one aspect of the problem. Much more weighty is American society's role, and conditions of economic and cultural deprivation, in Stevie's downfall. At sea as to how to help Stevie, James half-heartedly encourages the former's various misguided attempts at redemption, from evangelical baptism to camaraderie with the Aryan Brotherhood. When Stevie espouses hardcore racism, James is silent.

It is significant that when Stevie's mother comes back into his life, James is somewhat perplexed that Stevie's destructive behavior does not diminish. (It should be noted that Stevie has continuously had a very supportive sister and girlfriend.) Perhaps it was the absence of a father figure, muses James at one point in the film, or perhaps, as James told the audience in Toronto, Stevie will view the documentary in his prison confinement and be encouraged to change his life. James is a serious and honest man, but without any attempt to draw some political conclusions about the environment produced by American capitalism, which destroys the lives and psyches of people like Stevie, his work remains on the purely "journalistic" (in the bad sense of the word) and superficial level.

Les Chemins de l'oued (Under Another Sky), the debut film by Gaël Morel, is a visually attractive but immature work about the human cost of war and Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria. The characters never step above the first few rungs of the dramatic ladder and the story line comes off as unfinished. It is hard to say what the filmmaker's political conceptions are, except that he is against the fundamentalists in Algeria. That is not enough.



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