

Buenos Aires 5th International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 1

The two paths

David Walsh
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The most recent Buenos Aires independent film festival opened as US forces continued their brutal assault on Iraq, shooting down protesters in Mosul and calmly presiding over the destruction of the country's cultural heritage. Not since the 1940s had the world seen such an act of naked aggression. For its part Buenos Aires bears witness to the depth of the Argentine and world economic crisis, with more than a quarter of the nation's population now out of work and well over half living below the poverty line. The city is measurably dirtier, poorer and gloomier than one year ago.

The director of the Buenos Aires film festival, in his introduction to the event's catalog, confessed to an impression, given the circumstances, that the endeavor might be "frivolous" and "irrelevant," and indeed wondered, "why we are holding this festival" at all. On the other hand, he went on to note that last year's event had been hailed by some as "a pocket of cultural resistance and a small source of hope."

These not unworthy but somewhat confused considerations hint at certain peculiarities of the present situation in cinema. Should a festival organizer, filmmaker or critic be stricken with a guilty conscience about staging or attending such an event? The question would surely not even arise—simple intuition would reject it!—if the level of seriousness in filmmaking corresponded in some manner to the level of seriousness of the political and social crisis. By "level of seriousness" is not meant simply the appearance of works responding directly to current events (although that is necessary), but a more general commitment to expressing the "intimate life" of a people and time "to its innermost depths and pulsation," in the words of the 19th century Russian critic V.G. Belinsky.

Every serious and truthful work of art contains an element of protest and, therefore, 'justifies' itself, however desperate the social or economic state of affairs, in fact contributes to altering that situation for the better. The bringing into the light of essential aspects of people's lives, no matter how intimate the subject or lyrical the approach, inevitably calls into question the current social organization, which opposes and oppresses elemental human strivings. The deeper and more profound the examination, the greater the element of protest.

The principal task of the artist in our view, therefore, is not to provide immediate solutions to social problems, much less to spin out blueprints for a future society, but to portray in the most indelible manner the complex realities of the existing world, which are so little or poorly understood by great numbers of people. Nothing could be more pressing than this. If the artist bends his or her will, at whatever cost, to the illumination of difficult moral, social and psychological problems, this must sooner or later find a deep response in the population. The life-and-death attitude the artist takes toward fundamental human issues will prove to be "contagious," so to speak. The spectator then has responsibilities of his or her own.

In the event, the Buenos Aires festival, as all such affairs, included both

"frivolity" and "resistance," both self-absorbed trivia and genuinely illuminating work. If there was not enough of the latter that was not primarily owing to lapses on the organizers' parts, but an expression of ongoing difficulties.

The festival presented a varied program, including segments devoted to new Argentine cinema, to Palestinian films, to the "secret history" of Australian film, to the new "queer cinema" from China, to a number of individual filmmakers (Harun Farocki, Otar Iosselani, Nobuhiro Suwa, Stan Brakhage and others), to the club of "Lost Films" and more. There are no arguments to be made against this somewhat adventurous approach. One ought to be grateful for the opportunity to see, for example, works by the French director Jean Epstein (1897-1953), including *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), and Roberto Rossellini's *India* (1958).

Nonetheless, the programming variety could not conceal an essential truth: that contemporary cinema remains largely impoverished and lags far behind an increasingly explosive social reality. Moreover, the "commitment to obsession" that film festival organizer's espouse, almost guarantees the presence of a certain number of charlatans and fakers. At some point it will have to dawn on film festival organizers worldwide that extremism in form is not a virtue in itself. Nearly any film school graduate, with a certain degree of effort, can make an incomprehensible or supremely cold and violent or sexually graphic work. Nor is it beyond the reach of many, unhappily, to produce five-, six- or seven-hour films in which no one and no thing moves.

It is more difficult, however, to take the measure of the epoch and the society in which one lives in a dramatically compelling and truthful manner. For that one first of all has to have a decided interest in humanity and an objective means by which to make sense of society and history, through grasping the social conditions of existence as rooted in class affiliation.

By and large, the people making films and those criticizing them seem unaware of the contradictions of the present situation in cinema. Things are going rather well as far as they are concerned. They believe that their ideas and lives are terribly important. For the most part, however, they are not. A general middle class self-absorption and evasiveness combines with more narrow vested interests—the success of this or that film project or festival, the continued prestige of a director whose career one has endorsed, a publishing venture, an academic position—to ensure a degree of blindness as to the inadequacies of contemporary filmmaking.

We are still in need of a richer, more suggestive, humane, sensual, passionate, historically concrete and subversive fiction. Who will create it?

Belinsky, writing in 1834, asserted that there were "two inescapable paths" for the artist. One involved forswearing oneself, suppressing one's egoism and breathing "for the happiness of others," sacrificing all for the good of mankind, loving truth not for the sake of reward, but for its own

sake. The other, he observed, was a “wider, less disturbing, easier” path: “love thyself more than anything on earth; shed tears, perform kindness only for the sake of profit; fear not evil when it bringeth thee advantage. Remember this rule: it will assure you comfort everywhere!” These two paths remain.

A number of films stood out

A number of films stood out in Buenos Aires: two documentaries and one fiction film in particular. *The Flowers of September* [*Flores de septiembre*] treats the tragic abduction and murder of high school students under the Argentine military dictatorship 1976-83. It will be discussed in a subsequent article.

Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs—The Iraqi Connection [<http://www.forgetbaghdad.com>], directed by Samir (born 1955), is a fascinating and eye-opening account of the experiences of former members of the Iraqi Communist Party, now living in Israel. In the film’s opening Samir, the child of Iraqi parents who emigrated to Switzerland, explains in a voiceover that he is going to Israel, to “enemy” territory, to search for former Jewish comrades of his father, a onetime member of the Iraqi CP.

The director does not, in fact, encounter anyone who remembers his father, but he does interview four former members of the party: Sami Michael, a well-known Israeli writer; Moshe Hourri, a former kiosk owner and building contractor and still a supporter of the Israeli Communist Party; Shimon Ballas, a writer and professor of Arab literature at Tel Aviv and Haifa universities; and Samir Naqqash, a novelist, short-story writer and playwright still working in Arabic, whose efforts are largely ignored in Israel.

The film addresses itself to a number of problems: the experience of Jews in the Iraqi Communist Party; the trauma of the Iraqi Jews’ emigration to Israel and the discrimination they encountered; the treatment of the “Jew” and the “Arab” in cinema, including Israeli cinema (film historian Ella Shohat, herself an Iraqi Jew now living in New York, speaks on this). The questions are all legitimate, but the one with which most spectators will be least familiar is the history of the Iraqi Communist Party.

The accounts of political activity in the late 1940s are anecdotal, but manage to shatter a number of myths. One of the interviewed men notes that he grew up in a Baghdad neighborhood without mosques, churches or synagogues anywhere in sight; “Iraqis are anti-religious” by nature, he suggests.

Shimon Ballas recalls his first party meeting in 1946 at the age of fifteen. Necessarily secret, because the organization was illegal at the time, the gathering was held in a Shiite quarter in a coffeehouse “for Muslims only.” Asked to explain the difference between idealism and materialism, Ballas gave the common garden variety answer, that idealists pursued noble aims, while materialists concerned themselves with the base things of this world. A shoemaker then proceeded to offer the meeting the Marxist interpretation of the question, referring to Hegel, Marx and others. Ballas admits to his shame. Clearly a new world opened up to him.

The Iraqi Communist Party, which had Muslim, Christian and Jewish members (with a considerable number of the latter in leading positions), was the “strongest in the Middle East,” according to the interviewees, with 100,000 members. One of the former members recalls the depths of popular support, as he was protected against the police at one demonstration by women in traditional dress, on a later occasion by prostitutes in a brothel. “Help me, I’m a communist!,” he shouted another

time to a farmer, who hid him in his cart. Sami Michael had to make his way to Iran, where he worked with the Tudeh Party.

The politics of the Iraqi Stalinist party are another matter, which largely avoid scrutiny in the film. A mention of the party’s “patriotism” is the only reference to the Stalinists’ subordination of their efforts to the Iraqi national bourgeoisie, according to the notorious “two-stage” theory of social revolution in the colonial countries.

The four are ambivalent to say the least about their emigration to Israel. In the early 1950s the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi Jewish population felt obliged to leave. Each man seems convinced that the Iraqi government collaborated with the Israeli regime in forcing them out and that Zionist forces carried out the bombings of Baghdad synagogues and libraries in 1950-51 which hastened the departure of the city’s Jewish population. They speak of the deep sadness they felt on leaving Baghdad.

The four report on the humiliations they endured as Iraqi Jews on arriving in Israel. One recounts being dosed with DDT as a form of disinfectant on embarking from an airplane. “They [the Israelis] bought us and we became their slaves,” another asserts. The Iraqi Jews carried out strikes in some of the refugee camps in protest against their conditions. Samir Naqqash observes, “Israel changed people, from better to worse, it released diabolical instincts.” Sami Michael, a popular writer in Israel, remarks that “everything is narrow, artificial, organized to ideology.”

The film traces the process by which the four, despite their misgivings, reconciled themselves to Israeli society. “What had become of the communism of my youth?” one asks. The Arab Jews were silenced, told that they were splitting the Jewish nation by their complaints of discrimination, their suffering overshadowed by the Holocaust. However, Ballas, who left the Stalinist movement in 1960, comments, “My thought remains rooted in socialism. I didn’t change.” *Forget Baghdad* is one of those rare works that manages to be simultaneously tragic and inspiring.

Coal miners in China

Mang jing (Blind Shaft) is the remarkable first feature film directed by Li Yang (born 1959). It concerns the fate of two coal miners who earn their living by staging accidents that kill fellow workers they have passed off as relatives and collecting the compensation due family members. *Blind Shaft* opens and closes with violent deaths, but the film devotes itself primarily to a depiction of the everyday brutality of life under the Chinese Stalinists’ “free-market” policies. The murders or attempted murders flow logically from an economic paradigm in which “only money matters.”

In the opening sequences, the two are sitting with a third miner down a shaft. “All the men in my village have left to look for work,” he says. They kill him and open negotiations with the boss, a self-important yuppie, who wants to cover up the death. The latter’s henchman suggests, “Why bother? Why not just kill the two of them?” In the end, the mine owner agrees to pay 30,000 yuan (\$3600) in compensation to the dead man’s “brother,” one of the two murderers. “Pack your bags and burn the corpse! Get the f*** out of here!,” the boss screams.

The two go visit a brothel. In an extraordinary scene, they propose to sing an old favorite, “Long live socialism!” The prostitutes tell them “the words changed years ago.” They sing the revised version, “The reactionaries were never overcome. They came back with their US dollars, liberating China.”

The pair next pick up a 16-year-old, desperate for a job, and explain they can find him work in a coal mine, but only if he pretends to be a nephew of one of them. He’s a youngster, straight from the country, who has never had a drink or slept with a girl. One of the two older men begins

to soften, “It’s not right, he’s too young.” The other responds, “You feel sorry for him. Who feels sorry for you?” They try a new mine, with a crude thug for a boss. “What’s a few deaths?,” he asks rhetorically at one point.

The soft-hearted one tells his colleague, “If we kill him [the youth], we’ll end his family line.” The pair take him to a brothel. Afterward, the boy feels remorse, “I’ve shamed myself. My life’s over. I’ve turned into a bad man.” Violence prevails in the end. The final scene is a cremation, the final shot the chimney of the crematorium. A holocaust of sorts. Unofficial estimates put the total of dead in Chinese coal mine accidents last year at 7,000 or more.

Mang jing is not the end-all and be-all of filmmaking, but it is a sharp-eyed, truthful work done with compassion. Where is the European, North American, Japanese or Australian equivalent?



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