

Buenos Aires 5th International Festival of Independent Cinema-Part

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Structures of evasion

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Marxist criticism insists, against other viewpoints, that some degree of historical perspective is not only necessary for the analysis of art works, but also for their creation. The artist needs to have serious thoughts on how a given society or community arrived at its present social and psychic condition in order to make sense of critical phenomena, large and small. Every relationship, even the most intimate, bears upon it the impress of this more general history.

The guiding principle of art cinema today (and its critical accompaniment), including the “leftist” variety, runs counter to this notion. The assumption here, probably only vaguely grasped or intuited by many artists, is that “we all know” and “agree” that grand, universalizing systems of thought have failed (“modernism,” “liberalism,” Marxism), indeed led humanity disastrously astray, and that one is much better off working at the microcosmic level. The particular is everything, the universal nothing. Such is the hallmark of a stagnant and debased intellectual climate.

The “universal,” insofar as it is consciously present, has been abandoned to the banal commercial product (“love still conquers all,” “perseverance always pays off in the end,” “the pursuit of material gain is the root of all evil”), where it is treated with varying degrees of sincerity and cynicism. Or it returns in the form of a disguised or not so disguised theism.

There are innumerable means of avoiding the task of tenaciously probing the character of the present age, some of them employed by intelligent and sensitive people.

Apocryphally, Descartes is supposed to have said of Racine’s work, “Presuming that it’s good, but what does it prove?” Certain films prompt the same response, including *Vendredi soir* (*Friday Night*) by Claire Denis, *Japón* (*Japan*) by Carlos Reygadas and *M/Other* by Nobuhiro Suwa.

On the eve of moving in with her boyfriend, a woman stuck in a massive traffic jam in Paris—due to a transit strike—offers a lift to a pedestrian. They end up spending the night together. This is *Vendredi soir*. The slightness of the piece is meant as something of a provocation: “This is life, it’s found in small moments, not big moments.” Fine, but then one ought not feel obliged to have a big response either.

The first part of the film is largely irritating. So is the male character (played by Vincent Lindon). If one is more inclined to be forgiving, it is due to the presence of Valérie Lemercier as the female lead. Claire Denis and other French film directors (and not only the French) largely make films about themselves, with whom they are immensely pleased. Lemercier has a sweet, worried face, one that is not complacent, a face that represents a different principle. Denis deserves credit for casting her, but Lemercier belongs in a different film.

Carlos Reygadas has made a film (*Japón*) about an anonymous artist from Mexico City who travels to a remote canyon intending to kill himself. There he lives with and eventually becomes emotionally attached

to an elderly woman, Ascen, short for Ascension. The film has a number of striking or shocking images of nature, brutality, taboos of various kinds.

Reygadas, an admirer of Tarkovsky among others, seems concerned about human beings restoring or at least accepting their relationship with nature (and the Divine?). As for the relations among people, the director seems less interested, or perhaps simply more disapproving. He paints them generally in dark colors. The local population is backward, cruel.

Why is the painter going to kill himself? No one, least of all the director, asks this elementary question. Reygadas has said that he had the landscape of the bleak canyon in mind for his film before a story. This is telling. The filmmaker wants to be forceful, bold, enigmatic, but his conceptions about life are limited, so much of the work has the feeling of something done largely for effect. He has succeeded with the critics, who find the work “amazing.” This is unfortunate, as Reygadas may have genuine talent.

M/Other by the Japanese filmmaker Nobuhiro Suwa (beware of clever titles! Suwa has also directed *2/Duo* and *H/Story*) is an intelligently done, rather arid work. Suwa belongs to the generation of Japanese directors striving to make spare, meaningful films, but coming up short because it has little to say about contemporary society. Indeed it is difficult to bring to mind a single recent Japanese film which has made an effort to grapple with the present malaise in that country. It cannot be a good sign that the filmmakers are largely impervious to the insecurity and suffering of wide layers of the population. They apparently have their sights set on “higher things.”

In *M/Other* a young woman, Aki, suddenly finds herself saddled with a child when her older lover brings his 8-year-old son Shun into their house after his ex-wife has an automobile accident. Despite the man’s promises to share the burden, Aki largely assumes the role of taking care of Shun. She grows resentful. At the same time, she develops a fondness for the boy. The experience opens her eyes about her boyfriend: he’s selfish and traditional-minded. He says at one point, “Shun will be leaving soon,” but she replies, “We can’t live as we did before.” Becoming a “family” ends their relationship. Aki is caught somewhere between being the “other” and being a mother.

The film is careful, patient and dull, at two hours and a quarter unsustained by its content.

M/Other is one of a number of films that would have benefited by severe paring. *Ana y los otros* from Argentina (see future article) could have been reduced to one amusing scene. *Picture of Light* (Peter Mettler, Canada)—about an excursion to film the Northern Lights—would have been vastly improved if the self-important and self-aggrandizing narration had been removed, along with a number of scenes, and the film reduced to a 20-minute travelogue. (For example: “It may well be that the Northern Lights can’t be filmed, that film is in conflict with nature. ... Is it just a surrogate for the real things, is it just a surrogate for the real experience?”

Is it necessary to explain that an image is not the same thing as the original object, but that an accurate image captures something essential about the object, grains of “absolute truth”? Mettler’s *The Top of His Head* is unbearably provincial.)

Part of the Sky is a film from Belgium (director Bénédicte Liénard) about women in a prison and a factory. Claudine is a worker in a bakery; Joanna, her former friend, is in prison for an unspecified violent act. Claudine has to decide whether or not to testify for her old workmate. The lives of the two groups of women, prisoners and workers, are presented accurately, but without great inspiration or to great effect (although it is noteworthy that the corruption and worthlessness of the existing union is taken for granted).

Liénard worked as an assistant for the Dardenne brothers (*Rosetta*, *Le Fils*). This group of Belgian filmmakers may have its heart in the right place, but there is an artistic and intellectual passivity here (which hints at caution, if not timidity) that is irksome. Accuracy and detail are not everything. Besides the presentation of events, a critic-philosopher once noted, there is such a thing as *judgment* of events.

The Rite ... A Passion from India (K.N.T. Sastry) also seems to have its heart in the right place, arguing against superstition and religion. The shot of the Hindu priest on his cell phone is a nice touch. However, the work is poorly and amateurishly done. *Latina/Littoria* (Gianfranco Pannone) and *Cuore napoletano* (*Neapolitan Heart*, Paolo Santoni) are further reminders that Italian cinema is essentially nowhere at the moment. The former deals with the emblematic city of fascism, built by the Mussolini regime in the 1930s, and its present-day political disputes. The fascist mayor, an out-and-out worshipper of *Il Duce*, and a former Marxist writer form an alliance of sorts which speaks to nothing so much as the deep disorientation of sections of the 1968 generation of Italian radicals. The latter film treats Neapolitan popular music, and should have been considerably more interesting and entertaining than it is.

Houve uma vez dois verões (*Two Summers*, Jorge Furtado) and *Jealousy is My Middle Name* (Park Chanok) are inconsequential films from Brazil and South Korea, respectively. *Going Down* (Haydn Keenan, 1983) and *Cowards Bend the Knee* (Guy Maddin, special presentation) are silly films from Australia and Canada, respectively.

Films by Otar Iosseliani hold an attraction for certain critics and audiences. The Georgian-born director, in France for decades, makes tepid and muddled films full of ironies that some consider insightful or amusing. *La Chasse aux papillons* (*The Butterfly Hunt*, 1992) is typical: it features a priest who drinks too much and whose room is a wreck, a group of Asians who want to buy an estate from an aristocratic French family, an old lady taking target practice, a terrorist attack, a pair of impoverished Russians suddenly turned into millionaires, a diamond-buying Indian and so forth. The whole thing adds up to very little.

Iosseliani came into conflict with the Stalinist regime in Georgia in the 1960s and 1970s and emigrated. As with most of the eastern European and Soviet dissident artists, there is no hint of an understanding of the Stalinist phenomenon or the post-Stalinist reality, although Iosseliani had the honesty to admit, after a trip to Georgia in 1994, that the situation “was even worse than before because during the Soviet time there was a good infrastructure, and now there is nothing.”

The filmmaker claims to be neither an optimist nor a pessimist, while asserting that “we shouldn’t make the mistake of thinking the future will be better than the past.” There is not much here.

The German left filmmaker Harun Farocki is a somewhat more complicated case and this brief comment should not be considered the final word. Born in 1944, Farocki attended film school in the 1960s, edited the journal *Filmkritik* from 1974-83 and taught at Berkeley in the 1990s. He has made dozens of short and unconventional films, aimed at criticizing conventional methods of image-making. One might say that Farocki operates one of the last branches of the Brecht Industry—which is

not the responsibility of Brecht himself—via its Straub-Godard subsidiary.

On the basis of viewing only a few of Farocki’s films, a final judgment would be unfair. However, the interim report is not hopeful.

Workers Leaving a Factory (1995) compiles footage from films over the past 100 years of the social process named in the title, beginning with the very first film ever made, by the Lumière brothers. Some of the sequences—from Nazi newsreels and East German documentaries, shots of a Ford factory in Detroit in 1926, from films by Griffith, Lang, Pudovkin, Chaplin and others—are fascinating and evocative. However, relatively little is made of the material. *The Job Interview* (*Die Bewerbung*, 1997) focuses on courses where people learn how to apply for employment. *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet at Work on Franz Kafka’s ‘Amerika’* (1983) treats a rehearsal for a film in which Farocki played a part. *The Inextinguishable Fire* (1969) deals with the production of napalm.

This is a dry, academic leftism, concerned principally with deconstructing conventional wisdom and “received ideas.” For the most part, however, Farocki is the master of the obvious, rather pedantically explaining to his audience things he feels it ought to know. The films are created with intelligence and precision, and occasionally, genuine artistic flair. But Farocki seems to be one of those leftists, a latter-day candidate for the Frankfurt School, who has intriguing ideas about every imaginable process (shopping malls, the organization of prisons, 17th century Flemish painting, media presentation of war and upheaval, etc.), except the most critical ones.

One has no idea, after the viewing of several of his films and reading interviews and some of his own essays, where he stands on the critical experiences of the 20th century: above all, the fate of the Russian Revolution, Trotskyism versus Stalinism, the nature of the regimes in East Germany and eastern Europe, German reunification, etc. Like Brecht, Straub and Godard before him (in quite different ways), Farocki concentrates on various “alienating,” deconstructive and assorted pedagogical efforts because he mistakenly locates the chief difficulty in popular consciousness in its acceptance of bourgeois narrative norms, rather than in the activities of definite political tendencies and leaderships and resulting problems of political perspective.

It is remarkable that this enemy of the “received idea” should write, without the hint of a qualification, of the “communist regimes” and “Polish communism,” repeating the greatest “received [false] idea” of the past century, i.e., that Stalinism equaled communism. In what does Farocki’s “Marxism” consist precisely, and why has his star risen so suddenly among apolitical “cinephiles”?

Farocki’s ‘critical criticism’ seems to be a rather non-committal, passive leftism, a leftism for people who are essentially satisfied with their cinema journals, academic posts and the film festival circuit.

Responding to a comment from Farocki’s co-director, Andrei Ujica, on *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992)—compiled from television coverage of the downfall of Romania’s Stalinist regime in 1989—that “We only pass comment on what the images may show us, not on what might have happened elsewhere,” a critic noted “This, of course, is a far cry from any attempt to uncover the reality that may or may not lie behind the images.” Indeed.

About *The State I Am In* (*Die innere Sicherheit*, 2000), directed by Christian Petzold and written by Farocki, which dealt with the fate of 1970s leftist terrorists on the run for 15 years, I wrote: “The film seems accurate in many of its details. It convinces, by and large, as a portrait of people on the run. But, again, there is not a single indication, first of all, of the couple’s ideas, and, second, what the filmmakers think of these ideas. Was terrorism a correct policy or was it not? What were its roots, and what were its consequences? Volker Schlöndorff’s *The Legends of Rita* is in many ways a less successful artistic venture, but at least it attempted to say something about terrorism and German society and politics.”

A further viewing and examination of Farocki’s work is necessary.



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