

Buenos Aires 5th International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 4

An Argentine tragedy

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Flores de septiembre (*Flowers of September*), directed by Pablo Osores, Roberto Testa and Nicolás Wainszelbaum, examines the tragic fate of a number of students at the Carlos Pellegrini secondary school in Buenos Aires in the late 1970s. The young people, involved with the Montoneros guerrilla movement, were abducted and murdered by the military dictatorship during the so-called “dirty war.”

The film is a remarkable effort to reconstruct the culture and relationships existing within a single school under increasingly terrifying circumstances. It consists of extensive interviews with classmates, former political colleagues and family members of three boys in particular, Rubén Benchoam, Juan Carlos Mártire and Mauricio Weinstein. It is impossible not to be moved by the testimony. However misguided their political activity may have been, which was not their responsibility, the young people clearly represented an extraordinary human type: selfless, idealistic, humane.

The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed a powerful radicalization in Argentina, part of a global process. The Montoneros group was formed as an armed urban guerrilla movement in 1970 by left-wing followers of former dictator General Juan Perón. The Argentine bourgeoisie, wracked by crisis, felt obliged to recall Perón from exile in 1973 and place him in power. Feeling betrayed by the new administration, which carried out right-wing policies, the Montoneros continued its activities, carrying out kidnappings and bank robberies.

The military seized power in March 1976 and immediately began its war of extermination against left-wing opponents, with the full support of the Ford administration and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger (and later the Carter and Reagan administrations). [See “US documents implicate Kissinger in Argentine atrocities”] An estimated 30,000 people disappeared into military and police custody in the years 1976-83 never to be seen again. The Montoneros, along with other guerrilla groups, was wiped out as an organization; many of its leaders left the country in 1977.

Forty students at Carlos Pellegrini high school were among the “disappeared.”

Classmates of the three murdered boys talk about the school, the neighborhood, the buses they took to get to school, the music they listened to, the girls they liked. Photographs show bright, open and honest faces, some very earnest, others slightly more mischievous or even sardonic. The content of the interviews would dispel anyone’s stupid notion, encouraged by the media today, of a “terrorist” or “fanatic.” These were youth appalled by injustice and oppression. “We were convinced a revolution was coming,” one of the Pellegrini graduates explains. The students fought against the social system, but with methods that isolated them and facilitated their eventual destruction.

The build-up to the tragedy is recounted. At school the Triple A (Alianza Anticomunista Argentina—Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance, state-supported death squad) made threats against the militants. Police or paramilitary squads burst into homes and demanded to know the whereabouts of a son or daughter. Finally, the youths were tracked down and murdered.

One classmate dropped out of the Montoneros when he felt the group’s efforts were increasingly futile and wrongheaded. When the others were picked up by authorities in April 1978, he waited for his turn to come. It never did. Another former political comrade explains how she was arrested and taken to a notorious concentration camp. She saw the boys as they were about to be taken away and shot. She is glad that at least one of their last moments was spent in the company of a friend.

The boys left their mark, on their comrades, girlfriends and even on students who were entirely apolitical and uninvolved at the time. The film effectively builds up a picture of an intense, caring and deeply human type, which seems too rare at present. On the other hand, the filmmakers interview former school officials who obviously collaborated with the security apparatus and assisted the

dictatorship. That type exists too, and not only in Argentina.

The audience in Buenos Aires was transfixed. The events are very recent. Many of the murderers and torturers, pardoned by succeeding governments, live in neighborhoods around the city. The country is descending into economic and political chaos once again. None of the contradictions of the society has been resolved. The film inspires, moves and cautions. It deserves to be widely seen. [See “An interview with Nicolás Wainszelbaum and Roberto Testa, directors of *Flowers of September*”]

Other Argentine films fall into a more familiar category and pattern: “independent” films that are not independent in the sense of seriously opposing prevailing conceptions and institutions. We have enough of these already from North America, Europe, Japan and Australia. If anything, this category of Argentine films has grown blander and less urgent as the political crisis and the suffering of the population have become more acute.

Apparently such films are defended on the basis that they accurately reflect a generation and a social layer. But that is true, of course, of every work. Commercial studio products too accurately reflect a generation and a social layer, simply not a very appetizing one, not one to whose thoughts and feelings it is worth devoting much time.

This defense is ironic, as it comes from people who might be described as “formalists.” Is art then simply a passive mirror? We Marxists think otherwise. The task of the artist is to reflect critically on life and society, go beneath the surface, tap into deeper currents. As a critic once remarked, he who, seeing an object, regards it from no point of view, has not gained much from the fact that he has eyes. The artist needs to be a thinker and a social scientist too.

One does not want to be unkind to young directors, but it is best to be honest. Films like *Nadar solo* (*Swimming Alone*, Ezequiel Acuña) and *Ana y los otros* (*Ana and the others*, Celina Murga) are weak. The former deals with a discontented middle class 17-year-old. He has a band, a friend, troubles at school, a trip to the seaside where he meets a girl. The problem is not the class affiliation of the protagonist, but that so little is done with his situation. In the end, the film permits the spectator not to take his alienation terribly seriously. It trivializes his condition and that is something that should not occur.

Ana y los otros suffers from similar difficulties. A young woman in her twenties returns from the capital city to a provincial town where she grew up. She seems to be casually looking for a former boyfriend, then not so casually. She pursues him. That’s the entire film. One feels that she is alone and not happy about her condition, but not much more than that. As mentioned in a previous article, there is a one amusing sequence with a young boy. Camila Toker is

charming as Ana.

It does no one, particularly younger directors, any service to flatter thin and relatively pointless films. That is not encouraging the “new, struggling” artist, that is simply perpetuating mediocrity and complacency. If certain young Argentine filmmakers do not adopt a more critical (and self-critical) approach to contemporary reality, they will not make a mark or deserve to.

Cantata de las cosas solas (*Cantata of Solitary Things*, directed by Willi Behnisch [born 1956]) is a difficult film to describe, which is perhaps the filmmaker’s wish. It takes the form of a series of images, held at length, of various, unconnected objects and activities: shots from a train, an eye, a bird pecking at a carcass, a marsh with semi-stagnant water flowing slowly, a group of banners, demolition, a stump by a stream, clouds above a building. Some make a startling or striking impression, some do not. It is difficult to make sense of the whole.

Certain texts are heard in a voiceover, one of which refers to preserving things “without history, without fear.” Another goes, “No one has yet seen what each man sees.”

Behnisch, in a conversation, suggested that he is concerned with Nature, Being and things in themselves. The director is intelligent and sensitive. I told him that I thought his film was fairly inaccessible, difficult to enter. He hoped that was not true. He said that he felt a certain world outlook was in the process of collapsing, based on man’s hierarchical relation to nature. The filmmaker said that he wanted to do away with the notion of images serving a particular function in a film. But hadn’t he decided on the specific images in the film as opposed to other possible ones? I asked. Yes, but the images were chosen spontaneously, because they triggered something, meant something to him.

We were sitting in a shopping center crowded with parents and children, teenagers. I commented at one point: “Let’s assume for the purposes of argument that you are a smart person, with ideas and sensitivity. Don’t you think that you could make a slightly larger point of contact with these people, who need more culture and more sensitivity in their lives? They are hungry for something more, although they might not know it. Without compromising your integrity or artistry, I think you might make more of an effort in that direction.” We left it at that.



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