An interview with Nicolás Wainszelbaum and Roberto Testa, directors of Flowers of September

David Walsh
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David Walsh: I just want to say that it's a very strong film, a very moving film. Why did you choose to make this particular work?

Nicolás Wainszelbaum: We have been working a lot, in many ways, on the theme of everyday life under the dictatorship [1976-83]. We had already conducted an investigation into this school and about the youth who entered it in 1973 and graduated in 1978. We always took quite an interest in specific locales, not necessarily the general climate or the world of the imagination during the era of the dictatorship. We were interested in focusing on small, restricted spaces and trying to see how power and the dictatorship were carried out in those small spaces.

The idea was to gain access to a more human level, which meant getting involved with the feelings, the personal tragedies, the limits, the rebellions, the motives, the losses and the illusions of those youth—because they were still youth—who were beginning, at that time, to consider political activism. At the same time, the film also tries to show the entire educational community: how the repressive system worked inside a school and the different attitudes it elicited from the young people, including those who were not militant, the students, the teachers. It's very interesting to see how the teachers form a quilt in which completely different attitudes are apparent, from the one who concentrated on everyday routine to the one who aligned himself with the dictatorship's politics.

DW: I understand those points, but you also must have been attracted to the personalities, I think. You reveal, you portray extraordinary people.

NW: A few years ago, Roberto [Testa] carried out an investigation into how the dictatorship had operated at the school and discovered in this neighborhood intertwined stories of the different protagonists in which a whole number of things played out. For example, the film has a very strong love story, cut short because one of the youths disappears [at the hands of the military dictatorship]. And there are unifying threads among these kids which make their stories quite rich. Roberto rescued this history and contacted all the relatives of the disappeared. Forty people disappeared at the school, but these are the three stories which best tell and account for all that historical process at the school.

DW: Leaving aside for a moment the political questions, what comes out in the film are the qualities of nobility, self-sacrifice, an enormous feeling for injustice. I wonder if the directors are conscious that they are holding up an example of a human type that is rare today.

NW: I believe these are unique stories. That entire era is quite different from this one, and no doubt that kind of sacrifice surprises us today because of its commitment and passion. Today one sees those characters' commitment and one can hardly believe that so much passion could be channeled politically. Maybe that's one of the things that shocks and clashes with today's reality the most, as well as the people who are presently seeing [the film]—above all the young and adolescent audiences who cannot believe that those youth, even when they were facing death and persecution, decided to stay in their country and remain militants. I also believe that we achieved in the telling of the story a freshness and spontaneity which make it unique.

DW: Why do you think it's possible that those people had that kind of commitment?

NW: I believe that the young people became drenched with the very strong spirit of the era, when political commitment played a very important role among all the youth. But we tried not to leave it at just that; we also wanted to show that other aspects came together. These are stories where activism creates friendship, love, and everyday situations that united the young people even when they were in different places.

DW: What would you like a spectator, particularly a young person, to draw from the film?

NW: Many things. First we became interested in creating situations that were neither black nor white, but quite human. That way we could bring the spectator closer to the characters' humanity, with their contradictions and everything that surrounds the human being. We also wanted to establish some distance from today, when political commitment has been lost or is expressed in other ways. Our idea was that we should regain those values, perhaps not in the same way, but regain them nevertheless. We want today's young people to begin to ask themselves questions about those youth.

DW: The other question, which may be more complicated, is the nature of the politics, the *suicidal* nature of the politics. It was not the fault of these youth, but what political force is responsible for that disaster? Who led them into this situation, what political forces were responsible?

NW: In the film we tried to show the isolation in which these youths ended up as militants and which also ended their lives. Without doubt, the leadership of the Montoneros worked these guys up to a point where they no longer gave a damn about dying.

Roberto Testa: I believe that the dynamics of Argentinean politics during that era was incredible. Toward the end of the 1960s, there was an upsurge of leftist politics throughout the world. This appeared here mixed with the renaissance of Peronism. The result was a very strange marriage between, on the one hand, the strong pull of Peronism, which in no way could be considered "leftist"—even though at that moment [Juan] Perón himself was giving speeches to support these youth—and, on the other, there were these youth, who saw Peronism as the tendency that the masses supported. My personal opinion is that Perón used those expectations, including armed resistance, because it was politically expedient at the time.

Then, all these young people, who had joined a force which they considered both Peronist and socialist, quite quickly became orphans. Political events accelerated and then a break-up of that social process began in which Perón was the first to cast them aside, followed by their own leaders when things got difficult. The leadership of the Montoneros left the country, many leaders fell, and many of the ties between different levels of leadership broke up. And these boys, who in their majority had no possibility of leaving the country, remained here, surviving in any way they could. They finally ended up being hunted down by the state.

DW: It's very tragic. And it's not just personally tragic, but also the society pays a price if ten of thousands of the best people are murdered. The society is still paying the price.

RT: Absolutely. Not only are there 30,000 "disappeared," among which there were the most questioning and searching youth of the era, but the social fabric at different levels also changed because of that central wound. We still have the families, the friends and a whole society which has remained terrorized until today.