San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 1

A modest proposal: a cinema of ideas

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This is the first of three articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival. The second article will be posted later this week.

So many notions taken for granted today by artists, including filmmakers, need to be challenged. One of the greatest weaknesses of contemporary art is a disbelief in its own significance and capacities. In North America, in particular, decades of official philistinism and reaction, as part of a general social regression, have beaten down a good many of the more sincere or sensitive souls. Meanwhile, charlatans and various essentially talentless people have been feted.

As a result, many serious or semi-serious artists have been led to accept the fact of their own "smallness." The conviction that one's efforts are of no great consequence must enter into the production of the artistic work and help shape its final form. Why present a frontal challenge to prevailing ideas or approaches if nothing much will come of it? Better to decorate one's little corner, have an "artistic career" and stand aloof or pretend to stand aloof from pressing social and intellectual problems. In this manner, the discouraged or defeatist artist helps reinforce and police his own impotence. He becomes an indispensable link in a chain of causation.

In passing, it should be noted that the temporary decline in artistic substance and richness has been accompanied by a vast increase in the dollar-value of the art, film and "entertainment" industries, that a loss of meaningfulness *within* the art work has been more than compensated for in certain eyes by the emergence in the last several decades of the artist who grabs headlines for his extra-artistic activity, by the artist-celebrity. In part this is merely the recognition of a unhappy fact of life: today's artist or filmmaker is often *less* intriguing for what he does inside the artistic sphere.

In any event, it is almost excluded from the start that a filmmaker who has internalized his own insignificance will tackle great questions, will rise, in Mayakovsky's phrase, to "address the ages, history, and all creation." At present, the word "universal" merely provokes a shrug or a smirk. We are awash in studies of details, largely presented apart from the whole. (A typical comment from a film festival catalogue: Film *X* "wisely refuses to position itself as a metacommentary on social malaise or a gripping vision of alienation; instead, it merely presents one girl, and her mother, as they try to find wonder in the world.") So much so that a time in which artists attempted something larger, epic in scale, seems almost unthinkable. Such attempts, conventional wisdom would have it, belonged to a relatively recent Dark Age in which socially driven, ideological works dominated and when the supposedly deluded artists thought they could participate in changing the world.

There is no reason to underestimate the damage done by Stalinism, with its "Socialist Realism"—i.e., its "concentration camp of artistic literature" (Trotsky)—whose residual impact is still with us, but the time has come to re-establish certain elementary truths: that smallness in conception and artistic ambition yields small results, that the artist has the obligation to study the socio-historical process as a whole and make sense of it, that art without great aims is "mere rattle," that ideas *matter*! Yes, one might as well stick one's neck out: what's needed today more than anything else is a cinema of *ideas*.

It is with some of these issues in mind that we view current films, including those screened at the recent San Francisco International Film Festival (April 17-May 1).

Extraño (*Foreign*) is an intelligent, careful film from Argentine director Santiago Loza (born 1971). It concerns a middle-aged man, Axel (Julio Chávez), who has given up practicing medicine and lives with his sister. He seems once removed from every situation and relationship. With his nephew he is an almost-father, with a pregnant woman he meets in a bar, Erika, an almost-husband. Axel moves in with her, but they live side by side, not really together. He: "You talked in your sleep." She: "What did I say?" He: "I don't know." Later, she: "Aren't you curious about the baby's father?" He: "No."

His passivity and paralysis presumably express a deep depression. But then the women in his life (sister, Erika, ex-girl-friend) are hardly more cheerful. Erika's former partner committed suicide. Erika laments that "nothing will be left of us" after death, and insists on a desperate trip to a disco where she dances alone, eight months pregnant. When the baby is born, Axel leaves again, by train. In the last extended shot, he is seated in the moving train, hands joined.

Extraño is a thoughtful, patient, spare work, but in the end insufficiently distanced from its central character and his dilemma. There is much to be troubled by in the world, particularly in Argentina (and whether the filmmaker wishes to be seen making reference to the present situation or not, it inevitably comes to mind). However, the film suffers from its own passivity and reflects *all too accurately* its protagonist's mental and moral state.

Is the film intended as a criticism of a certain social or psychological type? In any event, the somewhat self-serious shots of Axel sitting pensively wear thin. Real talent and sensitivity are at work here, but the filmmaker needs to liberate himself a bit from an overly cautious and muted approach and speak more clearly and openly, without reserve. One feels he has something to say.

The Adventures of God, written and directed by veteran director Eliseo Subiela (born 1944), is perhaps another response to the Argentine malaise: the effort to remain in a dream state. An absurdist piece, in which the anonymous protagonist rises out of the ocean and wanders around an empty luxury hotel, Subiela's film considers the possibility that we are merely God's dream. "Perhaps we're only a dream. Would we be alive only during a dream?"

The film has its amusing, if not subtle moments: Jesus Christ performing magic tricks, the protagonist eating his mother for dinner, a woman constantly giving birth, a mirror reflecting different moments in time. "I wake up with an inexplicable sadness," says the lead character at one point. "I've hidden my fury and disgust for so long," he says at another.

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One would perhaps have liked to see those sentiments expressed more directly. Subiela's film does not break new ground, with its echoes of expressionist and surrealist efforts (also *Last Year at Marienbad* and *The Trial*). *The Adventures of God* has its charms, as long as it's not taken too seriously.

Bus 174 (Ûnibus 174) from Brazil is a sincere, but overlong documentary treatment of a Rio de Janeiro city bus hijacking in June 2000 (after a bungled robbery) carried out by a former street kid. The incident, which ended with a hostage's death and the police murder of the hijacker, was broadcast live on television for four hours and watched by some 35 million people.

Filmmaker José Padilha (born 1967) makes an effort to go beyond the headlines by uncovering the facts about the short, wretched life of Sandro do Nascimento, the hijacker of bus 174. As a boy, Sandro saw his mother murdered in front of his eyes. After passing through various hands, he ended up on the street. He was present in Candelaria Square in Rio in July 1993 when police opened fire on a group of sleeping street kids, killing six; two more were taken away and executed.

Some of the homeless kids, whose numbers are estimated to be in the millions on Brazil's streets, are interviewed. "If they [the police] could, they'd kill us all." Of Sandro: "Everybody was against him. ... He said his family was dead, everybody was dead. ... He had nothing to lose." Sociologists are interviewed too and speak of the kids' rage at their social exclusion: "These boys battle against invisibility."

After an escape from Rio's most notorious jail in 1999, Sandro was adopted by a middle-aged woman, one of the few people to treat him decently. She gave him a room and freedom. But he told her, "I can't read or write, who'd give me a job?" He carried out the hostage-taking high on drugs, out of control, at the end of his rope. The police merely finished him off.

Bus 174 is too long because the filmmakers are too timid about making a frontal attack on Brazilian society. Detail becomes a substitute for an open indictment. The academics and other experts who appear wring their hands at the events, but no one says the obvious: that such a society's foundations are utterly rotten. The solution is not better training for the police, as the film suggests, but the uprooting of a system that condemns wide layers of the population to misery.

Glauber Rocha (1938-1981) was one of the initiators of the *Cinema Novo* (New Cinema) movement in Brazil in the 1960s. *Stones in the Sky* (*Rocha que voa*), directed by his son, Eryk Rocha (born 1978), treats the filmmaker's life and work, making use in particular of material recorded during his visits to Cuba in the early 1970s.

Rocha emerged from the political-cultural radicalization that swept Latin America. He advocated a break with "European bourgeois film" and an indigenous Brazilian approach to cinema, making use of folk culture, local rhythms and symbols. Such ambitions were common at the time in the colonial and semi-colonial countries of Latin America and Africa. Various national schools of cinema and theater "of the oppressed" appeared at the time. Often with the best of intentions, these efforts, which remained trapped within a radical bourgeois nationalism—encouraged by various Stalinist, Maoist and Castroite currents—rarely went further than populist explosions of anger and despair.

In *Black God, White Devil* (1964) and *Antonio das Mortes* (1969), Rocha demonstrated a genuine artistic flair, but his outlook, as represented in the present documentary, remained extremely limited. How total independence from bourgeois filmmaking was to be achieved remained unclarified. The idea of a neo-realism "in terms of Latin American needs" was an equally abstract formulation. In practice, Rocha glorified the "outlaw killer" and guerrillaism in *Antonio das Mortes*, the story of a hired gun for the landlords who undergoes political enlightenment.

In general, the director exhibited an unhealthy fascination with violence, even writing a manifesto entitled "The Aesthetics of Violence." There is nothing inherently progressive about a strategy of "armed struggle," which refuses to make clear its social basis or aims. Certain words and phrases are conspicuously missing from Rocha's comments—"working class" and "socialism" most prominently. Frankly, the "Third Worldism" advanced by Rocha seems an utterly false path both politically and culturally, a reality underscored by the evolution of the Castro regime and the various petty bourgeois nationalist movements around the globe.

Love & Diane (Jennifer Dworkin) and *girlhood* (Liz Garbus) are documentaries concerned with social deprivation and its consequences in the US. *Love & Diane*, filmed over a number of years, follows the unhappy lives of Diane and Love Hazzard, mother and daughter in East New York, a poor neighborhood in Brooklyn. The opening sequence, shot through a windshield on a rainy, miserable day, is one of the film's most memorable. The images capture something indelible about the unspeakable desolation of America's inner cities.

Diane is a recovering crack addict whose children had been taken away from her and placed in group and foster homes. After many years and bitter struggles, she has finally managed to reunite her family. Now her daughter Love seems destined to repeat the same unhappy experience, burdened with a child she neglects. The film documents the agonizing efforts of the family to navigate the public welfare and social service systems. No official seems malicious or unkind, at least on camera, but one senses that even the best of intentions are utterly futile in the face of the obstacles the Hazzards have to overcome: poverty, lack of education, lack of resources, isolation.

Like *Hoop Dreams*, *Stevie* and so many other American documentary efforts, *Love & Diane*, although it contains a number of extraordinarily truthful and painful moments, shies away from the harshest truths. In the final analysis, such works, while expressing sympathy for their subjects, remain confined within the prevailing orthodoxy of "individual responsibility."

They refuse to say what needs to be said: that if human beings such as Diane and Love, despite the most titanic and heartbreaking efforts, are defeated and broken, driven to crime and drugs, over and over again returned to square one or worse, then the fault lies with the social system, not the individuals. One really has to return to fundamentals and explain, as Brecht once noted, that such stories reveal not the wickedness of the poor, but the *poverty* of the poor.

The same more or less could be said about *girlhood*. Liz Garbus, co-director of *The Farm: Angola, USA* (1998), follows the lives of two girls in a juvenile facility for Maryland's most violent offenders. Shanae stabbed a girl to death when she was 12. Sixteen-year-old Megan's mother is a drug-addicted prostitute. Shanae is a model prisoner and does well within the system; at the end of the film she is accepted to college, although her mother dies at 34. Megan has more difficulty, dealing with her mother's massive problems and her own rage.

Garbus's film is accurate and honest, but not apparently animated by outrage. Indeed there is always a danger that such subjects inure the filmmaker or the spectator to the conditions under study. Everything depends on perspective and social analysis, and an absolute unwillingness to accept these social facts as eternal and unalterable.

Robert Capa: In Love and War examines the life of photographer Robert Capa. Here was an artist born to a different generation and a different social climate. Born André Friedmann in Budapest in 1913, Capa imbibed anti-capitalist views with his mother's milk. A foe of the semi-fascist regime in Hungary, Friedmann fled to Berlin at 17 and later, after the Nazis' rise to power, to Paris. One of his first photographic assignments was to take pictures of Leon Trotsky delivering his famous speech, known to us as "In Defense of October," in Copenhagen in November 1932.

A "displaced person all his life," Friedmann, along with his great love, Gerda Pohorylles, invented his new persona, Robert Capa, American

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photographer, at the age of 22. Capa quickly earned a reputation as the "greatest war photographer in the world," in the Spanish Civil War (where Gerda died, killed by a tank), in China during the Japanese invasion and in World War II.

Capa was apparently a cool customer. Writer Walter Bernstein recalls his experience during the war, finding himself in a foxhole, terrified, with Capa. The photographer chatted calmly about Tolstoy and "calmed me down."

After the war and after the great struggles of the 1930s, Capa drifted. He had an affair with Ingrid Bergman, but declared that "Hollywood is the biggest mess of shit I ever stepped in." (Hitchcock's *Rear Window* was apparently inspired by the Capa-Bergman relationship.) He gambled, followed the races, chased women, lived in hotels, got bored. Capa was subjected to the McCarthyite witch-hunt because of his "communist sympathies," and forced to turn in his US passport in 1953. He declared that he had been approached by a Communist Party recruiter when he was 17 who turned out to be "far less radical than I hoped."

Unhappy and restless, declaring that he had to do something "to live again," Capa took an assignment to cover the French colonial war in Vietnam in 1954. A sympathizer of the Vietnamese, Capa got too close to the action and stepped on a land mine, which killed him. The film, directed by Anne Makepeace, is worth seeing, although it avoids treating the more complex issues of mid-century politics: including Stalinism and the fate of the Soviet Union and their impact on the artist.

Drowned Out focuses on the massive dam project on the Narmada River in India, the largest river development anywhere in the world, which threatens to drown countless villages and displace over 250,000 farmers. Those who will be driven out are offered inadequate resettlement on bad land. In one resettlement site, 38 children died within a year from disease.

The government claims that the dam is needed for power, food and irrigation, that one of its chief aims is to divert water to drought-stricken areas. Critics suggest that the project's waters will never reach those areas, that it will chiefly benefit the chemical, pharmaceutical and agribusiness interests in an industrial belt. Writer Arundhati Roy is a member of the movement in opposition to the project. She notes, "In India everything must be done in the name of the poor." The film is solid, earnest and thoroughly respectable.

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