

San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

A growing seriousness

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This is the third and final part of a series on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival. Parts one and two were posted on May 21 and May 23.

Attempting to gauge the state of world filmmaking on the basis of viewing several dozen films, or even more, at a limited number of film festivals, is a potentially hazardous undertaking. How representative such a selection might possibly be, and even what the word “representative” would mean in the context of international film production (thousands of feature films released each year in dozens of countries, in innumerable genres, with widely varying levels of intelligence, artistry, technology, etc.), is open to question.

Nonetheless, having followed “art” and “independent” films over the course of a decade or more entitles one to say, based on the experience of the 2003 Buenos Aires and San Francisco film festivals, the following: that overall there is a growing seriousness in this field. One might almost ask, given the state of global affairs, how could there not be? Wars and threats of new wars, economic misery for most of the world’s population, growing social tensions, ethnic and national conflict, the traumas of millions of refugees and immigrants—if none of this had any effect on screenwriters and directors, that would signify the death of filmmaking for all intents and purposes as an activity bearing in any meaningful sense on essential human realities and its absolute transformation into an “entertainment commodity.”

By a growing seriousness is meant, first of all, that a certain number of filmmakers register outrage at the state of the world and the conditions to which wide layers of the population have been reduced. They do so in general with only a vague understanding of the causes of this state of affairs and an even less precise notion as to what to about it, but nonetheless their response is legitimate and healthy.

As a whole, the mood of cynical flippancy associated with “post-modernism” has dissipated somewhat, as the layer of the middle class which could afford to consume its “playful” self-indulgence has fallen on far harder times at the hands of the global economy. This is not to say, of course, that the artistic personality “occupied with himself, narrating about himself, walking around himself, sniffing himself and licking himself” (Trotsky) has disappeared. Alas, no, he is very much still with us.

As is the “artistic personality,” if such it can be called, entirely addicted to celebrity and wealth. Belinsky, writing in 1844, clearly had the present period in mind when he wrote that “[T]he scope of genius, talent, learning, beauty, virtue and, consequently, success, which in our age is considered to be above genius, talent, learning, beauty and virtue—this scope is easily measured by a single measure which conditions and comprises all others—by MONEY.”

Along with every other social institution or activity, filmmaking is undergoing a process of “polarization.” There is a growing awfulness at one pole (this is not by any means limited to commercial movie-making; awfulness is distributed throughout the various branches of the film world,

art and independent cinema as well), where one finds work of immense stupidity and crudity, genuine imbecility in some cases. One wonders now and then about those who fork over funds, considerable funds at that, to individuals of little or no discernible talent—former directors of deodorant or shampoo commercials; film school graduates without a single important thought or experience; hacks whose servility toward those with money and power conditions everything they do; clever boys and girls who we are told have a “strong visual sense,” but lack the elementary skill or interest to create a single psychologically believable moment; and so on.

This last “lack” is worth considering. The conspicuous decline in the ability to relate a coherent and convincing story must have a social significance. One cannot, as Marxist critics have noted, entirely cheat history or genuine culture. The artist does not put thought and energy into the construction of a drama for nothing. At the end of the day, he or she has to have a compelling purpose for making this effort. Many contemporary filmmakers simply have nothing to say.

Moreover, the entirely self-involved have an added difficulty. Telling a story involves going outside oneself, imagining the implications of other lives and conditions, putting oneself in another’s shoes. There are people working in the film industry so insulated, so infatuated with themselves they are literally incapable of that leap of imagination.

At the other pole, there is a distinct minority of filmmakers who interest themselves in bringing an artistic sensibility to bear on present realities, with both spontaneity and intellect, and bringing something new and complex into the world.

Cry Woman is a remarkable film from China, made by the husband and wife team of Liu Binjian (director and co-writer, born 1963) and Deng Ye (co-writer and producer). It is unusual in that it combines a strong element of social critique and, without cynicism, a streak of black humor.

Guixiang is an energetic young woman from the provinces living in Beijing with her ne’er-do-well husband, Changgeng. She sells bootleg CDs and DVDs on the street, while he gambles. During an argument over a game of mahjong, Changgeng blinds a playing partner and lands in prison. Guixiang, burdened as well with an abandoned child, is sent back to her hometown by the authorities. Prospects are not good. At a theater, she explains, “I was in the opera,” and asks for the director. She’s told, “He’s off to make money elsewhere.”

She takes up with an old boy-friend (now married), the director of a funeral parlor, who offers her work as a professional mourner due to her distinctive and exuberant manner of crying. He explains that there are 23,000 inhabitants in the region, about 230 deaths a year. “I’ll be your agent. I provide you with the dead.” And she wails over them, these strangers, for money. Unhappily for the pair, as soon as they go into business there is not one death for ten days. While having sex one afternoon they hear a television report about the discovery of poisoned beef in the area. “We’re back in business!”

Guixiang is still thinking of her husband, despite her lover’s

observation, "He's a loser. Let him stay in jail." She needs 10,000 yuan to secure his release. This means a great deal of crying. The rate board lists the various laments—"Earthquake," "Typhoon," "Infinite Echo" and so forth—and their prices. Her boy-friend explains, "Our business is to control each link in the death sector." Guixiang even mourns for a deceased dog.

She goes to the prison with only 5,000. Sex with a prison official takes care of the difference. However, shortly afterward her husband gets killed. Unfeeling officials pay her a visit and briefly explain the details. "Sign at the bottom of the page," they tell her. She has an assignment to lament the death of a local big-shot. Guixiang cries and cries, but for once her tears are for real, for her dead husband, for herself. The family of the departed is moved to tip her well. Her heartrending sobbing continues. Few scenes in recent films can match this.

The Chinese Stalinist authorities did not care for the film, for good reason. They rejected it, according to the Rotterdam film festival web site, on the grounds that it painted "a negative picture of life in the Chinese countryside," and "is not conducive for the quality of socialism." What exists in China is the opposite of socialism and *Cry Woman* is certainly not conducive to that, for which the filmmakers deserve congratulations.

"Genre criticism," that is, seeking out and admiring films on the basis of their belonging to a specific stylistic or thematic category, is an inherently limiting enterprise. At present there are critics and filmgoers who, faced with the generally deplorable state of North American and European filmmaking, have analogously become specialists in Iranian or "Asian" cinema and will look at nothing else. Aside from the fact that this leaves North American and European filmmaking intact and unchallenged, this attempt to sidestep the current difficulties creates a false, idealized picture of Asian cinema, for example. There are good Asian films, such as the one just reviewed, indifferent Asian films, and so on. Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kong, South Korean and Thai film writers and directors do not inhabit a separate universe. On the contrary, there is more than enough confusion in those circles to go around.

Blissfully Yours (from Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, born 1970) is one of those films seriously in danger of being overpraised. The film concerns a trio of characters: a young Burmese man, Min, apparently illegally in Thailand and suffering from a mysterious skin disease; and two Thai women—Orn, a middle-aged woman who looks after him for money, and Roong, his girl-friend. Roong takes off from her work at a local sweatshop to spend the afternoon in the jungle with Min. Orn ends up in the same isolated spot, first with her husband, then on her own. Some sexual activity goes on, but much of the second hour of the film is devoted to silent scenes along a jungle stream, as the characters stretch out, hug, cry and sleep.

Weerasethakul demonstrates in the few moments of the film devoted to the urban and industrial environment a sharp eye and a certain social awareness. The short scene at Roong's factory is the most intriguing in the entire work: we see her at work along with other young women painting plastic or ceramic bunnies, and we see the factory manager lording over the employees.

The filmmaker does his best to be cryptic, and occasionally mischievous: the credits come on screen midway through the work, odd drawings scratched on the film appear from time to time. Various incidents take place that are only partially or obscurely explained to the viewer. A sense of unease dominates the film, despite, or perhaps because of, the characters' various attempts at happiness.

There might be something to *Blissfully Yours*, but, unhappily, the film is likely to be praised for what is not there, for its elliptical and indirect approach, rather than for what is. Pregnant pauses are hardly something new in the current international art cinema (although these are lengthier and more pregnant than most), indeed they have become something of a cliché.

One might be uncharitable enough to suggest that contemporary

filmmakers often include pauses and "meaningful" silence because they are not capable of summoning up the appropriate words or interaction. Such ingredients require a degree of social and psychological analysis. Many directors would prefer to avoid that burdensome task. *Blissfully Yours* seems a serious enough effort, but its willful obliqueness eventually grows wearisome.

There is something to be said, after all, for dialogue and the dramatic-literary element, even in the cinema, which we know is a "visual" medium (at what point in time did this half-truth become an excuse for intellectual laziness?) For some years now authors, playwrights, even screenwriters have found conversations between characters useful as a means of shedding light on phenomenon as diverse as, say, the inner life and the nature of the social order, whether it be Shakespeare in *Henry VI, Part 3*, Goethe in *Egmont*, Isaac Babel in *Marya*, or Robert Buckner in *Dodge City*. This is a tradition that ought to be revived.

The San Francisco festival screened two Japanese films, *Aiki* and *The Last Scene*, which at the very least managed to avoid the self-conscious, studied straining for "meaning" (and not finding much) of most art films from that country at the moment. *Aiki*, directed by Daisuke Tengan (born 1959, collaborator and son of filmmaker Shohei Imamura), is a relatively unsentimental account of a young boxer, crippled and made despondent by a car accident, who finds new meaning in life through *aiki-jujutsu*, a form of martial arts. His teacher can send people whirling through the air with just a flick of the wrist, and through striving to master the same technique, the young man rejoins the human race. A young woman, a temple assistant, helps out. The film is worth viewing if only for her exit line in one scene, "I moonlight as a shrine maiden. Come see me some time."

The opening sequences of *The Last Scene* (Hideo Nakata, born 1961) take place in 1965. A famous pair of co-stars, Ken and Keiko, are making their final picture together. Keiko, now married, is retiring from the screen. Ken, whose youthful good looks are beginning to fade, faces a grim future. He is mean to everybody: prop girl, his wife, he even punches a lighting man. After Keiko's retirement Ken's career rapidly goes down the drain, he begins drinking and his life generally goes to pieces.

Thirty-five years later Ken, who hasn't acted in decades, is hired to play an old, dying man on a horrible television show about a wunderkind doctor. In fact, Ken is dying. Assisted by a production assistant, a forgiving crew (who recognize him) and the ghost of his dead wife, he pulls off the performance, and passes away. The scenes of Japanese filmmaking in 1965 are well-done and convincing, as is the unflattering picture of contemporary television production peopled by selfish, boorish types without memory, knowledge or sensitivity. The film, however, suffers from sentimentality and withers away, like its central character, to relatively little by the end.

The subject of *All Hell Let Loose* (directed by Susan Taslimi, born 1950) is a volatile family of Iranian expatriates living in Sweden. One daughter, Minoo, has returned from America to attend the wedding of her sister. Minoo is the bane of her father's existence. He calls her a whore and much else. In fact, unbeknownst to him, Minoo has earned a living in the US as a stripper. He shouts, "You've ruined my life." In fact, he has done that to himself through his authoritarian, short-sighted and violent behavior. The days leading up to the wedding and the ceremony itself produce a family crisis and meltdown. There is nothing ground-breaking here, but the work is honestly and intelligently done, with a certain edge.

Palestinian filmmaker Hanna Elias's first feature film, *The Olive Harvest*, contains some of the same elements of family drama, although under more stressful conditions—the occupied West Bank. Mazen comes out of prison after 15 years for setting fire to an Israeli settlement; his brother, Taher, is an up and coming Palestinian Authority official. They both find themselves in love with the same woman, Raeda. In fact, Taher has only held back from marrying Raeda because, by tradition, the older

brother must marry first. Meanwhile, Raeda's dangerously ill father, a farmer, is bitter about the departure of his other daughter for the city. The question of the land and who will best preserve the continuity of land ownership is at the heart of this film. It is a film made by and for the Palestinian petty bourgeoisie, rather sentimental and overwrought.

As though to confirm the point, a June 7, 2000 article on the ElectronicHouse.com web site explained that "idealive, the global online marketplace for investing in the arts and entertainment, announced today the first-ever online financing of a film project a film by director Hanna Elias entitled *Olive Harvest* using venture capital valuations.

"Noted Silicon Valley entrepreneur Kamran Elahian has taken a lead position in the financing, which has been earmarked to complete post-production shooting and editing. Mr. Elahian is a managing partner of Global Catalyst Partners, an international venture capital fund, and founder of nine start-ups including Cirrus Logic, Cahoots.com, and Centillium.

"'Venture capital generates progress and new growth because it backs people with vision and the passion to realize that vision,' says Mr. Elahian. 'By applying this structure to artistic projects, idealive helps to create more and better projects that can reach underserved audiences, bypasses the bottleneck of traditional studio financing, and creates a new level of efficiency in the market all of which benefit both artists and investors.'"

The ultimate product bears the imprint of this process. *The Olive Harvest*, in the manner by which it was produced as well as its central concerns, is very far removed from the suffering Palestinian masses of Gaza and the West Bank.



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