Sydney Film Festival—Part 1

Classic films a festival highlight

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This is the first of a series of articles on the recently concluded Sydney Film Festival.

The Sydney Film Festival celebrated its 50th anniversary this year with a mix of over 200 contemporary features and documentaries and a selection of classics and lesser-known works chosen by former festival directors. While many of the recent movies were uneven, confused or forgettable, the older films provided some of the better moments of the two-week event. They gave festival patrons the opportunity to view some of the more interesting cinema produced in the past five decades. They also highlighted the dismal level of contemporary cinema, dominated as it is by generally mindless and/or reactionary blockbusters or the often self-indulgent offerings promoted as "art house" or "independent" work.

Some of the "classics" screened were *Living* (Akira Kurosawa, 1952), *Gates of Hell* (Teinosuke Kinugasa, 1953), *The Exterminating Angel* (Luis Buñuel, 1962),*Titicut Follies* (Frederick Wiseman, 1967), *Family Life* (Ken Loach, 1971), *The Spirit of the Beehive* (Victor Erice, 1973), *Fox and his Friends* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder 1975), *Shivers* (Wojciech Marczewski, 1981) *Funny Dirty Little War* (Hector Olivera, 1984) and *Father's Land*, (Peter Krieg, 1986). These films, some of which will be reviewed in future articles, were amongst the best attended at the festival and rated highly in audience voting.

Among the diverse issues explored included: treatment of the mentally ill in Massachusetts (*Titicut Follies*); a child's view of life in the aftermath of the 1939 fascist victory in Spain (*The Spirit of the Beehive*); the impact of wealth on personal relations (*Fox and his Friends*) and the ideological and social consequences of nationalism (*Father's Land*).

If one had to sum up the essential strength of these intelligent and at times deeply moving films, it is their directors' commitment to artistic truth and a determination to deeply probe social life and human consciousness. The best work was produced at a time when a more critical attitude to the social order and the political authorities was widespread among filmmakers.

This is not to suggest that all the movies are without weaknesses or that all the contemporary films were of no consequence. Nor is it correct to suggest that some sort of cinematic template can be drawn up from the classics and simply applied. Artists are obliged to make an ongoing examination of social life, with all its complexities and contradictions.

The problem is that it is comparatively rare to find modern filmmakers prepared to take this road. In fact, numerous filmmakers and critics today, even as they favourably profess their admiration for groundbreaking cinema from previous periods, dismiss the intellectual approach that produced them as hopelessly dated or idealistic. Indeed, the past few decades have seen cinema retreat into general misanthropy or even worse.

The pressure exerted by the giant corporations that control the film industry and the elevation of entertainment celebrities to unprecedented levels, is certainly a major factor in this artistic decline. But the parlous state of contemporary filmmaking is an expression of the general decline in political consciousness among broad sections of the population. Instead of challenging this state of affairs with a political and historically conscious approach, many potentially talented filmmakers and artists have simply adapted themselves to it.

Given that this year's festival attempted to provide a general overview of its 50-year history, it seems particularly pertinent to look back at some of the general conceptions animating those who first established the event.

In 1954, festival organisers, who included a number of socialist-minded intellectuals, never conceived of the

annual event as a commercial venture. Instead they regarded it as a vehicle for artistically revitalising the small and ailing local industry. This would be done, they believed, by providing access to the best of international cinema and thus break through the narrow insularity of Australian social life during the early years of the Cold War.

While this outlook may have appeared rather innocuous to some, Australia's ruling elite did not view it this way. They regarded the festival and the local film industry with deep suspicion and directed their spy agencies to pay the closest attention. The Australian government, like its counterparts elsewhere, feared that cinema's mass appeal would educate and enlighten audiences and therefore strengthen those challenging the powers-that-be and undermine Cold War anti-communism.

David McKnight, a historian and former member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia (CPA), provided some confirmation of the government's fears in his presentation to the festival's annual Ian McPherson Lecture. Citing recently declassified government documents, McKnight said the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) devoted extensive resources to its operations in the local film world.

Film societies, the precursors of Australian film festivals, were subjected to secret state snooping, with the ASIO Director General instructing all Australian states in 1951 to provide details on film society membership. ASIO dispatched agents to the first-ever Australian film festival held in January 1952 at Olinda, a small town on outskirts of Melbourne, and kept files on senior members of the Sydney Film Festival.

By 1964, it had personal files on 11 of the Sydney festival's 33 organisers and had agents operating inside the organisation. ASIO operatives provided detailed information on festival officials and film industry figures. Festival directors had their phone calls bugged and were photographed by secret police because they had contact with Soviet and Eastern European filmmakers.

Likewise, the festival was regularly in conflict with Australia's notorious censorship regime, particularly during the 50s and 60s. Australian censors banned *The White Haired Girl*, one of the first films from Mao Zedung's Peoples Republic of China, because they considered it would be "offensive to a friendly nation". In other words, it could not be shown in Australia because it might upset Chiang Kia-Shek's anti-communist regime in Taiwan.

Festival organisers were involved in numerous battles with Australian censors. The last film banned at the Sydney Film Festival was *I Love, You Love* by Swedish director Stig Bjorkman in 1969. The then Liberal-Country Party government stopped the movies because it contained a sex scene with a pregnant woman.

Resistance by festival officials and audiences to this rulings and other repressive rulings coalesced with agitation against conscription, opposition to the Vietnam War and a general movement of the working class on wages, conditions and democratic rights. This broad movement eventually forced some liberalisation of censorship during the early 1970s.

Following its election in 1996, the Howard government, however, has begun a frontal assault on these minimal gains. A few days before this year's festival, the federal government's Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) banned screenings of Larry Clark and Ed Lachman's *Ken Park*. The US film has been shown at festivals around the world and will be commercially released in several European countries. According to the Australian censorship authorities, however, *Ken Park* "offended the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults".

Festival patrons were rightly outraged. By contrast, the organisers meekly capitulated to the OFLC Review Board decision. Festival President Cathy Robinson told a forum organised in place of the scheduled screening of *Ken Park* on June 17 that although the festival had a video copy of the movie and could have screened it, the board had decided not to do so because it was concerned about the reaction of advertisers and corporate sponsors.

Robinson also claimed that a legal battle with the OFLC over the film would "divert attention from the broader question of censorship". She provided no indication, however, that the festival would develop any action against this major attack on democratic rights, which constitutes a serious challenge to film festivals throughout Australia.

If the Howard government's conception of a "reasonable adult" is anything to go by, the *Ken Park* ban will be the first of many. The acquiescence of the festival organisers to the OFLC decision will further embolden the government.