

Toronto International Film Festival 2003—Part 2

Reproductions of life

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A certain type of intellectual snob or skeptic is taken aback at the thought that art might—or might be expected to—provide objective knowledge of human relationships and social life. Artistic effort, according to such people, ought to be reserved for the consideration of “higher”—or often “lower”—things (the supposedly “darker,” “primal” stuff of life). The physical state in which millions of people live, as well as their moral and mental condition, is of little interest to our snob or skeptic. “It’s all Eros and Thanatos,” he or she mutters, “Eros and Thanatos.”

Far from being unconventional or “advanced,” such sentiments, expressed with varying degrees of sophistication, predominate in the artistic world. Parisian cinéastes and Hollywood philistines alike, although they might phrase their concerns differently, agree that the concrete and exacting examination of the facts of modern life is a tedious and largely pointless undertaking, unworthy of them and unworthy of art. They have long since transcended, almost with one mind and spirit, the ‘consoling’ thought that changing society might improve on human nature—which they have studied and found wanting, dominated as it is by ‘greed, lust and pride’—or address the ‘eternal questions’ of love and death.

As a consequence we are all too commonly offered the self-absorbed, abstract, ‘timeless’ consideration of experience, generally the filmmaker’s unmediated own, without regard to history or social life. Trotsky once noted that the “servile preoccupation with oneself, this apotheosis of the ordinary facts of one’s personal and spiritual routine” was “unbearable.” Unhappily, this sums up a considerable portion of the world’s film (and artistic) output at present.

The contemporary artist who seeks to understand life profoundly, who attempts in particular to render social life transparent, is a rarity. The Russian critic Chernyshevsky observed that artistic “products (the products of human life, this must not be forgotten) are nearly always created under the overwhelming influence of the need for truth (theoretical or practical), love and improvement of life ... This is how all artistic creations that are remarkable for their merit were produced.”

Determining how overwhelming (or otherwise) this “influence” has been in its creation may be one of the more valuable guidelines for evaluating a given work, for determining its seriousness as a “reproduction of life.” This is one of the ways that we regarded the films in the recent Toronto festival. Here were hundreds of efforts, many of them weak, tangential, trivial, either false pictures or pictures of entirely secondary or tertiary aspects of life (including the “self-satisfied seeking for psychological nits”—Trotsky).

There were, as always, a handful of remarkable films. And then there were others, sincere, honest, valuable for their insights.

Wang Xiaoshuai (*So Close to Paradise*, *Beijing Bicycle*), interviewed by the WWS in 1999, is a Chinese film director. *Drifters* is his latest effort. Like his previous works, the film pays attention, among other problems, to social differences and their consequences in China. Its protagonist, nicknamed Er Di (“younger brother”), is a young man in the southeastern

region of Fujian, a coastal area from which boatloads of young people set off in an arduous and hazardous effort to enter the US illegally.

Er Di once stowed away and made it to America. He fathered a child there, but the girl’s family, also Chinese and his employers at a restaurant in California, turned him in to immigration authorities and he was deported. Now the boy and his grandfather are home for a visit and Er Di is urged by his older brother, as a matter of family honor, to see his son. He is first turned away at the door of the wealthy family. Eventually the grandfather lets Er Di briefly see his son. When he attempts to give the boy a gift at his fifth birthday party, however, the older man confronts him.

We learn that Er Di was obliged to sign a contract in the US stipulating that if he wanted to work in the family’s restaurant he could not say he was the boy’s father, or else he would be handed over to the authorities. This humiliation is too much for Er Di’s older brother, who more or less kidnaps the boy. Er Di and his son have a brief outing, before the two brothers are jailed. In the end, Er Di decides to leave for America again. Meanwhile the television news announces China’s entry into the World Trade Organization.

Wang’s film conveys the widespread desperation and alienation of young people in China under conditions of a widening social gap. And also their illusions, about America in particular. Er Di is instructed by the authorities to give a lecture to the local young people about his experience and “how tough it is in a foreign land.” Sullenly he sits in front of the class, smokes a cigarette and says nothing as the eager youths pepper him with questions.

Er Di does not develop the relationship between China’s entry into the WTO, its “free-market” economy and the conditions of young people. Wang is perhaps being circumspect. He has experienced serious censorship problems, with his first feature *The Days* in 1994 and with *So Close To Paradise* (which went unreleased for three years until he made changes, including the title of the film). Or perhaps he is unclear himself how he feels about China’s evolution.

In any event, one senses that he has substituted at times certain formal flourishes for a more probing exploration of his subject. The film is terribly slow and the languor is not always justifiable. Wang openly acknowledges his admiration for Taiwanese cinema, with its long takes, shots filmed from a distance and elliptical narratives. He has allowed himself to be influenced too strongly, however, almost at moments to the point of parody. The result is that certain subordinate elements of the story simply are not given the time in which to unfold, particularly Er Di’s relationship with a young actress from the Shanghai Opera. She comes in and out of his life, but their relations feel largely extraneous to the film as a whole. When she decides to go with him to America and declares her undying love—“I go where you go”—it comes out of the blue.

Nonetheless, *Er Di*’s defining motif—a young man forced to sign away the rights to his child in order to hold on to a wretched dish-washing job—is a powerful one. It remains present to the spectator’s

consciousness—as a humiliation, as an open wound—throughout the work, and afterward. Something of the vast anguish and discontent of the Chinese population makes itself felt.

Israeli filmmaker Ra'anana Alexandrowicz has made his first feature film with *James' Journey to Jerusalem*. Previously the director has been known for his documentaries. *The Inner Tour* (2001) is an extraordinary work. It follows a busload of West Bank Palestinians on a three-day tour of Israel, where many had previously raised families or owned homes and farms.

In 2001 we noted on the WWS: “The filmmaker Alexandrowicz describes his documentary as an effort to show one of the ‘two parallel and contradictory books, which reflect the history of our country.’ But the film testifies to something more than two parallel histories. *The Inner Tour* provides a small glimpse of the suffering of a population driven out of their homes and dispersed, into refugee camps and exile. Everyone in the tour has had a family member imprisoned or killed by the Israeli military. Everywhere the bus goes someone sees his or her land.”

The central protagonist of *James' Journey to Jerusalem* is the son of a Zulu preacher, and the next in line to become pastor, sent from his African village to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem. The villagers sing, “Jerusalem, you are our destiny—the place where our dreams lie.” Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, James finds contemporary Israel. A cynical immigration official claps James in jail upon his arrival. He scoffs at James' naïve notions, commenting, “We barely get by in this godforsaken place.”

James is plucked from his cell by a small contractor, Shimi, who exploits undocumented workers. Shimi has his own “exploiters,” his wife and cantankerous father, Sallah. Through the latter, for whom he does gardening, James learns something of the ways of the advanced capitalist world. “Here we prey on each other,” Sallah explains, admonishing James not to be a “sucker.” Amusingly, James rapidly moves into business for himself, becoming a sub-contractor on his own, employing his fellow Africans. The shining vision of Jerusalem fades as he accumulates money and a vast array of consumer goods. When an inevitable crisis erupts, the young African realizes he has abandoned his original dream. In the end, the closest he comes to Jerusalem is a photo opportunity while in police custody.

The film takes the form of a fable. James comes from an imaginary village and his initial naïveté is deliberately unreal. Although the film offers a glimpse of the harsh conditions facing illegal immigrants in Israel, Alexandrowicz's principal concern lies elsewhere, in a critique of a corrupting value-system based solely on money and “getting ahead.”

I spoke to the director, an intense and articulate man, in Toronto. I explained that after the first five minutes of the film I had expected a more or less social realist work about the condition of illegal immigrants in Israel.

Alexandrowicz replied, “There is this original sin in touching upon the world of economic immigrants to Israel, but not actually making a film about this, but rather about Israeli society and culture as I see it now, the influence of successful modern economy on society and on basically on human interaction in Israel, not only in Israel, but about Western economies in general.”

I asked about his attitude toward his society.

“Let me answer the question in a very small way,” he began, “and see if it helps. In one of the central points of the film, there is a discussion of a term we use in Hebrew, ‘frayer’ [sucker]. Again, this idea of not being a ‘frayer,’ of getting ahead, of not letting anyone step over you. This is something that is becoming ever more central in our society, but again I think if you look at the North American and European economy, this is a basic problem. This is what I mean by the interplay of economy and human interaction. Money is very powerful. ... When we become convinced of these economic principles, and I'm speaking also about my

weaknesses, when I come to accept them, when I enter into the system, when I compete in the system, I feel that I change as a human being. I think that has happened to my society and other societies, the soul of the society is somehow being made harsh by these principles.

“When you look at the political problems in my country, the way that we've been trying to solve it for decades is by not being anyone's ‘frayer.’ It's not working out for us. In the long term, it doesn't work for any society. You make some short-term benefits, but in the long term you pay a big price for not being a ‘frayer.’”

I noted that the film takes a certain delight in James' evolution, as the audience does: “The audience finds it very amusing, his corruption, his accommodation to the system. To a certain extent his change is necessary, because we don't live in imaginary villages.”

Alexandrowicz responded, “No, we don't. This is why I chose this genre, because I think I'm not making any statement that should be engraved. There is something comic about this corruption. It's a weakness in James' character, Shimi's character, Sallah's character, I wrote them out of myself, out of my weaknesses, and temptations. It's a good way to communicate with people, to take pleasures and delight with this change, and then maybe something is reflected back as to how we change, rather than saying this in a serious tone. Then it loses its credibility completely.”

The Inner Tour had raised, quite scathingly, the issue of the fate of the Palestinians expelled from Israel. I asked Alexandrowicz about his attitude toward the present political situation. He answered carefully (later noting that “I'm not a public figure who has anything of importance to say”):

“If you ask me if I'm optimistic or pessimistic, then I would say, I have a deep optimism because I feel that I know something about the two societies, the two peoples, and I feel that they are very compatible. I feel this deep connection, and I know because of the way I live, the people that I know and the connections I have with Palestinians, I know that there is the possibility for a very good relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. So I would say that in this way, I'm very optimistic on the human level. When I analyze the way the political issues are developing, I am scared to death, I'm very afraid. This is the way I feel.”

James' Journey to Jerusalem is a lively and intelligent film. It is strongest when most concrete—the relations between the three principal characters (Shimi and Sallah are drawn particularly well), the images of Israeli urban society, the facts of economic life. Alexandrowicz directs the comic interchange between the naïve African and the various hustling Israelis, who are deeply human, with considerable aplomb and assurance.

The fable structure is the film's weakest element. And it points toward a more serious problem. Alexandrowicz terms his film “a metaphor for my society,” one that was “only created a century ago, with a very idealistic and pure dream; the practice of making this dream come true throughout the century has derailed the dream completely.” This is a distorted view of the history of the Zionist state. No doubt there were many “dreamers” who believed or hoped that Israel would become a democratic and egalitarian paradise for the most oppressed people of Europe and the world. However, its founding principle, “A land without people for a people without land,” was profoundly anti-democratic, denying the existence of the Palestinian people and asserting the ethnic and religious interests of Jews over those of Arab Muslims. The formation of the state on such a reactionary basis inevitably led to “ethnic cleansing,” which Alexandrowicz himself has documented, and the current monstrous Sharon regime.

The film director explains that he never attended university and that making films is his means of “studying.” Alexandrowicz is honest and sincere, and does not shy away from complex questions. Certain historical issues, however, pertaining to the origins of Israel and the democratic rights of the Palestinians simply cannot be sidestepped without intellectual and artistic consequences.

The Galindez File, from Spanish director Gerardo Herrero, is a somewhat odd little film, with certain merits. It is a fictionalized account of the effort to discover the truth about the fate of Jesús de Galindez, a political refugee from Franco's Spain, who disappeared in New York City in 1956. Before he settled in the US, Galindez had lived in the Dominican Republic and become a firm opponent of the Trujillo dictatorship in that country, writing exposés of the regime's misdeeds.

In Herrero's film, based on a novel, an American researcher, Muriel Colber (Saffron Burrows) is pursuing the Galindez story in the 1980s. Muriel's determination to get to the bottom of things, unbeknownst to her, arouses concerns in US intelligence circles. It turns out that the CIA had assisted in the kidnapping of Galindez by the Dominican authorities, who proceeded to torture and murder him.

In the course of her pursuit of the historical truth, Muriel turns up evidence that points to Galindez' own unsavory political operations. She discovers that this "freedom fighter" was busy informing on a variety of leftist movements in the US on behalf of the FBI. A Basque nationalist, Galindez was presumably attempting to establish his "anti-red" credentials with Washington at the height of the Cold War. Why did another wing of the American state then conspire in his death? Apparently because Trujillo "filled many pockets" in the US Congress.

Aside from the performance of Burrows, who is not a great actress but conveys considerable integrity and sense of purpose, the film is useful for pointing out not merely the complicity of American intelligence in the crimes of the Trujillo gangster regime, which will hardly come as a surprise, but the agency's unhesitating readiness to liquidate US citizens who threaten its operations. Another point in the film's favor is the barbed depiction of Muriel's advisor, a "leftist" professor, who is quite easily pressured by the CIA into betraying his former student (and lover).

Kamchatka is an Argentine film, directed by Marcelo Piñeyro (producer of *The Official Story*), which treats the consequences of political repression and terror from a child's point of view. In the days following the Argentine military coup in 1976, two opponents of the regime (he is a lawyer specializing in defending political prisoners) leave their apartment in Buenos Aires and hide out with their two young sons in a "safe house" in the suburbs. The family takes a new last name, and the older boy, 10, changes his name to "Harry," after his hero, Harry Houdini, the escape artist.

The film is a relatively modest effort, content to recount the growing tension in the family and the concerted efforts of the parents to hold things together, as the country sinks into bloody chaos outside the walls of their hideout. The father's office is ransacked by the military, friends are murdered. The noose tightens around them and the family is forced to flee again. Recognizing that they are endangering their children's lives, the couple is forced to leave the boys with the husband's parents. It is a painful moment. "Harry" runs after his parents' car. In fact, he never sees them again.

Kamchatka never reaches extraordinary heights, but its attentive portrayal of humanity in the face of barbarism (Ricardo Darin and Cecilia Roth as the parents are quite appealing) is legitimate and valuable.

The Blonds, also treating the period of dictatorship in Argentina, seems to me less successful. Directed by Albertina Carri, whose parents (nicknamed "The Blonds") disappeared under the military regime, the film combines fiction and documentary in a rather flippant "post-modernist" manner to tell a terrible story. The film has moving moments, but overall it is somewhat complacent and its cinematic effects seem more of an affectation than anything else.

Loving Glances is an amiable film from Serbia, directed by Srdjan Karanovic. Set in 1995 in Belgrade, it follows the misadventures of a young refugee from the Krajina region. Its tale of star-crossed lovers is amusingly done and the blows it aims at the sacred cows of every Balkan nationalist are entirely welcome, yet somehow the net result is

unnecessarily slight. Even a comedy about such events needs more bite.

Cuban director Juan Carlos Tabío (the former co-director of the late Tomás Gutiérrez Alea) has also made a slight film, *So Far Away*, about those who stayed in Castro's Cuba and those who left. It has an overly clever script, which rather predictably "plays on the lines between reality and fiction" and the cleverness of which takes up too much of the director's time. He forgets to say anything of great consequence, aside from a few truisms about the dangers of national stereotyping. The film is graced by a nuanced performance from Spanish actor Antonio Valero.

From South Korea *A Smile* (directed by Park Kyung-hee) follows the path inward taken by a young woman, a photographer, who discovers she has a rare eye disease. She loses or discards a lover, a career and the possibility of studying abroad. Presumably this is offset by her inner enlightenment (the "Smile" in the title belongs to Buddha). "We only perceive things within limited ways," someone intones. Is her eye disease perhaps a metaphor then for the human condition? We have our suspicions that it is. The film quite meticulously covers all too well-trodden ground.

South From Granada (directed by Fernando Colomo) pays tribute to British writer and Bloomsbury group member Gerald Brenan, who came to the south of Spain in 1919 and stayed in the country (except for the civil war period and its aftermath), completing three major works on Spanish life and literature. The film is a little too "warm and poignant" for its own good, perhaps possessing one "fiery young peasant girl" too many. In the end, in its acceptance of bourgeois norms and expectations, it is also rather conformist.

So, surprisingly, is *The Best of Youth*, a six-hour work made for Italian television by Marco Tullo Giordana. The director of *Pasolini, an Italian Crime* (1995), Giordana has fashioned a story about the Italian "generation of '68." The film principally follows two brothers from the mid-1960s, one who becomes a radical psychiatrist, the other a policeman. The psychiatrist marries a beautiful but unstable woman who joins the terrorist Red Brigades.

The film covers a variety of episodes in Italian history, from the floods in Florence, to mafia trials in Sicily, and does so intelligently. But its conclusion, with the remnants of the family, more or less tranquil and prosperous, gathered in the Tuscan hills, is remarkably smug. Apparently all the struggles and sacrifices of the previous thirty-five years have justified themselves by bringing about the reconciliation and inner peace of these Italian petty bourgeois—not too high a price for such an achievement!



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