

Toronto International Film Festival 2003—Part 5

Seven films, genuinely concerned with humanity or not

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This is the final part in a series of articles on the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-13).

My Town

My Town from Poland is infused with a humanity and sympathy generally lacking in post-Stalinist Eastern bloc films.

Filmmaker Marek Lechki's protagonist is 25-year-old Gozdzik, who lives with his parents in an isolated prefabricated apartment building in the suburbs of a small town in the mining and industrial region of Upper Silesia. At the film's start, Gozdzik, with a tone of mild resignation, sighs: "This is where I'm living, this is where I've always lived."

Amid the abandoned mines and foundries, the town's inhabitants, mostly unemployed, attempt to cobble together some semblance of a life. Poverty-induced anxiety, frustration, depression and alcoholism abound. Gozdzik has recently missed a university entrance exam, much to the chagrin of his mother who is herself barely coping. His sole activities are playing hockey and hanging out with his friend Cichy, a loner obsessed with restoring an old car left him by his father.

Recently unemployed, Gozdzik's father is drinking heavily and spends most of his time fishing in a pond where there is nothing to catch. "Things were supposed to be different," says Cichy as he gives Gozdzik a carp to place in the otherwise fishless pond. The two act out of concern that the latter's father is sinking into a deep depression.

The cast of remarkable and well-defined characters also includes a lonely, but aggressive old man in a persistent quest for companionship. He is continuously prodding Gozdzik to arrange a date for him with a young quasi-prostitute residing in the apartment building. The two Dabrowski brothers satisfy their boredom by chasing rats and bullying Gozdzik. Then there is Zosia, a new girl in town. She and Gozdzik are attracted to one another, but Zosia wants more than the inexperienced and somewhat emotionally paralyzed Gozdzik can offer.

Uncle Jan comes to town and his strained jocularity infuses some spirit into the dejected bunch. When his visit ends, he leaves with more than the building's warm farewell. As Gozdzik later discovers, Jan has pocketed the meager savings of his sister—Gozdzik's mother.

The realization that conditions in the town are almost beyond hope produces different responses: Cichy tragically hangs himself without warning, Zosia leaves to be with her father in Germany and Gozdzik physically drags his father away from the pond. Eventually Uncle Jan returns the family's money and invites Gozdzik's family to live with him in an area that he claims has more prospects. One is skeptical.

My Town is pointed in its truthful and artistically rendered depiction of an abandoned people. With a gentle touch, the film carefully lays the blame on society and not its victims, whom it treats with dignity and respect, while not ignoring their foibles and weaknesses.

The film seems to contain contradictory impulses: on the one hand, a

genuine anger at the wretched situation and, on the other, a whimsical or airy quality, connected perhaps to a certain resignation (a "painful-and-irrational-as-it-is, life-goes-on, no-matter-what" sort of attitude). More than anything, one senses that layers of the population have been disabused about the false promises of the 1990s and the wonders of the "free market," without having developed an alternative vision, other than a general promotion of decency and humanity. Despite this limitation, the film's humanism is not inconsequential considering the disorientation and cynicism that have dominated artistic circles in eastern Europe.

Alila

In an apartment building on the boundary between Tel Aviv and Jaffa, director Amos Gitai's *Alila* presents a mix of relationships that portray something of the chaos and tensions brewing within Israeli society. Ezra and Mali's son Eyal is struggling with the implications of mandatory military service. He tells his father that he doesn't know how he'll get through three years of duty in a combat unit. Ezra replies: "For three years I ran around with a five gallon jerry-can on my back. It'll toughen you up, it'll make a man out of you." Shortly after this conversation, Eyal runs away and fails to appear for his induction into the army.

To eke out a living Ezra hires illegal Chinese immigrants to build an illegal extension on the apartment building. In the production notes, director Gitai explains that the human landscape of Tel Aviv is "composed today of foreign faces, other destinies, like those of illegal immigrant workers. Since [the] occupied territories are sealed off, there are 300,000 to 400,000 workers from Asia, Romania, Ghana, Nigeria today.... They don't have Israeli nationality and very few even have work permits. I am very interested in the life of these non-Jewish, non-Arab communities in this region." Unfortunately, the film does little to grapple seriously with the lives and concerns of this population.

The building's residents include an aging Holocaust survivor upset by the presence of the undocumented laborers; the macho ex-military man Hezi and his mistress Gabi, who puts on a tough exterior (and a wig and "sexy" wardrobe) to protect herself against the world and against Hezi in particular; and a paranoid and angry policewoman on a continuous rant against Arabs in general. The relationships are incestuous and claustrophobic. "These communities rub shoulders, side by side, each trying to make their own space.... There's a constant penetration of intimate spaces in each 'cell' of private life," explains Gitai.

In the midst of this chaos and hubbub, the most important issue is Eyal's crisis about his military obligation. Here Gitai is obviously referencing (approvingly) the "Refuseniks," Israeli soldiers who have refused to serve in Gaza and the West Bank, and the increasing signs of opposition within the military to engaging in further acts of terror against the Palestinians.

Although Gitai offers valuable criticisms of Israeli society, he halts at a

certain point. The film's disjointedness and hyper-activity, like nervous ticks, work to distract the spectator from the director's own ambivalent position regarding the origins and actions of the Israeli state. Eyal's refusal to enter the military is a major decision, and represents a threat to the Zionist project. *Alila*, however, presents this as one strand among many, on a par with the sexual escapades and marital discord. Again from the production notes, Gitai states: "If this country becomes a religious autocracy or a strictly military or nationalistic country, it will disappear." What does Gitai think has happened under the Sharon regime?

The director fails to grasp that there is a direct link between the antidemocratic origins of the state of Israel (and the aims of the Zionist movement) and its present militaristic, nationalist, semi-fascist regime. The fact that Gitai dances around this historical truth prevents him from delivering anything more than sharp, but ultimately glancing blows to the social order he is criticizing.

Struggle

In Austrian filmmaker Ruth Mader's *Struggle*, Ewa, facing a miserable future in Poland, takes her young daughter—first legally and then illegally—to Austria. There she joins the roadside day laborers vying against one another for whatever lousy jobs they can grab from rich exploiters. On the run from immigration officials, existence could not be bleaker.

Marold is a middle-aged Viennese real estate agent, financially stable, but divorced and saddled with a painfully alienated relationship with his adolescent daughter. He is socially isolated and emotionally stunted. This has led him to seek out exotic sexual outlets. He hooks up with Ewa who is now predictably in the sex trade—she fulfills his unconventional sexual fantasies and he answers her financial needs. Life seems tolerable for the couple as they stroll through a shopping mall.

The film has little dialogue and is obsessively preoccupied with scenic detail, providing little insight into the characters, who are kept at a chilly distance. The director describes this approach as her "respectful" detachment from the actors and her focus on "authenticating detail." The overall effect, however, is to bombard the spectator with images of various social ills, repetitively and gratuitously presented. At the same time, these ills and those who profit from them entirely dominate the passive, unconscious, dehumanized victims—Ewa representing the working class and Marold the middle class. It is almost impossible to find a point of entry into the film or its characters.

The Toronto festival catalogue notes that "Mader was inspired to make *Struggle* when she discovered that workers traveled from Poland, Slovakia and Romania for six weeks of back-breaking, low-paying labor in the strawberry fields of Austria." The director states that "I'm not interested in bourgeois drama. I don't want to show banal [middle-class] anxieties, my interest lies in social conditions." These are valid aims. But the problem is that Mader does not make any real assessment of the concrete historical or social situation and therefore cannot penetrate or dramatize, in any significant way, the psychology of those confronting the traumas she reproduces. They remain near automatons. The struggles in *Struggle* are presented in an abstract yet in-your-face manner and, consequently, make little impact.

Pupendo

Set in the 1980s, before the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in eastern Europe, *Pupendo* (directed by Jan Hřebejk) focuses on Bedrich Mara, a well-known and once successful Czech sculptor ostracized by the Prague art academy for his dissident beliefs. He is a light-hearted drunk who now supports his family by mass-producing kitschy pottery. His more conformist counterpart is Mila Brecka, a respected and respectable school principal who benefits from his membership in the Czech Stalinist party. Structured as a comedy, the movie is a nostalgic look back to a time when life was slightly more benign—more like child's play. *Pupendo* is a child's game in which a prankster disarms his victim by promising something

pleasurable, then delivers a sharp slap to the stomach.

While taking mild pot-shots at the old Stalinist regime, the film conveys—intentionally or not—the feeling that life in the former Czechoslovakia was more carefree, despite political repression, than life in the present "free market" environment. What is the relationship between these two periods? What is one to make of the "new Czech reality"? On these questions, veteran director Hřebejk remains silent.

Clouds of May

In *Clouds of May* director Nuri Bilge Ceylan pays tribute to the Turkish countryside and the simplicity of country life. Slow-moving with a meager plot, the film relies almost exclusively on pretty imagery and quaint sequences. Despite all the plush aesthetics, the film has little to say beyond offering up a vague reverence for country people and their attachment to the land, with passing references to the harshness of big-city life in Istanbul. The comparisons that have been made of Ceylan's film to Iranian cinema and the work of Abbas Kiarostami are simply misplaced; the similarities are purely superficial.

Encounter

In Ömer Kavur's *Encounter* (also from Turkey) Sinan, an architect, feels responsible for the loss of his teenage son in a motorcycle accident and also suffers from an unknown illness. In the chemotherapy ward, he meets a shady businessman, Mahmut, also ill, and plagued by haunting memories. The various plot twists and character interactions are quasi-mystical, unconvincing, and for the most part, uninteresting.

An inane story poorly told, this Turkish film is a self-absorbed, middle-class melodrama, set in a country whose catastrophic economic conditions for masses of people make the inappropriateness of such navel-gazing particularly glaring.

Soldiers of the Rock

The brutal exploitation of South Africa's black gold miners is an important topic and one wants to give the young director of *Soldiers of the Rock*, Norman Maake, a recent graduate of the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance, the benefit of the doubt. However, instead of an exposure of the plight of the workers—the "soldiers of the rock"—whose labor in a key industry has created much of the country's wealth, the film weaves a fantastical story, almost a fable. The movie eventually crescendos into nearly unendurable hysteria. And its "prescription" for the liberation from the "dark spirit of the mine" is for the workers to themselves become mine owners.

Alexandra's Project

Alexandra's Project (directed by Rolf de Heer) is a truly mean-spirited and fraudulent film from Australia.

Alexandra is a secretly unhappy housewife and anxious mother. Steve, an executive who adores his children, is charming, but a somewhat inattentive husband. So far, not an unusual scenario. On Steve's birthday, however, Alexandra exacts a truly horrific revenge: Steve, trapped behind his home's steel shutters and doors, must watch a video in which Alexandra's discloses that she is whisking the children away to another continent. Furthermore, she reveals that to obtain money for her outlandish project she has for many years prostituted herself, and has included the slimy next-door neighbor—who has assisted her with her "project"—among her customers. Adding painful insult to painful injury, she is not only taking the children, but she has removed all reminders of them, including his office photos of them.

In an interview on *ninesmsn*, de Heer explains his reasoning: "For me, what she does is part of her process that she has to go through, to be able to escape what she is caught in, and it is as brutal as it is because otherwise she might not manage, otherwise she will never escape." Why? Why can't she just leave and work out a custody arrangement with Steve, who is a good father? Better still, why can't she try to explain herself to Steve, who is obviously not a brute (although she claims he is because he likes to have sex with her) or unsympathetic. He is aware that Alexandra

is unhappy, but she never complains except to tell him not to call her “Alex,” and occasionally mentions other such trivialities.

One feels that if Steve can ever tear himself away from the video and overcome his emotional devastation, he should go after his children, who are in the hands of a quasi-psychotic monster. But the reality is that the film does not contain an ounce of *reality*. It is the ridiculous and insipid concoction of a poseur. Needless to say, the film has attracted “critical” attention of a certain type.

Although it indicates some of the ongoing difficulties in cinema, the experience of *Alexandra’s Project* was happily not typical of the Toronto film festival.

Series concluded



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