

## 6th Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 1

# A possible experiment: to feel something more deeply for the world

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*This is the first of a series of articles on the 6th Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema, held from April 14-25.*

The Buenos Aires film festival is a wide-ranging affair. In addition to screening contemporary independent films, organizers seek out the unusual, the “experimental” and the aesthetically extreme. In a film world dominated in large measure by mind-numbing conformism and mediocrity, such an approach is generally welcome.

There are not many events at which one would have the opportunity to view footage from Orson Welles’s unfinished *Don Quixote* (a project begun in 1955 and shot over the next 14 years), rarely seen films by John Ford (*Prisoner of Shark Island*, for instance), the complete works of Brazilian “Cinema Novo” filmmaker Glauber Rocha (1938-81), films by American social critic Emile De Antonio (*Point of Order*, *In the Year of the Pig*, *Millhouse: A White Comedy*, etc.) and veteran avant-gardist Jonas Mekas, as well as the oddities and rarities presented in the *Lost Cinema Club* series.

This is all to the good.

The somewhat exotic goings-on, however, cannot and should not be allowed to conceal the elementary fact that the contemporary film world, which includes many of the “extreme” filmmakers whose work is shown in Buenos Aires, tends to be narrow and self-involved. The combination, so prevalent at the moment, of individual emotional experience without great significance and a sterile, nervous preoccupation with formal innovation does not provide a sturdy enough basis for enduring work. It remains true that not everyone who searches for something new really finds it.

Some sort of genuine interest in the world, a body of knowledge enriched by a serious relationship to the world, even some familiarity with the great emancipatory ideas of our age—it is difficult to imagine an artist today producing important work without any of this. Once contemporary life is truly engaged, then no doubt new forms of representation will prove necessary. But the search for the new must be driven by deep-going and important impulses, not simply the itch to impress the critics or one’s fellow artists and circle of friends.

Such considerations are lost on most contemporary artists and critics to whom they may seem rather dogmatic and unreasonable. For many not much more is required of a work than that it excite the nervous system. Create such a work and you will be covered in adjectives: “dazzling,” “transgressive,” “dizzying,” “obsessive” and so on. In general, very little is asked for. Critics and artists scratch each others’ backs in an opportunist ritual. A considerable number of out-and-out charlatans thrive in such circumstances.

Difficult social-intellectual conditions explain many of the problems.

Decades of social reaction and stagnation and the encouragement of every form of ideological backwardness have taken their toll. Goethe put it rather well more than two centuries ago: “If external conditions do little for him [the artist], if he concludes that the world is easily satisfied and only desires a pleasing and comforting illusion, it would be surprising if convenience and self-satisfaction did not commit him to mediocrity, and it would be strange if he did not prefer to acquire money and praise by producing fashionable wares than by pursuing a course that will more or less result in impoverishment and martyrdom.” (*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, translated by Eric A. Blackall)

In any event, the words “experimental” and “avant-garde” have been worn rather thin by over-use and, frankly, misuse. In art the term “avant-garde” in particular was associated historically, from the 1820s onward (thanks to the utopian socialist Saint-Simon), with aesthetically *and socially* progressive movements, opposition to existing artistic forms *and social institutions*. In our day, for definite historical reasons, it has come to mean virtually anything formally or technically out of the ordinary. (In the film festival catalogue, for example, Olaf Müller can refer somewhat ironically to the work of “Christofascist” Russian filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov as “postmodern reactionary avant-garde.” One knows more or less what Müller intends to say, and it is not without validity, but what possible content is left to the term “avant-garde” in this connection?)

How many contemporary “avant-garde” filmmakers would stand up to serious scrutiny if the original double-sense of the word were brought into play? Alarming few. Exposed to such a test the number of over-inflated reputations and the amount of pointless clowning might be seriously reduced.

No country has a monopoly on the silly, the pretentious, the insufferable. France, however, has a good head start. *Le Monde vivant* (*The Living World*, Eugène Green), for instance, is apparently being taken seriously by critics. In this work the unfortunate performers, in modern casual dress, impersonate knights and damsels in this story of the rescue of a lady from an ogre and speak their lines (“I’m escorted by my faithful lion”) in a self-consciously deadpan fashion. A labrador stands in for the lion.

If this were a light-hearted and whimsical affair, it could simply be ignored. Unhappily, the acting style, apparently meant to remind us of French director Robert Bresson, and the references to psychological theorist Jacques Lacan suggest that the director has grander things in mind. Being foolish is not the worst thing, but one need not go out of one’s way.

Argentina has received the benefits of the “French touch” as well. We are informed that Nicolas Azalbert, director of *Sinon j’étouffe* (*Otherwise*

*I'll Suffocate*), arrived in Buenos Aires as a special correspondent for *Cahiers du cinéma*, the film magazine. His film (naturally, with music by Sonic Youth and Pergolesi!) is also silly and pretentious, about a failed love affair and other matters. It might be pointed out that *Cahiers du cinéma* may have mattered 40 years ago or so, although precisely how it mattered and how much it mattered then is a reasonable subject for debate, but it long ago outlived its usefulness.

Diego Fried has produced native foolishness with *Sangrita*. “A mysterious house,” as the catalogue tells us, “an intruder, two naked girls waiting on a bed [one in a leather mask], a lens that spies.” The dialogue follows suit: “Who are you? And what are you doing in my bed? Are you naked?” And so forth.

15, from Singapore (Royston Tan), proves once again that even a mediocre narrative is preferable to none. To care about characters deeply—in this case, a group of five teenagers—requires dramatizing their dilemmas.

From Japan, we get Kiyoshi Kurosawa, a master of the pointless. And there are others: Jim Jarmusch, Raúl Ruiz, Chantal Akerman, Takeshi Kitano, etc.

It is always far easier to stage gimmicks and histrionics, *tour de forces* of various kinds, than to look closely and intently at life and the relations between people. (Although it must be said that not all epochs reward gimmickry and histrionics as richly and consistently as this one.) Some in the film world have no interest in such an examination because they are quite content with the existing state of things and their own position within it. Often “hard-bitten” coldness or aesthetic extravagance thinly veils an essentially self-satisfied acceptance of the bourgeois status quo in all its important dimensions. For others it is simply too challenging. To look closely and intently at life of course requires effort and the ability to make an analysis of complex issues. These qualities are incompatible with self-absorption, impressionism and cynicism. One has to meet the world halfway or more to make any sense of it. And the truth of things, contrary to much of contemporary thought, is not immediately apparent on the surface.

To look at life also means more than simply airing one’s own dirty laundry. This is an explosive age. The small change of middle class existence seems drearier and drearier, and ever more inappropriate. It may be rude, but who cares about much of all that? The musings of the average 30-year-old (or older) filmmaker—who has gone to film school, fumbled around in the job market for a few years or gone directly into the “industry,” known a few lovers, smoked and drank a bit too much here and there, been disappointed or elated by small failures or successes as the case may be, even wondered occasionally about his or her place in the universe—are no doubt precious to the individual involved, but perhaps he or she might consider holding on to them for a just a little while longer. Self-expression is not always the most advisable course, at least not until one understands the first thing about life.

To look at reality seriously means viewing it as much as possible as a whole, richly, and probing situations and difficulties to their roots in social life. This process is seen today as lacking poetry. And it may under certain conditions, sometimes perhaps necessarily. But there is no reason why it must under the best of circumstances. What connects human beings, the deepest and most persistent conditions which make up their souls, are social conditions; in the first place, as Trotsky noted, “the conditions of class affiliation.” Indeed he suggested, profoundly, that the “class standard” is especially fruitful in art “because the latter often expresses the deepest and most hidden social aspirations.”

The most remarkable film artists working today are able—consciously, perhaps in part intuitively, or both—to treat social relationships and the deepest, most hidden human aspirations with *both* science and poetry, so to speak.

At the Buenos Aires festival, it seemed to me that some of the most

serious fiction films included the remarkable *Crimson Gold* from Iran (Jafar Panahi), *Parapalos*, which deservedly won top prize, from Argentina (Ana Poliak), *Memories of Murder* from South Korea (Bong Joon-ho), *Osama* from Afghanistan (Siddiq Barmak), *Levelland* from the US (Clark Lee Walker) and *Koktebel’* from Russia (Boris Khlebnikov and Alexei Popogrebsky).

To argue against a cheapened use of the terms “avant-garde” and “experimental” is not the same thing of course as mindlessly advocating “traditional” means of expression. Pushing the throttle too far forward in that “conservative” direction would be absolutely no help either. In fact, every method of treatment—social-realistic, surreal, sober-minded, ecstatic, austere, baroque and otherwise—will become available and fruitful to the filmmaker genuinely serious about his or her explorations.

The notion that grappling with the various aspects of reality—“nature, human society, people’s thoughts and feelings” (Voronsky)—and representing them accurately is “unpoetic” is inevitably bound up with the contention that artistic imagery has a purely subjective or perhaps arbitrary significance. A great many artists at present busy themselves primarily with the problem of making a stirring or provocative impression, of creating a particular effect. If the work has a certain kind of coherence—in other words, for example, if the striving for effect is consistent from one end of the work to the other—than it is deemed a success. Hardly anyone dares ask the simple question: yes, but is it true? Does it shed some light, directly or indirectly, on the way people and things really are?

The problem of the correspondence of the image to reality simply does not arise for many artists and critics. They at least have been convinced by modern (or “post-modern”) philosophy that such a problem is a non-issue. There is simply the artist, his or her intentions and the realization of those intentions. If an artist “realizes” him or herself, translates his or her thoughts and feelings into artistic form in a clever or convincing fashion, no more is required. The source of the artist’s intentions and the degree to which the work truthfully speaks to life, these issues are rarely considered.

The philistine view that art has a substantially or entirely personal significance—science is objective, but art subjective—has taken strong hold, sadly, in most artistic circles. But this view is wrong. As Voronsky quite rightly pointed out, “Subjectivism in science is sometimes stronger than in art, especially where class interests are openly touched upon. There are more arguments about Marx’s theory of surplus value than about Tolstoy’s *The Caucasian Prisoner* or *Kholstomer*. Darwin’s theory even now meets a host of the most vehement opponents. The novels of Balzac, Flaubert and Tolstoy, and the works of Gogol and Chekhov give indisputable, albeit incomplete, artistic truths. In short, the concept of truth has significance not only in science but also in art.”

Dismissing the objective significance of their own activity, considering it either a kind of child’s play without consequences or the exposition of a purely individual relationship to nature and society, prevents many artists from developing a more powerful connection to their work and to their potential audience. In fact, under all conditions, art matters a great deal.

The case could be made that the truly “experimental” or “avant-garde” approach in film today involves, first of all, engaging deeply and critically with social life. The “unusual” work at present brings emotionally and intellectually compelling imagery and drama to the screen and gives concrete expression to the broadest and most complex human problems. The “groundbreaking” artist, in short, helps his or her fellow human beings make sense of the world and their lives.



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