

Buenos Aires 6th International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 2

Documentary films: the French role in counter-insurgency, American radicalism in the 1970s and other matters

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

A number of valuable documentary films were screened at the recent Buenos Aires film festival.

Marie-Monique Robin's *Death Squads: the French School* examines the role of French imperialism in instructing first the US and later various Latin American militaries in methods of counter-insurgency, repression and torture. The film is very welcome at a time when all sorts of stupid illusions are being spread about the beneficent role of France in world affairs.

In fact, the French bourgeoisie has one of the most sordid records of repression and violence against oppressed peoples, in Africa and Asia in particular. If Paris plays the "pacifist" today in relation to the Bush administration that is only a result of France's relative military weakness, on the one hand, and its tactical conviction that identifying itself too closely with US policy will not serve its own predatory ambitions, on the other.

Robin's film explains that after its ignominious defeat in Vietnam in 1954 the French military was determined to learn the appropriate lessons and exterminate the anti-colonial opposition in Algeria. *The Battle of Algiers* (1967), directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, dramatically documents this effort. The French army in Algeria, directed in many cases by veterans of the Resistance, resorted to commando patrols, death squads and torture during interrogation in an attempt to gain its ends.

The "Battle of Algiers," both the film and the actual battle plan, Robin's work reveals, became instructional material for forces of reaction around the world. French officers came to Fort Bragg in the US to teach their American counterparts counter-insurgency techniques that were later used in Vietnam, for example. Operation Phoenix, a CIA operation that led to the deaths of 20,000 Vietnamese, was based on the French model.

The French also assisted various murderous South American dictatorships, including the Argentine, Brazilian and Chilean. Robin documents how military cadets in Argentina were shown Pontecorvo's film. (The decision by the US army to screen the film for Pentagon employees last August, for the same deadly purpose, made headlines last year.) The French were also apparently deeply involved in Operation Condor, the notorious agreement among South American dictatorships to coordinate the arrests and assassinations of political opponents in the 1970s.

Robin, a journalist, interviews a series of French, US and South

American military and government officials in this meticulously documented film. Veterans of the French campaigns and training schools are quite open and unapologetic about their teaching of the methods of torture. In some cases, Robin apparently used hidden cameras.

Her interviews with former Argentine and Chilean military higher-ups, immediately implicated in the torture and murder of tens of thousands, are particularly chilling. Justifying the torture and then secret execution and disposal (many of them dropped from helicopters into the Atlantic Ocean) of what he claims were "only" 7,000 political opponents in Argentina, General Diaz Bessone, a major figure in the 1976-83 military junta, tells Robin: "How can you get information [out of someone who has been detained] if you don't pressure them, if you don't torture them? ... You think that we could have [publicly] shot 7,000 people? To shoot three, no more than that ... look at the mess that the Pope created for Franco with only three. The world comes crashing in on us. You can't shoot 7,000 people ... And if we put them all in prison, what then? That's what happened here. Then came a constitutional government and they freed them all."

The Weather Underground, directed by Sam Green [see accompanying interview] and Bill Siegel, treats a quite different aspect of the history of the 1960s and 1970s: the group of American radicals who responded to the war in Vietnam and the turmoil of the time, including national liberation struggles in various parts of the globe, by bombing US government buildings and other facilities.

The group members avoided an FBI manhunt for most of a decade until, isolated and disillusioned with their own methods, they began turning themselves in to the authorities. The filmmakers interview the leading members of the group, including Bernadine Dohrn, Mark Rudd and others, as to their thoughts on their own political histories and their attitudes toward the present situation.

Green and Siegel have collected some fascinating archival material, particularly from the television networks, which quite graphically brings out the explosive character of the epoch. The film accurately conveys the outrage and horror provoked within wide layers of American youth by the unending brutality of the war in Vietnam. Some of the group's members describe having been essentially driven mad by the thought of the thousands of Vietnamese dying on a daily basis as a result of their government's policy.

Rudd tells the filmmakers, "Our nation was murdering people, and we didn't know what to do about it." Bill Ayers, another leader, says,

“Opposing the war was urgent and immediate.” Naomi Jaffe comments that the group’s activity “fit into a period of revolution in the whole world. And I didn’t want to miss it.”

The film traces the history of the “Weathermen” from the stormy Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) convention in 1969 at which their faction gained leadership of the massive student organization. After their “Days of Rage” in Chicago, a planned rampage through the city’s commercial district in October 1969, drew only a few hundred people, the group members increasingly turned to individual acts of terror.

The murder of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in Chicago in 1970 further incensed the Weathermen. The group issued a “Declaration of War” against the US government and changed their name to the “Weather Underground Organization.” (The group’s original name was inspired by the lyrics of a Bob Dylan song.) After an accidental explosion killed three members of the group in a Greenwich Village townhouse (they were planning to bomb a military base), the survivors determined to pursue only non-lethal projects. They went on to bomb the US Capitol, the Pentagon, police and prison buildings, welfare department offices and a host of other targets.

Green and Siegel also interview an undercover FBI agent, who details the federal law enforcement’s futile effort to apprehend the Weather Underground members, and former SDS leader Todd Gitlin, who offers the moralizing, liberal argument against terrorism. Gitlin suggests that the Weathermen group by carrying out bombings had entered onto the path of Hitler and Stalin. The Weathermen killed only three members of their own organization. US imperialism murdered 3-5 million people in Vietnam alone, but Gitlin’s righteous wrath is directed at the handful of disoriented left-wingers who planted explosives in a misguided attempt to disrupt imperialism’s activities.

The most striking feature of the film, in addition to the volatility of social life in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is the banality of the political conceptions held by the members of the Weathermen and Weather Underground. Sincere and courageous as they may have been, theirs was the politics of petty bourgeois frustration and impatience. No one in the entire film, then or now, offers a coherent analysis of American capitalism or a perspective as to how it might be overthrown.

Facing political difficulties in their initial encounters with workers, the Weather Underground essentially wrote off the American working class as a revolutionary force. In their comments the group members hardly rise above stock phrases about solidarity with “black oppression” and “Third World Liberation.” That one of their major successes was the liberation from prison of LSD advocate Timothy Leary speaks volumes about the organization’s deep disorientation.

The Weathermen only expressed in a particularly sharp form the lack of perspective and historical understanding that characterized the New Left as a whole. Above all, these radicalized middle class layers failed to come to terms with the great issues of the 20th century, in particular the fate of the Soviet Union, Stalinism and Trotsky’s opposition to the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. How was it possible to embark on a genuinely revolutionary path without having made an analysis of the greatest revolution in world history and its consequences? The issue was simply sidestepped by the Weathermen, amid a great deal of verbiage about “communist commitment.” What was the USSR? What was China? What was Cuba? What was the social basis for a revolution in the US? What was its program? No one had a serious answer.

The thoroughgoing lack of a coherent perspective comes across clearly in the film. As the decade of the 1970s wore on, the various bombings seemed increasingly irrelevant, particularly following the end of the Vietnam war and the de-radicalization of considerable sections of the middle class. Infighting, disillusionment, even despair, set in. Rudd, now a community college teacher, sums it up: “It was too big. We didn’t know what to do ... I don’t know what needs to be done now, and it’s still

eating away at me, just as it did 30 years ago.” A fairly damning self-indictment.

The German left filmmaker Harun Farocki has produced *War at a Distance*, comparing the development of automated, automatic warfare with its equivalent in industrial production. Born in 1944, Farocki attended film school in the 1960s, edited the journal *Filmkritik* from 1974-83 and taught at Berkeley in the 1990s. He has made dozens of short and unconventional films, aimed at criticizing conventional methods of image-making.

I feel obliged to repeat what I said last year about Farocki’s work: “This is a dry, academic leftism, concerned principally with deconstructing conventional wisdom and ‘received ideas.’ For the most part, however, Farocki is the master of the obvious, rather pedantically explaining to his audience things he feels it ought to know. The films are created with intelligence and precision, and occasionally, genuine artistic flair. But Farocki seems to be one of those leftists, a latter-day candidate for the Frankfurt School, who has intriguing ideas about every imaginable process (shopping malls, the organization of prisons, 17th century Flemish painting, media presentation of war and upheaval, etc.), except the most critical ones.”

War at a Distance, unhappily, only confirms this view. Farocki presents in somber fashion the development of warfare from the first television camera mounted on a missile (in 1942, by the German military) to the laser-guided missiles and digitalized battlefields of the present day. The human eye, and human presence in general, has been further and further excluded from warfare, according to Farocki’s analysis.

It’s all rather dismal and chilling, and one has the unmistakable impression that the filmmaker believes that the world’s military machines have things firmly in control. Of course the film was shown in Buenos Aires precisely as all the carefully-laid plans of the Pentagon were unraveling in Iraq, in the face of the first serious mass opposition. The film’s despondent tone suddenly seemed a little comic and absurd, quite out of place. One has the sense, however, that real life and real events will have little or no effect on Mr. Farocki’s art or his politics.

The Irish documentary filmmakers Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’Briain, shooting *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, about Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, stumbled into a right-wing, US-backed coup in April 2002 and managed to film it. The results are intriguing, as the various elements within the Venezuelan ruling class and military jockey for power, but the filmmakers’ uncritical attitude toward Chavez weakens the work significantly.

Chavez, a populist military officer, is the latest hope of a section of the international “left” milieu. He has no doubt earned the ire of Washington and powerful sections of the Venezuelan ruling elite by certain of his actions, refusing to privatize the country’s state-owned oil company and distributing some of the oil wealth into social programs, fraternizing with Fidel Castro, opposing US intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia. In the end, however, as Bartley and O’Briain’s film indicates, Chavez is incapable of any real independence from the Venezuelan bourgeoisie or military.

During the April 2002 coup, Chavez opponents and his supporters contest the presidency, while the masses press their faces against the fence surrounding the presidential palace. In the end, the president is rescued and brought back to power, not by the actions of the urban poor, but by his own presidential guard. In fact, his dependence on the Venezuelan military has only grown since that time. Illusions in Chavez will prove disastrous for the Venezuelan masses.

Aleksandr Sokurov, the Russian filmmaker, made *Sonata for Viola: Dmitri Shostakovich* in 1981 when the USSR still existed. It was apparently a commissioned work. It recounts in a relatively straightforward manner the episodes of Shostakovich’s life and career. One does not know what Sokurov’s attitude toward the Russian

Revolution and the Soviet Union was at the time; one assumes it was hostile.

Nonetheless, the film is quite correct to outline the reactionary role played by Stalin and the bureaucracy in attempting to crush artistic creativity and cultural life in the USSR. The film offers up the composer's more populist observations without comment. If the filmmaker's intent was to demonstrate that Shostakovich lived in internal exile all his life, he failed to make his case. The far more contradictory relation of intellectuals and artists to the Russian Revolution and the USSR under Stalin still awaits artistic and dramatic treatment.



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