Buenos Aires 6th International Festival of Independent Cinema—Part 3

Looking beyond one's nose

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*This is the third and final article of a series on the 6th Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema, held from April 14 to 25. There are two accompanying interviews, with directors Ana Poliak (*Parapalos*) and Clark Lee Walker (*Levelland*).*

Filmmaking ought to confront the realities of modern life—by its own means, as an art form and not by inventing or prettifying anything or accepting orders from anyone, but it needs to confront the realities of modern life. Compelling and enduring drama will only arise out of such a confrontation.

Crimson Gold from Iran, directed by Jafar Panahi, is one of the strongest films of the past several years. Seeing it once again in Buenos Aires brought home its remarkable qualities. The film recounts the fate of a poor man in Tehran, a pizza delivery man, driven over the edge by official double standards, sadism and injustice.

The film project began when Panahi and fellow Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami came across a news item: a thief, trapped by the security system inside a jewelry store, killed the manager and then himself. Panahi explained, "I became obsessed with this story. I asked myself what could have pushed a human being to such an extreme. Abbas ended up writing a screenplay about this incident, with the intention of tracing the events leading up to it and discovering how and why such a horrifying thing could occur."

Very few filmmakers today concern themselves with such problems. Kiarostami and Panahi have constructed a convincing work that makes it possible to understand why an individual goes mad under external and internal pressure. This is an artistic work, not a propagandist document, full of the unevenness and unexpectedness of life. Not a pat "fleshing out" of ideas, but an exploration of what the director does not fully understand, is striving urgently to understand.

The film begins and ends with the violent showdown in the jewelry shop. I wrote last September: "'Why are you doing this?' the store manager asks Hussein. 'He's crazy,' say people in the crowd outside. But Hussein, the 'thief-murderer,' is a victim of a cruel and hypocritical social order, one that punishes its young people for alleged sins while the elite enriches itself at the population's expense. As a vulnerable human being, someone who has nothing, not even mental stability, his action is not so inconceivable. Kiarostami and Panahi have managed to put a human face on this lowest of the low, this pariah."

As the example of *Crimson Gold* perhaps makes clear, by "the realities of modern life" mentioned above we mean something more than the immediate and narrow concerns of the privileged social element currently dominating the film world. It goes against the current cultural grain to suggest that some problems and some lives are more important than others, but this remains a stubborn fact of life.

The significant filmmaker has to work through, as a matter of course, the history of the art form. Beyond that, ultimately he or she also has the responsibility to approach in some fashion the decisive problems of the epoch. On the basis of assimilating the broadest human concerns, the creation of dramatic situations that bring them to life will not seem an externally imposed demand but a pressing aesthetic and moral imperative.

As Panahi explained in an interview with the *WSWS*: "It's true that when you live in a society like ours things like that [the murder-suicide in the jewelry shop] happen all the time, but there are certain times, certain moments, certain days, when you hear what happens, the pain hits you so hard, you think about it seriously. It's like when you take the same route from home to work every day and one day you notice for the first time something that was always there. You focus on it. It causes you pain and you think you have to do something about it.

"So as a filmmaker, when I heard what happened it struck me and I had to do something about it. We were going to [director Abbas] Kiarostami's photographic exhibition. When he told me what happened, I could not stay at the exhibition any longer and I felt I had to do something. I can't even remember what kind of emotional feeling I had that day."

Filmmakers select stories and plots, but not under conditions of their own choosing, so to speak. Serious artists like Panahi do not simply invent, they *discover* the raw material for their drama in life. (One might even say that some stories choose *them*.) Certain episodes intrude, impose themselves on the artist with the force of necessity and help generate works within which this same force of necessity is lodged. Of course, the formal and emotional distance between the fact of social life and the ultimate work may be quite large since art works on life according to its own laws and needs.

Again, it contradicts the current prevailing outlook, but the filmmaker may very well have to go beyond his or her immediate experience, look around, examine and *analyze* social life as a whole, make determinations about entirely (at least at first) foreign and unfamiliar phenomena. In the modern era, it has never been given as a birthright to any artists from the middle classes, the social layers from which the overwhelming majority of artists and intellectuals emerge, that they could simply gaze at their immediate circumstances and produce breathtaking works.

Ana Poliak, the Argentine director of *Parapalos* and another serious artist, explains in the interview that accompanies this article that she made a film about "pin boys" in a bowling alley in part because her experience with them as a child was her first glimpse into social difference. She explains, "It was the first time that I had the feeling that we were not all equal.... I could see behind the back walls of the alley, where I saw kids my age, naked from the waist up, who were working very, very hard. I couldn't quite understand the situation.... During the match I would concentrate on the boys' feet and hands, and I felt that on the other side there was another world, parallel to mine, which I couldn't comprehend. I started from this idea to make the film."

Moreover, Poliak notes that she wanted to investigate how much a

person can resist "thanks to his own light.... This is connected, in some way, to the differences in social classes that I discovered when I was little, and I guess that's why I'm so interested in this type of character. I can't find answers for these questions. I think that my social class doesn't have that capacity, that light." Whether one agrees with this precise formulation or not, the basic thrust is clear: the need to examine the conditions of another class and perhaps even consider its moral superiority.

Poliak may be out of step with her own time, but entirely in line with the best traditions of the modern artist. Far from being satisfied with their own upbringing and milieu, many serious artists, from the latter part of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, felt obliged to turn toward the circumstances of the most oppressed layers of society, seeing in the situation of the latter greater tragedy than in their own and often, as well, greater potential. This humane and democratic sentiment has largely dissipated and needs to be revived.

Various factors have conspired to encourage self-absorption, complacency and pettiness in the majority of artists' souls, not the least of which was the Stalinist degeneration and the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union—an event not widely understood—and the general discrediting in many eyes of the notion that filmmakers and others ought to concern themselves with the betterment of the world.

Certain artists are more advanced. They manage even today to be both highly intuitive and highly analytical, to be aware of themselves and their world. They bring together economics and mental life, money and emotion. They have some sense of the dysfunctional character of modern capitalism, of the intense pressures it places on the human body and spirit, of the far-reaching consequences, above all, of the extraordinary levels of social inequality.

Panahi spoke with us last year about inequality and its emotional consequences: "Inequality exists in every country of the world. But a certain point can be reached...there is no middle class anymore, because of wrong political decisions or economical problems. And then the gap between poor and rich gets bigger, and that's how it is right now. That causes violence and aggravation. And the various people who are struggling with this problem react differently. Hussein [the character in *Crimson Gold*] was not a thief; if he had been, he would have stolen from the rich man. He wanted to defend his humanity against humiliation. We don't want to say whether it's right or wrong. But we say that's how it is."

Ana Poliak's *Parapalos* (*Pin Boy*) is a sensitive and beautifully realized work. "Ringo," recently arrived from the countryside, goes to work as a pin-setter in a bowling alley. He shares a small apartment with his cousin, Nancy, who collects Marilyn Monroe memorabilia. Indeed, because they work different shifts, they share the same small bed. The job of pin-setting is physically demanding. During the medical examination that opens the film, the doctor warns him that the job "swallows your life." If you break your leg while dodging the pins, "you have nothing," no insurance. "The union is not for the poor, it's for the bosses."

At the bowling alley, Ringo makes the acquaintance of the other "pin boys," particularly 'Nippur' (named after a comic-book character), an anarchistic ex-hippie who has been doing the job for years. Nippur has his own philosophy about life and work. He hangs up pictures of Andy Warhol and Janis Joplin, he cites Shakespeare. He tells Ringo, "Everything in my life is borrowed, except for freedom." Another time he says, "I do what I want," but of course like everybody else, he doesn't. He thinks about turning to crime, but who will he rob? "Everybody's broke!" He declares sweepingly, "Some day all this is going to change," but it's rather a vague sentiment.

Another worker used to work in a mine, a job even worse than this one. A cook at the bowling alley tells Ringo about his grandfather who fled the German army under Hitler. The cousins talk; Ringo takes her bowling, she misses the pins. He has artistic talent.

Ringo is quiet, observant. He has the capacity to tolerate a great deal, to resist the physical punishment inflicted by the job. He has the "light" that Poliak speaks about. But even he has "long and horrible" days after which his head hurts and he can't sleep. "All that noise" and darkness. "You rarely see the sun" in the bowels of the bowling alley, and "the sun has vitamins."

All the conversations ring true. The images are precise and true. Poliak is a genuine artist, compassionate, intelligent, observant. Her first film, *The Faith of the Volcano*, was an intense and personal response to both national and personal crises. This is a more accessible work, more direct. She seems to be looking for the "light" and strength she finds lacking, as she says, in her own social milieu.

In a statement, Poliak wrote: "I think the fact of knowing new people and trying to understand them sets me in motion. The poor, their ethics and their candor. I have no certainties. It is change that interests me."

Is she idealizing this relatively innocent youth from the country, as Pasolini might have done? Perhaps. But one feels that the portrayal is honest and sincere (as Pasolini's were, for that matter).

These are real people on screen, but reality is complex and so is art. Poliak has no script, she creates the film along with her performers. One has no doubts about the seriousness of her method or the depth of feeling. But does drama automatically emerge from such a process? The filmmaker would perhaps reply that there are all sorts of dramas taking place in *Parapalos*. No doubt. But there is a certain passivity in the character, in the relationships, in the film as a whole that acts against certain larger dramas occurring.

One is not asking for bombast or grandiosity or a comprehensive socio-political statement, but rather a little more of the dramatic intensity of *The Faith of the Volcano* attached to the life of the working class characters. People with "light" also need to be criticized and their contradictory, sometimes explosive, lives and mentalities given full value. People respond to difficult conditions; they accept, they resist, they do both. Sometimes they resist in an anti-social fashion, sometimes they see things more clearly. Out of this complex, objective process, the possibility of altering the world arises.

Poliak is one of the artists one believes in and treats seriously.

In her statement Ana Poliak says, "I'm a little bit resistant to the idea of a new Argentine cinema. There is a lot of confusion and injustice." Indeed. One has to treat such "new waves" with a certain amount of skepticism. The media and the various film-critical industries create the "Scottish New Wave" and the "New Italian Cinema" and so forth on a regular basis. The results do not always live up to the claims.

Magic Gloves by Martin Rejtman from Argentina is an amusing but complacent work. People and objects intersect in this flat, alienated existence. Alejandro, a taxi-driver, is dumped by his girl friend. In fact, she never says a word, she simply nods when he suggests that possibility. A taxi passenger, who makes terrible music, offers him a new place to live in exchange for driving him and his wife around. Alejandro claims to be the friend of a porno actor in Canada who, when he shows up, doesn't remember him. He gets a prescription for glasses first, then has an eye exam. He sells his car to get into the "magic gloves" business, which booms at first due to an unexpected cold wave in Buenos Aires.

There is a certain, dry sardonic quality to the film. But it wears thin. The filmmaker, although critical of people who expect miracles, who passively wait for someone or something to solve their problems, is not terribly sympathetic to his characters. A commentator writes about Rejtman's fictional creations, "These creatures do not suffer, they do not cry, laugh or hurt.... They are pure signifiers, surfaces of sense, whose function consists in repeating whatever the text indicates like robots." This is not a recommendation.

Una de dos (*One or the Other*), from Argentine director Alejo Hernán Taube, takes place during the upheavals of late 2001. Martin works in

Buenos Aires as a courier for a crime outfit, transporting counterfeit money. He goes back and forth between that world and his provincial town, where his old friends and family live. The street fighting and political crisis, recurrently present in television news broadcasts, form the backdrop of the drama. Martin has a girl friend or two, his father is a militant in a textile factory that goes on strike. A friend wants into the criminal world. Forced to turn informer, Martin gets caught in the crossfire between the police and the crooks. He takes off down the road.

Taube's film has a certain sincerity and intelligence, but it sheds relatively little new light. One can't help feeling that the abundant use of news footage is somewhat opportunistic. The characters and situations in the provincial town are a bit familiar, a bit clichéd, but the use of televised images of food riots is supposed to make the work look very contemporary and socially "hard-hitting." Perhaps Taube's commitment to the social layer portrayed in the film is genuine. Let's wait and see until he has three or four films under his belt. It's the body of work that counts.

B-Happy from Chile also wants to be hard-hitting but ends up feeling forced and contrived. The film takes as its protagonist an extremely oppressed girl, living in rural Chile, and proceeds to heap tragedies on her. Her father, when he comes out of jail, is unreliable and devious, and possibly worse. He soon takes off. Her mother dies horribly of asthma, leaving the girl with her brother. The brother, rather unbelievably, simply leaves her in the empty family home. She ends up turning tricks, etc.

One misery after another, and not all of it very convincing. On the one hand, we are led to believe that the girl is utterly self-reliant and unafraid; on the other, she slips into prostitution without a peep of protest. The brief, episodic sequences, too coolly and cleanly served up, serve to conceal the fact that there is no genuinely coherent drama here.

B-Happy seems more arranged to conform to someone's idea of what a contemporary art film about working class life should look like rather than a genuine attempt to grapple with that life. This is film festival fare.

Levelland, directed by Clark Lee Walker (see interview), treats the lives of a group of teenage skateboarders in suburban America. The ranch-style houses, the strip malls, the schools, even the landscape is flat. The youths make their own hills and valleys, in backyards, in abandoned swimming pools, with borrowed and stolen materials. They struggle with the unfavorable and unfriendly conditions to make something of life.

The central character has an affair with his high school drama teacher. His brother, unable to rouse himself out of bed, ends up in a mental institution. Their mother worries, tight-lipped, about her job in a one-company town. Another boy is dominated by his father, a fearsome football coach. One of the skateboarders, "Steve," is really "Esteban" to his family, on the poorer side of town.

The film is far from perfect. Too much of the dialogue is self-conscious; not all of the actions (including the student-teacher affair) are particularly convincing. But at its best *Levelland* provides glimpses of contemporary American life, specifically American suburban life, whose flat surfaces tend to conceal from the undiscerning eye extraordinary social and personal tension—and resistance, too.

At times, the film bears too much resemblance to an ordinary "coming of age" film; then Walker inserts a detail—the anxious white-collar worker, the Mexican kid with two lives and two identities—that brings things into focus. There are faces, gestures, objects and buildings that tell us something about the present moment. It's not all done with finesse, but there is an honesty here that holds promise. In the end (literally, the film improves as it goes along), there is even a tragic quality, both in that youth inevitably ends and adulthood begins and also in that so many lives in America are so wasted and so ill-spent. The final image is haunting.

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