San Francisco International Film Festival 2004—Part 2

For greater complexity, more uncovering

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This is the second in a series of articles on the 2004 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 15-29.

Modern society is extremely complex and it demands an artistic response of equal or comparable complexity. It is one of the difficulties of our time that many artists with their "hearts in the right place" either feel the need to simplify reality, in the name of a misplaced populist accessibility, or genuinely see the world in rather primitive terms.

"Ignorance never helped anyone!" Marx thundered a long time ago, pounding his fist on the table, and it remains an elementary truth in every sphere. One of the tasks of film art is to build up a rich and all-sided picture of life, a *luxuriant* picture, so to speak. To create works, fiction or non-fiction, that either merely vilify the wicked plutocrat or idealize the noble oppressed, or both at once, does not seem the most advanced artistic project of our time. This is hardly telling the spectator more than he or she already knows.

Of course, there is also a false complexity, a false density, in works that reek of self-involvement and exhibitionism. Layers of the middle class, who think themselves above the fray, are dedicated to the "self-satisfied seeking for psychological nits." We know far more than we need to know, for example, about the sexual obsessions of certain individuals. Such works are a kind of running in place; they tire one out and never get one anywhere. There are extremely detailed works, in this sense, that shed no light whatsoever on the general human situation.

And at a time when so many critical features of life are so dimly perceived!

The population needs to see through the manipulations and mystifications of social existence, to reject all the relentless attempts by the mass media to provide it with a false and vicarious life, to locate real life and the struggle for real life. For this, knowledge and sensitivity and flexibility are needed, some of which can only be gained through drama and images. People need to recognize themselves in the conduct of others, to criticize themselves through the criticism of others. None of that can take place when the human figures in film appear to belong to an alien species.

The analysis of motives, the examination of the gap between what people think and say about themselves and that which they are and do in actual fact—shamefully little of this is to be found in present-day film work. So much stays masked and hidden in the dark, and remains potent and oppressive, as a result. A false individual sexual-psychologism, on the one hand, and rudimentary social instruction, on the other—art must have something more to offer than this meager choice.

Soviet critic and Left Oppositionist Aleksandr Voronsky summed up this side of the artist's task rather well: "Innermost thoughts and feelings, secret passions and desires, undisclosed crimes, everything that is usually kept carefully hidden from public opinion and from the outsider's eye, that which the hero himself doesn't even know—all this the artist makes the subject of his portrayal, and with the power of his creative gift he penetrates into all these hidden corners and nooks of human experience." Writing of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Voronsky noted that "they were not sparing in their depiction of the reality which nourished their works with its mighty wealth and variety." (*Freudianism and Art*)

Where and how are these "secret passions" and "undisclosed crimes," these "hidden corners and nooks of human existence" in all their "mighty wealth and variety" represented in contemporary cinema? Hardly anywhere and poorly.

In search of complexity at the San Francisco International Film Festival, we seized upon these works first and foremost.

Memories of Murder, directed by Bong Joon-Ho (*Barking Dogs Never Bite*), is one of the more commendable efforts along these lines. The film bases itself on a real case, of South Korea's first serial killer, who raped and murdered 10 women in a small town outside Seoul over the course of six years (1986-1991).

According to the film's production notes, "Other than the victims, the killer left not a single shred of evidence. Over 3,000 suspects were interrogated. At least 300,000 police took part in the massive investigation. There was no profiling mechanism, nor any idea of preserving the crime scene for forensic investigation. Not a single person was indicted for the crimes."

The director acknowledges his attraction to crime films, but adds, "I found that the actualities of a murder case don't conform to the conventions of the crime genre. Only something like *Silence of the Lambs* could have produced an intellectual thriller pitting the detective against the criminal. Reality is nothing like this. I wanted to show reality." A worthy ambition.

In a rural area in Gyeonggi province the body of a young woman is found, murdered and sexually assaulted. Two months later, a series of rape-murders begins. A special task force is established. Local police detective Park Doo-man, who believes in his intuition ("I can read people") and in terrorizing the usual (and obvious) suspects to gain results, is joined by Seoul detective Seo Tae-yoon, a more cerebral and sophisticated type.

They are beset by difficulties from the outset: crime scenes that are inevitably compromised (by crowds, children and, in one case, a tractor that drives over footprints) and a relatively primitive technology. But more than that, by the stupidity and brutality of a police force used to beating up prisoners under decades of military dictatorship. (We witness in passing the police thrashing demonstrators protesting the appearance of the country's president.) They have no problem extracting confessions from a number of suspects, but none of these "admissions of guilt" have any value.

Indeed, the cops have no difficulty in finding suspects, people melancholy or vulnerable enough to commit any number of strange and unhappy acts. One man goes mad in interrogation; another admits to masturbating at a crime scene; a third, chronically lonely individual admits to requesting a certain song, which has appeared on the radio every night a murder has been committed. But he's no more guilty of the

horrible crimes than the others. Even after they brutalize him, he tells the police to their faces, “People know you torture innocent people.... You’ll never victimize me.”

In the end, the killer is never caught. A potential eyewitness is hit by a train, trying to avoid what he thinks will be another beating from the police. The series of rape-murders eventually ends. Years later, one of the investigators goes to the scene of the initial crime and encounters a young school-girl, who tells him that someone else had recently visited the spot—presumably the killer. What did he look like? he eagerly asks. “Ordinary,” she says.

The picture drawn is of a society so dysfunctional, so dominated by violence and the “memory” of previous violence and repression—decades of ruthless and cruel military dictatorship—that a mere serial killer disappears in its midst. The savage methods of interrogation, the backwardness in every regard, the use of the police primarily to control and oppress the population—all of these make “solving the crime” an impossibility. Which crime would that be? And which criminal? Too much damage has already been done to the population and its psyche. The 10 rape-murders inevitably get lost in the shuffle.

Song Kang-Ho is remarkable as the local detective, Kim Sang-Kyung equally fine as his Seoul counterpart. In the former’s overwhelmed, confused state and the latter’s sadness and even despair, something more than the mentality of two police detectives is captured. The film suggests that if any hope is to be found, it must lie in expunging from the entire society the stench of its crimes.

Silent Waters, directed by Sabiha Sumar, is not a flawless work, but it is honest and serious in its depiction of the horrors of the India-Pakistan partition in 1947 and the sinister threat represented by religious fundamentalism.

In 1979, under General Zia-ul-Haq’s military dictatorship in Pakistan, Islamic fundamentalistm is being deliberately stirred up. Ayesha, a single mother in her 40s, lives with her son Saleem. He’s a dreamy boy, in love with Zubeida, who comes from a wealthier background. A bit rudderless and uncertain about his future prospects, Saleem falls under the influence of fundamentalist agitators, who operate under the patronage of the local landlord. They threaten and bully the townspeople, particularly those who make rude jokes about the ruling general.

When a group of Sikh pilgrims comes to the town in Pakistani Punjab, the simmering intolerance threatens to turn into a communalist riot. One of the Sikhs goes in search of his sister, left behind in 1947. An awful secret comes to light, that Ayesha was forced to give herself to her Muslim abductor at the time of partition, the only alternative to the suicide demanded by her Sikh family so that she might retain her “honor.” Upon discovery of the past, Saleem turns against his own mother.

From the film’s production notes: “The film is based on actual events that took place when the Indian sub-continent was partitioned in 1947 into two new states—India and Pakistan. It was a time of intense violence. In pre-partition Punjab, Muslims and Sikhs had lived side-by-side, but during the partition men from both sides of the religious divide slaughtered each other. Each looted the other’s property, which included their respective women: little distinction was made between robbing cattle and abducting women. Muslim men abducted Sikh women while Sikh men abducted Muslim women. The women were raped, bought, sold and, sometimes, murdered; some ended up marrying their abductors.

“From the women’s point of view, they faced danger from two sides. The immediate threat came from males within their families. Their fathers, brothers or husbands forced them to commit suicide to preserve chastity and protect family and community honour....

“The official estimate of the number of abducted women was placed at 50,000 Muslims in India and 33,000 Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan. But it is feared that the actual number was much higher.”

The film turns this horror into a fairly convincing and straightforward drama, to Sumar’s credit. *Silent Waters* has some plodding elements and the portrayal of Ayesha is a little conventional and melodramatic, but the fundamentalist charlatans are well represented. And the dilemma of a drifting, marginal personality, like Saleem’s, is a real and ever-present one. The director’s legitimate anger and compassion have found valuable artistic expression.

Eugene Martin has entitled his film about young people in Philadelphia rather portentously *The Other America*, presumably a conscious borrowing from social reformist Michael Harrington’s famous 1962 work that exposed widespread poverty in the US. In any event, the film lives up to its title, so to speak, at least in part, by its seriousness and humanity.

At the center of the film is Ari, a teenage boy living in a homeless shelter. His unseen mother is attending school, but has to choose between housing and educational costs. Ari keeps his condition from his friends. He develops a crush on Cassie, a girl with her own secret—her mother was murdered—and who has ambitions of becoming an actress. An Asian girl, Jackie, falls for Ari. The evolving relations of this trio, against the painful reality of Ari’s homelessness, form the basis of the work.

“This is my America,” different voices repeat several times in the film. One cannot but help hear in this a criticism, a protest. This is not the America presented in official imagery. Here are homeless shelters, metal detectors in schools, garbage dumps, urban wastelands, graffiti on the walls: “Capitalism is feudalism,” “College = debt factory.”

The film meanders at first, an uneasy mix of documentary and fiction. It finds its feet, appropriately enough, with the first bit of staged material. Cassie, in an audition, reads a speech from the film *Norma Rae*, “I believe in standing up for my rights.” Somehow, the film heeds the call and evolves in a more dramatic and coherent fashion.

Ari’s fumbling attempts to reach out to Cassie affect us. She moves her hand away from his at one point, “I’m not looking for a boy-friend right now.” But he proves to be someone of substance and depth. His secret life in the shelter is revealed. One friend, Jorge, warmly tells him, “No matter what you’re doing, I’m by your side.” Cassie tries to find Ari at the shelter. He’s picked up by the police. When we see her patiently, stubbornly waiting for him outside the police station, it’s a deeply moving moment. They embrace. “This is my America.... “ One feels something.

Martin shot his film, 83 minutes long, with a small crew, using a new camera, a Panasonic DVX100, and always using natural light. He conducted interviews and observed young people at several large public high schools in Philadelphia over the course of 18 months. He explains, “I have aimed for a kind of filmmaking that is direct, intimate, and unmediated. In other words, I wanted to find a way to crash through the pretty staid conventions of filmmaking and get to this other place, although at times I had no real idea where I was going with it.”

It’s not all successful, and the idea of art that is “unmediated” is positively worrisome. Fortunately, the better parts of the film feel quite “artificial” and premeditated. *The Other America* belongs to that minute category of films in recent years that provide at least a limited glimpse of real life in the US, particularly for its young (*All the Real Girls*, *Raising Victor Vargas*, *Levelland* and others).

L’Esquive, French slang for “dodging,” follows a group of French young people, most of them of North African heritage, in the rundown housing projects of suburban Paris. Krimo, a taciturn and uncommunicative teenager, experiences “love at first sight” when he spies blonde Lydia in her costume, preparing to take part in a production of Marivaux’s eighteenth century comedy, *A Game of Love and Chance* (in which two lovers change social position with their respective servants to observe the other while in disguise).

Krimo bribes his pal Rachid to give up his part in the play so that he can spend time next to Lydia. Unfortunately, Marivaux’s language is too much for him, to the constant dismay of the drama teacher. Meanwhile, the fiery Frida and Lydia get into endless wrangles, and Krimo’s former

girl-friend, Magali, threatens Lydia with mayhem. When the latter refuses to give Krimo a staight answer in response to his declaration of love, his friend Fathi warns Frida that there will be bad consequences for *her* unless she gets Lydia to respond positively to Krimo's advances. The group maneuvers Lydia and Krimo into the front seat of an automobile where they are supposed to work out their relationship, but a carload of brutal police disrupts their plans.

The film suffers from naturalistic excesses, at times severely. It's impossible to state categorically whether adolescents in the Paris suburbs scream at each other at the top of their voices as often and for as long as these do, but it is certain that it makes for moments of cinematic tedium. Happily, the film has more going for it than that, including a certain honesty and sympathy. At its best, and calmest, the film treats the lives of these kids, pariahs in the media and official French political life, with respect and seriousness.

Tunisian-born director Abellatif Kechiche comments: "These suburbs are so stigmatised that it seemed almost revolutionary to set a story here that wasn't about drugs, girls shrouded in veils and arranged marriages. My aim was to find out how the people who live here talk about love and the theatre. I wanted to convey an entirely different, more personal perspective." With the necessary qualifications mentioned above, he has succeeded in this legitimate aim.