San Francisco International Film Festival 2004—Part 3

Several new filmmakers, but ongoing problems

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

Chinese filmmaking is going in various directions. There is an openly commercial component, often playing on nationalist sentiments and pursuing bombastically epic themes. There are also more critical voices, a small minority, angrily documenting the horrific consequences of the new "free market" policies for enormous numbers of people.

A third tendency—and this is an international tendency, in fact—takes the deplorable social conditions as a backdrop, more or less treated as inevitable and unalterable, against which certain small human dramas are played out. Genuinely small. One has the unhappy feeling that in many cases the social situation in question is merely a convenient means by which the filmmaker hopes to propel him or herself to better things.

Manhole from China (a directorial debut for Chen Daming) has promising features. A young man, Tang Daxing, has served seven years in prison for brawling in defense of his sweetheart's honor. She, Xiao Hui, has waited for him, but the world has drastically changed during his time in prison. A friend lets him in on the secret: "Money's everything." Tang tries to find work without success, before falling in again with a couple of lowlifes. His parole officer, who's having marital problems, takes an unusual interest in him.

Xiao Hui—who opens an ice cream parlor—and Tang break up ("He doesn't even have a job!" she complains), and she gets engaged to a new entrepreneur, who has a secret addiction to gambling. Tang and his associates plan to rob the man, but the police are watching the bumbling would-be thieves. By a stroke of luck, Tang fails to take part in the crime. A more or less happy ending finishes off the work.

Manhole hints at terrible problems and dislocations, but opts in the end for bland comedy and blander romance. Everything in the work is slightly muted, lightened, flattened out. All that is necessary to convince us that the disastrous conditions for masses of Chinese can be overcome by a combination of pluck and luck.

Brother to Brother imagines a relationship between a young gay black artist living in New York City, Perry, and one of the last remaining members of the Harlem Renaissance, Bruce Nugent, a sexual and artistic non-conformist (Nugent actually died in 1987). Perry—whose family has bitterly rejected him—is discontented with various elements of his life, including an art world ready to devour him, his white boy-friend and gay-bashing black classmates.

An encounter with Nugent, now virtually a derelict, opens up new possibilities. The film cuts between Perry's present and scenes from Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s, with the flamboyant Nugent as guide. The gay poet and painter was a friend and colleague of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Thurston and Wallace Thurman, among others. The group published *Fire*, a literary quarterly, in 1928; Nugent's short story in the initial issue was apparently the first literary work on a purely homosexual theme ever published by a black writer.

From Nugent, Perry learns about past struggles against all sorts of barriers, and rejects the misanthropic turn inward that he had considered. He seems ready to take up the torch once carried by Nugent and others.

The film, directed by another first-time feature director, Rodney Evans, has a certain intelligence, sweetness and its own non-conformism, but it is so typical of its day in significant ways. Informed by decades of "identity" and sexual politics, Evans manages to treat the Harlem Renaissance without a single reference to the impact of the Russian Revolution and socialism on figures like Langston Hughes. (At the time of the October Revolution in 1917, Hughes organized a celebration at Central High School in Cleveland.)

A critical-oppositional cultural movement emerging in the 1920s within the most oppressed layer in the US population was inevitably influenced by and gravitated toward Marxism, the sharpest critique of bourgeois society and its mechanisms of oppression. There's not a hint of this in the film. Everything is more or less reduced to the sexual. A pity.

Koktebel is also the product of first-time directors, Boris Khlebnikov and Alexei Popogrebsky (both born 1972). A recovering alcoholic and his son flee Moscow and travel through the Russian countryside toward a Crimean seaside resort. The man's wife has just died, the city environment has

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proven intolerable. The pair are planning to drop in unannounced on the father's sister.

The boy has an obsession with flight, with kites and wind. He claims to be able to see any location from a bird's point of view. Koktebel, in fact, is the old name for a town renamed Planerskoye in the 1930s in homage to Soviet airplanes and gliders. Koktebel was once a haven for the pre-Soviet, pre-revolutionary intelligentsia.

On a part of their journey, father and son travel by freight train. A railroad inspector comes upon them on the train and orders them off, but instead of taking them to the police, which the father expects, gives them food and shelter. The boy hangs out with a girl more or less his own age. "Dad teaches me everything." The forest is beautiful, everything one would expect from reading Russian poets: birch trees, wooden houses, rain and sun, immensity and silence.

A Pushkin-quoting homeowner, who hires the boy's father to repair his roof, turns surly and threatening after the two go on a vodka binge. Accusing the father of stealing his money, he shoots the other man in the shoulder. A lovely female doctor treats the wound. The father wants to stay with her, the boy thinks this a betrayal. "Let's stay here for winter," says the father. All you do here is have sex, the boy replies, adding,"I don't like it here, I've got nothing to do here." He plunges ahead by himself, reaching the seaside town thanks to a lift from a truck driver. The boy's aunt is not there, but she has left a letter.

Certain things are done well in the film. The relationships are unsentimental and convincing; the drunken homeowner is particularly effective. The countryside is breathtaking. As a picture of life in contemporary Russia, the film has merit. The tone and mood ring true. The murkier, quasi-allegorical elements suggest that the filmmakers have something more in mind: perhaps to chart the disordered, confused, but "necessary" course back in time and space to a different Russia, pre-revolutionary and pre-Soviet. If that's the aim, it's a futile and sterile one. Let's see what further work Khlebnikov and Popogrebsky produce.

In the Company of Men (not to be confused with the 1997 Neil LaBute film) takes its inspiration from a work by British leftist playwright Edward Bond.

Leonard, the adopted son of a billionaire arms dealer, is impatient to be taken seriously as a partner and heir. "I want to join the board." "No, you're not ready." "When you die, will I get it all?" Rebuffed by his father, Leonard becomes the unwitting instrument by which the older man's greatest and most hated rival, Hammer, can take over the corporation. Having easily fallen into the trap, however, Leonard prefers to destroy himself rather than allow the family-owned company to pass into Hammer's hands.

Director Arnaud Desplechin intersperses sequences from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, as well as scenes of the director and actors rehearsing the film. The Desplechin-Bond work exudes seriousness and intensity, but the script has much that is contrived and strained. (The billionaire's chauffeur, for example, is a former sailor on a nuclear submarine court-martialed for adorning truncheons with condoms as a prank! One feels a continual striving for effect, which almost as invariably falls flat.)

Unhappily, Bond, a talented writer, long ago settled into a kind of bleak radicalism, which is content to portray contemporary society as a nightmare without relief. It is not apparent from Bond's plays how humankind could ever possibly free itself from this horror, since everyone and everything is corrupt and infected beyond redemption. There is too much moralizing, too much demonizing here, which also does not convince. To grasp that "new meat is eaten with old forks" requires at least a minimal familiarity with dialectics.

El Alamein: The Line of Fire, directed by Enzo Monteleone, recounts the events of the famous World War II battle in North Africa from the point of view of ordinary Italian troops. As an intertitle explains, 100,000 or so German and Italian troops faced 195,000 Allied forces in October-November 1943. In the end, 9,000 died, 15,000 were wounded and 35,000 taken prisoner in the Allied victory.

The film is rather conventional in its approach, borrowing its point of view from a new volunteer, a university student, Serra. He encounters the usual suspects, the hard-bitten sergeant, the blustering officer, the confused and exhausted men. "No one knows what's happening, or what to do," a character says at one point and that sums up the soldiers' predicament. The British capture most of the Italian troops; Serra and a few comrades are left with a truck in the trackless desert.

The film is perfectly sincere, but it hardly breaks new ground. Moreover, to make a powerful anti-war work, as we have noted before, requires something more than detailing the horrors that befall one's "own" forces. An artist needs to represent and empathize with the tragic fate of the "enemy" to truly bring home the ghastliness and waste of war. A film like *El Alamein* might almost as easily provoke Italian national feelings as anti-war sentiment.

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