

Toronto International Film Festival 2004: Part four

Some things are difficult, but they need to be done

David Walsh
7 October 2004

This is the fourth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival. Part three was posted October 2.

Filmmakers can perform many feats today, but their collective ability to make sense of history and social life has reached a low point. Not only does this weaken the cinema itself; it leaves the writers, directors and performers largely unprepared for changes in objective circumstances.

American filmmakers, above all, need politics. Not “correct” positions on this or that question, much less an immersion in identity politics (there’s more than enough of that to go around already), but an all-round education in social physiognomy. This would mean rediscovering that one has to get beneath the skin of society, penetrate the more profound motives behind the immediate motives in human behavior, investigate the relations between social layers and provide, in fact, a picture of the social whole. To know the world in any depth—in other words, to have an appreciation of something more than humankind’s obvious psychological and biological necessities—is to know, first and foremost, these most common and essential social interconnections.

Human beings live, work and love within and on the basis of definite pre-existing and enduring circumstances determined, above all, by objective class forces. If those historically determined circumstances are ignored altogether or misinterpreted, how can the concrete content of life, work and love be fully understood?

Artistry and social insight are only seen as entirely opposed under unfavorable conditions, where events have caused artists to lose confidence in the possibilities of improving humanity’s collective existence. The traumas of the late twentieth century have helped bring about such a situation. The lazy and the opportunistic take advantage of this for their own reasons; they find making sense of the world too difficult or troubling. But even the more sincere may stumble when the world of art, perceived as the uncorrupted realm of the “spirit,” and that of politics, portrayed as cynical, ‘materialistic’ or futile, have been so clearly and deliberately detached from one another.

Art demands utter sincerity and great powers of intuition, but it also requires knowledge. A lack of socio-political understanding leads a great many filmmakers and other artists to stumble around in the dark much of the time, searching for ‘timeless’ and ‘universal’ truths that are simply not to be had, or that turn out to be nothing less than banal lowest common denominators. In the end, films that attempt to place themselves outside of history and social life tend to be a bit dreary and boring. They miss the point that elementary psychological and biological relationships take place—in fact, *come to life*—under specific conditions that have a qualitative, determining effect on those relationships.

American David Gordon Green has made three feature films: *George Washington*, *All the Real Girls* and now *Undertow*. The third is the weakest. Green, a great admirer of American films of the 1970s, applies a

quasi-lyrical, unhurried and oblique approach to stories about ordinary people in the South. The circumstances of his characters are always promising. One sees in the background generally signs of social decay. A genuine sensitivity is at work. The characters struggle, sometimes inarticulately, sometimes with considerable poetic insight, with their situations.

But not nearly enough is made of the material. In the latest work a widowed father and his two sons are attempting to make ends meet on a small farm. A confrontation develops when the father’s angry and resentful brother, just out of prison, shows up on the doorstep. Violence erupts and the boys flee for their lives. Much of the film follows their flight.

The characters are too arbitrarily drawn, they verge on the merely eccentric. Chris, the older boy, is uncommunicative and moody; the younger son, Tim, suffers from some unknown ailment and likes to eat soil, paint and anything else that comes his way. The presentation of the two older men (played by Dermot Mulroney and Josh Lucas) is rather formulaic. Perhaps Green has better luck obtaining his particular intense but offhand performances from the relatively untried or the non-professional; Mulroney and Lucas, two talented actors, seem to be acting in a different and more conventional film. Even the dialogue, often composed in Green’s films of apparent non-sequiturs, seems to have been written differently for them. All in all, *Undertow* is an unsatisfying experience.

One knows, without having to ask, that Green rejects “politics” in or anywhere around his art. He could hardly make himself more aesthetically explicit on that point. Of course, social insight, or alleged social insight, can be used inartistically. There continues to be heavy-handed or pat work along those lines. (Vulgarizing populist art did not disappear with the demise of the large Stalinist apparatuses. It reflects the outlook and interests of petty bourgeois social layers within each country.) After all, we still have John Sayles (with his latest, *Silver City*) and a host of less talented people ranged behind him, “radical” feminist, gay and other filmmakers (about whom there is generally nothing especially radical). Truly, some of the very worst work—self-pitying, self-absorbed, self-important—comes out of such circles at present.

However, because some filmmakers wield their limited political views like blunt instruments is no argument against grappling with and criticizing the essential facts of social life, the facts that largely shape people’s lives. In reality, in Green’s insistence on the elemental, the senseless, the “natural flow” of life, there is something of an adaptation to the backwardness of life in parts of the South. It is possible to have too much respect for people.

The Dutch-Australian director Paul Cox is another who overvalues the biological automatism of life. His fiction films (as opposed to certain of

his documentaries or semi-documentaries) are rather pale and weak as a result. Cox's latest film, *Human Touch*, treats a married couple and their discontents. She comes closer to an elderly, art-loving 'New Age' philanthropist, who photographs her in the nude, and pulls away sexually from her husband. He turns for comfort to a Chinese masseuse. They teeter on the brink of dissolving their marriage, then give themselves once last chance, on a vacation in France, to sort out their relationship. Meanwhile, a sculptor friend of his attempts to reproduce human consciousness in the shape of luminous, cave-like creations.

The strong need to find some means of making contact with others, through art, through physical contact—and the neurosis or dysfunction that results when such efforts are blocked—seems to be one of Cox's concerns. But the attempt to derive something superficially 'universal' about art, sex and consciousness from the relationships here (which are not timeless at all, but Australian, middle class and early twenty-first century) falls somewhat flat.

Entire national cinemas seem either oblivious to or overwhelmed by events. After attending film festivals for 11 years, I cannot bring to mind a single Japanese film that has offered serious insight into the state of that society, under conditions of traumatic economic stagnation and decline. One would be better off reading the financial pages. Something might come through between the lines. The filmmakers apparently could not care less about the moral or physical conditions of wide layers of the population. That's beneath them.

They are on to considerably loftier tasks, such as melancholy studies of middle class loners, bloody and pointless police (or anti-police) dramas, and various attempts to come up with the most macabre and grotesque examples of human behavior. All to prove what? Nothing very much. Except perhaps, by implication, the impossibility of making sense of the universe—to assert once more the highly unoriginal idea that the project of rational thought and action is useless in the face of the dark incomprehensibility of man and nature. For the most part, it's that sophomoric.

Vital, directed by Shinya Tsukamoto, about a man who dissects his dead girlfriend in search of her soul, and *Nobody Knows*, directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda (*Maborosi, After Life*), about four children, left by their mother to live alone and in secret for months, are two of the latest essentially empty and tedious Japanese works. From them one derives relatively little, except the overwhelming sense that disarray and disorientation prevail in Japanese cinema.

Japanese society has undergone massive changes, which are complex and require analysis. Its history is also complex. One can shy away from the difficult task of examining the conditions that have a bearing on every aspect of life—that's easy enough to do, and quite acceptable these days—but the result is a cinema that marginalizes itself, renders itself insignificant.

Mid-century Japanese cinema, which had to deal with the consequences of authoritarianism, war and foreign occupation, shied away from almost nothing. Its strong point was a type of moral audacity, and a merciless criticism of official society that had led Japan into a cataclysm. It peered into everything. Now, Japanese films avoid all the important questions of life. We await an inevitable revival.

The overrated but prolific Scandinavians (including Iceland and Finland) have reacted to events—the end of the supposed social democratic idyll—with misanthropic hysteria (Lukas Moodysson and his friends), semi-hysterical mysticism (Lars Von Trier and some of his friends) or complacency (nearly everyone else). Almost no one has yet considered the possibility of taking a long hard look at the social order and drawing some rather sharp conclusions.

The 'Dogme 95' group has more or less ground to a halt, after adding little to the corpus of world filmmaking. The claim that getting to the heart of things required little more than a jittery camera and an even more jittery

scenario has proven an unreliable aesthetic guide.

With the disruption of the old postwar conditions, life having suddenly proved more problematic, filmmakers in Denmark and elsewhere decided to wash some of the society's dirty laundry in public. They found that beneath the pleasant surface a great deal of unpleasantness lurked. This more or less unhinged them. That's fine, but why should anyone assume that makes for valuable art?

Niceland, from Iceland's Fridrik Thor Fridriksson (*Cold Fever*), is a fairy tale-like work that centers on a naïve young man's quest for 'the purpose of life.' We simply lose interest. Aleksí Salmenperä's *Producing Adults* (from Finland), about a couple who differ on whether they should have children or not, is also quite trivial.

The moral decomposition of a section of formerly left-wing intellectuals continues apace. One of the prime examples of this tendency in filmmaking is veteran Swiss-French director Jean-Luc Godard. His latest work *Notre musique (Our Music)* is a travesty, a gloomy, pompous and self-pitying meditation on humanity's rottenness.

The film is divided into three portions. The first, *Hell*, is composed of horrific images of warfare. This is what man does best, Godard suggests, slaughter his fellow man.

The second section, *Purgatory*, takes place in Sarajevo during a literary conference. Godard himself is there, along with an Israeli journalist, a Palestinian writer, a trio of Native Americans, the French ambassador and various others. Muddled and depressive conversation goes on. The backdrop is the bloodletting of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. As it turns out, Godard is for dialogue and not war.

The filmmaker walks around gloomily, pontificating on art, society and filmmaking. In response to a question as to the alleged inhumanity of revolutionaries, he explains, "Because humane people don't start revolutions; they start libraries." This from a man who once embraced the thuggish stupidities of Maoism.

I find a comment in my notebook "Insufferable, I wish I could leave." This was about the time, I think, that the unfortunate Native Americans were confronting an old man in an overcoat who registers books in a room heated by a bonfire. Or was it during the scene in which a journalist points out sagely that those who act don't have to time to consider their actions, while those who write "don't know what they're talking about"?

Perhaps I jotted down the note during Godard's lecture on filmmaking, when he criticizes Howard Hawks in *His Girl Friday* for shooting Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant not as a woman and a man, but as two men, whatever that means. Or it might have been at the point at which someone asks Godard whether digital video can save the cinema and he meaningfully refuses to answer, staring blankly into the distance.

It's difficult to remember the precise moment in a film in which the insufferable moments pile up so fast and furiously. *Notre musique* is driven. A French commentator called the film a "senile" work. One needs to correct this: it's a politically and morally senile work.

For an entire swath of erstwhile left-wing intellectuals, including Godard, the war in Bosnia provided the opportunity for swinging sharply to the right. Convinced by the collapse of the Soviet Union that there were little or no prospects for a genuinely progressive transformation of society, they junked their previous convictions, which had never been based, in any event, on the class struggle and the revolutionary role of the working class. Many returned to the bosom of the upper middle class from which they had temporarily strayed. Their incomes, way of life and social connections drew them closer to that milieu. Ridding themselves of the vestiges of "Marxism" did not prove terribly difficult under those circumstances.

Godard, who had a brief brush with revolutionary politics in the late 1960s, has simply made the transition more openly and disgracefully than most. One might add that he has not necessarily reached the final destination in his political journey to the right.

Eros, another poor work, is composed of three short films, by Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai, Steven Soderbergh and Michelangelo Antonioni. Wong Kar-wai's segment, about the decline of a woman from her status as the mistress of important businessman to ill and dying streetwalker, at least has the merit of coherence. It is rather empty, made simply for show, like Wong's work in general, but it tells a story.

The Soderbergh contribution, about an anxiety-ridden adman in the 1950s, flies by and makes no dent on one's consciousness. Antonioni's short work, about a couple with marital problems and a pretty girl who attracts the husband's attention, and perhaps the wife's as well, is apparently pointless. Again, this is not so much physical senility, as the exhaustion and decay of a certain generation.

Midwinter Night's Dream, by Serb director Goran Paskaljevic, belongs to the category of film that aims to appear hard-hitting, even lacerating, but whose grimness is a means, instead, of avoiding all the concrete and truly challenging problems. At the center of the film is Lazar, who returns home after 10 years in prison (for killing his best friend in a brawl fueled by the insanity of the civil war in Yugoslavia) to discover a single mother and her autistic child living in his family's home. Ultimately, the three set up house together. They live happily for a while, then tragedy strikes.

In 1999 I wrote about one of Paskaljevic's previous works, much praised, *Cabaret Balkan* (or *Powder Keg*): "Its basic theme seems to be that the Serbs are animals who have just been waiting for the chance to jump at one another's throat. It has some striking performances, some tragic moments that ring true, but, in the end, this kind of thing is very superficial. How much does it help to explain a tragedy by suggesting that it was always there in the making? This is not so much deeply-felt fatalism, as shallowness, the refusal to sort out complex historical issues."

One could say the same of *Midwinter Night's Dream*, more or less. Lazar recounts horrifying tales from the Bosnian war. The Serbs must be monsters, it seems. (One feels the pressure of international middle class public opinion operating here.) Then what? Well, a tragic, violent climax is inevitable, and the director duly provides one, even though it seems to come quite out of the blue. The forced denouement merely strengthens one's suspicion that the entire work is a contrived and largely manipulative affair.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact