

Vancouver International Film Festival 2004—Part 2

Once again, avoiding the more difficult problems

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This is the second in a series of articles about the recent Vancouver film festival. Part One was posted October 15.

Latin America filmmaking has been in a bad way in recent decades. The bloody tragedies of the 1960s and 1970s in Chile, Argentina and elsewhere—whose root causes in the activities of definite political tendencies (Castroist, Stalinist, centrist) are not generally grasped—have encouraged the most provincial, cynical sections of the intelligentsia to draw self-serving conclusions: above all, that nothing much can be done about the state of the world and one should more or less please oneself. Such a petty and selfish conception is a poor basis for art—in fact, no basis at all.

A “new wave” of younger Argentine and other South American filmmakers has arrived, which is not burdened down with the same historical baggage, including the abject cynicism. However, the work emerges mostly from relatively privileged or semi-privileged layers, and it retains a good deal of self-absorption. The films tend to be accounts of the private lives and dilemmas of middle-class young people, which are often “set against the backdrop” of social traumas. The artists feel the need to have a social conscience in the face of the wretched conditions that exist, or to be seen to have one, but we hardly feel that a life-and-death struggle to make sense of social life and history has been conducted.

Machuca from Chile and *Captive* from Argentina are works that attempt in a limited way to treat the events of the 1970s and their consequences.

The first film (directed by Andrés Wood, born 1965) is set in Santiago under the popular front regime of Salvador Allende in the early 1970s. A progressive priest at a private school for mostly wealthy children initiates a social experiment, bringing in a group of local working-class kids. In this way, 11-year-old Gonzalo Infante, from an upper-middle-class family, meets and becomes friends with Pedro Machuca, whose family lives in a shantytown.

Gonzalo has reasons to escape his own family. His mother is carrying on with a wealthy older man, his father—although his heart may be in the right place—seems ineffectual, and he has a spoiled sister with a fascistic boyfriend. He feels more at home with the poorer kids, including Pedro’s flirtatious, foul-mouthed cousin Silvana (Manuela Martelli from *B-Happy*). On the other hand, Pedro’s father, while drunk, tells his son that in a few years, “He [Gonzalo] will be working for Daddy.... You’ll be cleaning toilets.”

Meanwhile, angry parents at the school confront the priest about his social-mixing policies, complaining about “communists” brainwashing their offspring. The social tensions in the city increase. The famous “march of the pots” takes place, several thousand middle- and upper-class women marching through Santiago protesting alleged food shortages. Gonzalo’s mother is one of them. She gets into a fight with Silvana, who is there as a vendor. The older woman screams at the girl, “Get back to

your shantytown!”

After the brutal military coup of September 1973, life changes at the school. The reform-minded priest is removed, the army takes over, cutting the boys’ long hair and generally putting “everything in order.” Gonzalo rides his bicycle to see his friends in the shantytown. The military is there, arresting troublemakers. They open fire. Gonzalo is grabbed by a soldier. “I don’t live here,” he protests. “Look at me. I don’t belong here.” He rides away, abandoning Pedro and his family to their fate.

Machuca has its strong points. The portrayal of the Chilean upper middle class, as selfish, ignorant and thuggish, rings true. One derives a similar picture from *Captive*, and the documentary on the anti-Chavez coup attempt in Venezuela, *The Revolution Will Not be Televised*. These privileged layers in South America, historically parasitic, sit atop a social volcano in constant fear and hatred of the masses beneath them.

The treatment of the working-class characters is much less compelling. These scenes feel contrived and overdone, the human figures the product of a schema. Silvana in particular is simply too relentlessly pugnacious to be convincing or affecting. She is not drawn from life. Pedro’s drunken father and much put-upon mother suffer from the same affliction. They chatter a great deal, but have next to nothing to say about Allende and the impending disaster. This is a film in which ideological matters are entirely handled, for good (the leftist priest) or ill (the anti-Allende forces), by the workers’ “social betters.”

Wood’s film cannot seem to make up its mind about its central focus. Or, rather, the focus is constantly shifting between the “micro” and “macro” perspectives. A great deal of attention is paid to the infidelities of Gonzalo’s young and attractive mother, seen from his point of view. It’s not entirely clear why. She seems to be sleeping with someone because he’s wealthy, but the episodes do not shed that much light on the greater tragedy. Is this merely a “coming of age” drama, with Oedipal overtones, using the “political situation as a backdrop,” as one critic comments?

The film brushes against a critical question—the determination of the Chilean elite and military to crush, indeed eliminate from society, the threat posed by the working class and social egalitarianism—but does not probe the matter in great depth. The relative shallowness of certain sequences, their perfunctory character, has to be bound up in part with an unclear or unformed attitude toward the events of 1970-1973.

Providing a “child’s-eye view” of great events is the film’s organizing principle. It is not so much the “view” that the novelist or filmmaker often strives for, but the child’s response, as the most vulnerable member of society, to the brutality and irrationality of the adult world. This is a legitimate device, but it depends for its success, ironically, on the artist’s possessing and presenting, directly or not, a precise view of the events him- or herself. (For example, Huck Finn may accept slavery as more or less a fact of life throughout much of his account, but the revulsion felt by

Mark Twain is unmistakable.)

Here, one feels, the device is used more as a means of avoiding such a presentation. *Machuca* is neither fish nor fowl. We are shown too much leading up to the coup (including television footage of Allende's meeting with Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev) to make the content of the drama simply the random observations of an innocent. However, the images are too fragmentary for any coherent picture of the Allende regime and its overthrow to emerge. One has the unhappy suspicion that if asked about this partial picture, Wood would answer, "Oh, but that's all a child might have seen."

This is a form of intellectual evasiveness. We are obviously intended to derive something more than a private significance from the episodes involving Pedro, Silvana and Gonzalo, or the latter's family, but never enough to form a firm opinion of the critical issues. The film comes down against the military coup, which is all to the good, but hardly daring at this moment in history; yet on the more vexing question of the character of the Allende regime itself, it sheds little light. We see the angry reaction of the prosperous layers, but the working class is entirely passive, except for street demonstrations. The Machuca family and the rest of the shantytown dwellers, one feels, are merely eternal victims, waiting around to get it in the neck. That falsifies the reality of the period. We are given certain glimpses and not others.

The Allende government came to power in 1970 in a period of global radicalization, especially in Latin America. Masses of Chilean working people hoped and expected that the new regime would introduce socialism. However, the "Popular Unity" administration, composed primarily of reformists and the Stalinists of the Chilean Communist Party, was neither socialist nor "Marxist." It made no serious inroads into the capitalist ownership of industry and finance. And when the workers, taking seriously the perspective of challenging the Chilean ruling elite, walked out on strike (the copper miners) or mobilized themselves in self-defense squads against the right wing, the Popular Unity government attacked and beat them back. None of this is even hinted at in *Machuca*.

Allende and his regime appeased big business and the military at every turn, eventually inviting generals into the cabinet. Virtually on the eve of the coup, the Communist Party pledged its loyalty to the military, praising the "absolutely professional character of the armed institutions." Allende claimed, "Over and above all things, the Chilean armed forces are professional and respectful of the constitution and the laws."

The population was politically disarmed, demobilized and lulled to sleep by its supposed "socialist" leaders. Meanwhile, the military and fascist elements energetically prepared a devastating blow, which, in due course, they delivered. Following September 11, 1973, thousands were summarily executed, hundreds of thousands arrested and tortured, and nearly 1 million people fled the country.

There must be a relationship in a case like *Machuca* between artistic weakness and faulty or limited historical analysis. Defeat in Chile was not inevitable. It resulted from the policies of certain social actors. The bloodbath did not take place because middle-class "people of good will" turned away from the plight of the oppressed at the moment of truth, although no doubt that did occur. (In any event, Gonzalo is merely a child. It seems odd to place so much emphasis on his "cowardice" in the face of the shantytown massacre by the military.)

Evasiveness on the more complex questions finds expression in the film's overall haziness (despite certain strong moments), its somewhat forced and "distant" character, its predictable (and rather clichéd) relationships, and its ultimately unmoving and unsatisfying quality. It's not possible to "cheat" or take shortcuts on important matters without consequences.

From Argentina, *Captive* (directed by Gastón Biraben) is a more integral film, if narrower in scope. Its central character is a 15-year-old girl, Cristina Quadri, the daughter of well-to-do parents, who attends a

Catholic school where the atmosphere is decidedly conformist and stifling. One day, she finds herself taken from class and placed before a federal judge who informs her that her biological parents were among the "disappeared," victims of the military junta in the late 1970s.

Cristina's natural response is to reject the judge's account and return to the Quadris. Under her bewildered questioning, they admit that she was adopted, but claim to know nothing about her real parents or their fate. Put in the custody of her maternal grandmother by the judge, while her former parents face criminal charges, bit by bit, the girl comes to learn the horrible truth: that her parents were political activists arrested by the dictatorship, that she was born in prison, that both her mother and father were murdered, that she was handed to the Quadris by friends of theirs in the security apparatus.

The drama, a composite drawn from actual cases (only a small proportion of the stolen children have been returned to their rightful families), is legitimate and affecting. Bárbara Lombardo is convincing as the young girl.

The consequences of the military rule for the children or families of the "disappeared" is a recurring theme in Argentine films, and, again, an entirely legitimate one. However, one wishes that occasionally the set of social circumstances that made this regime of butchers possible in the first place was a more popular subject for filmmakers. There was a time, although the filmmakers might not care to believe it, when artists pursued their own investigations, in dramatic form, of the sources of great and terrible social developments.

From France, Olivier Assayas, director of *Clean*, and Benoît Jacquot, director of *À tout de suite*, have taken different approaches to cinema, but they have shared this much in common: a powerful awareness of what the "right kind of film" should look like externally without, unfortunately, having much of anything to say. Their work has suffered, above all, from an extraordinary lack of spontaneity and feeling for the concrete, existing world.

Clean is not a great film, but it shows signs of life. It concerns Emily Wang (Maggie Cheung), the widow of a fading rock star who overdoses on heroin in a Canadian motel room. After time in jail for purchasing the drugs, with her son taken away by her in-laws in Vancouver, the woman retreats to Paris to repair her life. The film does not break new ground, and Emily's redemption is somewhat predictable, but insofar as the work represents a break from the icy confines of Assayas's earlier films (one approves entirely of Nick Nolte—in a supporting role—as opposed to the insufferably self-satisfied Charles Berling and Virginie Ledoyen), one can only feel encouraged.

À tout de suite (*Right Now*) is more of the same, unfortunately, from Jacquot. The story, based on a true one, of a college student who impetuously runs off with a bank robber in the 1970s, is simply "one damned thing after another," without amounting to much of anything. The director (*A Single Girl*, *Sade*) seems to operate on the basis of the passive (and all-too-cautious) theory that events accurately and cleanly presented offer up—in and of themselves—some greater truth, or perhaps the postmodern point is that there is no greater truth, simply the episodes themselves. Either way, Jacquot's films are not illuminating, and that is one of the aims of art.

Jem Cohen's *Chain* follows, in semi-documentary style, two women: a homeless American girl, who spends her days in a mall, and a Japanese executive, in the entertainment real estate business. They never meet; we simply observe them and listen to their thoughts. Much of the film is composed of shots of cityscapes, shopping centers, suburban wastelands, etc. The images are intended to convey alienation and disaffection and succeed in doing that, but not much more.

This is, unhappily, one of those "radical" films that seems to suggest that modern technology, urbanization, architecture, industry, trade—and the economy's globalizing tendencies—are nothing but a ghastly mistake and

that contemporary existence as a whole is simply nightmarish. If that were the case, it would be unclear what hope there was of creating a new and better society that must necessarily emerge from the womb of the old.

The Forest for the Trees is a slight German film (directed by Maren Ade) about a young woman teacher from a small town who comes to the big city and suffers a mental collapse under the pressures of loneliness, the unfriendliness of her colleagues and the unruliness of her students. The ease with which she disintegrates and the inappropriateness of some of her behavior (she intrudes embarrassingly on a neighbor's life) are not entirely convincing. One feels at all points that the film being pulled toward an inevitably sad and somewhat overblown ending.

Until When... (directed by Dahna Abourahme) is a documentary work about Palestinian refugees living in the Dhiesheh camp near Bethlehem. It treats material that has been far more powerfully and innovatively examined in other films. *On the Sunny Side* is a dangerously slight and complacent film from Slovenia. Apparently, life is quite fine in the region, despite rumors to the contrary.

Czech Dream is a nasty misanthropic film in which a pair of clever film academy students, Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda, create a publicity campaign for a new "hypermarket" (superstore), supposedly opening in a Prague suburb. The joke is on the thousands of people who show up in response to promises of bargains. The film students want to show that people are fools, who will fall for anything colorful and well advertised, such as the campaign for Czech entry into the European Union. However, the snide Klusák and Remunda are the ones who end up appearing in the worst light.

I Like to Work, from Italy (Francesca Comencini), is a film about a genuine problem, "mobbing" or bullying and harassment at work, particularly directed by company officials against more highly paid or longtime workers. After the merger of her company, Anna, a divorced mother, finds herself suddenly removed from her old position and shunted about, even humiliated. Every day, she undergoes a new form of psychological torment. The problem is real, but the presentation is often unconvincing and contrived. And again, modern work is presented as simply nightmarish. Nor is the director's solution, turning to the existing trade unions, to be taken seriously in this times, in Italy or anywhere else.



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