

Vancouver International Film Festival 2004—Part 3

No answers yet to new problems

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This is the third and final in a series of articles about the recent Vancouver film festival. Part 2 was posted October 21.

A purely formal criticism of film, without reference to social development, is as tedious as it is pointless. The film writer or director does not inhabit an empty space, but the same complex social universe as everyone else. Films represent the thoughts, feelings and moods of living human beings, members of definite social groupings at a particular moment in history.

The filmmaker is not a filmmaker, of course, apart from the artistic decisions he or she makes about dialogue, action, shots, light, sound and editing. The artist has to be judged on the basis of the beauty, vividness and truthfulness (correspondence to the object) of his or her choices. The latter are not pulled out of thin air, but express the acceptance—or rejection—in general terms by the given artist of a particular aesthetic language or school or trend. Artistic decisions, in other words, have a history; they show the influence of previous advances in the field and reflect new efforts to transform life experiences into poetic form.

But one feels the need to emphasize this latter point under present conditions: that the source of art is life and its most important experiences, which are fundamentally social phenomena. Every significant aesthetic choice reflects an attitude toward life and society, not merely toward other aesthetic choices, even if it appears that way at times to the artist.

If there was not a commonality (and not merely a biological one) in human experience, art and every other means of communication would fall on deaf ears. New artistic forms appear as responses to new needs, which are, in the end, socially determined needs. The artist transmits, through his or her specially organized consciousness, the new impulses coming from without. The filmmaker may be the most adventurous creature alive, but he or she has only the world of three dimensions and the “narrower world of class society” to draw upon and rework.

The impasse reached by two of the leading filmmakers of the 1990s, the Iranian Abbas Kiarostami and Taiwanese Hou Hsiao-hsien, is further proof that social life is the central driving force in art and film, and that its significant changes impose a critical influence on the careers of individual artists.

Kiarostami, in *Close-Up, Where is the Friend's House?* and *Through the Olive Trees*, produced a number of the most compelling and humane works of the last decade. He is an artist of rare intelligence and sensibility. However, his recent work shows signs of an intellectual crisis.

I wrote about his *Ten* in 2002: “The film, which consists of ten conversations in a car, mostly between a mother and son, is tame and weak. The woman has separated from her husband, much to the boy’s dismay, in an effort to win some degree of independence. Her son will have none of it, and presumably Kiarostami intends to explain the continued weight of patriarchal and repressive social relations in Iran through his situation and behavior. For the most part, however, the mother and son are merely irritating, spoiled, in the one case, self-involved, in the other.

“The film is not ‘disappointing’ only because one has been expecting Kiarostami to encounter this sort of difficulty, based on the trajectory of his most recent work. The continued refusal of the major Iranian directors to make a serious appraisal of the Iranian revolution, the Islamic regime and other historical and social problems has inevitably led them into something of a blind alley. The Iranians have specialized in intense, intimate and humane dramas, in the particulars of social life. They drew on the democratic impulses which nourished the struggle against the Shah, but which have been brutally suppressed by the reactionary regime in Tehran.

“In the long run, to portray the particular (the specific human relationship or dilemma) in any depth one must be drawing on some degree of understanding of the universal (the state of society and its development as a whole)—or the portrayal, undernourished, loses strength and purpose. The enduring artist sees the relationship of the immediate experience to the experiences of humanity as a whole, grasps both what is unique and what is universal. It is critical that the Iranian filmmakers address the larger issues.”

10 on Ten is a further symptom of stagnation. Kiarostami sits in a car with a digital camera trained on him and rather grandly provides ten lessons about filmmaking. He discusses various aspects of filmmaking: subject matter, script, location, music, acting, etc. Kiarostami argues for a pared-down cinema that remains “faithful to nature and human nature.” He opposes this to Hollywood cinema in which “capital and capitalists” impose restrictions on the filmmaker.

Making his case for a cinema rooted in “everyday life,” Kiarostami argues that “by simply showing reality, one can make people see or feel reality as it is.” It is the duty of the spectator “to fill in” whatever is missing. He praises the “endless thirst for reality and truth” that humanity demonstrates, noting that there is “no shortage of stories.” There are millions of people with “millions of problems.”

Insofar as Kiarostami’s comments are accurate, they are rather elementary, and insofar as they leave out pressing questions, they leave out the most pressing.

In fact, the introduction of the digital camera—lightweight, possible to operate single-handedly, etc.—has solved nothing. The filmmaker still must have something important to say. Kiarostami speaks about “existence...beyond political and social issues.” This is his Achilles’ heel. There is no humanity in general, but humanity living in class society at the beginning of the twenty-first century, including humanity suffering under the Islamic Republic. What does the filmmaker have to say about its condition?

Frankly, it’s a bit disturbing to see the filmmaker pontificate in “lesson eight” about “The Accessories.” By this time, one would have liked a single reference to the external world, to the Middle East, to the invasion of Iraq. Whatever the intention, the filmmaker comes across as rather self-satisfied and insulated.

In fact, images of reality do not necessarily provide the truth about

reality. That is far too easy. Reality must be submitted to analysis, rearranged and organized in such a manner (with an eye to the laws and history of social organization) that its essential truth, not obvious on the surface, emerges. If the truth about human relationships presented itself on the face of things, there would be no need for art at all. Every conscientious observer with a digital camera would be an artist. But this is not the case. Specialized knowledge (about both art and humanity) and skill are required. Art, like science, concerns itself with the difference between what we see and what we do not or cannot see.

A discussion of the merits of the digital camera and non-professional actors can, in its own way, become a diversion. Potentially, artists have an infinite variety of means at their disposal for disclosing the nature of things. Nothing intrinsically stands in the way of a massive production, with the most expensive cameras and equipment at its disposal, with well-known actors performing in costume on elaborate sets, from getting at the truth—except, generally, for the conceptions of the producers, directors, writers and actors involved and their subservience to the profit interests of giant conglomerates, i.e., an intellectual and social problem.

Kiarostami's approach runs the risk of making a virtue out of necessity, and leaves untouched the question of questions—the need for a social transformation that would put the massive resources of the film and television industries under the democratic control of the population, in Iran and everywhere else.

Five, also by Kiarostami, is a piece of self-indulgence unworthy of a major artist. It consists of a number of shots of the sea or seashore, without action or dialogue, each lasting some 10 to 15 minutes. One feels that, in addition to having run out of things to say for the time being, the filmmaker has been reading too many of his admirers. No artist has the magic ability to transform dross into gold, or should imagine that he does.

Kiarostami's artistic dilemma is bound up, whether he knows it or not, with the growing political and economic crisis in Iran.

The Iranian revolution of 1979, although it ended up bringing to power a reactionary regime, was one of the great popular mass movements of the twentieth century. The absence of a socialist alternative—thanks in particular to the betrayals of the Stalinist Tudeh Party—permitted a group of clerics to lead the revolution and consolidate their Islamic Republic.

The revolution's democratic implications found partial expression in the 1980s and 1990s in the Iranian film industry. Working carefully to avoid the censorship, Iranian filmmakers, often using children, treated the problems of ordinary people in a sensitive and imaginative manner. Their films, influenced in part by Italian "neo-realism," burned with anger over injustice, cruelty and inequality. Obliquely, the film directors also took aim at the religious fanatics and bigots operating the Iranian state.

No doubt, the emergence of the "reform" movement around Mohammed Khatami, who was elected president in 1997 with 70 percent of the vote, sparked considerable hope among sections of the Iranian intelligentsia.

The "reformers" have proven to be no alternative to the religious "hard-liners." At every point, Khatami's forces appeased the reactionary mullahs, seeing their main task as preserving "peace and order," while social conditions continued to worsen for masses of people. Taking the measure of the opposition, the religious leaders made a farce out of the February 2004 elections, banning more than 2,300 reform candidates (another 1,000 withdrew on their own). In Tehran, only 2 million out of 8 million people voted. The national participation rate was 50.5 percent, the lowest since the founding of the Islamic Republic. The reformers have carefully avoided an all-out confrontation with the clerical rulers, fearful that such a struggle might draw in wide layers of the discontented.

Further state repression is on the order of the day, even as the ruling elite engages in bitter internecine warfare. The Iranian bourgeoisie is caught in a blind alley. The conditions of globalized capitalism make sustained national economic development an impossibility. Iran's full integration into the world economy would hurt certain of the social

elements (smaller businesses, bazaar merchants) that support the regime; it would also require intensified attacks on the living standards of working population. Illusions in this or that section of the reactionary elite must be dispelled.

Kiarostami finds himself in a bind at the moment. Ordinary people have retreated to the background in his films. His surrogates, the rather despairing middle class figures, in *Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry US*, or his own image, in *10 on Ten*, have come to the fore. The situation in Iran is complex and painful. The filmmaker's script for *Crimson Gold* (directed by Jafar Panahi) indicates that he is aware of the social contradictions in the country. In some fashion or other, he needs to address them. The alternative is not a good one.

The situation of Hou Hsiao-hsien is somewhat analogous. The Taiwanese director's humanism of the 1980s has stubbed its toe on the complexities of the new century and new national and world realities.

Hou's early semi-autobiographical works, *Boys from Fengkuei* (1983), *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* (1985) and *Dust in the Wind* (1987), are among his most sincere and successful. He also directed the first exposure of the crimes of the Chiang Kai-shek Nationalist regime, in *A City of Sadness* (1989). The February 28, 1947, massacre—during which Nationalist troops murdered between 18,000 and 28,000 native-born Taiwanese—features prominently, if indirectly, in the film. The film also treats the activities of left-wing opponents of the CIA-backed regime and their subsequent tragic fate.

I wrote about him in 2002: "Hou is a serious artist, which is to say he mobilizes both objective and subjective resources. He has said that social questions interest him less than the fate of families and individuals, and there is no reason to doubt him, but as an honest and sincere artist he obviously found it necessary to trace the roots of individual dysfunction to their broader historical sources...."

"If one were to use the adjective 'Shakespearean' simply to describe an artistic type: someone who accepts reality, does not shrink from it or moralize about it, pictures it as fully and objectively as he or she can—without of course suggesting that the given artist possesses Shakespeare's genius—then the term might apply to Hou.

"Gifted with extraordinary powers of observation, Hou has attempted to integrate his examination of large social and historical questions with stories of the lives of ordinary people, of people of his own and subsequent generations, of people struggling with the problems of love, sex, youth, age and death. One could say that Hou possesses that feeling for life, that interest in its unchanging and dynamic elements, which is so vital for the artist and so lacking in many of our contemporaries.

"If his most recent work (*Flowers of Shanghai*, *Millennium Mambo*) is less interesting, this is only proof that powers of observation are not the only prerequisites for the serious filmmaker: in this difficult and complicated age, extraordinary powers of social analysis are also needed. His lack of interest in social questions has perhaps caught up with him. Hou seems as bewildered and overwhelmed by the present state of society in Taiwan, and presumably in China as well, as his relatively unsympathetic youthful characters in *Millennium Mambo*."

Café Lumière, unhappily, confirms this general diagnosis. The new work is the least interesting of Hou's films. An homage in part to Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu and set entirely in Japan, the film treats a few months in the life of a young woman, Yoko, living in Tokyo. She discovers herself pregnant, but has no interest in marrying the Taiwanese father of her unborn child. She tells her father and stepmother the news. They struggle to help or advise her. Yoko develops a friendship with a second-hand bookstore owner, obsessed with trains and train lines. The two attempt to make a connection in an alienating urban environment.

The film is calm and quiet, but without the intensity (and element of protest) at its core that Hou's films once possessed. Again, it betrays something of a complacent or indifferentist attitude toward modern life.

Ironically, the notion appearing to animate *Café Lumière*, that “life [simply] is,” tends to be adopted by the artist in retreat from actual, existing life. Human existence never simply “is,” it always takes place within definite conditions and it has, so to speak, taken largely, definite aims at any given moment in history. Hou’s new film fails to engage with either Japanese or Taiwanese life in any serious manner.

After two inventive works, *The Other* and *Silence...We’re Rolling*, Egyptian director Youssef Chahine comes up short in *Alexandrie...New York* (dedicated to the late writer and social commentator Edward Said).

A fictional Egyptian filmmaker, Yehia, returns for a retrospective of his work in New York and encounters Ginger, his great American love of 40 years before. Yehia discovers he has a son in the US, where he went to theater school. Through flashbacks, musical numbers and deliberately fake recreations of American locations, Chahine attempts to explain or perhaps work out his ambiguous feelings for the US.

The filmmaker obviously despises American foreign policy, and in particular its support for the oppression of the Palestinian people, and at the same time he loves American culture and, above all, its films.

Is this really such an insurmountable difficulty? There are two Americas, both in the present and the past. One, with decent, democratic and humane instincts. This America finds expression in the sacrifices of the revolution of 1776, the Civil War and other great social movements. This tradition lives on today within the most politically and socially advanced sections of the population. Socialists strive to raise these instincts to the level of the new, social-revolutionary tasks. The other America, the America of the ruling elite, is ruthless, predatory and essentially criminal.

Chahine’s problem is not with America—there are no great secrets there. His chief problem is his own limited left-nationalist outlook. In his segment of 11’09’’01—*September 11*, the director put into the mouth of one character the dangerous argument that American civilians may make legitimate targets since they live in a “democracy” and have elected the governments that carry out imperialist policies.

This is simply ignorant. In fact, a financial oligarchy presides over America, which guarantees its maintenance of political power through the two-party stranglehold. In the final analysis, George W. Bush is no more representative of the majority of Americans than Hosni Mubarak is of the mass of Egyptians.

Shane Meadows has been given numerous opportunities to make independent films about British working class life—*24/7: Twenty Four Seven* (1997), *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999), *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2002) and now *Dead Man’s Shoes* (2004)—and has failed each time. This last work concerns the vengeance wreaked on a gang of local lowlifes by the brother of one of their victims.

Meadows explains that the film developed out of a conversation with actor Paddy Considine (who plays the avenging angel) about the “everyday atrocities that go unheeded in Britain’s small towns” (quoting the film’s production notes). In *Dead Man’s Shoes*, set in a Midlands village, the director addresses this problem by bringing to the screen a series of appallingly violent and pointless acts.

Meadows fails to grasp that while his stated theme may be the senselessness of the “atrocities,” he all too obviously revels in organizing the bloodshed; the overall effect of the film is to glorify the carnage. One is confronted here with an extraordinary level of artistic and social unconsciousness.

The Last Train, directed by Alexei Gherman Jr. (born 1976), is a product of the post-Soviet film industry in Russia. A fitting product, one might say. Set during World War II, on the Eastern Front between Germany and the USSR, the film is hysterical and preposterous. (Gherman is the son of Alexei Gherman, the director of *Khroustaliyov, My Car!* (1998), an hysterical and preposterous film about the Stalin era.)

A German doctor, with a hacking cough, and a postman wander through

the snow, witnessing atrocities and eventually falling victim themselves. Horrors are piled upon horrors, and, what’s more, perpetrators and victims alike are vile. In fact, everything and everyone is vile. The film is littered with gems: “I’d like to be a rock.” “You’re a fool and I’m a fool.” “All’s dark, black and I don’t exist.” “It’s all kind of pointless. No drama, no plot. Everything’ll be okay.” “I had a dream today. I don’t remember it.” “No one will come for us. We’ll all die here.”

The “sublime nihilism” (in the words of one commentator) of the film consists in this: it sets out to prove that German fascism and Soviet Stalinism were one and the same creature, that defeating Hitler’s armies meant nothing, that all the sacrifices of the Soviet people were a waste of effort and that, generally, humanity is not worth lifting a finger for. So much for the new Russian “intelligentsia.”



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