

San Francisco International Film Festival 2005—Part 2

Problems with history

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This is the second in a series of articles about the recent San Francisco film festival, held April 21-May 5

Filmmaking is a social process, its very emergence and evolution bound up with modern industry and production. With rare (and generally unhappy) exceptions its imagery treats human beings' lives together. And yet the inner structure and deeper tendencies of this social life are so inadequately understood at present. It remains a challenge for film artists to make genuine headway under conditions in which the cultural climate encourages a lack of interest or ignorance as to the nature of existing society and the crucial, 'shaping' experiences of the twentieth century.

Many artists feel genuine anguish over the economic and moral conditions facing wide layers of the population (as well as past tragic events), but very few have a serious grasp as to how we arrived at our present predicament, much less how we might emerge from it.

In his work written in the 1930s, *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács points to a number of tendencies within what he describes as the "crisis of bourgeois realism" in the late nineteenth century that are worth revisiting today. Our present cultural regression has made these tendencies, which were offset or openly opposed earlier in the past century when art and culture had a more oppositional character, come to the fore with great force. What were weaknesses or limitations in the work of a genius like Flaubert entirely dominate far lesser, largely unconscious figures today.

Lukács (whose writing on cultural matters, like that of many Stalinist or pro-Stalinist intellectuals, proves most valuable the farther removed he is from the middle of the twentieth century) argues that the revolutions of 1848, during which European bourgeois society first felt itself seriously threatened by the working class and socialism, changed "historical feeling" and the "sense and understanding of history" within intellectual circles. No longer could the bourgeoisie come forward as the ideological leader of social development; its outlook and intellectual products became "class ideologies in a narrower sense."

The open denial of history (Schopenhauer), the removal of its contradictions (Ranke) and the introduction of deep subjectivism into its study (Nietzsche) had their analogies in the artistic sphere. Lukács writes of several tendencies in the treatment of history in fiction: that of 'modernizing' history, of making it 'private,' and of 'exoticizing' (and brutalizing) it.

In essence, he describes a situation in which the driving forces in history and social life are no longer honestly or courageously treated: instead present-day sensibilities are assumed to be eternal ('natural') and injected retrospectively into the past; history is reduced to picturesque atmosphere or immobile background against which purely private (and often trivial) stories unfold; and—with the real, vivid social connections having been lost—the exotic, along with atrocity and brutality, becomes an end in itself. In sum, "History becomes a large, imposing scene for purely private, intimate and subjective happenings."

I think these tendencies are worth considering in the light of

contemporary art and film, where they are all so pronounced.

And not always malignantly or perniciously pronounced by any means. These are simply the 'givens' with which, for example, the vast majority of film artists operate. Certainly one of the distinctive or most pronounced features of contemporary cinema is its separation of public and private life into two quite opposed realms. Social life, the 'outside world,' is viewed as chaotic (but essentially static), irrational, cruel, largely incomprehensible. Private life, emotional life, consists in the playing out of more or less timeless psycho-biological processes or relationships (sexuality, love, family relations, 'coming of age,' fear of death and so forth).

That social life or history could have an influence on these latter phenomena is largely excluded. In so far as the two realms (public and private life) are treated in a single work, they are either considered in parallel fashion, like train tracks that never meet, or as intersecting, even perhaps colliding 'factors,' each of which, however, remains essentially unchanged by the collision.

Two wars

Countless recent films on historical or political themes, including a number presented at the San Francisco film festival, come to mind in this connection; for example, *In the Battlefields*, directed by Danielle Arbid (France/Belgium/Lebanon)—and not because this is a poorly-made film. On the contrary, it is rather well done, with a great deal that rings true.

The work is set in 1983, during the Lebanese civil war, in Beirut. A Maronite Catholic, twelve-year-old Lina is the only child of Fouad, a philandering gambler, and his unfortunate, pregnant wife, Thérèse; they live in a house owned by Lina's tyrannical aunt Yvonne. In one of the earliest scenes, Lina's mother brings in a priest and attempts to make her husband swear off gambling. Nothing works; the family is tearing itself to pieces. Meanwhile, war rages outside.

Lina's only friend is the Syrian maid, Siham, a few years older. Siham takes Lina along on some of her outings with her boyfriend, Marwan. Ultimately, she confides in the younger girl that she plans to run away. Lina cannot bear the thought of losing her friend and confidante; she gives Siham's plans away to her aunt, who promptly imprisons the maid in her room. When Lina finally frees her, Siham is still outraged; she tries to strangle the other girl. In the final sequence, Siham screams that the two are not the same, they 'never will be,' as Lina chases her down the street.

Director Arbid (born Beirut, 1970) presents us with two 'battlefields,' the interior family conflict and the external civil war. The former is treated in some detail, the latter is merely the brutal setting in which the family drama, as well as the adolescent drama of awakening sexuality, takes place.

Critics and publicists have responded along these lines. One writes: "It is a movie about war, the interior war within the family portrayed in her [Arbid's] film contrasted with the external battle of bomb blasts and rifle shots. It is up to viewers to decide which war is worse." (This is a remarkably light-minded comment. According to one historian, "In all, it

is estimated that more than 100,000 people were killed [in the Lebanese civil war], and another 100,000 handicapped by injuries. Up to one-fifth of the pre-war population, or about 900,000 people, were displaced from their homes, and perhaps a quarter of a million emigrated permanently.”)

Another commentator, a critic, on the other hand, asserts that the film “evokes a psychological climate in which the war outside the apartment and the one inside are one and the same.”

The director, however, is quite explicit: “For me, cruelty begins at home, and that’s where it began before it contaminated the whole country. That cruelty is the focal point of *In the Battlefields*. I wanted to fragment a world that is perceived only in snippets, and to film instinctively, very close to the bodies, very detailed. I wanted the color of concrete to suggest the color of flesh, and I wanted flesh to be omnipresent in the movie. I wanted time to stand still, and then be sped up by scenes of violence.”

The diffuseness of the film, its lack of overall dramatic tension, despite its many excellent details and convincing moments, the fact that the work takes shape (or fails to take shape) as a series of interesting, discrete facts—all this must find its source, in part at least, in the director’s approach to historical tragedy, as the sum-total of private failings and flaws. Not very much can be explained on this basis.

If one were to take the filmmaker’s comment literally, certain questions might arise: Was there more cruelty ‘at home’ in Lebanon than in other countries in the region that managed to avoid civil war? Was there a sudden surge in domestic violence in the 1970s and 1980s that provoked the conflict? Did the war really have nothing to do with class and ethnic differences in Lebanon, with the oppression of the Palestinians by the Israelis, with the machinations of French and American imperialism, in short, with national and world economy and politics?

Of course the director makes no attempt to explain the Lebanese war. I say ‘of course,’ unhappily, because it is taken for granted by most contemporary artists that such an effort would be futile or even counter-productive. Social science has been almost entirely excluded from art’s jurisdiction. But there is no reason, in my view, why an objective accounting of the Lebanese events and the most intimate, even lacerating study of personal and family relations ought to be mutually exclusive. That is a prejudice of our day that needs to be challenged!

Argentine films

Yet one sees relatively few challenges along those lines. For example, in the majority of films from South America. *Little Sky* (*El cielito*), directed by María Victoria Menis, and *Kept and Dreamless* (*Las mantenidas sin sueños*), directed by Vera Fogwill and Martín Desalvo, are two recent works from Argentina.

Little Sky is a sincere effort. It concerns an itinerant teenager, Félix, who drops off a train in a small town. A former factory worker, Roberto, offers him room and board on the farm he now works with his wife, Mercedes. When drunk, which is often, Roberto proves to be loud and even brutal. Eventually Mercedes packs her things and disappears, leaving her one-year-old boy behind her. Félix takes off too, with the child, for Buenos Aires. Nothing good happens there. In fact, after falling in with some local youths, tragedy befalls him.

In *Kept and Dreamless*, nine-year-old Eugenia is obliged to look after her badly drug-addicted mother, Florencia. The little girl even fixes broken appliances. Florencia has difficulty holding herself together on a daily basis. She takes money from her own mother for an abortion and spends it on drugs instead. A school chum, married to a wealthy husband, hires her as a maid. Florencia’s mother, furious about the money for the abortion, gives up on her daughter. She says: “I’m sorry you live in these times. There are no ideals, no beliefs, no real rebellion, just mass stupidity.” In the end, Eugenia’s father puts in an appearance. Things may be looking up for mother and daughter.

Both films are well-intentioned and intelligent. What is missing, and what is missing from so many Argentine films? In part there is a social

issue. Social and historical circumstances, including the present economic disaster, apparently propel Argentine filmmakers, most of them from the middle class, to address themselves to the conditions and lives of workers. This is to their credit. One generally feels, however, a certain distance in the treatment. Often it seems somewhat forced, strained. Everyone speaks a little too loudly, gestures a little too broadly, carouses a little too desperately.

As a rule, the current wave of Argentine films tends not to be terribly reflective or complex; a variety of facile populism or radicalism, with nationalist overtones, dominates. The working class figures tend to fall into two categories—saintly, passive victims (like Félix) or backward, ignorant louts. No doubt both social types exist, but so does a third variant: contradictory and unevenly-developed human beings, those who see certain things about their lives but not others, who are capable of rotten acts—and also noble ones, who have received blows yet are still alive and kicking. Where are they in the cinema?

The economic crisis, which has devastated Argentina since 2001, makes its presence felt one way or another in many of the films, but often merely in the form of a personal hindrance, something that blocks the individual character from reaching his or her potential (in other words, how the crisis is perhaps experienced by a considerable section of the more privileged youth?), as opposed to a social problem demanding a social solution. Or, again, the personal dilemmas of the protagonists are treated as mirroring in some fashion, or being mirrored by, the general social breakdown, without any discernible or persuasive connection.

The distance referred to above is present in *Little Sky*. There are artfully organized details and episodes, but somehow the film never gels. Roberto’s drunkenness seems a little overdone, and why does the wife, who apparently adores her child, leave him behind? Would Félix, who has enough problems of his own, take on the responsibility of someone else’s child? Events unfold a little too rapidly, without the filmmakers’ having demonstrated the necessary commitment to their characters and their tragedy. Despite its sincerity therefore, one isn’t entirely convinced by the film, one isn’t quite moved.

Kept and Dreamless is weaker. If in the other film the concrete Argentine situation seems the occasion largely for portraying an inevitably (and too easily) doomed victim of injustice and social neglect, here it has no apparent link to the events. Everything is going to hell, including Florencia, seems to be the general thrust. Fogwill, as the lead character, tries a little too hard. Everyone is a little shrill. Under the circumstances in Argentina, the drama seems rather secondary.

Brazil, Angola, Albania

Almost Brothers, from Brazil, is somewhat more successful, in its own way. The film focuses on two childhood friends in three different time periods—the 1950s, the 1970s and the present. Miguel’s father was a liberal white musicologist; Jorge’s was a brilliant black samba musician who was never recorded. In the 1970s, under the military dictatorship, they meet in prison; Miguel is there on account of his left-wing politics, Jorge as a thief. In contemporary Rio, Miguel is an establishment politician, Jorge a crime boss who conducts business by cell-phone.

The director, Lúcia Murat (born 1948), was herself a political prisoner. The jail scenes are the most convincing, as Miguel attempts to organize and defend the political prisoners, while Jorge drifts toward and takes the part of the more backward elements.

History again, however, proves a problem. Rather than truly grappling with the current complexities of current Brazilian political and social life, Murat takes an easier route: staging violent scenes of gang warfare. In the end, the brutality tells us relatively little.

From Angola, *The Hero* (directed by Zézé Gamboa) is a well-meant effort about a former hero of the anti-colonial war, an amputee, down on his luck in the capital city of Luanda. In another part of town, a young boy laments the absence of his father, missing in the war. A prostitute mourns

the loss of a son she was forced to abandon. A pretty teacher takes up the cause of the suffering veterans. A corrupt politician wants to use that cause for his own ends. The film feels something like a primer on civic responsibility rather than a deeply critical look at Angolan society; it has something of a semi-official character.

Gjergj Xhuvani is an Albanian filmmaker, who made *Slogans* in 2001, an account of life in a remote village under the Stalinist bureaucracy. The main activity of the town apparently, presided over by the local Party officials, is the spelling out of giant political slogans composed of stones on a mountainside, a grueling and time-consuming enterprise. I commented at the time: “The film obviously does not say all that can be said about the Hoxha Stalinist regime in Albania, but its portrayal of bureaucratic idiocy rings true. And it is done, surprisingly, in a rather objective manner, without turning the Party bureaucrats into monsters.”

Dear Enemy is Xhuvani’s new film, set toward the end of World War II, apparently loosely based on the experiences of his grandfather. Harun, a merchant, conducts business with the German occupiers, while hiding an Albanian partisan, a wounded Italian soldier and a Jewish watchmaker in his cellar. When he first brings the soldier back, he tells the partisan, “I’ve brought you a friend, so you won’t be lonely.” Harun’s sister, who loves everything Italian and is burdened with a sad-sack for a husband, falls for the former soldier. Meanwhile he also has a German-speaking sister-in-law who charms the German officers.

The film has genuinely touching and comic moments, but there is something finally disturbing in the “Everyone-has-his-reasons” line of argument, particularly when a German officer becomes a kind of martyr to the general mayhem. Indeed one commentator draws the logical conclusion from the film, “The absurdity of taking sides is made clear and allegiances are eventually displaced in favor of day-to-day survival.” It is entirely in order to reject the demonization of any people, but was it “absurd” to take sides against Nazism? Were all the participants of the wartime struggle in Albania equally blind and deluded? Is “survival” all that counts? This is another manner of treating, or rewriting history with rather alarming implications.

Filmmakers continue to have problems with history.



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