

Toronto International Film Festival 2005—Part 1

World cinema and the world's problems

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This is the first of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival.

In recent years how could one have countered the argument that the state of international cinema refuted the materialist conception that the evolution of the world determines the evolution of art? After all, the products of the film industry grew increasingly trivial even as economic conditions worsened for masses of people and political life grew ever more ominous.

Of course, to argue that social life ultimately determines the course of art is not to suggest that the one is ever identical to the other, that art under any conditions reflects social truth in some automatic or seamless fashion. Events, traumas can and do intervene and divert art from its truth-telling course. The film industry as a profit-making industry in particular is susceptible to social pressures. At its best, Hollywood hardly offered a 'close reading' of American or any other society.

In any event, the retrograde character of American studio works in particular *has been itself* an expression of social trends: the vast social gap opening up between the wealthy elite (including the Hollywood upper crust) and everyone else, a related intellectual and cultural decline and a growing evasiveness on the part of a prosperous middle class layer in the face of troubling events.

The American circumstance was the most pronounced, but similar processes were at work elsewhere: increasingly privileged and socially indifferent layers came to prominence in France, Japan, Scandinavia and beyond (add profound political disorientation to the mix in those countries formerly run by Stalinist regimes).

In the mid-1990s certain Asian filmmakers (in Iran and Taiwan in particular) swam against the stream, upholding the principle of a democratic interest in the lives of ordinary people and the details of everyday life against the culture of celebrity and money. Unsurprisingly, they were not so impressed by the American example, Iran and Taiwan both having suffered under vicious US-backed dictatorships for decades.

However, the abstract humanism many of these filmmakers adhered to, which was largely unmixed with an understanding of the great events of the twentieth century, proved an unreliable guide to the complexities of the late 1990s and the early years of the new century. Taiwanese cinema has almost completely lost its way and while the Iranians continue to produce serious, humanistic works, they do not reach the heights of those made a decade earlier. We have entered perilous and demanding times.

Objective reality provides a powerful impulse. The truth about things cannot be eternally swept under the rug. New tendencies are emerging. Notwithstanding the immense obstacles, cinema has begun

to register the way things are for masses of people, albeit in a confused, preliminary and not always thoroughly artistic fashion. This latter weakness is perhaps inevitable. Significantly new artistic form is a response to stimuli originating outside art. For years art and cinema have appeared dead to this kind of stimulation. Various formal twistings and turnings have taken place, with the artists pretending that nothing mattered except themselves and their art objects. "Innovation" of a generally hollow kind has been the order of the day. Events have now taken the film artists unaware. All the things that art had supposedly 'said good-bye' to—political life, the conditions of masses of people, history—are once again making themselves felt. The artists are unprepared, by and large, and begin clumsily. But, nonetheless, a cultural process that is on the whole a healthy one has begun.

Naturally, evasiveness continues to flourish along a broad front. The recent Toronto festival had more than its share of self-involved, tedious and trivial works ... and personalities, especially the ones who are photographed and gossiped about the most. Even while Hurricane Katrina devastated a portion of the southeastern US and, at the cost of a great many lives, exposed much of what is rotten and depraved about official America, the culture of celebrity and money was alive and well in early September. Insignificant people only grow more insignificant.

The film festival, however, also gave voice to those concerned about humanity and its future.

The results were quite disturbing and even exhausting. First of all, under any circumstances, the viewing of several dozen films in a concentrated manner, if they have any substance to them, has a peculiar effect on one's sense of space and time. The spectator is dislocated, removed from his or her immediate environment and enters a quasi-dreamlike state. The cinema's dark space, with brilliant, moving images projected on one wall, becomes the 'real world' and the intervals between films something of an intrusion. Moreover, if a film is dramatically convincing, the spectator leaves his or her 'own' time-frame to a certain extent and enters into that of the work. One experiences at some unconscious level the duration of the events portrayed. At the conclusion of the entire event, the viewer feels that he or she has been away an indefinable but extended length of time, not a mere week or ten days.

At this festival, *quantity* tended to dominate at the expense of *quality*. While the various films did not attain the greatest aesthetic heights, they did give some expression to the weight of the world's problems and, to a certain extent, its pain.

Over the course of little more than a week, one witnessed the murder of Ukrainian Jews by German forces in World War II (in Liev

Schreiber's very inadequate *Everything is Illuminated*); the massacre of Algerians by French police during the Algerian war of independence (*October 17, 1961*); the savage operations of French colonialism during that same conflict (*La trahison*); the anti-Sikh riots in India in 1984 that claimed the lives of thousands (*Amu*); the tragic consequences of the Iran-Iraq war (*Gilaneh*) and the Lebanese civil war (*A Perfect Day*); the making of suicide bombers (*Paradise Now* and *The War Within*); the enduring tragedy of the Palestinian people (*Attente*); the wretched conditions in Cameroon (*Les Saignantes*); the plight of African refugees in South Africa (*Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*); the brutal exploitation of Chinese textile workers (*China Blue*); the present dismal state of affairs in the Czech Republic (*Something Like Happiness*); repression and religious fanaticism in Iran (*Iron Island* and *Border Café*); religious fanaticism in India (*Water*); the barbarism of the death penalty in modern-day Iran (*Day Break*) and postwar Britain (*The Last Hangman*); the brutality of the Argentine military dictatorship (*Sisters*); the disastrous impact of civil war in Sri Lanka (*The Forsaken Land*); a bloody coup and repression in South Korea (*The President's Last Bang*) and the history of US militarism (*Why We Fight*)!

Perhaps none of these works were indispensable, indeed some were quite unsatisfactory, but the cumulative picture of human distress was disturbing, as it should have been. Jean-Pierre Bekolo concludes his film *Les Saignantes*, about corruption and power in Cameroon, with the intertitle: "How can you watch a film like this and do nothing after?" Presumably a good many of the filmmakers would have adopted such a question as their own.

A degree of seriousness prevailed in these works, and probably in others we were not able to see. This seriousness is reflected in the directors' various remarks about their lives, works and methods.

Shonali Bose, the director of *Amu*, begins her director's note in this fashion: "I was a 19 year-old student in Delhi when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated at the end of October 1984. In the days and nights that followed, thousands of Sikhs were massacred. The city burned. Like many other people, I worked in the relief camps, transcribing postcards from widows to their relatives, writing down their stories of the horrors that had taken place. It was unforgettable."

The director of *October 17, 1961*, Alain Tasma, writes about his art: "In my view of my profession as a director, erasure is a major quality; making sure that the [artistic] work goes unseen ... making people forget the fiction, the fabrication, and the tricks ..."

Hany Abu-Assad, director of *Paradise Now*, the story of a pair of would-be suicide bombers from the West Bank, says: "The full weight and complexity of the situation is impossible to show on film. No one side can claim a moral stance, because taking any life is not a moral action. The entire situation is outside of what we can call morality. If we didn't believe that we were making something meaningful that could be part of a larger dialogue, we wouldn't have gambled our lives in Nablus."

In an interview, Vimukthi Jayasundara, director of *The Forsaken Land*, about Sri Lanka suspended between war and peace, comments: "For me, filmmaking is an ideal vehicle for expressing the mental stress people experience as a result of the emptiness and indecisiveness they feel in their lives. With *The Forsaken Land*, I wanted to examine emotional isolation in a world where war, peace and God have become abstract notions. I wanted to address, but also question, the tension, misunderstanding, tenderness and human interaction inherent in every human relationship. Anywhere on earth."

Mohammad Iradasoulof, *Island* director about homeless people in Iran who live aboard a rusting hulk of a ship under the benevolent dictatorship of a tribal chief, told an interviewer: "The story that happens on this ship may occur anywhere in the world. Betrayal by leaders of a society is not limited to a specific geography. It has been an issue for humans in every part of the world since long ago."

About the consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, *Gilaneh*'s co-director Rakhshan Bani-Etemad argues, "War has caused disaster all over the world in all times. Although it is the men who fight the wars, the catastrophe of it is devastating for women for years to come."

One is not likely to forget the conditions of the teenage girls documented in *China Blue*, obliged to work in a southern Chinese jeans factory from 8 am until 2 or 3 in the morning, who resort to clipping clothespins on their eyelids to keep themselves awake.

In *The Last Hangman*, Albert Pierrepoint (Timothy Spall), Britain's final executioner, reaches the breaking point when he is obliged to place a noose around the neck of a former friend. Later, drunk, he cries out to his wife, "I murdered the bloody lot of them. I can't bear it any more!"

And Indian-Canadian director Deepa Mehta can be forgiven a great deal, including the rather stereotyped romance at the center of her *Water*, the film about the terrible fate of widows (forced to live in seclusion, never able to remarry) that Hindu fundamentalists prevented from being made in India in 2000, for a moment in which certain facts of life are spelled out clearly. Why are we forced to live like this, one of the wretched women asks? Someone answers that "disguised as religion, it's just about money—one less mouth to feed, four less saris, and a free corner in the family home."

All in all, serious efforts. To a certain extent their cumulative effect was all the more stark because of a certain lack of perspective on the part of the filmmakers themselves. They tend to portray one tragic historical episode or social moment apart from a consideration of the long-term processes that produced it and the social forces that could set things right. In most cases, these artists see no way out of the dilemmas or tragedies they depict. Their pessimism or despondency may weigh on the spectator.

Few of the works in their entirety impressed one with their sincere, obligatory truth (*October 17, 1961* is one of the exceptions). One did not often think, 'Yes, from beginning to end, it could not have been any other way!' There was a tendency toward an overly rational approach in some cases, a certain pragmatic narrowness, "art as a tool." These artists lack full confidence in their intuition. And indeed the filmmakers' collective intuition is far from adequate, starved by decades of a reactionary cultural climate.

Social and historical films are called for, no question. Are the present efforts sufficiently rich and complicated? Clearly not. But there are signs of life, of struggle.

To see the world as it is, what does this mean? To look at the world wisely, directly, honestly, to pursue artistic truth without compromise. This needs to be encouraged with all our strength.

To be continued



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