Toronto International Film Festival 2005—Part 2

Valuable films from France

David Walsh
28 September 2005

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

It is hardly a secret that French cinema has been in the doldrums for some time. The difficulties have come in a number of shapes and sizes—self-involvement, false complexity, social indifference, empty histrionics, and the last resort of the cinema scoundrel, quasi-pornography.

The years go by. One encounters over and over again the claims about this or that "unforgettable exploration" of relationships, language or communication in French filmmaking. And, above all, the works are so terribly *forgettable*. Almost nothing stands out from a blur of self-important films that supposedly "stunningly capture" any number of "emotional complexities." Equally banal have been the inevitable "meditations on sex and power," which are styled "claustrophobic" or "troubling," even "primal"! Sadly, the French art film directors have competed with one another in a meaningless and contrived extremism (in the form of extended emotional unravelings, sexual acts, cold-blooded killings, etc.) which continues to impress film festival programmers and critics alike.

It is less valuable, however, to pillory the individual filmmakers and their failings, real as the latter are, than to point to the circumstances that have produced the current situation. The filmmakers are themselves victims to a certain extent of a historical process whose consequences they have inherited and little understand.

Behind the present unhappy state of affairs lies, above all, the increasing demoralization and cynicism of a considerable portion of the French intelligentsia that has occurred over the course of several decades. For most, drawing lessons from the betrayal and defeat of the mass French general strike of 1968 proved too intellectually taxing or too disruptive of relationships with the bureaucratic apparatuses (principally Stalinist). In the wake of May-June 1968 many intellectuals preferred to find fault with the working class and write it off as a revolutionary force.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 let out whatever air remained, more or less, in the storied 'generation of '68.' A 'postmodernist' mood comfortably settled in. Thousands of former French leftists have flooded the trade unions, think tanks, universities, journals and political parties. They have made their peace with the existing order and consider anyone who hasn't a lunatic. The shameful 'culture of opportunism' in France that extends to the so-called 'far left' parties has had a considerable impact on artistic life as well. It is within this general atmosphere that some of cinema's problems have emerged.

The exceptions in French filmmaking have been few and far between in recent years. One thinks of Claire Devers' *The Thief of St. Lubin*; Erick Zonca's *The Dreamlife of Angels*; Christophe Ruggia's *The Devils*; certain films by the late Maurice Pialat (*Van Gogh*, *À nos amours*); a few (but not the most recent) of Eric Rohmer's efforts; documentaries like *Death Squads: the French School* by Marie-Monique Robin and *L'Affaire Sofri* by Jean-Louis Comolli; and the honest and sensitive films of veteran director Bertrand Tavernier and a handful of others.

The comments Devers made to me in 2000 remain entirely in order: "Among a lot of the filmmakers ... the current thing to say is, 'Oh, politics, that doesn't exist any more. Left and right is the same. The only way to get out of the situation is to take the money.' That's not a criticism. Very few people think that politics are important for a society. It's very sad and it worries me that no one wants to take a position.

"There are numerous young filmmakers who say, 'Politics is the 1960s, the 1970s, we don't belong to that at all. We're interested only in the private, the individual.' For me that's the discourse of the right-wing. They are taking a political side, accepting this sort of argument.

"It's often very narcissistic. They think that their sincerity is enough. We need the world too in cinema."

It's a fact, the world is needed in cinema. One remains convinced that the great revolutionary, truth-telling traditions in France will be revived.

It is perhaps too early to declare a trend, but it is worth noting that two valuable and intelligent French films were screened at the recent Toronto film festival—*October 17, 1961* (*Nuit Noire* or 'Black Night' in French), directed by Alain Tasma, and *La Trahison* (*The Betrayal*), directed by Philippe Faucon. Both, perhaps significantly, concern the Algerian struggle for independence against French colonialism.

Tasma's film in particular is a striking and powerful work, which depicts in careful detail the events leading up the bloody assault on Algerians by the Paris police on October 17, 1961, as well as the massacre itself.

Briefly, in the summer of 1961, after almost seven years of a bloody independence struggle, negotiations between the Algerian nationalist forces and the government of Charles DeGaulle reached an impasse. Between August and October the National Liberation Front (FLN) carried out the assassination of a number of Paris police in retaliation for the brutality of the French state, its 'dirty war,' against the Algerians.

Police organizations demanded drastic measures and Maurice Papon, the Paris police chief, declared at a cop's funeral, "For each blow we receive, we'll deliver ten." On October 5, 1961, Papon imposed a curfew on all "French Muslims from Algeria." In response, the FLN called for a mass action. It proposed: "Algerians will boycott the curfew. To this effect, starting Saturday October 14, 1961, they are to go out en masse in the company of their wives and children. They are to circulate on Paris's main arteries: the Champs Elysées, and the Boulevards Saint Michel, Saint Germain, Montmartre, etc."

The FLN, as the film documents, insisted on the peaceful, unarmed character of the protests. They fully expected arrests and repression. But the Paris police officialdom had its own plans; moreover, there were openly racist and fascist elements working in the ranks of the police.

Tasma effectively builds up a picture of the volatile situation, through a variety of mostly fictional characters: a policeman, Martin, who seems hesitant at first about the most brutal tactics, until his friend is killed by the Algerian forces; Abde, a young Algerian immigrant with aspirations of assimilating into French society; Sabine, a journalist, who unwillingly gets

involved in pro-FLN activity; Papon and his right-hand man (the only 'authentic' figures in the film), who meticulously plan the violence; local FLN leaders in Paris.

We witness the humiliation of Paris residents of North African origin, Algerian or Moroccan. More, truly severe humiliation at the hands of the Paris cops, when Abde and his French teacher go to a police station to report the disappearance of his relative. At a policeman's funeral, Papon makes his threat of severe reprisals. The FLN leadership meets secretly in Germany and plans the curfew protest.

Papon receives his instructions from above: "You have carte blanche." Informed of the FLN plans for a mass demonstration October 17, he issues the order that no such action will be allowed. "If they want war," the police prefect declares, "they will get it." The Algerians start off from their homes en masse, far more than the police expect. Some 20,000 take part; more than 10,000 will be arrested that night.

At a police roadblock on a bridge, the first confrontations take place and the initial arrests. Provocative, racist elements spread the false rumor that shots have been fired by the pro-FLN crowd and that police have been wounded. The floodgates open. Martin shoots at the defenseless protestors, followed by other cops. After the crowd retreats in panic, the wounded are thrown, screaming, into the Seine.

In the courtyard of the Paris police headquarters, arrested Algerians are beaten mercilessly, some to death. When a young army doctor arrives the next morning to treat the injured, he is informed that basic medical supplies have been denied. We only see his horrified face as he enters the room of the dead and dying.

Sabine, the journalist, and her cameraman have captured some of the killings on film, including that of Abde. She is transformed, appalled. "I saw men killed yesterday." When Sabine organizes a special showing of her film footage for the media, the police show up and seize her film.

At a press conference, journalists confront Papon with rumors of bodies thrown in the river, fatal beatings and other atrocities. He promises to investigate every claim, while denouncing efforts to besmirch the good name of the Paris police. An intertitle informs us at the end that no inquiry was ever held. Between 50 and 200 people were murdered the night of October 17, 1961.

The film is modestly and precisely made, but combatively, with genuine and not contrived feeling. Papon, who was convicted in 1998 for his role in the deportation of French Jews from the Bordeaux area in 1942-44, is beautifully portrayed by actor Thierry Fortineau, as the epitome of the 'banality of evil.' This is a film that simply has the ring of truth. One knows that the director, screenwriters (Patrick Rotman, François-Olivier Rousseau and Tasma) and actors have taken great pains.

This kind of work stands out against the majority of pretentious and empty-headed products of the Paris film world. It is a rebuke, whether intentionally or not. And a rebuke also of the ex-leftist pessimists, all those who have 'let down' by the working class and history, who are thoroughly convinced that nothing can be done, convinced of the essential rottenness of humanity. A little artistic honesty and integrity, as well as a willingness to struggle, go a long way.

One only hopes the film will be shown widely. The pertinence of its subject and themes should be obvious in the contemporary world, with a revival of colonialist savagery and repression against immigrants, in the name of the fight against "terrorism," at home. But the artistic sincerity and dedication is also not a small matter. Tasma represents the French intelligentsia at its best—courageous, clear-sighted, egalitarian. (See An interview with Alain Tasma, director of *October 17, 1961*)

La Trahison by Philippe Faucon (born in Morocco) is also a well-made and convincing film, a step up from his previous *Samia*, about which I wrote in 2001 that it "treats the situation of Algerian immigrants or their descendants living in France. Samia is a teenage girl in Marseilles whose unemployed brother, angry at his own circumstances, tyrannizes her life. Her father, seriously ill and generally exhausted after a life of hard, poorly paid work, demands that traditions and the traditional role of women in particular be respected. His son sees himself as the righteous defender of his sister's virtue. The film is intelligent, but hardly breaks new ground."

The new film takes place during the Algerian war, in March 1960. A French unit operating in a remote rural area includes a number of *harkis* (Algerians who fought with the French, considered traitors by the nationalists). Lieutenant Roque, disgruntled and tired of the seemingly endless war, commands the unit. Sick of the conflict or not, he carries out orders to terrorize the population and uproot the FLN. Women in a village are interrogated, "Where are your husbands?" They don't know, they say. The village is burned, the population forced into internment camps.

One of the *harkis* asks, "Can you promise me that France won't abandon those who fight for her?" No guarantees are forthcoming. A brutal officer tells Roque, 'We're too soft. That's over." After an encounter with more villagers, one of the *harkis* recounts, "The look that [village] woman gave me, I'll never forget it." Another Algerian woman asks, "Why are you with them?" Kids throw stones at the French troops.

The captain calls Roque in; they have received information that "his" Muslims plan to cut his throat and occupy the garrison on behalf of the FLN. Is the information reliable? No one knows for sure. The men are to be watched, the guards reinforced. As spectators, we are not sure either, whether the *harkis* are planning to mutiny or whether the report is merely a racist provocation.

(One thinks of Brecht's *The Exception and the Rule*, in which a merchant is acquitted of shooting a coolie in self-defense on the grounds that the although the coolie did not mean his boss any harm, the latter, given his brutal treatment, had every reason to *suspect* his employee of wishing to murder him.)

The tension builds as the mutual suspicion between the French officers and their Algerian troops grows more and more intense. The suspicion and accompanying treatment may be grounds enough for mutiny. There is no way to escape the master-slave relationship. The film makes this point effectively.

The French treatment of the Algerians in the region becomes more brutal. People are rousted, pushed up against the wall. A suspect is tortured. Roque searches the *harkis*' quarters, finding a leaflet: "France will abandon you as it abandoned its allies in Indochina." One French soldier taunts one of the *harkis*, another fraternizes. The Algerian soldiers discuss among themselves: "They don't see us as equals."

In the end, it hardly matters whether the trio of Algerians was plotting all along or not, their 'treason' to the French colonial cause and thus loyalty to themselves is preordained. "Long live independence! Long live Algeria!" one says, as he climbs into a truck that will take him to prison.

La Trahison is made with intelligence and feeling, if perhaps not the passion of *October 17, 1961*. And there were other decent films, which we will discuss ...

To be continued