Toronto International Film Festival 2005—Part 4

Art and the social element

David Walsh
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This is the fourth of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival.

We have been emphasizing, even *overemphasizing*, the social element in films at this year's Toronto film festival. Were there no lyrical works, love stories, melodramas, fantasies, films of a largely personal character, whose artistic success did not depend on their attitude toward broader social life?

It is difficult, in the first place, to see what 'artistic success' would mean in the case of a work that ignored or pretended to ignore the conditions and fate of most of humanity. Such a work might be polished, even impeccable, in many regards, but it would not possess the sincerity or honesty to enter lastingly into the thinking and feeling of a large audience.

Film artists in North America, Europe and Japan at the moment have great difficulty in working up problems of social life in convincing, lively, complex drama. Many, perhaps most, filmmakers and critics would acknowledge the necessity of a concern with their fellow human beings ('After all, we have a social conscience too!'). Utter solipsists are relatively few in number. But most in the film world would insist that such a concern is appropriate only in small doses.

And this division, this subordination of the social element, finds expression within given works (personal dramas played out 'against the background' of historical events or specific social circumstances) and in the film world as a whole: documentary filmmaking is allowed a certain place, and there is the continued production of 'docu-dramas' (particularly in Britain, but not only there), the 'fleshing out' of a specific social problem in a fictional form. Such works are generally the result of months or even years of diligent research. They also *generally* lack spontaneity and rarely rise to great artistic heights.

There is a consensus in the film world, commercial or 'independent,' that a social concern pursued rigorously is nothing but a tiresome diversion from creating or evaluating purely artistic works. At present that generally means films relating to certain kinds of extreme emotional experience. How can social life impinge, for example, on the study of a love relationship? ('Especially my relationships!') How can one 'criticize' love—this mad, obscure thing that simply happens to one? Isn't eroticism an eternal 'life-force,' essentially unaltered across the ages?

No, it isn't, as a matter of fact, and the films presented at any large festival are enough to convince one of that fact. Love relations and their psychology not only change historically, they are extraordinarily varied even within contemporary global society as a whole (in Cameroon, or Iran, or South Korea, or France, or the US, etc.), as well as within each of its component countries (depending on social class, urban or rural setting, generation, etc.). And this global society has been 'homogenized,' relatively speaking, to an unprecedented degree by economic, social and cultural processes.

When garden variety filmmakers or critics today speak of 'eternal' values and dilemmas, which are not for all intents and purposes susceptible to criticism, they generally mean conclusions drawn from their own experience, the practices of the contemporary North American and European urban middle class, extended infinitely into time and space. As a 'universal' guide, this may prove less than infallible.

Never before in the modern era has there been such a lack of historical or social perspective in intellectual circles (although a good deal of retrograde cultural relativism sloshes about in artistic milieus of a certain type). The musings of artists and filmmakers in a few major cities, unburdened by any overly strong sense of social responsibility, passes for contemporary ideas and aesthetics: "Humanity acts in such and such a manner, psychologizes, philosophizes, travels about, eats lunch and makes love according to this or that inevitable pattern." In other words, 'This is how I act or how I would like to be thought of acting, and I don't care to have it examined too closely.'

Unhappily, as a rule the works that receive the greatest critical acclaim at present are those that confirm the self-image of the critic and the social layers for whom he or she speaks. ('Just like that character, I'm a man [or woman] of great passion, who would pursue love unto death ... if only circumstances were slightly different. I too have a rather special soul, which the average person in the street hardly begins to understand. I also scorn material possessions, more or less. That's me up there on the screen, brooding, obsessed, all in all, a bit tormented, and not by problems at the office, or credit card debt, or difficulties with my wife [or husband], but by Existential Problems.')

We ought to state clearly, although it will make some people unhappy, that those who feel that social questions do not belong in art's realm are generally those who can afford, as a result of their own material circumstances, to hold such a viewpoint.

Of course filmmakers and critics no more make history under conditions of their own choosing than anyone else, but so many are so poorly conscious of the choices they *do* make and their social consequences.

To repeat, it is difficult to see how a film writer or director could abstain from adopting an attitude, informed or developed to some degree, toward humanity's general fate and yet remain strictly true to the facts of this or that particular situation in a manner that would be genuinely illuminating.

There's a need to be historically concrete. Artists confront different challenges at different moments. The artist may turn to purely personal lyrics as the result of disappointment with the historical turn of events. Society can place such an immense obstacle in the artist's path, through defeats for the cause of human progress and accompanying disappointments, that he or she is effectively blocked from gazing at a wider picture: that picture is simply too painful for the time being, or apparently hopeless, or the atmosphere is too repressive. (Plekhanov discusses the examples of Pushkin and Baudelaire in the nineteenth century with great sensitivity in *Art and Social Life*.)

Is that the present situation? Have the most sensitive artists relentlessly attempted to confront the social problem and simply found themselves rebuffed by objective circumstances and been turned away, or perhaps

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inward? Is there a body of genuinely soul-searching, highly personal, even 'decadent,' work, animated by an 'art for art's sake' spirit, that would provide evidence of such a process?

We rather confront self-involvement without self-criticism and slovenliness rather than decadence. Social indifference, which has accumulated over a number of decades, dominates in many artistic circles, particularly in North America, Europe and Japan. That too has roots in history—in the residual effects of the political traumas of the last century (above all, the crimes of Stalinism and ultimately the demise of the Soviet Union, the supposed 'death of socialism' and the decay or collapse of the traditional labor movement) combined with the unprecedented enrichment of a sizeable layer within the art, music and film world—but a less creditable one. Hardly anyone out there has turned to dissolute bohemianism only after throwing him or herself repeatedly against some impregnable fortress of reaction.

If we insist on the *social* element in filmmaking it is not simply because of the state of the world, although that might be cause enough, but because of the state of filmmaking. To find its proper footing, so to speak, cinema has to first find the world. We have made the point before: many of the most serious artists, including film writers and directors, in the early part of the twentieth century took certain things for granted: hatred or suspicion of patriotism, government authority, big business, religion. When certain elementary principles of social life are grasped, which almost inevitably generate an intellectual and emotional urgency, then the treatment of a love relationship, or the fate of an individual, takes on a different and larger, more compelling meaning. The most minute detail in art, like Blake's "grain of sand," may reveal the "world," but *only* if the artist's previous conscious and unconscious efforts lead in that direction.

Today we tend to see details and particularities that are not enriched by broad understanding and deep feeling. Social indifference or ignorance under the present conditions makes a particularly miserable program for artistic work. So while we are not apprehensive of naming any emotions or states of being, no matter how intimate, we do insist on *first things first*: a concern and engagement with the world and no shrinking from it.

Of course such an engagement is no guarantee of artistic success.

Amu (Shonali Bose) is constructed like a detective story. A young Indian woman, Kaju, the adopted child of a relatively privileged family, has spent most of her life in Los Angeles. In 2002 she returns to see "the real India." Her family is horrified when she takes public transportation and visits slums.

Kaju has been told that her parents died in a malaria epidemic. She comes across facts that contradict that story. She digs deeper, offending her adoptive mother, who has also now arrived in Delhi. The truth eventually emerges: her father died in the communalist rioting of 1984, during which mobs killed thousands of Sikhs, claiming to be revenging the death of Indira Gandhi at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards.

The riots, far from being a spontaneous act of 'outrage,' Kaju (or Amu, her real nickname in childhood) learns, were stage-managed by the highest echelons of the Indian state. In lines that were removed from the film by the Indian censor board in that country, survivors tell her that the members of the government gave the orders for the slaughter. "All of them were involved ... police, bureaucrats, all were involved." Amu's mother survived the riots themselves, but she was worn down by her inability to gain justice from the legal system. She committed suicide, leaving behind a letter for the woman who would adopt her daughter, requesting that the girl "should never know anything" about her parents' fate.

The film is a worthy effort. The scenes of 'ethnic cleansing' in 1984 are horrific, especially an efficient, cold-blooded attack on a train. The revelation of the girl's history cannot help but move the viewer. These issues are very much alive, and not only in India. The film's creators are articulate and precise in their unequivocal indictment of the Indian establishment, including its so-called "secularist" wing, the Congress Party. [See accompanying interview with Shonali Bose and producer Bedabrata Pain]

As a fully realized work of art, however, *Amu* falls short. Too many of the characters are 'types' of a highly recognizable variety. The drama is primarily a device for exploring historical issues; for the most part it has insufficient life of its own. An extremely articulate political voice still needs to find correspondingly advanced, spontaneous artistic expression.

Two African films in Toronto were noteworthy. In *Les Saignantes* (from Cameroon) director Jean-Pierre Bekolo has chosen a pseudo-science fiction structure (as deliberately unconvincing as Godard's *Alphaville*). The film is set in 2025: corruption reigns, the capital city's infrastructure is decaying; everything takes place at night near sinister canals and warehouses. Two women who sell sex end up with the dead body of a high-ranking official. A secret society of only women comes into play, as well as a severed head. A villainous official is hungry for power and money and sex. He comes to a bad end.

The film is something of a cry of despair. The director made it apparently to emerge from his own state of depression. It has darkly humorous moments, but the overall impression is one of outrage and horror. The drama has its strengths and weaknesses, in fact, more weaknesses than strengths, but still, its sincerity and certain images linger in one's memory.

Tellingly, the disturbing intertitles are one of the film's strongest elements: "How do you make a film of anticipation in a country with no future?" "How can you make an action film in a country where acting is subversive?" "How can you make a horror film in a place where death is a party?" "How can you film a love story where love is impossible?" "How can you make a crime film in a country where investigation is impossible?" and, finally, "How can you watch a film like this and do nothing after?"

Bekolo is imaginative. He wants to see and do something different in African filmmaking, which, under hellishly difficult circumstances, has become somewhat stereotyped in recent years. We are all for it. However, the film lacks a social concreteness and precision that would lend it greater weight. The events are somewhat clumsy and farfetched. Whether in 2005 or 2025, we need a clearer picture of Cameroon, and less of a merely vague, sinister impression.

Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon, directed by South African Khalo Matabane, is a moving film, made in a very simple manner. The protagonist, Keniloe, meets a Somali woman, Fatima, in a Johannesburg park on a Sunday afternoon. She tells him that her father and brother were killed in her nation's civil war, that she, in fact, was left for dead and had to flee the country. Keniloe is disturbed and intrigued; he wants to chronicle her life story.

The next Sunday he goes to the park and looks for her, without success. He searches the city; he begins to ask people on the street their stories. Everyone he interviews is a political refugee, mostly from other parts of Africa. The film is simply that, brief encounters with these refugees, from Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Congo, but also the Gaza Strip, Yugoslavia and South Korea. The young woman from Yugoslavia says, "I don't know if the war is over in my head." They are extraordinary people for the most part, warm and sympathetic.

But there are also economic refugees. In a deportation center, Keniloe speaks to those who are about to be kicked out of South Africa (the wealthiest country on the continent), young workers who are quite defiant. One protests the deportation at the hands of 'brother Africans.' Young men behind bars sing gleefully, "You're wasting your time, I will come back."

Finally, he tracks his Fatima down, in a house on a side street. But, after all his efforts, she doesn't want to talk about her past life. It's too painful.

The technology now exists to make such films. If one has ideas in one's

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heads, it is possible to make significant works with extremely limited resources.

Iranian filmmaking continues to be serious, although one is always aware of the things that can and cannot be discussed and, as well, the political limitations of the film artists themselves in a country where left-wing thought has been banned for years.

Kambozia Partovi is obviously angered by the oppressed condition of women in Iran. He previously wrote *The Circle* for director Jafar Panahi. In his *Café Transit* (*Border Café*) a widow, Reyhan, would like to operate the restaurant her late husband owned. Her brother-in-law, Nasser, is opposed to that on a number of counts. He thinks "running a café is not for women." Moreover, he would like Reyhan to become his second wife. She doesn't care for the idea. She says demurely: "He would only provide financial support." She attempts to reopen the café in the teeth of the opposition of Nasser and her other in-laws.

Rarely do Iranian films indicate any interaction between Iranians and Western Europeans. Here the café is apparently on the border with Turkey. Truck drivers from Greece, Germany, Turkey, and Hungary pass through. A Greek truck driver becomes enamored of Reyhan; a stray Ukrainian girl, determined to travel to Italy, lands at the café. Her presence in the kitchen has to be hidden from the authorities. It's not entirely clear whether Reyhan is legally allowed to run the business. (Her husband left no will and without one, she is only entitled to 1/8 of his estate.) Eventually the courts and police close her down, but she still will not give in to Nasser. She investigates opening another café.

The film has certain affecting moments and characters, but as a whole fails to make a deep impression. The Greek truck driver is idealized, and the would-be romance rather trite. Large questions are touched on rather superficially or tangentially. In any event, the right of an Iranian woman to run her own small business is a legitimate question, but considering the suffering of the region and the dark shadows that continue to hang over it, is this truly the most compelling matter one can find for a drama? Or does this indicate something about the social layer the director inhabits?

Day Break (directed by Hamid Rahmanian**),** also from Iran, treats the death penalty in that country. The judicial methods it describes are barbaric enough. Essentially, on the day of the scheduled execution, if the condemned man is found medically fit to die, the victim's family is permitted to determine whether the sentence will actually be carried out. "The decision is yours," the court official tells the family. Religion and appeals to forgiveness in the name of religion play a large role in the proceedings.

The central figure in Rahmanian's film, Mansour, is undergoing his third medical exam. Twice the family of his victim has not turned up. This time too, they fail to appear. The mother in the family has died, and the process will have to wait for at least another 40 days. "This is a kind of torture." The other prisoners run a pool, betting on whether this or that condemned man will be spared the gallows.

The exposure of the death penalty procedure in Iran is welcome. However, *Day Break* is rather strained, a bit superficial and thus also fails to affect the spectator deeply. One does not have the impression that the filmmaker has 'staked all' on this film. It seems a trifle facile.

It is useful to be reminded, however, that the reactionary Iranian theocracy shares attitudes toward capital punishment strikingly similar to those held by the Christian right in the US, both as to their enthusiasm for putting people to death and their reliance on so-called "victims' rights," i.e., the substitution of vengeance for a rational justice system.

Adrian Shergold's *The Last Hangman*, an account of the career of Albert Pierrepoint (Timothy Spall), Britain's final executioner, is a superior work. Pierrepoint, following in his father's footsteps, becomes a hangman in the early 1930s (his career lasted until the mid-1950s). Speaking of his calling, "It's in me," he tells his horrified mother. All she can say is: don't bring it over the threshold. Slated only to assist another man during their first execution, Albert steps in expertly when the prisoner freaks out and the assigned hangman is paralyzed. Afterward, the other man throws up; he tells Pierrepoint, "We just killed a man ... take the money, I don't want it." Such things never appear to bother Albert, the consummate technician, who dissociates himself psychically from the violent, barbarous act. As he later explains to a colleague, "It's not really us in there, is it?"

Pierrepoint becomes the pride of his profession, able to size up a prisoner at a glance and expertly estimate the depth of the drop that will bring instant death. He is even given the task of executing Nazi war criminals (forty-seven in all). The British military is able to boast: "Our executions are the most efficient and most humane."

Years later, forced to hang an old pal, Pierrepoint falls apart. "I murdered the bloody lot of them," he confesses drunkenly to his wife. The movement against the death penalty grows in the 1950s. In the face of a growing clamor, Albert still claims, "I shall sleep soundly tomorrow," but the tide of public opinion has turned. In the end, he resigns, over financial issues, "a matter of principle." A title at the end reproduces Pierrepoint's final thoughts on the matter, from 1974: "The fruit of my experience has this bitter aftertaste ... Capital punishment, in my view, achieved nothing except revenge."

From Argentina, *Sisters* (directed by Julia Solomonoff) is the most recent film to treat the consequences of the savage military dictatorship that ruled in the late 1970s, murdering an estimated 40,000 political opponents. The film is set some years later, in 1984. One sister, Elena, lives in Texas, in a prosperous suburb, the other, Natalia, comes to visit. The latter has been living in political exile; her lover, Martin, was captured in hiding and killed by the military. Natalia still wants to know who denounced him and why. Her inquiries lead to a terrible discovery about someone in her family.

The suffering of the Argentine people under the dictatorship, which was backed to the hilt by Washington, and the lessons of that experience are inexhaustible sources for historical research and drama. One can only welcome each new sincere attempt. However, *Sisters* is one of the weaker efforts, largely reducing the bitter experience to the small change of petty bourgeois family relations. In this, unfortunately, the film ends up telling us more about the contemporary intellectual class in Argentina than anything else.

To be continued

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