Vancouver International Film Festival 2005—Part 2

Working class life and other problems

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This is the second in a series of articles on the recent Vancouver International Film Festival

How to treat social life and its infinitely complex relations to human psychology, emotional life, the most intimate circumstances, at this moment in history?

One may personally sympathize with this or that style or individual artist, but from a purely objective point of view, there are many possible truthful approaches, as long as one is committed to exploring life and artistic possibility with complete sincerity and honesty.

This is not an argument for eclecticism or lowering one's aesthetic standards in the interest of some amorphous, lowest-common-denominator 'socially progressive' ideal. By an *equally* objective standard, some works are more complex and challenging than others.

One of the approaches in fiction film continues to be associated with the British school of neo-realism, or naturalism, or 'docu-drama.' After several decades, the name of Ken Loach still figures prominently. However one may feel about the latter's artistic limitations and political trajectory, there is little question but that his body of work is a serious, if considerably uneven, one.

Provided a decent script, performers (professional or nonprofessional) with forceful personalities, locations in which he feels comfortable and permits himself a certain spontaneity, Loach remains capable of genuinely affecting moments, if not memorable dramas as a whole. Thus, the remarkable and authentic portions of *My Name is Joe* and *Ae Fond Kiss*. On the other hand, at its weakest, in unfamiliar or uncongenial surroundings, his work tends toward the politically schematic or emotionally strained (*Bread and Roses*, *The Navigators*, *Sweet Sixteen*).

At a time of almost universal renunciation of principles, Loach's ongoing commitment to scenes and problems of working class life, encouraged by his experience with the revolutionary socialist movement decades ago, endures as a pole of attraction to a significant layer of film artists. In interviews with sometimes unlikely filmmakers, one encounters admiration for Loach, because he 'hasn't sold out,' etc. For socially engaged French filmmakers, in particular (like Alain Tasma, who we recently interviewed in Toronto for his *October 17, 1961*), finding themselves isolated in a sea of self-importance and pretentiousness, Loach represents something of an "Other." This should not be dismissed as a mere fluke or misunderstanding.

In terms of a critical-artistic approach, I remain convinced that Fassbinder in *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* and Pasolini in *Accattone*, for example, engage social life in far richer and more demanding ways than Loach does in virtually any of his films, but his body of work remains something to be reckoned with.

Along these lines, several films from Britain and Ireland presented in Vancouver treated aspects of contemporary life. The most successful was *Yasmin*, directed by Scottish-born Kenny Glenaan (with a screenplay by Simon Beaufoy [*The Full Monty*]). With sensitivity and intelligence, the film treats the circumstances of a young Muslin woman living in the north of England before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks.

When we first see her Yasmin leads a double life, leaving her house each morning in headscarf and associated garb before stopping her flashy little car (which she refers to as "sex on wheels") in the middle of nowhere and changing into tight jeans and designer shoes. She hangs out in the pub with friends from work, has an English quasi-boyfriend and generally couldn't care less about affairs in the Middle East or South Asia.

Her father is a devout Muslim, her brother deals drugs in a perfunctory fashion and fools around with the local white girls. Out of obligation to her family, Yasmin has agreed to be 'married' to a Pakistani immigrant, Faysal, in need of permanent residency. She considers him a goat-herding primitive and maintains separate quarters.

The events of September 11 begin to change her life. She finds "Yas loves Osama" on her locker and later "Taliban van" on her work vehicle. "Who's Osama?" she naively asks her workmate.

When Yasmin's legal husband puts a move on her, she throws him out and insists on a divorce, creating a rupture with her father. Unfortunately, the isolated and homesick Faysal has been making lengthy phone-calls to his brother in Pakistan, who teaches at a school that has received funds from a group deemed to be terrorist by the British government. In a convincing and chilling sequence, police storm the family house in full combat gear, terrorizing everyone, wreaking absolute havoc.

Yasmin is interrogated about Faysal, who the police eventually pick up. Tensions grow at work, including with her erstwhile boyfriend. She's suddenly looked at with suspicion. Meanwhile her brother has given up drug pushing for a flirtation with Islamic extremism. "They [the police] pointed a gun at my head!" he shouts at his father, who wants nothing to do with the fundamentalists.

When Yasmin ventures to the police station in order to obtain a signature from Faysal for her divorce papers, they promptly arrest her on spurious grounds. In jail, the young woman picks up a copy of the Koran. Upon her release, Yasmin's sympathies grow for Faysal, who languishes in custody. She persists in efforts to free him, all of a sudden referring to him as "my husband." She waits for hours inside and outside a police station.

Yasmin is undergoing a cultural-political transformation, but not apparently a religious one. When her brother announces his intention to join the Islamic cause in "Pakistan and Palestine," she tells him, "I think I preferred you as a drug dealer..." In the end, it is not clear where she is or what she's going to do. Life as she knew it has changed for good.

The filmmakers have taken on the task of exposing and "almost putting your fist through this notion of Islamophobia that's grown up" since September 11, director Glenaan told an interviewer from the BBC. The film hacks away at the argument that Islamic fundamentalism is an expression of the global forces of Evil, who are ranged against the forces of Good. It points to definite social processes and problems, including economic hardship and the brutality of imperialist policy, that give birth to

such desperate moods.

It is an entirely honorable project, and not undertaken lightly. In a conversation in Vancouver, the director described the "invisible war" going on against Muslims in Britain since September 11. He noted that since the July bombings in London "the floodgates have opened." The police/army murder of Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes in the London underground "has quieted things down a little, the mad paranoia. Before that everyone was getting targeted." The Blair government has subsequently proposed attacks on democratic rights that surpass anything proposed in Washington.

Glenaan's film was based on 12 months of gathering material, interviewing residents, accumulating countless incidents. Originally *Yasmin* was to be set during the 2001 riots in Bradford, Oldham and other northern towns, which were fuelled by the activities of fascist organizations such as the National Front and the British National Party. During those violent episodes, the NF and BNP deliberately provoked conflicts with Asian youths, and then left the streets clear for the police.

Ultimately the September 11 events came to the fore. Glenaan and his associates wanted to examine how "international politics could come through your front door in a sleepy northern England town." Unemployment there is four times the national average. "There's a stigma attached to coming from those areas," the director explained. The "[Asian] kids are caught in a vacuum. They're British, not British. They have a foot in both camps." They're alienated from British society and their parents, he told me. "The more extreme elements will capitalize on that."

Glenaan listened to horror stories from some of the British Muslims he interviewed. A SWAT team stopped one man—whose name happened to be Hussein—driving with his son: "They held a rifle to the boy's head. 'Tell us or we'll kill the fucker,'" the police told the man. These thuggish activities are simply "creating more Osama bin Ladens," Glenaan observed.

He described the evolution of one Muslim woman, on whom the character of Yasmin was partly based. After September 11, "She started to feel guilty. She was ostracized, she had a nervous breakdown and lost her job." The woman underwent a kind of retreat inward, she began adopting traditional dress and yielding to her husband.

I suggested that the current situation in Britain, including the July bombings in London, could only take place under conditions of an enormous political void, created by the worthlessness of the traditional workers' organizations.

Glenaan remarked that support such as it is for the BNP is bound up with the growing political alienation of the population and the betrayal of the Labour Party. Labour "is not interested in poverty." A white woman told him she was voting for the BNP. "I asked why. 'Because they're fighting for my street, a better bus service,'" and so on. He added, "I can see why people feel betrayed" by Labour. "There is massive mistrust." A local factory closed and moved to France. Glenaan overheard two workers in a pub blaming the 'Pakistanis,' who obviously had nothing whatsoever to do with the shutdown. For the most backward elements, "9/11 confirmed their suspicions. Now they can openly say what they think."

The film is honest and smart, and often amusing. Its insistence on examining the lives and circumstances of real human beings, not the imaginary creatures conjured up by the mass media, is a blow against the reactionary stupidities of the authorities in the US and Britain. Archie Panjabi is entirely charming as Yasmin, and the rest of the cast (amateur and not) performs admirably for Glenaan, a former actor. A scene in the local pub, where a slightly inebriated Yasmin 'apologizes' for 9/11, with a combination of sarcasm, bitterness and genuine (misplaced) guilt, to a group of increasingly unfriendly female workmates (one or more of whom may be rivals for her would-be boyfriend) stands out in particular.

The information that a drama is based on assiduous research may induce a certain alarm. Oftentimes such pieces have the feel of works created by committee, with characters carefully designed to stand in for every social type and situation. Research is a fine thing, but I think the late French filmmaker Robert Bresson's method was not bad in this regard. He painstakingly planned out every aspect of his films, worked it all out in his head ahead of time, then when it came time to start filming, put all his plans aside and plunged into the work as though he were improvising it.

Yasmin, although it was eventually scripted by Beaufoy, suffers a little perhaps from being the product of an amalgamation of different individuals' experiences. Life doesn't quite work like that, as the rounded-off totality of a body of experience. Some of the sharpest, *most particular* (and therefore most revealing and persuasive) edges can be lost in that process. One senses that certain episodes have been included in order to fill a generalized social command. On the whole, however, the work speaks strongly and sincerely. And with a rare depth of feeling and commitment. It tells the truth, and that is the most important thing.

On the other hand, *Shooting Magpies*, also from Britain, in my view, *does* suffer from a pronounced case of filmmaking by committee. And here this is literally the case. The work is the product of the Amber Collective in northeast England, a group that has been working together since 1969 (and making feature films since 1985). Their *Like Father* (2000)—about a former mining community on the East Durham coast and the relations between different generations—failed to make a deep impression, despite its obvious sincerity and hard work, and the new work fares little better.

Shooting Magpies deals with a group of people in dire economic straits. Emma, a young mother, is trying to get her boyfriend off heroin. She relies on her friend, Barry, a youth worker (and the moral pillar of the local community), who is having difficulties with his son. In turn, Ray, a dealer in gold, is trying to get *his* son off drugs; the latter eventually commits suicide by jumping off a cliff, but not before leaving gold (which he has stolen from his father) on Barry's doorstep. The latter, in turn, gives the gold to Emma, who needs it for her boyfriend's anti-drug treatment, telling her to "pawn it far away." She holds on to a bracelet. Things then go wrong in most possible ways.

Some of the film's moments are convincing (Emma Dowson as Emma is affecting), but most are not. The filmmakers are clearly determined to make each detail authentic. They may have succeeded in that, but at the cost of failing to create a genuine, compelling drama. Artistry, including a certain ease and grandeur of language and performance, still counts for something.

Everyday working class life deserves serious and compassionate treatment, but some sense of a larger historical picture needs to be present, or the result may be stunted and narrow. The spectator is more likely to respond to the inevitably gloomy goings-on with "Oh, it isn't that terrible!," rather than "What's to be done about this?" Or everything is reduced to mere wishful thinking about the possibility of this or that individual 'doing right' under adverse circumstances, which is not a very promising standpoint.

The more profound truth (and a reason to be *genuinely*, not light-mindedly hopeful) about the lives of people living in the ruins of the mining and steel industry in northeast England may not emerge from their immediate circumstances or present level of social or psychological awareness.

In the first place, why does the Amber Collective never say anything about the collapse of the British labor movement, which has entirely abandoned these people? The latter haven't found themselves in their current social and moral plight solely as the result of objective economic processes. They have been callously betrayed by the Labour Party, as well as by various "left" (Communist Party) and syndicalist forces, their anticipation of a different kind of future than the one offered by British capitalism, and *not merely an individual one*, systematically crushed. This

has played a major role in temporarily demoralizing and paralyzing the population. Leaving this critical element out, for whatever reason, has a qualitatively harmful effect. One is presented with only one side of a complex social-ideological picture.

In any event, some dramatic means, and not an artificial one, might have to be found to introduce apparently 'outside' elements into the narrative (larger economic and historical trends, other social layers, disruptive ideas and emotions)—which of course are *not*, in fact, external at all, but which are contained in the circumstances of these people too if they were looked at critically, historically, and not merely from a purely empirical, passive (and ultimately despairing) point of view.

Something similar might be said about *Pavee Lackeen* (from Ireland, directed by Perry Ogden), except that the sincerity of the filmmakers and the quiet painfulness of the subject matter raise it to a slightly higher artistic level. A family of Travellers, the Irish equivalent of the Roma (Gypsies), is at the center of this docudrama. The story simply follows 10-year-old Winnie and her family over the course of a week. Principally, the film treats the often unhappy encounters between the Travellers and different levels of bureaucracy (school, welfare authorities, police and so forth). Little happens, but we see something of a life. Winnie (Winnie Maughan) is a determined and bright girl, her mother, (Rosie Maughan), is probably in her thirties, but with the face of a sixty-year-old.

Dark Horse from Denmark and *Crash Test Dummies* from Austria are not likely to endure terribly long in anyone's memory, but they have their merits. The filmmakers (Dagur Kári and Jörg Kalt) have this much in common, they cannot quite make up their minds whether to amuse themselves at the expense of their characters—generally, young people with bleak prospects—or to criticize (with humor as well—why not?) their conditions of life. This obviously speaks to a broader ambivalence in the European and North American artistic community, or the portion of it that concerns itself at all with social issues. At its worst, this middle class grouping leans toward cynicism and mocking those 'unfortunates' not as bright or fashionable as itself (or as it perceives itself to be); at its best, this same layer demonstrates a genuine sympathy and sensitivity—sometimes, as in the case of these films, both qualities appear side-by-side in the same work.

The Austrian film is slight, the story of two broke young Romanians who venture to Vienna for the purpose of driving a stolen car back home to Bucharest, for some lowlifes. While in Vienna they encounter a slightly batty group of Austrians, including a bewigged store detective too softhearted to arrest any shoplifters and a young woman, Martha, who makes a living as a human crash test dummy. Katharin Resetarits, as the latter, continually under the influence of pills and wandering through life in a slightly bemused but amiable state, is amusing and even memorable. The film's apparent conclusion, that the European Union with its new eastern European members is a mad project but somehow workable, is not.

Daniel in *Dark Horse* is a graffiti artist who has officially earned a grand total of $7 in four years, leaving him off the charts as far as the tax department is concerned. He has an overweight friend, training to be a soccer referee, who has a terrible time with women, which causes him some difficulty when his first match proves to be between two all-female teams. Meanwhile, the judge who rules in a case involving Daniel's illegal graffiti efforts (the artist accepts commissions from the lovelorn to paint giant hearts and accompanying messages on the sides of buildings) seems to be going through a nervous collapse, wandering through a rather forlorn-looking Western Europe. Again, the shifts from dark to light seem a little more than the director can handle.

The City of the Sun is one film that gets it quite wrong, attempting to mine humor out of the dismal state of life in the Czech Republic, specifically the industrial town of Ostrava, which has one of the country's highest unemployment rates. The film follows the fortunes of four jobless factory workers, each of whom has a daunting situation in his personal life as well. Nothing much is made of any of it. We are apparently expected to celebrate the resilience of the 'human spirit' by the film's end. Why should we be obliged to? Rather than being placed in that somewhat humiliating position, we might be offered a more honest treatment of post-Stalinist life.

The Dogme group comes from Denmark as well. I would prefer ten *Dark Horses* to the continuing dreadfulness turned out by this group (Lars von Trier et al). In *Dear Wendy*, directed by Thomas Vinterberg (maker of the overrated *Celebration*) and scripted by von Trier, the Danish filmmakers set out to explain the supposed 'gun cult' that dominates American life. A group of young pacifists, the Dandies, who are nonetheless in love with guns, survive an underground existence in a small US town. Tragedy ensues. Abstract, foolish, empty—nothing is convincing or real in this work, not even remotely.

This film and von Trier's latest directing efforts (*Dogville* and *Manderlay*) deserve separate and specialized treatment, but suffice it to say that *Dear Wendy* sheds not one glimmer of light on American society, but does further demonstrate the misanthropy and hysteria of the Dogme group. Rarely, even in recent decades, have human beings been treated with such contempt and lack of understanding.

There could hardly be more convincing proof that the Scandinavian "Third Way" (Social Democracy plus healthy doses of the 'counter culture') has foundered utterly on the rocks of the global economy. Presumably someone there will have a more rational and penetrating response to the present dilemmas.

To be continued