

San Francisco International Film Festival 2006—Part 1

Film and history

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This is the first part of a series of articles on the 2006 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 20-May 4

The 49th San Francisco international film festival, held recently, screened some 225 films from forty-one countries, seventy-five or so of them full-length features. The festival honored actors Ed Harris and Tilda Swinton, directors Werner Herzog and Guy Maddin and screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière. The Skyy Prize for a first narrative feature went (deservedly, I felt) to *Taking Father Home*, directed by Ying Liang (China, 2005). Some 82,000 people attended this year's event.

In addition to several films we have already commented on—for example, Alain Tasma's remarkable *October 17, 1961*, Philippe Faucon's *The Betrayal* from France, and Mohammad Rasoulof's *Iron Island* from Iran—the San Francisco festival presented a number of other interesting works.

As always, there were films that sounded intriguing but which, for scheduling reasons, we were unable to see. Of those that we did see, the ones we thought most highly of and intend to write about include Serge Le Péron's *I Saw Ben Barka Get Killed* (France), Ying's *Taking Father Home*, James Longley's *Iraq in Fragments* (US), Koji Wakamatsu's *Cycling Chronicles: Landscapes the Boy Saw* (Japan), Shui-Bo Wang's *They Chose China* (Canada/France) and Chantal Richard's *Lili and the Baobab* (France). One might add as well Greg Zglinski's *One Long Winter Without Fire* (Switzerland/Belgium), Giuseppe Piccioni's *The Life I Want* and Fernando Solanas's *The Dignity of the Nobodies* (Argentina)—the latter not for its politics, frankly, but for its stark depiction of social conditions.

During the film festival the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party also sponsored a public forum on the present artistic and cultural condition, with special regard to the US political situation. We were able to discuss with a number of serious readers of the WSWS some of the basic Marxist conceptions of art, as well as the particular problems and possibilities that artists and intellectuals face in the present circumstances.

Out of this dual effort—viewing several dozen films and the further consideration of a Marxist attitude toward artistic work—certain ideas emerged compellingly, above all, the need to take into account the force of *objective* circumstances in life and art (to see our own strivings “as nothing but a consequence and indication of the course” of objective development itself) and the significance of the *historical* approach (i.e. to treat every subject, global-political or the most intimate, as a process whose source and development needs to be traced out).

The following thoughts were prompted by the recent experiences.

In any given period, art, if it is to be worthy of the name, responds to the greatest intellectual and moral challenges of the day; it must express “the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the

spirit,” as Hegel says. It does so, of course, in its own peculiar manner: as art, in drama and color and sound, not as philosophical or scientific exposition. Nonetheless, something indispensable about our life must find expression in art or it fails us and does not deserve our attention.

One of the greatest human problems of the present day, in our view, lack of confidence by wide layers of the population in any alternative to the existing order, and the widespread political confusion that afflicts so many, with all its attendant cultural and psychological difficulties. This dilemma has different aspects, but one central one is a terribly lowered level of historical knowledge. The critical events of the 20th century that have shaped our world, including our social psychology and climate, are woefully misunderstood.

These are not strictly a political-scientific problems. The common feeling of being *at sea*, of not knowing how to orient oneself socially, morally, even to a certain extent personally, is bound up with these historical questions. If the present social world, one that is often threatening, brutal and cold, is all that's possible—if the avenues of fundamental social change are thought to be closed off—this has implications for every aspect of life. It already *has had* implications for every aspect of life; we live in the midst of the social and cultural results.

A lack of historical knowledge makes people vulnerable to any amount of filthy business. One factor in the ability of the US government to invade and occupy Iraq was the failure of broad layers of the American population, despite their skepticism and instinctive distrust of the official pretexts for war, to draw on a deep understanding of the history of the region, the US role in the area, or the history of colonialism and imperialism in general.

A mass radicalization is inevitable (and, in fact, is under way), given the ever-worsening social conditions and the prosecution of an unpopular, predatory war. This will change many things for the better, including the atmosphere in which filmmaking is carried on. It would be mistaken, however, to think that a shift to the left in public opinion will solve all our political and cultural problems by itself.

It is not possible to make real progress along any number of lines without some wider popular understanding of how we have arrived at this particular world-historical juncture. Filmmaking, in its own fashion, needs to address this, for the sake of its audience, and *for its own sake*. “The educator must himself be educated.” The intellectual framework within which the vast majority of writers and directors operate is utterly inadequate. The film artists, by and large, have little or no grasp of the great social currents; in fact, in most cases they are being carried along almost entirely unconsciously by one or another of these currents. They have an intensely limited knowledge of historical laws, and this prevents them from imbuing their own work with any extraordinary depth or breadth.

A seriousness toward the contemporary human situation means, first and foremost, a serious willingness to trace out its roots in social development. I would go so far as to say that the cinematic problem *is* the historical problem today.

For the most part, art and filmmaking at present adapt to, even celebrate, the present difficulties, or remain prostrate before them. This takes various forms: mere laziness and superficiality, posturing coldness or nihilism, irrationalism, cynicism, the cult of intuition and false ‘spontaneity’ (which has little that is truly spontaneous about it).

We need to oppose the view that the world is simply overwhelming and no sense can be made of history or society; that the individual human being can experience no more than him or herself; that human beings are innately flawed, even evil, and incapable of making progress; that emotional excitation is the end-all and be-all of life; that the artist has no access to objective truth.

In my own view, an emphasis on ‘human nature in general,’ on the elemental biological-physiological features of life would also be wrong, would amount to an evasion. The artist today needs to treat the specific, concrete, historical human being, in all his or her weaknesses and strengths. Art, like philosophy at an earlier day, should start “out from real premises and ... not abandon them for a moment. Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and fixity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions” (*The German Ideology*).

In an earlier epoch the artist possessed a greater understanding of the social organism and this inevitably, sometimes quasi-unconsciously, imbued his or her work. This cannot be assumed today. The world has advanced in many ways, and objectively the basis exists as never before for a global social transformation. However, the fate of the Russian Revolution, its terrible degeneration under Stalinist rule, and the resulting bitter disappointment among broad layers of socialist-minded workers and intellectuals, resulting in a decline in the influence of Marxism, have helped bring about a temporary cultural-intellectual regression that cannot be wished away. It needs to be acknowledged and addressed head-on.

Under these conditions (under any conditions, but *particularly* under these conditions), reconstructions of the surface of everyday life, which offer no clue as to how the given characters or society arrived at such and such a point, will have an extremely limited value. We need more than the circumscribed ‘docudrama,’ more than the picturesque ‘slice of life,’ more than even the most meticulously detailed but *ahistorical* study of an ordinary life. Entire national cinemas (Iran, Taiwan, perhaps China too) are experiencing difficulties over this question at present. ‘Humanism’ that does not account for the *social evolution* of human problems is not true humanism! The individual artist is not to blame, but this is the harsh reality.

Socio-historical understanding of a scientific character needs to be revived and cultivated among artists and intellectuals. An advance in this direction, even among a relatively small number to begin with, would have a marked impact on artistic life.

To repeat, treating the human situation seriously, *in all its dimensions*, involves a serious attitude toward the sources and history of our present circumstances. A meaningful treatment of this complicated reality will almost inevitably call upon all the skill, creativity and intellectual depth at the artist’s disposal.

Of course, we are not speaking of academic history, whereby the writer-creator places him or herself outside the social process, or regards history in a non-contradictory fashion, without internal self-movement, as an interesting collection of facts or events.

And not “radical” history or art either, which specializes in telling people what they already know. For such artists, nothing ever changes, history is entirely static, an eternal struggle between the virtuous people and the evil-natured oppressor.

No, we mean the all-sided study of events and processes as a means of penetrating and inhabiting the present in the richest possible manner. It cannot be accidental that some of the most memorable recent works in both the commercial and art cinemas have treated historical events in a relatively complex manner. For example, the aforementioned *October 17, 1961* (which chronicles the massacre of Algerians during a demonstration in Paris), Steven Spielberg’s *Munich*, and Deepak Kumaran Menon’s *The Gravel Road (Chemman Chaalai)*, screened in San Francisco last year, a sensitive work about life on a Malaysian rubber plantation in the 1960s.

Nor is it accidental that some of the more striking films at the recent San Francisco film festival also dealt with historical questions, *I Saw Ben Barka Killed*, *They Chose China* and *Cycling Chronicles: Landscapes the Boy Saw*, or, at least, with social life in a coherent, artistic manner: *Iraq in Fragments*, *Taking Father Home*, *The Dignity of the Nobodies*.

How do we account for ourselves? How do we make sense of our lives and reality? The amnesiac approach has failed art and filmmaking, failed it utterly. The world was not born in the year 2000. A great deal of human memory, so to speak, is missing. There is much to be recovered. We need to revive something of the spirit of artists like Balzac, who regarded “his creative and artistic activity as equivalent to an activity of a historical-interpretative and even historical-philosophical nature ... And in practice his people and his atmospheres, contemporary as they may be, are always represented as phenomena sprung from historical events and forces” (Auerbach, *Mimesis*).

A hunger for historical knowledge will emerge. The present crisis demands it. People will want to know, will *have to know*, about the origins of all the political and social tendencies they confront, about why life is the way it is, about why they feel and think in the particular ways they do. A great deal of what is popular now—the infatuation with externals, the facetiousness and unseriousness of so much film and art work, its mere quirkiness as opposed to a genuine engagement with the objectively contradictory character of life—will lose its appeal and turn into its opposite. Many of the current celebrities in the art and commercial film worlds, undeserving of their reputations for the most part, will fall into obscurity; most of their concerns will seem, in retrospect, intolerably petty. New names will appear, apparently out of nowhere, with bolder and larger themes.

Beauty and depth, human complicatedness—is that too much to ask for?

Filmmaking remains capable, and will prove capable, of reaching extraordinary heights, once a change in the social atmosphere occurs. We see brilliant glimpses of the possibilities even under the present conditions.

Japanese filmmaking has been something of a black hole recently: perhaps the most narcissistic and socially indifferent cinema. If one had been searching for detailed pictures of life in various countries in the past decade by looking at their respective film efforts, one would probably have learned the least by watching the Japanese cinema. One would have found out more than one wanted to know about a certain privileged, fashionably morose, self-satisfied layer of the middle class, and little else.

It was therefore a pleasant surprise to encounter *Cycling Chronicles: Landscapes the Boy Saw*, which has several remarkable sequences. But then one discovered the filmmaker, Koji Wakamatsu, was born in 1936. The younger generation in Japanese cinema, by and large, has still to be heard from in a serious way.

Wakamatsu, in fact, began making soft-core pornographic films in the 1960s. According to Paolo Bertolin in the *Korea Times*, Wakamatsu then created his own independent company and “went on to combine eroticism with overt social and political critique.” Roger Garcia, in the film festival catalogue, writes: “Wakamatsu has long been driven by a sense of political and social outrage, and a sympathy for those who have been marginalized or suppressed by dominant history and institutions.”

In *Cycling Chronicles*, a 17-year-old boy (Tasuku Emoto) desperately

and fiercely pedals his way across Japan. He encounters a number of people who reveal to him painful truths about Japan's past. It appears that the boy is running away from his own violent secret.

The various dialogues—three urban teenage boys discussing the youth's case; fishermen complaining about their conditions; an older man talking about Japanese war crimes; an elderly Korean woman, brought to Japan as a "comfort woman" (prostitute at the disposal of the armed forces), describing her life—are wonderfully done, deeply convincing and truthful.

The majority of the film is made up of scenes of the boy cycling through the Japanese landscape. In a sense, Wakamatsu makes the same mistake as so many of his contemporaries, assuming that the wordless scenes, juxtaposed to the relatively brief dialogues, will resonate with meaning. They don't entirely. We need more words, more history and fewer snowy mountains and seascapes!

Nonetheless, the spoken sequences are superb, angry yet poetic. The longest, with the older man describing the war, is the most memorable.

Wakamatsu explained to interviewer Bertolin, "The old man is not an actor, but art critic Hariu Ichiro, a friend of mine who shares a lot of my political views. I asked him to act in the film, just to talk about his 17 years [the translation is unclear here, presumably Wakamatsu meant "to talk about what he was like at 17," which Ichiro does in the film], about the war, about the Emperor, with complete freedom of speech. I know well his personal story, therefore, even though nothing was scripted, I had a clear idea of what he would have been saying."

The old man and the youth are seated together, on a bench. The former begins speaking in a quiet but forceful tone. He explains that when he was 17 he was obsessed with death. The Japanese military, he says, turned young people into killers of men, women and children. The Japanese forces killed 20 million people in Asia and among the Allied forces. "That's war. ... We were prepared to die for the Emperor and the nation."

The elderly man continues. "My brother went to Mongolia. He died of cold or hunger. I went to Mongolia." He saw a monument there set up by members of the Japanese parliament, its message: "Rest in peace—You heroes of war." He finds this horrifying. "People were told to die gladly for the Emperor."

The monument suggests, he says, that the Japanese soldiers who lost their lives in the war "were stepping stones to Japan's recovery." He goes on, "We killed more than 20 million people, women and children. We couldn't bring down the Imperial system [at the end of the war], it was sustained by the US occupation and Japanese politicians."

Later, in the postwar years, "an era of personal greed set in." People were told to satisfy their own interests. Lies were told about the war, Japan's role was concealed. Japan became a "hollow, unstable society." And now the military has resurrected itself, Japanese forces are sent anywhere, "even to wars started by the US." He addresses the youth directly, "Your generation must not stand upon someone else's pain." This is a society that rests on political deception, hypocrisy and lies. "It's hard to be happy."

It's a brilliant, unflinching scene, unmatched by virtually any I can recall in recent films. A scene without verbal fireworks, unselfconscious, unimpeachable, a scene one does not forget. Such opportunities are open to every artist, why do so few avail themselves?

In the interview carried by the *Korea Times*, Wakamatsu observes that Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is "just a wagging dog for America." Speaking of Japan's role in World War II, he says, "Many scholars and documentary makers who investigated on Japan's war crimes were silenced and ostracized. Two directors who were working on the issue died in dubious circumstances. One had been an assistant director of mine, and was killed during a protest I too was taking part in. These incidents have never been fully investigated and this is another reason why I am so mad at Japan today."

Such outspoken and talented artists are rare, but they do exist.

To be continued



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