

San Francisco International Film Festival 2006—Part 4

Other European and Asian films

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This is the fourth and final part of a series of articles on the 2006 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 20-May 4. The first part was posted May 13, Part 2 May 19 and Part 3 May 22.

In Greg Zglinski's *One Long Winter Without Fire* (*Tout un hiver sans feu*), Jean (Aurélien Recoing) and Laure (Marie Matheron), a dairy farming couple in the Swiss Jura mountains, have lost their daughter in a barn fire. Their grief is almost unbearable. Moreover, the farm is in danger of going under. Laure has a breakdown and is hospitalized, presumably temporarily.

Jean finds a job in a foundry, tending a furnace, where he makes friends with a young Kosovar and his sister, Labinota. The latter is waiting, probably in vain, for her husband, missing six years. Jean and Labinota find some consolation in each other's company. Human warmth at a dance and a New Year's celebration help bring Jean back to life. Meanwhile his wife's mental state is improving, but she runs the risk of losing him.

Recoing (from Laurent Cantet's *Time Out*), much in demand in French and European film and television at the moment, is a remarkable performer. He brings a considerable depth and commitment to the role. I suspect that without him, in fact, the film would be markedly less successful.

Most of all, one remembers Jean's pain, the biting cold and snow, and his slow thawing out.

Zglinski is a Polish-born, Swiss filmmaker. His family, which had been living in Switzerland, was granted political asylum at the time of General Jaruzelski's declaration of martial law in December 1981. He returned to his native country in 1992 to attend film school in Lodz. He comments: "There were certainly some disadvantages. For example, we worked with old Arriflex 35s that the Germans left behind after the Second World War. But there was a way of considering the cinema as first and foremost an art and the filmmaker as an artist. The question of production, the financing of films, all that is dealt with at German film schools, for example, was of secondary importance."

Of his film, he says: "A man, Jean, has a fairly clear vision of his life. A drama takes place. He finds himself in a situation to which there seems to be absolutely no solution. On one side, there is his wife Laure, who he loves but it is impossible for him to live with her. Then there is this other woman, Labinota, who he shouldn't be with but who makes him feel good ... How can he live with all that? What should he choose? Who should he choose!? He must find a path between his emotions and his moral standards. But, basically, only one choice is possible: remaining true to what he believes in. And for that, he has to be attentive, on the alert, which, for me, is a sort of definition of the right attitude to life ..."

Not earthshaking, but serious and concerned, and the film is made in the same spirit. The characters are recognizable as human beings, flawed, unglamorous, suffering, but struggling to have lives.

Of course, it helps if one is alert on more than the level of personal relations.

The reference in Pierre-Pascal Rossi's screenplay to Kosovo presumably is an attempt to draw some sort of analogy between the meteorological and emotional conditions depicted in the film, including the possibility of relief that seems offered at the end, and the contemporary political situation in the Balkans or Europe as a whole. Fortunately, the filmmaker does not push the issue, which most likely would not have been treated well. The effort, as in Michael Haneke's *Caché*, to create parallels between individual traumas and national or social tragedies is a dubious one.

The fire that took the little girl's life in *One Long Winter Without Fire* was a terrible accident. The loss of a child is a personal tragedy of possibly overwhelming proportions. Of course, even in such cases, the accident may have a social component (conditions at home or elsewhere, economic or psychological pressures), but fatal accidents, even in the best of all possible worlds, will take place. It is no possible consolation to those involved, but a portion of the pain associated with such a tragedy is bound up with the finiteness of all human life.

It ought to be remembered, and by artists too, that the widespread death and misery in Kosovo—or Iraq, or Rwanda, or Chechnya, or any other of the earth's present hell-holes—are not accidental or inevitable, but the result of definite policies pursued by ruling elites or sub-elites and their parties and political or military representatives. The existing social order, its anarchy and decay, is responsible, in the final analysis, for the wretchedness in Kosovo, not unchanging Human Nature or the absurdity or cruelty of the universe. Whatever the filmmakers' intentions, the result of efforts to draw such parallels unthinkingly is to dissolve avoidable political calamities into some collective existential human suffering.

Giuseppe Piccioni's *The Life I Want* (*La Vita Che Vorrei*) concerns actors and the cinema. Laura (Sandra Ceccarelli) is an emotional, somewhat neurotic performer, who throws herself recklessly into life and roles. She has the opportunity to read for a part in a film with a well-known actor, Stefano (Luigi Lo Cascio), and lands the role.

The pair recite lines together, rehearse and start filming. The script is a version of the *La Traviata-Camille* story, a kept woman in the nineteenth century falls for a young man. The relationship will mean his social ruin, so she painfully gives him up, pretending that she doesn't care for him any longer. The dramatic situation and language are emotional, intense, a little overblown.

Through the words they say to each other, a writer's words, actors in cinema are able to express something to one another that people in less 'adventurous' or 'promiscuous' territory (Piccioni's terms) would find more difficult, or at least the process speeds up. For two people susceptible or already predisposed, *pretending to be* is one of the surest preparations for *being* in love.

Laura and Stefano begin an affair, but there are problems from the beginning. Her unsteady emotionalism goes against the grain of his relative coldness and detachment. He lectures her that acting "has nothing to do with feeling or truthfulness." He advocates the conscious simulation

of emotions on screen, not their reproduction. Laura is a “Method” actress, in need of motivation and drama, on and off the screen.

Having impressed those on the set with her skills, Laura begins to receive offers for other work. She goes to dinner with the producers and directors of an upcoming film. Stefano grows jealous, restive. He sleeps with an old girl-friend. “I don’t think about you,” he tells Laura. She replies, “You’re sad.” They drift apart and then get back together. At one point, fed up with the smiles and warmth she dispenses to everyone, he asks angrily, “Is there anyone you don’t get intimate with?” Later, she says, “You make me feel worse than I am.”

The film nears completion. Laura, pregnant by Stefano, disappears. She’s furious with him, deeply wounded by his words and deeds. Stefano can’t reach her for months. He finds out about the baby, visits her in the hospital after it’s born. Laura is chilly, but permits him to stay for a few minutes. He insists he’s turned over a new leaf. Perhaps they can rehearse her new film part together? She grudgingly accepts.

Piccioni’s work is an intelligent, sympathetic account of film life. The performers, particularly Luigi Lo Cascio (*The Best of Youth*), are fine.

Cinema, because of its mass character, its basis in modern industry and production and its potential to provide a sophisticated and sensitive artistic experience, is intimately linked to the development of contemporary society. Wherever it is taken seriously, whatever else it might be, cinema is not irrelevant. What goes on in filmmaking oddly matters. The popular ongoing fascination with Hollywood or its equivalents elsewhere, for example, is not simply a vicarious living through celebrity and wealth, although there is a great deal of that in it, it is also an instinctive awareness of (and a desire to come into physical contact with) film’s almost unique power as a means of conveying something essential about people’s lives together.

Piccioni manages to suggest something of that power, as well as the narcissism, self-importance and emptiness of so much that goes on in the film industry. It seems an objective portrait, more or less. Of course, matters are simplified, rounded out, made a little neat here. The characters are obliged to remain within certain bounds—this one intellectual and judgmental, that one emotionally messy and irresponsible—a bit more than is entirely healthy, but overall it seems an honest attempt.

One issue strikes one forcefully after a viewing of *The Life I Want*, however. Piccioni’s film is a critical but respectful picture of the Italian film industry. Granted that the film in which Laura and Stefano have roles is not any radical departure, nonetheless the production seems serious and artistically-driven. But is Piccioni filming a phantom? Where is the actual, living Italian film industry? *He* portrays it, but it has ceased to *portray itself*, more or less, at least at the international level. The figures of Visconti, Rossellini, Fellini, Pasolini, Antonioni and a host of other notable filmmakers have been followed ... by what exactly?

The collapse of Italian cinema, like the Japanese (also dominated by giants in the postwar period), is clearly bound up with a crisis of perspective that extends and indeed begins far beyond the bounds of the film industry. In Italy the disappointment and disillusionment of several generations produced, above all, by the world-historical treachery of the Communist Party, some of the miserable human remains of which now occupy the highest positions in the Italian state, has yet to be confronted and overcome. There is a subject worthy of a new, rejuvenated Italian cinema! Who will take this on?

From South Korea, *You Are My Sunshine* (directed by Park Jin-pyo) tells the story of an HIV-infected waitress, a former prostitute, for whom a good-natured, naive farmhand falls heavily. Nothing will stand in the way of his affection. The film is cheerful enough, considering the subject matter, but a little condescending and facetious. Its tone is off sufficiently to weaken our interest in the lives and difficulties of the characters.

Brazil’s *Underground Game*, directed by Roberto Gervitz, is said to be “based on the imaginings of renowned Argentine author, Julio Cortázar.”

A lounge pianist maps out routes on the São Paulo subway and then follows them, looking for any woman who takes the same precise route. He meets a number of women this way, but none fulfill his dreams. His encounter with a beauty in a red dress leads him toward mystery and danger.

Cortázar, a brilliant writer, could be *too brilliant* at times, too clever for his own good, but at its most arch and dreamlike, his work was saturated with opposition and social hostility. To a certain extent, that was taken for granted. Deprived of that quality, Gervitz’s film is simply a gimmick, a game, a conceit.

A Perfect Couple, from Nobuhiro Suwa, is another very poor Japanese film by a youthful filmmaker. Suwa, the director of the cleverly titled *M/Other* and *H Story*, is one of the breed of art filmmakers who believe that an actor pulling a long face suggests seriousness.

His new film, made in France, follows a couple on the verge of divorce, or apparently so. Marie (Valéria Bruni-Tedeschi) and Nicolas (Bruno Todeschini) have returned to Paris for a wedding after living in Lisbon for several years. The film consists of their rather dismal and uneventful stay in Paris, as they announce their impending break-up to old friends, attend the social engagement and pick away at one another.

This is a work that manages to be concentrated and obsessive, but only about entirely secondary and tertiary matters. The results are pretentious and unintentionally comical. At a certain point one develops the urge to imitate and perhaps improve on the dialogue (which was apparently improvised by the unfortunate actors). For example:

She: You’re bourgeois and superficial. You and your socialite friends.

Silence.

He: I don’t know.

She: I’m fed up. Everything you do is false.

He: I’m sorry. I’m tired.

She: I have nothing but regrets.

Silence.

He: Well, I don’t know.

She: So?

He: I don’t know. Are you tired?

She: Tired. Maybe. What do you think?

He: I don’t know. It’s bad, I know.

She: Yes.

Silence.

He: Are you awake?

She: I don’t know. Maybe.

He: I’m sorry.

And so forth.

Many immigrants, particularly Turkish, have arrived in a working class neighborhood in The Hague in the Netherlands. Tension has arisen between native-born and immigrant pigeon enthusiasts. *Strangers in the Neighborhood* (directed by Patrick Bisschops) looks at the problem. The film uncovers resentment among some of the Dutch residents, feelings that old ways and traditions are disappearing, sometimes ignorant claims about the ‘foreigners.’ The truth is suggested by the boarded-up storefronts. Economic insecurity and worsening conditions fuel the tensions.

A Turkish man, a pigeon owner, provides the most moving moments. He explains about racism and how he was kicked out of his last home. “Turks, Antilleans, Moroccans—you have to be internationally oriented here.” He makes money, but he finds life sad in The Hague: “I have no social life here. What good is money if you’re dead?” He wants to return to Istanbul, “the center of the world.” Suspicion and mistrust work both ways. When the filmmaker and a Dutch resident stick their heads inside a local pub, now Turkish-owned, they’re basically told to get lost.

The Turkish and Dutch pigeon racers can also become fast friends, as one example demonstrates. The film is slight, but the images are

authentic.

In *Shooting Under Fire*, directors Sacha Mirzoeff and Bettina Borgfeld document the last few weeks of Reuters photographer Reinhard Krause's four-year assignment in Israel covering the Middle East conflict. The dangers to which 'front-line' photographers are subject emerge graphically from the film and the anecdotes told by Krause and other Reuters photographers, Israeli and Palestinian.

It's entirely appropriate to deal with this subject, especially in light of the high mortality rate experienced by journalists and photographers covering the Iraq war and occupation. Nonetheless, one is still left with the unavoidable feeling that the conditions of those photographing the situation pale in comparison with those living it every day, particularly the long-suffering Palestinian population. In that regard, the film, simply by what it omits or fails to take a clear stand on, perhaps borders on the insensitive.

Canadian-born Ronit Avni and Brazilian Julia Bacha have collaborated on *Encounter Point*, a documentary about The Bereaved Families Forum, a group of 250 Palestinians and 250 Israelis who have lost loved ones and seek a dialogue with each other in the interests of peace in the region. Ali Abu Awwad, whose brother was killed by an Israeli soldier, is a leader on the Palestinian side. The film focuses as well on Robi Damelin, a South African-born, Israeli mother whose son was killed by a sniper.

Encounter Point contains a number of deeply moving moments, both in the recounting of personal tragedy and the meetings between the Israelis and Palestinians, but its only answer to the conflict is the pacifist-reformist politics of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. The activists' motives may be the most sincere, but this is not a way out of the present tragic situation.

A social struggle, a burning class question, exists in the Middle East. The strategy of 'armed struggle' based on bourgeois nationalism has failed the Palestinians, 'passive resistance' *à la* Gandhi will prove even less fruitful. Israeli workers and intellectuals need to be convinced to reject the utterly false political perspective and ideology of Zionism, including its 'left' variant. A revival of socialist internationalism among Jews and Arabs alike is the most pressing issue.

Concluded



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