

Toronto International Film Festival 2006—Part 1

Some things are sinking in

David Walsh
22 September 2006

This is the first of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 7-16).

Objective conditions drive consciousness. How this takes place is immensely complex, influenced and regulated by many factors, but that it does take place is incontrovertible. If filmmakers and other artists are honest and inquisitive and compassionate, sooner or later their work will reflect life.

Of course, some artists are not meaningfully honest (dominated instead by concerns about money, career and status) and others are placed in positions where the truth is more difficult to perceive (for historical and ideological reasons, such as artists living in the former Soviet Union, eastern Europe and China).

The recent Toronto film festival suggests that some of the more telling features of contemporary life are beginning to make themselves felt. A decade ago, in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, when history had apparently “ended,” film festivals had a distinct air of unreality. None of the contradictions of the existing social order had disappeared, but it had become intellectually far more difficult to address them.

Artists (with a few honorable exceptions) came to believe or convinced themselves that the social as a category was no longer fruitful territory (“Goodbye to all *that*!”), that nearly all questions were reduced to the private and personal. The results, at the aesthetic level, were inevitably miserable. Human life is social life, first and foremost. To portray it otherwise distorts and diminishes it.

Traumatic events, as well as discontent with the work produced over the past 15 years, have brought about a change, or the indications of a change. One felt at the 2006 edition of the Toronto festival a far more substantial connection between world reality and cinema reality than was the case in 1994 or 1998. Many of the problems that we know to be the most pressing found expression, even if only partial and inadequate, in the films presented at the recent festival.

It is perfectly clear, for example, that many filmmakers, along with much of the world’s population, reject the Bush administration’s “global war on terror,” and, instead, view with growing horror the actions of this criminal regime.

Along those lines, it can’t be coincidental that torture, for example, featured prominently in a number of films (Laurent Herbiet’s *Mon Colonel* [co-written by Costa Gavras]—on the Algerian war of independence; Ken Loach’s *When the Wind Shakes the Barley*—on the Irish civil war; Israel Adrián Caetano’s *Chronicle of an Escape*—about the Argentine military dictatorship), none of which dealt directly with the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein’s documentary, *The Prisoner or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair*, treats a recent case of humiliation and abuse, of an Iraqi journalist at the hands of American authorities in Abu Ghraib.

Officials in Washington believe they can drag people into cellars and torture them and that no one will know or care. This is not true, and the international cinema provides its own condemnation.

There was no shortage of problems considered at the recent festival: social inequality (in Rajnesh Domalpalli’s *Vanaja*, for example) and wretched poverty (in Tahani Rached’s *These Girls*); the roots of contemporary terrorism (obliquely, in *The Bubble* from Eytan Fox and *My Life as a Terrorist: The Story of Hans-Joachim Klein*, by Alexander Oey); the disastrous consequences of capitalist globalization for Africa and the state of things in that continent (in Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Bamako*, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun’s *Daratt* and Philip Noyce’s *Catch a Fire*); conditions in Iraq, Iran and the Middle East (James Longley’s *Sari’s Mother*, Tucker-Epperlein’s *The Prisoner*, Bahman Ghobadi’s *Half Moon*, Jafar Panahi’s *Offside* and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdolvahab’s *Mainline*); and the rise of China and India (in Gianni Amelio’s *The Missing Star* and John Jeffcoat’s silly *Outsourced*, for example).

Other works, with varying degrees of success, looked at the plight of economic refugees (*True North* by Steve Hudson); conditions in the former Soviet Union (*Armenia*, directed by Robert Guédiguian); the fate of the Cuban Revolution (Camila Guzmán Urzúa’s *The Sugar Curtain*); government conspiracy (*A Few Days in September*, directed by Santiago Amigorena) and popular hostility to the Bush administration (in Barbara Kopple and Cecilia Peck’s documentary *Dixie Chicks: Shut Up and Sing*, Gabriel Range’s *Death of a President* and Spike Lee’s *When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*). The lives and careers of John Lennon, Kurt Cobain and John Waters, all oppositional cultural figures in one way or another, also came in for examination. Documentary filmmaker Michael Moore, who showed clips from his upcoming film about the American health care system, was a prominent and popular figure in Toronto.

The overall shift to the left in the films presented and the festival atmosphere did not sit well with everyone. David Halbfinger of the *New York Times* commented provocatively, “American conservatives itching to go another round with Hollywood liberals may want to redirect their ire to the north this time of year. The Toronto International Film Festival, which opened here on Thursday, has been all but overrun with films attacking President Bush or the protracted war in Iraq—in subtle ways and like sledgehammers, with vitriol and with dispassionate fly-on-the-wall observation.”

Shlomo Schwartzberg of *Box Office Magazine* complained about the “political skew” in the festival’s offerings, commenting that “so many journalists and the public” responded positively to Range’s *Death of a President* because the film “plays into their anti-Bush, anti-Iraq war, generally leftist sympathies, and that is something that is endemic in almost any politically minded movie made these days, whether emanating from the US, Canada or from around the world.”

A radicalization in global cinema, or portions of it, a growing social awareness, does not solve all the problems. The recognition of the obvious fact that the world is in a terrible state and that masses of human beings are suffering is not by itself a guarantee of penetrating or enduring work.

To make a film as complex and challenging as reality itself, or at least to orient oneself in that direction, requires broad knowledge of social life and history, a grasp of the medium and its evolution, as well as artistic intuition and deep feelings. All that is not given to everyone, under the best of conditions. And the conditions in recent decades have been far from the best. Unsurprisingly, there remain many difficulties.

Nonetheless, the presence of numerous films sharply critical of the status quo is a welcome and long overdue phenomenon.

Inevitably, this shift occurs under contradictory conditions. The Toronto film festival, which this year screened some 350 films, 91 percent of them world or North American premieres, has become an essential cog in the international film industry machinery, with all the hazards that implies. More than 500 “celebrities” turned up for the recent festival, including leading performers from Hollywood, Europe and Asia.

In the eyes of the American studios, for a variety of reasons—location, timing, size, audiences—the Toronto festival is now considered, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, “the de facto start of awards season.” The *Los Angeles Times* cites the comment of Michael Barker, co-president of Sony Picture Classics, which screened *Capote* at the 2005 event and Pedro Almodóvar’s *Volver* this year: “The [Toronto] festival has the greatest US media presence of any festival in the world, except Cannes, and these days, it might be eclipsing Cannes.

Because of its position at the end of the summer season, Geoff Pevere of the *Toronto Star* observes, the festival has become “a magnet for anyone trying to sell a movie with less than slamdunk commercial prospects. ... If fall is the season to release those middlebrow movies most likely to snag the industry gold [Academy Awards], Toronto is the place to enter the race.”

Pevere writes that while the recent success at the Academy Awards of such films as *American Beauty*, *Crash*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Walk the Line*, *Ray* and *Capote*, all of which were first shown at the Toronto festival, has increased the event’s credibility with studio executives, “it has also meant more stars, more junkets and more general tabloid glitz at the event. Combined with the intensifying press focus on celebrity news, a weird skew has occurred. While the presence of star-driven movies might only represent 10 per cent of programming, it commands perhaps 90 per cent of the coverage.”

Indeed, the presence of crowds of autograph seekers and the merely curious surrounding hotel entrances is a relatively new development in Toronto. Catering to film industry luminaries has apparently become a major undertaking for the city’s fashionable hotels and restaurants. At the latter, according to the *Star*, “Staff are hired, a new menu is created and the drink list is updated, keeping it competitive with the newest concoctions out of New York and L.A. The food: high end. Think oysters, lobster, caviar and champagnes ... such as Cristal and Dom Perignon. “They can go through an \$1,800 bottle of wine quite quickly,” comments one restaurant event manager.

This arouses perplexity and disgust as much as anything else, especially when one bears in mind that the majority of the films and performers so feted generally constitute the *least interesting* element of the Toronto festival.

In contrast to that ...

Vanaja, the first feature film written and directed by Rajnesh Domalpalli, was one of the most remarkable works presented in Toronto. Set in rural southern India, it concerns a young girl, Vanaja (Mamatha Bhukya), the daughter of a low-caste and debt-ridden fisherman, who goes to work for the local landlady and political power broker, Rama Devi (Urmila Dammannagari).

Vanaja, 15, aspires to become a great dancer and receives instruction from her employer. She also comes to the attention of Rama Devi’s son, Shekhar (Karan Singh), just returned from the US, for whom his mother has great political plans. When Vanaja shows up Shekhar in front of his

mother, he sets out to persecute her. Lust and the desire to dominate are mixed in with his anger; he eventually assaults the girl and she becomes pregnant. The maid-servant tells her, “Why go to the police? The landlady’s too powerful. And if others hear about this, you won’t get married.”

Meanwhile the girl’s father has lost his boat and faces a desperate fate. Unable to abort the baby, because “every time it moves I know it’s mine too,” Vanaja has a painful choice to make regarding her child.

Domalpalli’s film is extremely well-observed. The girl’s situation is built up in a thoughtful and coherent manner. The social and personal relationships ring true. While Vanaja’s life has a tragic aspect, she demonstrates tremendous strength and resiliency. The filmmaker, however, doesn’t sentimentalize her. At one point she even fights to be able to return to the household where her abuser lives and holds sway—what choice does she have?

The performers, all non-professionals, do extremely well. Mamatha Bhukya and Urmila Dammannagari were not only obliged to learn how to act, but also to dance and play instruments. The scenes of Vanaja performing Kuchipudi, a classical southern Indian dance form, are breathtaking, some of the most beautiful moments of the entire film festival.

The smaller roles too are accomplished with skill. Ram Babu, the local postman and a ‘suitor’ pursuing Vanaja, and ‘Shorty,’ a local boy and mischief-maker (the roles are performed by brothers Krishna and Prabhu Garlapati), are splendid. Shorty’s imitation of the swaggering Shekhar, as well as his pop song (“Hold me baby, kiss me baby”), is particularly memorable.

A profound sensitivity to human difficulty and complexity animates the film. The director’s production notes reflect this. About Krishnamma Gundimalla, the woman who plays the cook and maid-servant, Radhamma, the director writes: “She was married at 9 to G. Narsiah—an agricultural laborer with whom she had 5 children. After her husband’s death, she began work as a laborer carrying baskets of bricks on her head to make ends meet. ...

“Her selection [for the film] occurred in November 2004, barely two months before the shoot, and learning not just the dialogue, but acting as well, was a Herculean task to say the least. Her favorite scene is the one where she consoles Vanaja after the rape. She had brought chilly paste to rub into her eyes, in the fear that she wouldn’t be able to cry. When the time came, however, she became so emotionally engaged that it took half an hour to convince her that it was only a scene.”

The director notes that Ramachandriah Marikanti, who plays Vanaja’s father, took up farming at an early age “instead of going to school, but over the years lost his possessions due to mounting debt. He then began rearing ducks and trading in eggs and local ox. Unable to make ends meet, he moved his family to Hyderabad, the capital, in 2001 and worked as a municipal sweeper until 2004. Following that, he eventually found work as a security guard.

“His favorite scene is the one in which he acts drunk, howling to Vanaja that his boat has been taken away. He confesses that he enjoyed getting slightly drunk on the sly to make his acting more natural.”

This is the film summed up!

In his notes, Domalpalli writes: “Inspired by a child’s scream in the film *Sophie’s Choice*, it was to be a tale about mother-child separation, but as it developed over the next three semesters [at Columbia University], it gradually took on the elements of class distinction and conflict that continue to infuse our society and culture even today.”

In a conversation in Toronto, Domalpalli spoke with some passion about the misplaced priorities of contemporary filmmaking. “I feel that too much emphasis is placed on the stars,” he said, “because these are the people you see. What about the people you don’t see, behind the scenes? If we could make people understand that film is a cooperative

undertaking, it is not one person's effort.

"For example, the scene with Radhamma, the maid-servant, when she consoles Vanaja after the rape. Yes, I wrote the words, [cinematographer] Milton [Kam] lit the scene, other people did various things. To my eyes, it is not effective because of any of our work, it is effective to me quite simply because Krishnamma Gundimalla brought her background, her past, her life, to bear on that scene. I happen to know her past was relevant to that scene, and she was able to access that in consoling the girl.

"One thing about this film, I hope that people will recognize it, there are a lot of people's stories coming through from different backgrounds."

I suggested that Domalpalli had tapped into very strong social and emotional currents.

He replied, "Let's talk a little about the girl, Mamatha, who plays Vanaja. I found her one year before the shooting began. An enormously intelligent girl, very sharp. We began with basic things for an actor. Her memory, her ability to translate things onto the screen were phenomenal. She comes from a lower middle class background, her father is a forest officer, her mother is a housewife."

I said the film implied that enormous talent exists in the most oppressed layers of the population.

"Thank you so much for having said that!" the director commented. "Because look at these people, Krishnamma Gundimalla and Ramachandriah Marikanti, who plays the father. Neither of them know how to read and write, but to my eyes, and to a lot of other people, their acting would easily stand up to that of the great stars.

"Why should you need a star to make a film? In India we have billboards three stories high of male stars. One of the questions I would get asked up front, in the beginning, was: who are your stars? From people involved in the initial stages of making the film. I would say, nobody. These people have now validated their work, have validated their presence on the international stage, and that to me is very important."

I commented on the magnificent dancing.

He told me: "This dance is called Kuchipudi. It is specific to my state [Andhra Pradesh]. I had the good fortune of having a student of one of India's greatest dance masters, gurus. This individual, Srinivas Devarakonda, taught Mamatha and Urmila over the span of one year. They began with elementary movements and progressed to what you see on screen. It's very classical, very ancient. Preserving the authenticity was very, very important."

The film spoke to the determination of the most marginalized and exploited, lower-caste girls.

"I wanted the protagonist to go alone through this journey. Isn't it that way? Going through life, we often have only ourselves to depend on. We are in a community, but when it all boils down, things have to be drawn from within yourself. I wanted Vanaja to find that strength. Vanaja is a metaphor, it means a water-lily, something that is growing out of mud and muck at the bottom, but something very beautiful. The final dance, the final sequence is a metaphor for that."

The relationships in the film seemed almost semi-feudal. It was not clear to me when the film was set.

"Excellent," Domalpalli commented. "In terms of the look and feel of the film, it is set in the 1960s, but I refuse to date it. Quite simply because, and I will insist on this, that the issues of then are still very much prevalent in India today. The issue of caste, the issue of color, the issue that those in high places, in power, have the freedom to make choices. Those who are not in those positions do not have choices. Someone asked in the question and answer session at the public screening, why doesn't she just keep the child? My answer is, because of her lack of choice.

"Think of the parent-child relationships. Vanaja's father loves his daughter very much. It's there in the tone of his voice, in his look. Yet he doesn't hesitate to give his daughter in marriage to a boy in exchange for paying off the loan. In a sense it's like a dowry. The question becomes:

what is this? How could a man love his child, yet be ready to give her up in dowry? We have to ponder this. There are many such situations in India, because of the lack of social choice.

"Then there's the mother and son. She's a dominating mother. He also has some positive qualities. If I created a person who was simply 'bad,' I would have failed. I hope that I would never do this. It doesn't exist as such. People make choices depending on their circumstances, and sometimes they do make bad choices. He's not a villain."

The social conditions are rotten.

"Yes. He's searching to establish his manhood, which he has never had. We have to humanize people, not demonize them."

What did he think of current Indian cinema?

"There is Bollywood and Tollywood [the Telugu language version of Bollywood particular to Andhra Pradesh], the commercial side of the whole thing. They have a very strong following. A lot of people love this kind of cinema, for many it is a form of escape from very harsh conditions. Tickets are relatively cheap. As long as people need such an escape, these films will have something to say and they will draw people.

"Our film has met with a very strong reaction in India, a very appreciative reaction. People felt that there was something different to be seen, that the issues were pertinent to them; to see these issues on screen was very reaffirming, to see themselves on the screen. I think that is a good starting point."

Domalpalli spoke about possible difficulties with the Indian censor. Also, shamefully, *Vanaja* does not yet have a distributor in North America.

I half-jokingly suggested that he ought to make a film about class relations in New York City, where he lived for a number of years, because no one else was doing it. We spoke about the problems in American filmmaking.

He observed, "Life experience comes from hardship, I think. If you are brought up in the lap of privilege, it is hard to know what another person feels. I come from a middle class background, I cannot say that I was out of the lap of luxury, but I think that it also takes some sensitivity and, I think, the desire to look at people and to see that these are human beings all around us, that there's not that much difference in how we think and how we react to situations.

"I think if people were to open their hearts and minds and thoughts to one another, the world would be a very, very different place."

We agreed that the political mood in the US and elsewhere was changing.

"The mood is very different all over the world," the director said. "I think that people are beginning to understand that the divisions that exist in our societies are enormously damaging. Something needs to be done. It cannot continue."

To be continued



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