Vancouver International Film Festival 2006-Part 1

What we see and what we do not yet see

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This is the first in a series of articles on the recent Vancouver International Film Festival (September 28-October 13)

The 2006 Vancouver film festival presented some 370 films (including 214 features) from more than 50 countries. Approximately 150,000 people attended the hundreds of screenings. The festival's East Asian films section remains the largest such exhibition outside Asia. Recent French films were also highlighted.

In the last category, veteran director Claude Chabrol's *A Comedy of Power* stood out. From China, Jia Zhangke's documentary, *Dong*, and his fiction film, *Still Life*, are serious efforts. One of Jia's former assistants, Han Jie, has produced *Walking on the Wild Side*, about young people in a desperately bleak Chinese mining town.

Indonesia figured in an unusually prominent fashion. One of the most remarkable films at the festival was *Serambi*, a semi-documentary on the aftermath of the tsunami in Aceh, co-directed by Garin Nugroho. The latter was also represented by his *Opera Jawa* (*Requiem from Java*). A young Indonesian woman leaves her family in Sulawesi to work as a maid in Singapore in Eric Khoo's biting *No Day Off* (39 minutes).

From South Korea, Lee Jun-Ik's *The King and the Clown*, a massive success in its native country, is a historical drama that manages a plebeian crudity both pleasing and rather unusual in contemporary films.

Among the documentaries, *Raised to Be Heroes* (Jack Silberman), about the Israeli 'refuseniks'; *The Root of All Evil?* (Russell Barnes), which accompanies Richard Dawkins as he takes on the world's major religions; *Our Own Private Bin Laden* (Samira Goetschel), which attempts to trace the roots of Islamic radicalism; *Maquilapolis: City of Factories* (Vicky Funari, Sergio De La Torre), about Mexican workers in factories just over the US border; and *The Mao Years* (Bernard Debord), a consideration of Maoism's influence among French intellectuals during the late 1960s—all raise particularly interesting questions, with varying degrees of success.

Drawing general conclusions from such a diverse affair, or one's limited portion of it, is always difficult.

Can any hints be drawn from the changes in subject matter at a major film festival? Perhaps, somewhat cautiously. In the 2001 Vancouver festival, for example (prepared no doubt before the September 11 attacks, much less the US invasion of Afghanistan, which occurred in the middle of the event that year), "Family Relations," "Romance" and "Youth" were three of the most popular "themes and genres," as defined by the catalogue's editors. "Environmental/Social Issues," "Globalization," "History" and "Political Documentaries" were also present.

By 2006, unsurprisingly, "Terrorism & War," a new category, loomed large, along with "History" and "Islamic Interest," while family relations, romance and youth had vanished as distinct groupings.

Events are moving people, including artists. The resurgence of colonialism and war, the domination of contemporary society by vast wealth, the brutalization of everyday life—these phenomena are registering on the collective human brain, at least that area of it capable of honest and rational thought.

What is the artist to do in the face of the present ominous situation? Where to begin? These are legitimate questions. Certain answers are provided more easily than others. First of all, bluntly speaking, the artist needs to study history and society. The average film writer or director's level of understanding of broader objective questions remains abysmal.

The decline in the influence of socially critical thought and practice (which find their highest expression in Marxism) has meant that what once was common among a section of the artists—some degree of critical insight into the character of economic and political life—can no longer be taken for granted.

Certain things have to be re-conquered—by artists, critics and audiences alike. Objectivity, depth of feeling, a willingness to struggle relentlessly for one's beliefs—how many of today's filmmakers (or critics) are equipped with these qualities? Far too much remains shallow and self-involved.

In the introduction to one of Ivan Turgenev's novels, a commentator notes that on the day of the writer's funeral in St. Petersburg in 1883, an illegal left-wing organization in Russia produced a leaflet enumerating his qualities. "Turgenev," said the unknown writer, "was a landowner by birth, an aristocrat by upbringing and by disposition who favoured only gradual social change. Yet as a writer he deserved praise for his talent, for the poetical beauty of his descriptions of nature, and for the pictures of his characters whom he described with psychological exactitude. Furthermore he had been the torchbearer of the younger generation, explaining their ideals and illustrating their sufferings, their spiritual struggles, and their entirely Russian idealism."

How many artists deserve a similar tribute today and how many critics could offer one like it?

The anonymous leaflet writer doesn't attempt to make the novelist into a more *politically* radical figure than he actually was, nor express disappointment at the author's sympathy for only "gradual social change" and leave it at that. Our unknown Russian revolutionary pays tribute to Turgenev as an *artist*, for his talent, the "poetical beauty" and "psychological exactitude" of his efforts—more than that, his role as a "torchbearer" for the young, "explaining their ideals and illustrating their sufferings." The phrases bear repeating.

These things have to be re-conquered in the face, on the one hand, of the complacency and ignorance of a privileged layer of artists and filmmakers who imagine themselves and their insignificant work to be located at the center of the universe, and, on the other, the vulgarity of so much of what passes for "left" art and criticism—in fact, a pallid and utilitarian populism, patronizingly rehashing the facts of life that nearly everyone already knows about.

What we don't yet see, or see only very rarely or in unsatisfying fragments, are the great tragedies and comedies appropriate to our period, which is so complex and difficult, fraught with almost unbearable contradictions: for instance, between the possibilities offered by a globally integrated economy and advanced technology and an often barbarous

reality, in which ideas and practices unworthy of the 18th century, let alone the 21st, have enjoyed a revival. What are the psychological and emotional consequences of these contradictions? There are a thousand other burning problems contemporary life presents. Few of them currently receive treatment in art and film.

It has become more or less a given in contemporary cinema that "social problems" properly belong in documentaries and a certain category of relatively routine political or historical film, whereas the intimate, the psychological, all the mysteries of the inner life, belong in fiction films of an 'elevated' and 'more refined' character—the 'genuine' works of art. The social and the psychological are separated off from one another and established in opposed camps—as though one could treat the individual psychic dimension apart from the larger circumstances shaping human behavior. This separation damages the consideration of both the general conditions of life and their particular expressions.

Of course, nonfiction (documentary) work clearly plays a more significant role in the cinema than it does in literature. The camera introduced an entirely new element into the human ability to objectively record events. Nonetheless, the training of the most skillfully wielded camera on political or social events, which will always have an element of the accidental or arbitrary, is not a substitute for the conscious artistic and intellectual reworking of the material given by life in fiction for the purpose of laying bare its essential truth.

We are pitifully poor in such efforts at present. We are awash in middlebrow commercial drama, which continually discovers that human beings are essentially all the same (very like the writer and director, oddly enough), flawed, capable of doing both good and evil, and in need of a spiritual pat on the back, in cynical, cold and violent (sometimes 'psycho-erotic') works, which play to the spectator's worst instincts, or in "independent" film musings, the unimportant thoughts of film school graduates without a single substantive experience or opinion.

We need complexity and richness. And we need all the technique the cinema has built up over the past century. In a reaction against the commercial film industry, with its pointless visual pyrotechnics, a school of international filmmaking has insisted on the opposite: the long take, the unmoving camera, the non-professional performer. In many cases, economics have understandably played a role. It's not every production that has $50 or $100 million to waste.

And, certainly, the cinema in Iran, Taiwan, China and elsewhere has been more sincere and more honest in the last decade than its Hollywood counterpart. Some excellent films have resulted.

One ought not make a virtue out of necessity, however, and every method can become a cliché—including a lack of ornamentation and obvious artifice. The existence of mediocre and self-important "movie stars" is not an argument against professional acting. Mannered or emptily impressive cinematography does not rule out the *artistic* use of a mobile camera. After all, camera movement, cross-cutting, close-ups and other cinema techniques were not invented purely to manipulate, although there has always been that element, but to fracture everyday, 'taken-for-granted' reality and render its *essential* content comprehensible to the spectator.

There is nothing sacred about any of the methods of the contemporary global art cinema. Indeed one develops the suspicion at a certain juncture that the filmmakers' and critics' obsession with a type of dubious stylistic purity is an evasion of the truly pressing task of examining the world and its goings-on far more closely. What's needed, above all, is a *definite and important* feeling for and engagement with life.

And one must say frankly that the fixation on the unmoving camera and long take often accompanies a certain political and social mood that still has not passed in intellectual circles: passivity, acceptance of social reality as unalterable, even resignation in certain cases. Liveliness, movement, depth, texture, noise, even chaos and confusion—these have certain social implications; they suggest a transitory and temporary reality, one on the verge of changing into something quite different.

As I noted a number of years ago about the international "Style of Quality": "The choice of the inarticulate peasant, the brutalized youth making his way in the city or the numbed prostitute no doubt expresses a humane impulse, but it also corresponds to the intellectual's vision of the 'oppressed' as mute, trapped, unresisting."

The unanticipated use of a close-up helps bring some of these problems into focus. One of the most artistic and humane films at the Toronto and Vancouver film festivals was Iranian director Jafar Panahi's *Offside*, about a group of soccer-mad girls who risk imprisonment by disguising themselves as boys and attempting to 'crash' a World Cup game in Tehran. In Iran, females are banned from attending such matches, for the sake of their precious morals.

The girls are inevitably caught and held in a pen on the stadium grounds, guarded by a group of soldiers. The soldier in charge is angry with the girls because he is supposed to be on leave from the army so he can help his ailing mother and take care of their cattle in the countryside. When one of the girls 'escapes' custody on a trip to the toilet, the soldier is furious at her and the guard who let her get away, convinced that now he'll never be granted leave and his life will be ruined.

To everyone's astonishment, some minutes later, the girl saunters back to the area of the holding pen. 'Why did you come back?' her fellow prisoners ask incredulously. She says matter of factly, 'I came back because of his cattle,' indicating the soldier in command. And, unexpectedly, there's a close-up of his face as he looks downward, registering remorse and guilt for thinking so badly of her and abusing everyone around him in his selfish anxiety about his own problems. Why hadn't he spared a single thought for these girls' rights, and for the misery of the entire imprisoned population? It's a moving moment, and a revealing one. The director perhaps overcame a stylistic concern to introduce a more important human concern.

In any event, of course, these are objective problems, not individual character flaws. Many technically talented artists, who sincerely oppose the existing order, cannot yet find any means of bringing together their formal skills and social understanding. The emergence of a *mass movement* in opposition to capitalism will clear away much of the skepticism, give confidence to many of the more sensitive personalities and open doors to new approaches. Solutions to problems that seem impenetrable today will suddenly make themselves available.

The artists have matured and oriented themselves under definite social and historical conditions, for the most part without being aware of the process. As Trotsky notes, in an especially brilliant passage in *Literature and Revolution*, "It is true that the majority of artists form their relation to life and to its social forms during organic periods in an unnoticeable and molecular way, and almost without the participation of critical reason. The artist takes life as he finds it, coloring his relation to it with a kind of lyric tone. He considers its foundations to be immovable and approaches it as uncritically as he does the solar system. And this passive conservatism of his forms the unseen pivot of his work."

To recognize, much less criticize and shift, this "unseen pivot" is not an easy matter; anyway, it's not accomplished overnight and not without the operation of external stimuli.

To be continued