Vancouver International Film Festival 2006—Part 2

Not everything, but certainly something

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

Claude Chabrol's *A Comedy of Power* (*L'Ivresse du pouvoir*), presented at the recent Vancouver film festival, is at least half a remarkable film, the outer shell, so to speak. Isabelle Huppert plays the leading character, a prosecutor in Paris named Jeanne Charmant-Killman, involved in a case meant to suggest the Elf scandal in France in the late 1990s.

In that affair, officials at Elf, the state-owned oil company, were accused (and convicted) of embezzling the equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars, keeping a slush fund for the purpose of bribing foreign leaders (in Africa, particularly), diverting large sums to the Gaullist and Socialist parties in France and helping themselves to large amounts of cash along the way.

In the opening scene, Charmant-Killman (the name is meant to tell us something!) has one of the company officials, CEO Michel Humeau (François Berlèand), arrested as he prepares to take a weekend trip, surrounded by fluttering female assistants. Stricken with a skin disease, and miserable in his jail-cell, Humeau is brought to Charmant-Killman's cramped little office and forbidden to smoke. She wants him to talk, and we know she will succeed. Eventually, she even takes pity on him.

The inquiry carries on while various conspiracies are at work, behind the prosecutor's back, aimed at sabotaging or limiting her efforts. A top politician, Descarts (the wonderful Jacques Boudet, who also appeared in the Costa Gavras-written *Mon Colonel*), over cognac and cigars, deplores the "piranha"-like investigator and plots her downfall. He teams her up with another female investigator, in the hope that they will "do each other dirty," but they combine and redouble their efforts to "flush them out of their holes."

Charmant-Killman receives death threats, her brakes are rigged and she almost dies in a car accident. Her husband grows restive, with her celebrity status, the presence of bodyguards and so forth. This element seems rather clichéd.

In any event, the big breakthrough comes, the corrupt officials begin to spill the beans. They explain, speaking of the operations in Africa, that "the money is oil to lubricate the process," and "before you extract, you grease the palms." Behind the scenes, the big shot, Descarts, seems unruffled: "Our structure's intact. We'll reorganize."

In the end, Charmant-Killman's boss orders her on vacation, there are "too many vipers, let it rest for a while." In addition to the time off, he offers her a bonus. She suggests, "You can keep the bonus, to buy yourself a pair of balls." Her home life ends tragically, and a spy is discovered in her own office. "To hell with them " are her final words.

Those so inclined interpret the film as a study of one woman's (or two women's) struggle against "a wall of patriarchal arrogance and patronizing attitudes, and against codes of condescension." The corruption scandal, the putrefied state of French capitalism, according to this argument, is *merely* the surface. No doubt her drama is a real one, and Huppert brings this out. Assaulted by temptations and doubts, she's not a saint (in any case, in the end, she's an element of the state apparatus herself). Charmant-Killman's role as a woman in an old boys' club is a piece of the puzzle. But not the most important, by far.

The film is at its best in its portraits of the politicians and company officials, exemplary representatives of the French bourgeoisie and nouveau riche. Chabrol outdoes himself. The portraits, the performances, are brilliant. One recognizes the types, articulate, world-weary, cynical, utterly at ease in their dishonesty. Unlike their American counterparts, the French crooks don't deign to lie so much as provide rational explanations for every filthy deed. There's hardly any awkwardness. It's all justified, "everyone does it," "business is business," and one has to take the logical steps, just as one has to provide for one's mistress, one's Siamese cat and so on. Speaking of the French politician Poincaré, Trotsky once wrote: "Hypocrisy, attaining the character of the absolute, becomes a sincerity of its own sort."

Questioned by an interviewer for *Le Figaro* about the resemblance between his film and the Elf scandal, Chabrol explained that he had provided himself at the start with a motto: "If they recognize themselves, they're confessing!" He added, "But I always made certain to underplay the reality, underplay what I saw on television and read in the newspapers." So, he was asked, "The reality was worse?" The director replied, "Ah, yes, 'they' are much worse!... It was so enormous that I had to make certain that the film would always retain its probability."

There are missing elements in the film. Chabrol, who has been making films for almost half a century (*Le Beau Serge*, 1958), is no revolutionary. Hardly—in many ways, he's a deeply conservative man. He finds himself in the uncomfortable position of appearing a radical in part because so much of official French filmmaking has adopted social indifference as its watchword. (In fact, who else is making this kind of film in Europe?) By maintaining himself, his cynicism, his mockery, also his keen eye, he appears a sharp social critic—for doing what almost no one else in France is currently doing. It's not entirely by default, of course, he deserves some of the credit.

Huppert, in her red leather gloves, adds a deeply human dimension. The German director Fassbinder decades ago accused Chabrol of regarding his characters as insects in a glass case (whom he views "with alternating amazement, fear and delight"), and there is more than a little truth to that comment.

Of course, Chabrol, as every contemporary filmmaker is legally obliged to do these days, denied that his work was a "political film." He told a press conference, "It's a film about the idea of power, about what power does to people. It is not a political film. I simply wanted to show the stupidity, and at the same time, the complexity of the mechanisms of power."

Chabrol says he wishes "that the most exploited might squeeze the noses of those who exploit them to see if milk or blood comes out." This is not everything, but it's something, especially in France at the moment.

The French petty bourgeoisie and its discontents comprise the essential

subject matter of *The Mao Years*, the documentary on Maoism in the 1960s and 1970s. The film chronicles the attraction of a substantial number of French intellectuals, artists and academics for Maoism (including, at least around its margins, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, André Glucksman, and Maurice Clavel). The filmmaker, Bernard Debord, narrates the work: "I fell in love with Maoism." But the director never adequately explains why he fell in love with a little red book full of banalities and certain reactionary slogans, including "Power flows from the barrel of a gun."

"We only wanted to rebel," he says, between interviews with ex-Maoists, including Serge July, a founder and longtime editor of *Libération*, one of France's leading bourgeois newspapers. The crowd is generally unappetizing and unenlightening.

The film makes extravagant claims for the Maoist tendencies, which never had widespread support in the working class, and their role in the 1968 events. An adequate response to the film ought to center on the question, what was the significance of the massive general strike, this challenge to bourgeois order, for different social layers in France?

The film has the merit of containing footage showing a young woman worker, at the time of the betrayal of the strike and the return to work in 1968, who breaks into tears at the thought of going back into the factory under the old conditions. "I'm fed up," she says, I don't want to go back into that damn place. Workers like her thought the world was going to change. That's why they walked out, not to play games, to "rebel" for the sake of it.

On the other hand, one of the ex-Maoists advances his own conception. He says, more or less, "well, France in 1968 was a very authoritarian society, very rigid." If the country has become more "livable" since then, it's because of the May-June protests and the role of leftist tendencies such as his. In other words, for sections of the French petty bourgeoisie, the "revolution" was about making society more flexible, more accessible to people like themselves. And, in this sense, the project was a success. Thousands of former French middle class leftists have elbowed their way or been invited into the establishment, in the media, the academic world, the unions, the political parties. For the mass of the working population, the great questions still remain, entirely unresolved.

Maoism was a viscerally anti-working class tendency. The film shows the French Maoists carrying out stunts "on behalf" of the poor and immigrants, but the former never sought seriously to educate workers. And when the popular mood changed in the mid-1970s, the radicalism subsided, the Maoists were naturally drawn to violence and thuggery (or like July and his colleagues at *Libération*, went over almost instantaneously to the establishment). This was fully in accord with a voluntarist, subjectivist theory according to which change could be forced through, with or without mass support. Maoism "fascinated" a section of the intellectuals, to employ the word used in the film, because it proposed a "revolution" in which the intellectuals and bureaucrats would remain firmly in charge.

The fragment I saw of Jacques Rivette's *Out 1: Noli me tangere* (1971), the director's nearly 13-hour film, which has rarely been shown—for obvious reasons—mostly induced sadness. The film is also, in its own way, a product of May-June 1968. In this case, let's say, the impact of those events on a well-meaning but deeply confused portion of the middle class. Rivette's film, impossible to summarize, begins with the rehearsal of a play by Aeschylus by an experimental theater company and proceeds from there, apparently haphazardly, to treat various collective endeavors (play rehearsals, political conspiracies , etc.).

Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum was on hand to introduce the film. He said it was his interpretation that Rivette found everything that actors did interesting, implying that the filmmaker valued 'bad' performances for what they revealed about the performers as well as 'good' performances. It's impossible to entirely agree with Rivette's position, which amounts to an abdication of artistic responsibility in favor of the haphazard. Art implies a more conscious working over of reality so that it reveals its more profound truths. The most interesting surprises, in fact, emerge as the product of deliberate efforts.

In any event, Rosenbaum has written that "*Out 1* is quite simply the definitive film about 60s counterculture: its global and conspiratorial fantasies and visions, its deliriously euphoric collective utopias, its ultimate descent into solitude, madness, and dissolution." The sadness that the film induces speaks to the impression it conveys, whether intentionally or not, and amidst all the confusion, that a historic opportunity was lost in 1968. There is a tragic element attached to the work, in more senses than one.

The Case of the Grinning Cat will further damage the (overblown) reputation of French filmmaker Chris Marker. An inexplicably trivial work, it treats the appearance on walls, billboards and other odd places in Paris of a grinning yellow cat. The image appeared on anti-war demonstrations and other political events. What did it mean? Marker decided to find out.

The film is not interesting except for another cat—the one, in passing, it lets out of the bag, i.e., its political perspective. Marker, as narrator, bitterly denounces the "Trotskyists" (meaning the centrists of the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire* and *Lutte ouvrière*) for splitting the presidential vote in 2002 and bringing about the defeat of the Socialist Party's Lionel Jospin. Marker fully identifies himself with the subsequent campaign to re-elect Jacques Chirac, the leading political representative of the French bourgeoisie. What a leftist!

In *The Untouchable*, directed by French filmmaker Benoît Jacquot, Jeanne (Isild Le Besco) is a struggling stage actress, involved in the production of a Brecht play, who learns from her mother that her father may have been an untouchable, a member of India's lowliest social caste. Jeanne sets off for India, tracks down her father, but never speaks to him. Le Besco is a lovely personality, but this is the latest of Jacquot's films (*La Fille seule*, *Sade*, *À Toute de suite*) that has left me entirely unmoved and uninvolved. At a certain point, one is tempted to take the director's matter of factness—intended to hint at unexplored depths—at face value, as simply artistic flatness and the lack of much to say.

From Germany, the Vancouver festival screened two works on the former German Democratic Republic, Stalinist East Germany. *Last to Know* (Marc Bauder, Dörte Franke), a documentary, looks at three families from the GDR that had one or more members imprisoned.

The Lives of Others (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck) is a fictional account of the persecution of artists and intellectuals by the Stasi secret police in the GDR, whose cruelty and absurdity leads one of the policemen, a fastidious and conscientious civil servant of the "socialist" state, to risk his life and career to protect the objects of his surveillance. The latter film has been much celebrated, and the performance of Ulrich Mühe, as the conscience-stricken officer, is certainly remarkable.

One must point out there is a right-wing and a left-wing critique of Stalinism and the GDR, the opposite of genuine socialism.

The treatment of both the real-life and the fictional figures at the hands of the Stasi, and the methods and politics of the East German regime in general, depicted in these films, were thoroughly abhorrent.

However, a few things need to be said. First, for the German bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie to puff out its "democratic" cheeks and wax indignant over the crimes of the Stalinists is a little unbecoming, considering that German imperialism, with the support or compliance of many in its educated and intellectual classes, constructed the most monstrous regime the world has ever seen not so many decades ago.

In one of the final scenes in *The Lives of Others*, one of the persecuted artists meets a former chief Stalinist bureaucrat, an odious figure, two years after the collapse of the GDR. They have a brief exchange, and, in parting, the writer says, more or less, "To think that people like you ever

ran a country." Again this seems a little self-satisfied in a nation whose ruling elite once placed murderous human filth like Hitler, Goebbels, Goering and the rest in power.

Second, 17 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin wall. It is more and more unseemly to address the repressive character of the GDR without considering the subsequent fate of its population, and, more generally, the fate of the populations in all the former Stalinist-ruled countries. Are they now living in paradise? Not only have they suffered, in many cases, an actual economic deterioration, the rise of neo-fascist tendencies, in the confusion created by the crimes of Stalinist "socialism," threatens these societies with outright dictatorial rule.

The two films are a response, one senses, to Germany's internal political and cultural situation: for example, the continuing influence of the Left Party/PDS, the political heir to the old Stalinist ruling party in East Germany, as well as the appearance of films such as *Good-bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker), which dared to suggest that not everything and everyone in the former state in the east was an abomination and that the newly unified Germany was not so much to brag about.

Despite the performance of Sergio Castellitto, Marco Bellocchio's *The Wedding Director* primarily conveys discouragement. Bellocchio (*Fists in the Pocket* [1965] and *China is Near* [1967]) belonged to the generation of Italian left directors in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Events have clearly taken their toll on him. Apart from *The Nanny* (1999), none of his recent films has offered too much. Individuals may get depressed, even for a long time, but continually translating that depression into artwork seems a self-indulgence. Some objectivity in regard to the general situation is called for. Bellocchio seems to assume that his melancholy feelings are applicable to humanity as a whole.

Border Post, from Croatian-born director Rajko Grlic, is the first film boasting of having been co-produced by all the former Yugoslav republics: Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. Set in 1987, on the Yugoslav-Albanian border, the work is, of course, a "black comedy" (one wishes that a single film emerged from the Balkans that could not be described by that phrase), about an army unit and its suddenly syphilitic Bosnian commander.

Needing an excuse to explain his absence from his young wife for three weeks during treatment for his ailment (caught from a prostitute), Lt. Pasic invents a military emergency, an imminent Albanian attack. He sends the Croatian medical student in his unit on some errands to his wife, and the two promptly fall for each other in a big way. The medical student's best friend, a Serb, sets out on a mock pilgrimage to Tito's grave. Meanwhile, much to everyone's surprise, the Albanians apparently prepare a real attack....

With actors from all the former republics as well, Grlic's film is no doubt intended to stand as a critique and a repudiation of nationalism and communalism. All to the good, and *Border Post* contains some genuinely amusing moments and feeling for humanity. Only one element is lacking, any hint as to why the region would be engulfed in fratricidal war within a few years' time.

Colossal Youth, from Portuguese director Pedro Costa, follows the lives of several Lisbon slum dwellers; in particular, Ventura, a Cape Verdean and a lost soul, thrown out by his wife, who may or may not have a number of children. He moves through a poor neighborhood like a ghost, holding conversations of a kind with daughters, a son, friends. Efforts are made to install him in a new housing project. Ventura recites, a number of times, a love letter he wrote many years ago.

Significant claims are currently being made for Costa. I don't accept them. In 1998, I wrote: "Pedro Costa's *Ossos* (Bones) is a film that revels in the miseries of its protagonists more than can possibly be healthy.... *Ossos* is so self-consciously despairing that one feels the director is continually trying to attract attention to his own 'deep feelings,' his own 'remarkable lack of sentimentality and moralizing,' and his own 'audacity in bringing the story to the screen,' i.e., one senses that he has less interest in the tragedy than in how impressed the spectator will be with him for having filmed it."

I think this remains largely true, although I have less reason to impugn the director's sincerity. Costa has continued to make films about the same area and some of the same characters. However, at its best, this is filmmaking of the utmost social passivity, which accepts the oppressed almost entirely as it finds them, aestheticizes their condition and, perhaps without meaning to, makes a virtue out of what is, in fact, transitory and ephemeral social "necessity."

Colossal Youth, in my view, is pretentious and tedious. It apes certain features of serious cinema without any genuine commitment or depth. French filmmaker Robert Bresson, for example, was not simply a somewhat eccentric Catholic. His best films were animated by a hatred of oppression, rooted in the experience of the European population with Nazism and war. I think that Costa's work is false coin mistakenly taken for the real thing.

To be continued