Vancouver International Film Festival 2006—Part 3

The passive voice

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

Well known Chinese director Jia Zhangke (*Platform*, *The World*) is responsible for two new films screened in Vancouver, a documentary, *Dong*, and a fiction work, *Still Life*. The first follows artist Liu Xiaodong at work on two large, multi-panel paintings—one of workers in the Fengjie region, laborers engaged in demolishing buildings as part of the Three Gorges Dam construction, and another of young bar girls in Bangkok.

The Three Gorges project on the Yangtze River has meant the displacement of more than one million people. Making the documentary impelled Jia to proceed with the second work. He has explained, "As soon as I saw the ruins and the faces of the displaced population, I knew right away that I wanted to make another film. I started thinking of making my movie with the same people, imagining their lives." The result was *Still Life*, an account of two individuals each of whom returns to the region, much of which is now under water, in search of a loved one.

The gigantic hydroelectric project has brought to the fore and worsened China's social polarization. According to the BBC, "Some estimates say at least 1,200 villages and two major towns have had to be abandoned and rebuilt. From the start, the central government promised cash compensation for all those forced to move. It also promised them new homes and new livelihoods. But that process has been highly controversial. Many families complained that much, in some cases most, of the compensation due to them was siphoned off by corrupt local bureaucrats. Official accounts seem to support their complaints that millions of dollars have been embezzled."

The displaced population has faced government corruption, indifference and incompetence, and a significant number of these people have been reduced "to begging and garbage collecting, or even prostitution," according to one commentator.

In October 2004 a riot in the city of Wangzhou, a city in the southwestern province of Sichuan, underscored the social tensions. After a government official allegedly beat a laborer, outraged crowds gathered and attempted to detain the bureaucrat.

The WSWS, basing itself on Internet accounts, described the scene. "News of the incident spread quickly throughout the city's working class districts. By late afternoon, tens of thousands of local residents had rallied outside the Wangzhou city government offices, chanting 'hand over the attackers,' 'punish the attackers' and 'for justice of the injured.'

"Workers pelted the riot police protecting the building with rocks and smashed the glass entrance. Police cars were set ablaze. According to the *Asia Times*, 'The character of the demonstration changed from a fight for justice to the expression of anger at the government.' As night fell, thousands of police and paramilitary personnel were deployed to restore order, firing tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the demonstration. Street battles continued until midnight. . .

"Some 250,000 people who were evicted from their villages to make way for the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River were forcibly relocated to the area, which already had high unemployment. Many of the migrants have been unable to find jobs and are forced to live on a 70-80 yuan monthly 'living allowance' ($US9-10) paid by the government. This payment for the Three Gorges refugees, however, is scheduled to finish in 2005. On top of the poverty and deprivation, the displaced villagers are treated with contempt by the state bureaucracy and subjected to police harassment. The simmering tensions eventually expressed themselves in an explosive fashion."

To their credit, the painter Liu and the filmmaker Jia have ventured into this highly-charged and complex territory—not directly, as neither refers to the social conflicts that have arisen, but nonetheless with insight and obvious intelligence.

Liu's work has been considered part of the so-called Cynical Realism movement in Chinese painting. According to one commentator, "Liu has been recognized for his paintings with their strong social commentary. Trained in the eighties in a time where heroic models were held up in school as emblems of emulation, Liu has instead chosen to focus on the antihero. Focusing an acute eye onto Chinese society, Liu concentrates on the everyday person in China and in particular the youth who are too young to recall clearly the days of the Cultural Revolution" (Virtual Museum for Contemporary Art from China).

In *Dong* ("East" in Chinese, but also Liu's nickname), Jia's camera follows the painter as he walks along the Yangtze in an area that will eventually be flooded. He picks his way among the abandoned machinery, piles of dirt, rubble and bricks. The surroundings are generally wretched. He paints the near-naked bodies of his subjects, the laborers.

Liu, of the latter, says, "They are not aware of the profound sorrow intrinsic to humanity or symptomatic of society . . . Yet the vitality of life bursting out of them is absolutely wonderful even in a deeply tragic environment or a condition of utter despair. You discover that life itself is truly moving, like a tree it grows freely full of luxuriance."

Dong contains an extraordinary sequence: the painter pays a visit to the family of one of the laborers killed in an accident on the job, in what appears to be a remote village. A crowd has gathered in the family's miserable dwelling, in the cold and damp. The widow, still a young woman, tells her little girl, "You'll never see him again!" The family has nothing. The faces of the older people express almost unbearable hardship. Other, younger faces are more lively, smiling, nervous in the presence of the camera. The painter, who has bought toys for the dead man's children, is moved deeply by the occasion, and so are we.

Liu's attitude seems summed up in the comment above and one he makes near the end of the film, and they may provide insight into Jia's work as well. In the latter statement, he tells the filmmaker, "If you attempt to change anything with art, it's laughable. . . But as long as I live I have to express myself. I use their bodies [his subjects] to portray them and to explain some of my views. What's more, I wish I could give them something through my art. It's a dignity intrinsic to all people."

These brief comments speak to larger issues. The painter, and the

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filmmaker too perhaps, is an intelligent observer of humanity, endowed with a great deal of sympathy for people's difficulties. However, he takes life entirely as he finds it, or claims to, and considers it absurd to imagine art playing a role in altering reality for the better. The most one can do through one's work is treat people with respect and bring out their personal vitality and complexity.

This combination of humanism and social resignation is hardly unknown in today's art world or cinema, but it has rarely been spelled out so succinctly. Behind this view lie a great many historical and intellectual problems, including of course the specific evolution of the political and economic situation in China, presided over by a "Communist Party."

Some of these difficulties find expression again in *Still Life*, Jia's fictional account of the flooded or soon to be flooded region. Han Sanming, from another city, arrives in the area, virtually penniless, to look for his former wife, Missy (he hasn't seen her in 16 years), and, we eventually learn, his teenage daughter. A coal miner at home, he finds work demolishing buildings (in fact, there are shots common to *Dong* and *Still Life*) in Fengjie.

In a second strand of the story, a young woman (Zhao Tao), a nurse, comes looking for a husband she hasn't heard from for two years. He has obviously started a new life. The woman begins or renews a friendship with an archaeologist, a friend of her husband's. She asks him, "Does he have another woman?" "No," comes the expected reply. But she knows anyway, "You're always shielding each other." She eventually comes across her husband and tells him she also is starting a new life.

Han meanwhile encounters various people, including hoodlums, a taxi driver who takes him to an address now under water (the last one he has for his wife), a slightly crooked but amiable landlord, his in-laws, his fellow demolition workers and one younger guy, who does an amusing imitation of film superstar Chow Yun Fat. He never sees his daughter, she's away in the south, but he does find his ex-wife, and they seem to have the possibility of starting something together.

This is their conversation. He: "Are you OK?" She: "Not so good." He: "I cared for you a lot, but you ran off." She: "I was young, what did I know?" She asks at last, "Why did it take so many years for you to look for me?"

In the final scene, Han is drinking and eating with his workmates for the last time; he's going home. "I'll never forget you." He tells them that coal miners make 200 yuan a day. Someone says, "We'll all come after you." He quickly warns them, it's dangerous work, dozens die each year. "Think about it carefully."

There is much to the film, but there is much lacking. The respect for human beings, the dignity granted them, is real. The film contains subtle and not so subtle criticism of the regime. In one scene, angry staff at one factory confront officials under portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao: "You sold our assets for next to nothing." They haven't been paid for months.

The flooding suggests the end or the beginning of the world. Old places and relationships are disappearing. What will take their place? The population has been left to its own devices, while giant projects like the Three Gorges Dam benefit those at the top. Abandoned by government and other institutions, people make their own social and personal connections, or break them, entirely apart from the official structures.

Jia told the press, "Many journalists, international and national, wrote reports and questioned the Three Gorges project. But once it was completed they stopped. I know the population is still suffering from it."

But not suffering in quite the silence Jia's film suggests. The massive riot in Wangzhou in 2004 revealed seething discontent. No doubt such a subject is politically explosive. Any Chinese film hinting at it would be banned by the Beijing authorities, or prevented from being made. Nonetheless, there are means at the artist's disposal to suggest popular dissatisfaction. Jia's films, cogent and artistically made, remain passive treatments of a largely passive population.

This has consequences for the drama, which, it must be said, is not so memorable in *Still Life*. One incident follows another, without an urgent or compelling impulse driving the sequences forward. Moments, interesting in themselves, tend to be forgotten because their necessary and decisive interconnection with preceding or subsequent moments is not there.

I wrote about *The World* in 2004, "One cannot help sensing that the difficulty in arriving at general conclusions about Chinese history and society has a bearing on the narrative approach of many of the Chinese and Taiwanese filmmakers. No doubt specific cultural traditions come into play, but the elliptical style, the deliberate fracturing of so many works into many small and apparently discrete dramatic units—cinematic *non sequiturs*, so to speak—may reflect in part this absence of an overall perspective. The filmmakers see individual fragments and moments of life in the region with astonishing clarity and even brilliance, but developing a comprehensive picture is more challenging."

The problem is large, the questions about the nature of the Chinese revolution and state are quite complex. Nonetheless, these great historical issues have to be approached. The artistic work suffers, even threatens to stagnate. It has been said before, but it bears repeating, that it's not possible to provide a significant picture, or even a smaller 'slice of life' in the long run, without troubling oneself with social and artistic perspectives.

Walking on the Wild Side, directed by Han Jie, who has worked for Jia Zhangke as a first assistant for some years, is not especially successful as a drama. Its tale of three adolescents who get in trouble at home and go on the road, experiencing a series of misadventures, is not terribly novel. The most striking feature of the film is its portrait of poverty and backwardness in China. Even if the film goes out of its way, perhaps somewhat sensationally at times, to depict social misery, the images it presents are nonetheless eye-opening.

This is not Beijing or Shanghai, but some wretched industrial and mining town, where everyone and everything is covered in grime and soot. The school is a wreck, with cracked walls and filthy hallways. In a scene reminiscent of Zola's *Germinal*, a coal miner comes directly home from digging in the earth, black from head to foot, to wash in a small bucket of water. Everywhere the three travel, the conditions are inexpressibly depressing.

The trio, drunk out of their minds, are lured into the backroom of some roadside bar, where the prostitutes are hanging out. Meanwhile the bar owner or his friends try to steal their car. When the friends run out of money, they try to rob a taxi-driver, and one of them dies in the process. One makes it home, to seek the comfort of the miner's widow, who now has a little cash from her husband's death benefits. All in all, a terrible existence.

Indonesian Garin Nugroho, on the basis of the two films he directed or co-directed that screened in Vancouver, is one of the more interesting filmmakers currently working. (The WSWS interviewed him in 2004)

Serambi (co-directed by Nugroho and documentary makers Tonny Trimarsanto, Viva Westi and Lianto Luseno) is a deeply moving account of the plight of the survivors of the devastating 2004 tsunami in Aceh in Indonesia. Reza is a young man, who lost his girl-friend and family members. Speaking with his friend, he questions everything: God, faith, the existing order. "Our people don't have faith any more. . . Maybe religion is only used for starting wars."

Usman has lost his adored wife. He continues to look for her. A friend asks him, "She never hurt your heart?" He responds softly, "She never hurt my heart, my hands or my feet. That's why I always think of her."

Tari is a small girl, who lost her family. She finds herself in a refugee camp, all alone. She and the other girls receive religious indoctrination. "I ran. The water chased me," she says of the terrible inundation.

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The landscape has been scraped clean of human habitations. Little help is forthcoming for the survivors. Reza says, “I want to be sure who I should fight.” Later, he remarks, “The most evil person is the one who lets oppression take place. It’s not the oppressor who is evil, but us who allow it to happen.”

Serambi is a quiet, sad and beautiful film.

Nugroho’s *Opera Jawa* (*Requiem from Java*) is an astonishing work, a modern-day Javanese opera—in honor of the 250th anniversary of Mozart’s birth—inspired by an episode in a Sanskrit epic.

Nugroho sets his story of the struggle of two men (originally a king and his rival) over a woman in an Indonesian village. One, a potter, Settio, is content until he begins to think, groundlessly, that his wife, Siti, is unfaithful. Treated unfairly, she ends up seeking solace in the arms of Ludiro, a devilishly charismatic and wealthy businessman. A peasant uprising occurs in the background. Not always easy to follow, the film is fascinating. Eko Supriyanto, as the leering and preening Ludiro, is especially riveting.

No Day Off, directed by Eric Khoo of Singapore, is one of three digital shorts commissioned by a Korean film festival. A second, *About Love*, is a well-done, but not especially earthshaking adaptation of a Chekhov story by the talented Kazakh director, Darezhan Omirbayev, about a lonely teacher who falls for the wife of an old classmate, now a rather crude businessman. The woman loves the teacher too, but no one ever speaks and they go about their lives in quiet desperation. (The third, *Twelve Twenty*, directed by Pen-ek Ratanaruang, is trivial.)\

In *No Day Off*, a young Indonesian woman, Siti (again), gets a job working as a maid in Singapore for a succession of employers over three years. The film eloquently presents the woman’s situation; she is at the mercy of the agency that hires her out and the various families, most of them petty and tyrannical, for whom she is obligated to slave away without one day off a week.

The plight of these severely exploited workers is brought out: 150,000 maids are working in Singapore, 60,000 from Indonesia. Siti receives $10 a month to begin with after her debts are paid. She does not receive her full salary until her tenth month working full time.

The various employers are only heard, they are never seen. Their conversations, often derogatory ones about the maid, are exquisitely done, capturing the vulgarity and selfishness of the Singaporean upper middle class and bourgeoisie. One employer brags that “tonight’s dinner costs three times her salary.” The conversation drifts to a $40,000 handbag. Family quarrels erupt, including nasty arguments about money. She works for one decent family.

Siti returns home finally, with enough money to build a tiny house. Her husband has taken off while she was away. A title informs us about the incidence of accidents and suicide among these maids in Singapore. She tells her son, “I won’t leave you again.” Another title explains that there are no laws in Singapore guaranteeing domestic maids a day off.

Khoo helps restore our confidence in cinema, proving that one can do something on film in only 39 minutes, as opposed to the innumerable filmmakers whose bloated, empty works last two and three hours, and more, without a discernible viewpoint or anything interesting to say.

Lee Jun-Ik’s *The King and the Clown*, from South Korea, is set in the 16th century under tyrannical King Yeonsan. Two talented street entertainers (the very masculine Jang-Saeng and the androgynous Gong-Gil) run into trouble in the provinces and head for Seoul—“We’ll put on the show of shows.” They team up with a trio of vulgar, foul-mouthed performers and perform a rude satire about the king and his mistress in the capital.

Inevitably, they come to the attention of the monarch, and quickly find themselves in jail. They escape execution by making the king laugh. Gong-Gil becomes the king’s object of desire. Various conspiracies and counter-conspiracies unfold. Performers and nobles drop off like flies. In the end, Jang-Saeng, his eyes put out, and Gong-Gil, end up on a tightrope again, leaping in the air.

The impertinent, irreverent, even obscene dialogue of the street performers is what one remembers the most. It suggests something of the quality of the language of the serving men and women, “carriers” and ostlers in Shakespeare (*Henry IV, Part 1*, Act 2, Scene 1, for example). This raises a question: why do we never see working class people, or small businessmen or traders (unless one includes psychopathic criminals), in virtually any South Korean or Japanese art films? The life of the vast majority of the population is systematically excluded from the screen in those films, with harmful artistic consequences.

Amir Muhammad is a clever filmmaker from Malaysia. His *The Big Durian* was a pointed and amusing look at ethnic politics in his native country. Cleverness, however, even combined with good instincts and sensitivity, proves inadequate when tackling big historical questions. One actually has to know something.

Muhammad’s new film is nominally about the life of longtime Malaysian Communist Party leader Chin Peng, still in exile in Thailand. In fact, the film tells us little about Chin Peng, the character of his efforts, or the nature of contemporary Malaysian society. Muhammad takes his camera to the towns and villages where Chin lived and worked, and finds quirky or unusual people there, with odd stories to tell. It’s rather facile and shallow.

Toward the end of the film, Muhammad interviews former members of the Malaysian CP, which conducted a guerrilla war first against the British forces, then the Japanese during World War II (at this time the Stalinists were allied with the British), then the British again in a brutal war, until national independence in 1957. Unable to come to terms with the Malaysian bourgeois regime, Chin and his comrades once again took to the jungles. A peace agreement was signed in 1989, but Chin was not among those amnestied.

The comments of the aging CP fighters—workers, farmers—are moving and revealing. “I went into the jungle in 1948,” one man explains, “I was 17 when I joined.” Their commitment and sincerity are unquestionable, but their conceptions are entirely nationalist. Their goal was simply national independence, they explain.

Muhammad’s tone is mocking, and there are always absurd aspects to any political or historical situation. The lesser artist makes a meal of them. What the filmmaker thinks of the more important questions, including the present volatile situation in Malaysia, one doesn’t know. (The film doesn’t even live up to its cynical title, which is never explained.) In general, when making fun of something, one should take care not to be more foolish than the subject.

To be continued

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