

Toronto International Film Festival 2007—Part 1

The world is so poorly understood—or is it?

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22 September 2007

This is the first of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 6-15).

The 2007 Toronto film festival presented some 349 films, 271 of them feature-length, from 55 countries. Approximately a third of a million people attend the various screenings annually.

It would be very helpful if many readers of the WSWS could experience a major film festival like the Toronto event. Not merely because a good portion of the most interesting films screened at such a festival will probably never be seen outside a limited number of cities (Paris, Berlin, London, New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, etc.), although that is a real consideration.

And not merely because a sampling of international filmmaking, with all its limitations and confusion, does provide some insight into global social life. It is inevitably illuminating—and expanding—to see how people communicate and work in Taipei or Cairo, to learn of conditions in Mexico City or rural Senegal, to view Kazakh and south Indian landscapes.

More importantly perhaps, the actual workings of the festival offer fascinating insight into some of our contemporary social and intellectual problems as well as the possibility of overcoming them.

It is easy, almost too easy, to be appalled by many features of the film industry. One is struck first and foremost by the intellectual and financial waste. Vast sums go into the production and promotion of works that are often trivial or worse. It's not a matter of opposing "entertainment," of the genuinely pleasing variety. Human curiosity is infinite and so are the means of satisfying it. People are captivated by stories, dramatic or comic, or dramatic-comic, which bring in adventure, spectacle and large emotions, as well as chunks of psychological and social reality. Cinema is capable of supplying an endless quantity of these lively elements. Our principal criticism is that it does this all too rarely today.

I was witness (or eavesdropper) to a fascinating conversation during the film festival. A foreign sales agent, British-born, was pitching a roster of films to a Chinese woman, presumably a distributor in East Asia. She was a gimlet-eyed businesswoman, but dramatic situations obviously interested her. After all, she has to sell her products to other human beings. The sales agent was a born storyteller. His brief accounts of the films and her responses intrigued me.

"This one is about a refugee from some Middle Eastern country. He arrives in Scotland and gets a job with a bank, he has experience in the field, it's a high-ranking position. His wife and children follow him. They get kidnapped by gangsters." "Scottish gangsters?" she asked. "Yes, Scottish gangsters, and they demand that he rob the bank or his family will be smuggled back to the country he came from, and meet a horrible fate. What should he do? He looks on the police and government officials as the enemy." "What does he do?" she asked anxiously. "Well," he said, and proceeded to explain.

The conversation went on for half an hour, and it was riveting, this *1001 Arabian Nights* on a miniature scale. His account of the films may very

well have been artistically superior to the films themselves. In any event, commerce as such is not the chief problem. Money has been part of the art world for several hundred years and it has not prevented some remarkable work from being done. Commerce will be a part of filmmaking until a higher social principle prevails.

My impression is that the hundreds of publicists, distributors, cinema owners, sales agents and others go along to the various films offered with relatively open and receptive minds. These practical people, limited as they may be in certain ways, are not the primary difficulty. They have relatively few pretensions, they know they are not the artists. They *look* to the artists, as does the public in general, to offer something extraordinary and enlightening. It is the latter, the artistic intelligentsia, the writers, directors and critics, who are so badly letting everyone down at present. They are too often offering shoddy goods, pale and weak reproductions of life. They posture, they preen, they take themselves and their careers seriously, but they do not treat life and their own work with sufficient care.

Laziness is also not a small matter. In that regard, the comment by opera singer Maria Callas, in *Callas Assoluta*, a documentary about the diva screened at the festival, that "a thing of beauty" is only created through hard work and dedication to the perfection of one's art is worth noting. Of course, inconsequential projects tend to encourage sloth and sloppiness.

The Toronto film festival this year presented itself as more of a contradiction than ever. The presence of the large US studios and their global counterparts continues to grow. Thus more film stars, more red carpets, more autograph seekers hanging around hotel entrances. The type of larger-budget film presented in Toronto comes from what is held to be the "independent," "artistic" end of the scale, for better or worse. For example, *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, distributed by New Line Cinema), *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, distributed by Warner Bros.), *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Shekhar Kapur, distributed by Universal Pictures), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (Robin Swicord, distributed by Sony Pictures Classic), *Sleuth* (Kenneth Branagh, distributed by Sony Pictures Classic), *Cassandra's Dream* (Woody Allen, distributed by The Weinstein Company) and so forth.

Much of the fuss at the festival occurs over films that will be quickly forgotten, whose flimsy or ill-considered conception almost guarantees oblivion.

The biggest contradiction at a large film festival, however, is not between the "commercial" film industry, on the one hand, and the "art" or "independent" cinema, on the other—there are valuable and slipshod films on both sides of that divide—but between those works that take our present-day life seriously and concretely, and those that don't.

From day to day, from film to film, one could draw quite opposed conclusions. A number of works (Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven*, Daniele Luchetti's *My Brother Is an Only Child*, Volker Schlöndorff's *Ulzhan* and Lee Chang-dong's *Secret Sunshine*, for example), while intelligent, seemed particularly unsatisfying. Their intelligence and

“maturity” only underscore their essential complacency and social vagueness. Everything in them is reduced to the level of personal dilemmas and choices, which are separated from their driving forces in social life.

The results in at least three of these cases (Luchetti’s film, about Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, raises other problems) are rather gloomy works characterized by arbitrary or senseless tragedy (in *Ulzhan*, the episode precedes the events of the film). This sort of thing—the depiction of sudden, often unexplained mayhem and its aftermath—is now a staple of international filmmaking.

Indeed, in response to *Born and Bred (Nacido y criado, 2006)* from Argentina’s Pablo Trapero, about a successful interior designer whose wife and daughter are apparently killed in a car accident, the *Observer*’s Philip French commented: “There is almost a whole genre of movies looking at the consequences of an automobile accident, ranging from Antonioni’s distant debut *Cronaca di un amore* to Julian Fellowes’s recent debut, *Separate Lies*.” (Or a bus accident in Atom Egoyan’s *The Sweet Hereafter, 1997*.)

One could add films such as Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Blue* (1993) and Hirokazu Kore-eda’s *Maborosi* (1995), two overrated films about characters undergoing bereavement and “discovering reasons to live.” And there are numerous others.

This is not an especially productive genre, in my view. Tragic and fatal accidents (in *Maborosi*, a suicide) befall individuals all the time under every social and historical circumstance. (In the middle of the political tragedies of the 1930s, the composer Alban Berg died apparently from blood poisoning resulting from an insect bite; the playwright Ödön von Horváth, a refugee from the Nazis, was hit by a falling tree branch during a thunderstorm in Paris.) This demonstrates that human beings are finite creatures and that human life is relatively fragile, i.e., it points to a physiological fact, a truism, in the end. How the survivors of these tragedies respond depends on all sorts of factors, which may or may not be generally instructive.

Human life, however, is not reducible to the physiological. There is the matter of its social organization. Life proves unbearable for masses of people under certain circumstances, after all, not because they face the prospect of death, which comes to everyone, but because of social contradictions that are impossible to overcome within the old framework. The critical events that take place, those that determine the content of life for millions, are socially determined events, not individual mishaps or misfortunes.

The trend of “bereavement” films in the 1990s and beyond (and various considerations of senseless or arbitrary violence, including in the films of disparate figures such as Michael Haneke and David Cronenberg), the narrowing of life supposedly to its most “elemental” aspects, in fact, has spoken to a generalized mood among a section of artists: social indifference and demoralization. “Hope” under these conditions is reserved for individual (equally arbitrary) choices the characters may make, for life, against despair. Tiny spaces are left open, in *The Edge of Heaven*, *Ulzhan* and *Secret Sunshine*, for such personal choices. This misses the point badly, and feels unconvincing. Art, to speak widely and profoundly to people, needs to come to terms, with a certain degree of accuracy and precision, with social development and evolution.

That the gap between art and life grows greater is perhaps inevitable. Objective events have a new and threatening pace. Art lags behind more than ever. War and threats of new wars, economic crisis, political instability, social inequality...this is generally finding inadequate expression, when it finds expression at all.

Even most of the more sincere artists have difficulty with perspective. The Soviet writer Boris Pilnyak in the 1920s compared some of his fellow authors to insects who couldn’t understand the beauty of a female statue because they felt nothing but small bumps and grooves as they crawled

over it. We have this problem today, in spades. We have loads of filmmakers, armed with the most advanced equipment and technology, who are moving about in contemporary society with no more sense of its overall shape than a lowly ant on the marble surface of the Venus de Milo!

Nonetheless, in an often confused and limited manner, the pressing social contradictions do impel a section of the artists to look more searchingly and critically at the world. Just at the moment when the critic is almost convinced that nothing much will emerge from this year’s festival, because the world is so poorly understood by the artists, he or she encounters a number of films that restore much-needed confidence.

A film like *Dans la vie (Two Ladies)*, for instance, directed by French filmmaker Philippe Faucon (interview included in a subsequent article), about two middle-aged woman, one Muslim and the other Jewish, both born in Algeria, thrown together by circumstances. Faucon (*La Trahison, Samia*) directs his film with the utmost delicacy, with the utmost concern for the dignity of his characters. There have been so many miserable French efforts in recent years, both self-indulgent and cold-hearted, but one is reminded here of the supreme ability of the finest French artists to combine lucidity and humanity.

Or *Boy A*, from British filmmaker John Crowley, which treats with great compassion the fate of a boy (a child murderer a decade earlier) considered to be the incarnation of “evil” by the authorities and the tabloid press. The British artists, at *their* best, bring to bear a socialist, working class sensibility that has not entirely vanished from such circles despite the sustained attacks of the Thatcher-Blair years.

Ramin Bahrani, an Iranian-American director (*Man Push Cart*), has made one of the most remarkable American films in recent years, *Chop Shop*. About two young people in Queens, who make their home in a repair shop, Bahrani’s film never strikes a wrong or contrived note. It examines these two lives and the lives of those who surround them daily with great sympathy. The understated but nearly polemical insistence that these lives—of parentless, homeless kids—are as worthy of consideration as (or more worthy of consideration than) those of the “rich and famous” is entirely to Bahrani’s credit. An interview with this director will also be included in a future article.

Nick Broomfield’s *Battle for Haditha* is a remarkable reconstruction of the massacre carried out by US troops in the Iraqi city in November 2005. The film systematically builds up a picture of the social and human forces involved. It lays considerable stress on the demoralized and brutalized condition of the Marines who took part in the killings, and the ultimate responsibility of the military high command. The leading American roles are played by former Marines, veterans of the Iraq war. The sociological significance of this can hardly be overstated. Veterans of an imperialist intervention, while it still continues, have participated in a scathing indictment of that conflict. This is unprecedented. Two of the Iraq war veterans involved in the film’s production spoke to the WSWS.

The new film from director Ken Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty, *It’s a Free World...*, suffers from some of the same defects as previous efforts by this pair, a somewhat formulaic and anti-spontaneous character, but it also exhibits some of the same strengths: a genuine feeling for the oppressed and a genuine social criticism. This time around, Loach and Laverty address themselves to the problem of casual labor and the exploitation of undocumented workers in London. A great deal depends in a Loach film on the ability and authenticity of his lead performer or performers. The filmmakers are fortunate in the presence of Kierston Wareing, as a working class woman who has imbibed the “entrepreneurial” spirit pushed by the free market propagandists of recent decades, to the detriment of “her” temporary workers and, ultimately, her own soul.

Trumbo, directed by Peter Askin, treats the life and career of Hollywood screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, one of the blacklisted Communist Party

members and a remarkable, complex figure. The various performers involved, including Paul Giamatti, Liam Neeson, David Strathairn, Joan Allen, Donald Sutherland and Nathan Lane, clearly lent their time and effort out of a deep feeling about the injustices of the anti-communist witch-hunts and perhaps, as well, fear of a new McCarthyism justified by the so-called “global war on terror.” The film is well-made and -organized, and in parts, quite moving, and in others, quite amusing. It also leaves a number of big questions unanswered: the nature of the Communist Party and its evolution, the driving forces behind the witch-hunts and the abject failure of American liberalism.

I Am from Titov Veles, from Macedonian filmmaker Teona Strugar Mitevska, is a flawed work, with a number of unsatisfying elements. Nonetheless, its cold-eyed view of post-Stalinist Macedonia, with its ravaged, polluting industries and all the horrors of privatization and capitalist restoration, rings true in important ways.

Hana Makhmalbaf, now 19, daughter of Iranian directors Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Salaam Cinema, A Moment of Innocence*) and Marziyeh Meshkini (*The Day I Became a Woman*) and sister of director Samira Makhmalbaf (*The Apple*), has directed her first fiction work, *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*. The film concerns itself with impoverished children in post-Taliban Afghanistan and their material and psychological needs. It does not break new ground, but its sincerity and directness cannot be faulted.

From Indian director Adoor Gopalakrishnan, *Four Women* examines just that: the lives of a prostitute, a virgin, a housewife and an unmarried woman. There are simplistic and somewhat crude elements, but also moments of considerable truth and pain. *Chaos*, from Egypt, is an angry, melodramatic film about a corrupt, monstrous police official and the corrupt, monstrous Egyptian ruling elite, from veteran director Youssef Chahine and his collaborator, Youssef Khaled.

The Counterfeiters, directed by Austrian Stefan Ruzowitzky, concerns the efforts of the Nazis during World War II to use the skills of Jewish forgers, printers and bankers locked up in a concentration camp to counterfeit massive amounts of British and US currency. The film, based on the memoirs of a Communist printer who attempted to sabotage the project, raises serious moral issues.

These are some of the films that seemed to us to be the most successful.

To be continued



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