Toronto International Film Festival 2007—Part 2

Urgency about human matters

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

In his *Chop Shop*, co-written with Bahareh Azimi, director Ramin Bahrani has chosen to treat a world and individuals that are invisible to the people who "count" in New York City.

Alejandro (Alejandro Polanco) and his sister Isamar (Isamar Gonzales) make their home in the back of an auto repair shop in Willets Point, Queens, a 75-acre area known for its auto salvage yards, repair garages and the like.

In the words of the *New York Times* in 2004, "Here, business bustles against a backdrop of stacked, crumpled cars and a slum landscape. The streets are unpaved and lined with tire-change joints, hubcap purveyors, muffler shops, windshield installers and rim retailers. There are brake and transmission specialists, and auto body garages. The area goes back many decades, since parts purveyors first set up on these ash heaps that Fitzgerald mentioned in *The Great Gatsby*." Some 2,000 to 3,000 people reportedly work in the area, many of them undocumented immigrants.

Alejandro, 12, solicits business for his shop, earning $5 a car. He also sands cars, sweeps up and does odd jobs for Rob (Rob Sowulski), the owner. In addition, he steals parts from cars parked at nearby Shea Stadium (where the New York Mets play baseball) and sells candy and pirated DVDs.

Isamar, 16, comes to live with Alejandro from a "safe home." Parents and other family members are never mentioned. Alejandro loves his sister and worries about her. Isamar gets a job cooking and selling food from a van. Alejandro has a dream about owning and operating a mobile food van of their own. Isamar finished 7th grade; Alejandro doesn't go to school. They fool around like children sometimes, but surviving their condition is difficult and demanding, an all-consuming task.

He is protective of her. He thinks she hangs out with the wrong people. Perhaps it's a little predictable—she's a good-looking girl, isolated in the world, with lousy prospects—that she prostitutes herself. Alejandro is horrified and angry when he finds out. They make up, warily.

They are saving money for a van, his dream at least. He steals his sister's money to add to his savings. When they buy the vehicle, it turns out to be useless to them. There are more painful moments.

The film's final sequence is remarkable. It's morning, and events have made their living together difficult. Alejandro is feeding the pigeons. There is something accepting in his bearing. Isamar emerges and gives him a half-smile, acknowledging that. She walks around, slowly, stomps her foot cheerfully and the flock of pigeons flies up in the air as one. The portion of the shot from her small smile to the end of the film lasts half a minute. It remains with you.

The looks the pair exchange communicate a great deal; it is probably impossible to feel or explain all they communicate. One would have to be these people and in their situation.

Their glances and demeanor manage to convey a sense of social solidarity. They each recognize that the other is not to blame for his or her sins. "We're in the same boat. It's not our fault." It's an act of social solidarity, which comes from living, sometimes punishingly, in this world. The acceptance is not resignation, one hopes, but a recognition of certain truths.

This is a film that could have gone wrong in any number of ways, and in the hands of most American (and European) filmmakers, would have. One kept expecting the shooting, the stabbing, the rape, the violent denouement. Such things occur in real life, of course, but in most films they serve to distract attention from the filmmaker's inability to treat real life in a meaningful manner. Since the average director is either largely uninterested in or ignorant about lives like Alejandro's and Isamar's, he or she adds "drama" all too often in an artificial, contrived and arbitrary manner.

The drama inherent in such lives, inherent in conditions that demand remarkable and complex moral choices almost on a daily basis, escapes those who live in a different and insulated world. Unhappily, one must say that many filmmakers have already made their critical moral and social choices—generally the wrong ones—before they begin their careers. They either look with contempt at the Alejandros and Isamars, or attempt to remake them in their own image. One does not have to excuse the misdeeds of these kids to recognize that they function, ironically, on a considerably higher ethical plane than most of the privileged inhabitants of the film world.

Bahrani is obviously an unusual filmmaker, as the accompanying interview may indicate. Born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1975, Bahrani studied film at Columbia University before living several years in Iran, his parents' homeland. He also spent time in Paris, before returning to the US and making his first feature film, *Man Push Cart* (2005), about a Pakistani immigrant who makes a living selling coffee and doughnuts to office workers in midtown Manhattan. *Chop Shop* is his second feature.

In his director's statement, Bahrani explains that across the street from the junkyards and repair shops looms Shea Stadium, "whose giant billboard reads, 'Make Dreams Happen.' I was curious to know what dreams can happen in this place, and who these dreamers are, so I set out to make *Chop Shop*.

"During the year I spent in the location, I became increasingly drawn to the lives of the young Latino kids who work and live in the auto-body shops. My story is about one of them, a 12-year-old Latino who has an immense yet flawed love for his 16-year-old sister. In their world there is no room for sentimentality and even less for judgment."

In the film's production notes, Bahrani is quoted as saying that he was amazed by what he saw in Willets Point. He explains, "I decided immediately that my new film would take place there! I thought to myself, if [Luis Buñuel's] *Los Olvidados* were to be made today and in America, it would be made there." The notes go on to say that "the film presents unique characters and a vision of New York never before depicted in cinema."

This may be a slight exaggeration, but not much of one.

The New York City that "counts" is the city of billionaires. According to *Forbes* magazine's latest list of the richest Americans, the number of such individuals rose by more than 40 percent in New York in one year, from 45 in 2006 to 64 this year. The total net worth of these 64 people, compared to that of the 45 the year before, rose by 370 percent, to $224 billion. By contrast, the net worth of the nearly 2 million city residents living below the federal poverty line remained at $3.45 billion. So the 64 richest New York residents have 64 times the wealth of the city's poorest 1.7 million people.

At one time, such a social fact would have caused a scandal. Newspapers and magazines would have been filled with scathing and outraged commentaries. Today, within the well-heeled media circles, it largely provokes cynical, amused or outright envious commentaries. A piece in *New York* magazine last year managed unpleasantly to combine all three attitudes. It began: "At the very pinnacle of the New York social scene these days is the billionaire, once a reclusive character who secretively moved world markets from his castle on the hill but now is more likely to be dining at a booth next to you. They're everywhere: This year, for the first time, everyone on the *Forbes* 400 list was a billionaire, up from thirteen billionaires in the early eighties." Etc., etc.

The enormously wealthy fill the horizon for such people, blotting out everything else. It is difficult to imagine a more disgusting, humiliating fate.

In general, the US film industry remains indifferent to the circumstances and dilemmas of the overwhelming majority of the population. And not simply the lives of the most oppressed layers. Following global filmmaking as a whole, one would learn a good deal more about life in Singapore or Tehran than downtown Kansas City or a Tallahassee suburb.

This is not simply socially deplorable, it is artistically deadening. The source of art is life—in particular, human interaction in all its complexity. A turning away from this interaction, whether out of indifference, opportunism or gloom, has the worst possible consequences for the artist. Art atrophies under these conditions, becomes mannered, self-involved and, finally, dull.

Social seriousness is not enough, nor are good intentions. One has to have a knowledge and a feel for the form. Bahrani organizes his images and dramatic moments in an artistic manner. He does not, like the Dardenne brothers in their *Rosetta* (1999), make the mistake of mimicking the ever-mobile Alejandro with irritating, jerky camera movements. He maintains the "pathos of distance."

As Bahrani explained in our interview, making a film of enduring value requires great mental and physical effort, a dedication to one's work. Nothing important is accomplished without tiring oneself. How many current projects are done in by their creators' unwillingness or incapacity to expend the necessary time and energy? Of course, the sloth is usually bound up with the triviality of the project itself. Why kill oneself when the film in question is the latest "erotic thriller" or a sequel to the most recent sequel? Nonetheless, a seriousness about precision and elegance in form would almost inevitably impel a good many film artists beyond the bounds of their present meager labors or at least bring them up against the latter's shortcomings.

Ramin Bahrani's Iranian connection is clearly significant, and it may be worth saying a few words in that regard.

The serenity, poetry and humanity of the best Iranian cinema of the 1980s and 1990s (Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi and others) has not been lost on this filmmaker. By and large, this is all to the good, but if one were to raise any issues with him, it would be along the following lines.

Bahrani acknowledged in our conversation that Iranian filmmaking had gone somewhat "stale" in recent years, with certain exceptions. One would have to agree. Why is that the case? Filmmaking is not a loaf of bread, which inevitably turns hard and inedible after a certain period of time. The Iranian filmmakers have become less fertile and interesting as a whole because they came up against challenges, in the post-Islamic revolutionary period that they have been as yet incapable of responding to. At best, they are tending to repeat themselves, walking in place. Some filmmakers have fallen more or less silent.

Censorship and repression have been of course major problems, but even more of a problem has been the thinness of the artists' social and historical perspective. They will need to find a way to a left-wing critique of the Islamist regime, one that has strong roots in the history of the Iranian working class and socialist movement and the international socialist movement.

Elementary humanism, a concern for the dignity and fate of the individual human being or even collective humanity, as we have pointed out before, may possess real force and content under certain conditions, especially when it opposes itself to a dictatorial regime or the bombast and fundamental misanthropy of the film industry. But a new set of circumstances often demonstrates the inadequacy of such an approach.

The "acceptance" by Alejandro and Isamar of their condition is a delicate question. A sense of solidarity and one's worth as a human being under even the most oppressive conditions is one thing, resignation to one's fate is quite another. The filmmaker who finds extraordinary human qualities in deprived conditions always runs the risk of making a virtue out of necessity. The political passivity of wide layers of the population in the US is a complex political and historical phenomenon, but it is an *ephemeral* one.

The artist who convinces him- or herself that the oppressed find joy in their lives may be surprised, at the next historical moment, when they suddenly reject that condition en masse. We trust that Bahrani will be intellectually conscientious enough not to neglect the unfolding social and political crisis even as he concentrates on the most elemental and intimate human problems.

In our conversation, Ramin Bahrani mentioned his admiration for Ken Loach, particularly the "content" of the latter's films. This is a comment one often hears from those filmmakers with a concern for social reality. This is entirely to Loach's credit. Whatever one thinks of his political evolution, there is no question about his continued and principled interest in the fate of broad layers of the population.

In *It's a Free World...*, Angie (Kierston Wareing) is a 30-year-old single mother of one son. When she's sacked from her job with a firm that recruits labor from eastern Europe, she sets up her own agency with Rose (Juliet Ellis), her flatmate. In a yard in back of a pub, Angie and Rose begin hiring casuals. She tours local factories on her motorbike in an effort to drum up business.

At first, she won't have anything to do with undocumented workers. A local boss tells her, however, that "illegal immigrants are the best," because they're frightened and will keep their mouths shut. Angie gets into this line of work, along with renting rooms at exorbitant rates to her workforce. Angie and Rose collect taxes from the workers, but don't pay them to the government. They console themselves—"Once we're on our feet, everything will be legitimate."

Angie's father, a worker from another generation, is shocked when he sees her activities. The sight of men and women lining up in the morning to plead for work reminds him of the bad old times. "I thought those days were over," he says. In response, Angie points out that while her father had one job for three decades, she's had dozens of jobs in only a few years. At times, she rationalizes her exploitation of the foreign workers: "We're giving these people a chance."

Drawn in by the money and the logic of the situation, Angie commits increasingly rotten acts. Rose, finally, has enough. "Is there anything you won't do?" "I don't know, maybe not." Out of her league, Angie's operations eventually put her and her son in danger. By the film's end, though, she's bounced back and heads off to Ukraine to recruit another group of unsuspecting men and women.

Loach says of his central figure, “She’s a product of the Thatcher counter-revolution that prioritizes business and entrepreneurial skills and doing deals and cutting your way through and elbowing past everybody and looking after number one.” This is a legitimate concern and criticism.

In recent years, Loach and his screenwriter, Paul Laverty, have come to specialize in the “problem” film, each film devoted, more or less, to a drama built around a single pressing social issue—privatization, the plight of immigrants, casual labor, union-busting, alcoholism, drug addiction and so forth. The films tend to be made from a template: under immense social or economic pressure, working class individuals, often despite their best intentions, find themselves betraying their interests or faced with that choice. The filmmakers’ answer is solidarity, common action, a collective spirit of opposition. The hollowed-out politics of militant trade unionism and “left” Labourism hover over their works, unfortunately. The problems in the films are not entirely aesthetic.

At their worst, the Loach-Laverty efforts feel pat and a little tired. They strike the spectator, and this is not a compliment, as the “fleshing out” of a preconceived idea. The effort to “work up” a drama to suit a given appropriate theme, toward which the filmmakers have definite views before they begin, tends to take much of the life out of the final result. Somewhere in an art work there must be room for elements that are unexpected, unpredictable and even unwanted. One feels obliged to point out that this too must be bound up with a certain “moderation” and “respectability” to their politics. Nothing out of control!

Laverty, at least, seems to be aware of the artistic side of the difficulty. In a note on the production, he explains his interest in the issue of casualization of labor, but then brings himself up short: “But a trend, no matter how profound, doesn’t make for a story.” Indeed it doesn’t.

Thus the structures of the Loach-Laverty films tend to be their weak point, with some exceptions. One rarely remembers the overall shape of the narrative. What saves these films are the filmmakers’ honorable social intentions, which impel them toward interesting and provocative problems, and Loach’s ability to coax extraordinary performances out of certain personalities. While the framework of a given film may be somewhat formulaic, the director has the capacity, as the result of his improvisational and spontaneous approach to performers, his intuitive feeling for artistic truth, to bring to life specific dramatic or comic moments.

Peter Mullan in *My Name Is Joe* certainly provided one of those remarkable performances. Kierston Wareing, although not working at Mullan’s level, provides another. The director clearly sensed that this struggling actress could bring out the ambition, charm and desperation—and cutthroat determination!—of his protagonist. In response to an interviewer’s question, Loach explained, “But why hadn’t she [Kierston Wareing] been picked up before? Because there’s a sense that there’s something dangerous about her, something really original that doesn’t fit too easily in to a compartment.” It is a measure of Loach’s skill that he grasped this quality and put it at the service of his drama.

The rest of the characters tend to be considerably weaker, with the exception of the father (Colin Caughlin), whose distaste for his daughter’s line of work seems genuine and deep going. The foreign workers, the local employers and so forth emerge as fairly predictable types.

To be continued