Vancouver International Film Festival 2007—Part 2

... And the new problems

David Walsh
1 November 2007

This is the second in a series of articles on the recent Vancouver International Film Festival (September 27 - October 12)

The younger generation of filmmakers all over the world faces considerable difficulties and obstacles. Like everybody else, the new directors and writers make their own history, but not under conditions of their choosing.

Those filmmakers who did the most important work in the postwar years, a number of whom were cited in the previous article, were shaped in many important ways by the events of the mid-century: the economic collapse and mass suffering of the 1930s, the rise of fascism, the growth of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the bitter disappointment it produced, the world war, the postwar reconstruction and economic recovery.

Cultural life suffered a genuine regression in the 1980s and 1990s in particular. It is not the fault of the younger generation that they cannot look back to their immediate predecessors. In 1968, for example, critic Andrew Sarris wrote, "That [Orson] Welles, the *aging enfant terrible* of the American Cinema, is still the youngest indisputably great American director is an ominous symptom of decadence in the industry as a whole."

That the succeeding *forty years* have not seen the emergence of a single indisputably and consistently great American director is a considerably more ominous symptom of this decadence. (John Cassavetes, Francis Ford Coppola and Robert Altman all made remarkable films, but none of them, in my view, maintained the highest level of work for a considerable length of time.)

This break in important filmmaking, the virtual collapse of serious work in many countries in the 1990s in particular (the US, France, Germany, Italy, Japan), is not the fault of the new directors striving to make sense of things. Having a quarter-century of reaction and stagnation immediately behind one is no help.

Numerous films screened in Vancouver demonstrated a concern for human beings and for the conditions under which they live. The impulse comes from life and reality. Anyone with artistic honesty is obliged to take a critical view of things. However accidental each filmmaker may see his or her own evolution, the fact that there is a growing anxiety about the state of life on the planet and a changed tone speaks to generalized circumstances.

A newly generated interest in social reality tends to be accompanied by a resurgence of naturalism, minimalism and rationalism. Taken as a whole, such a development is welcome. When young artists look around and see the misery inflicted on people and recognize as well to what extent those conditions have been ignored by the film world, even as studios and prominent figures have accumulated fabulous sums, they must feel genuine indignation and revulsion.

Hence the legitimate hostility to the "entertainment industry," its frivolousness, its wealth, its self-indulgence. A healthy hostility also exists to the unnecessary ornamentation, the narcissism, the showing off, the pointless formal virtuosity of much of recent filmmaking.

Another element determining the look and feel of many independent films is the limited financing available to so many. Chinese filmmaker Ying Liang was represented at the Vancouver festival with *The Other Half*. In an interview, Ying notes that his first film, Taking Father Home cost no more than 3,000 euros ($US 4,300) to make. He shot the film over ten months on borrowed equipment and comments, "If I had had 5,000 euros, I would have been able to pay the actors ... If I had had 8,000 to 10,000 euros, I could have improved the sound and visual quality, and also shortened the filming period dramatically" (Neil Young's Film Lounge).

In any event, this combination of factors perhaps helps explain the appearance of a good number of pared-down, structurally modest and often somber films, especially from East Asia.

Ying's *The Other Half*, an occasionally amusing and often troubling account of life in China's provincial Yigong City, is actually more ambitious than *Taking Father Home* and many of the other Chinese independent films. A young woman, Xiaofen, gets a job at a law office. ("What do you know about the law? "I watch television.") Her job is to take down the stories of her law firm's clients, mostly female. We see the clients straight on, while the lawyers are never seen.

One woman complains about her "mean" husband. Does she want a divorce then? No. "Let me talk. It's the only thing that makes me feel better." Another has a suitcase full of her husband's shirts. "I'm not giving them back. He has a new woman." A third wants a "secret divorce," unbeknownst to her mate. Then there's one client who proclaims proudly, "I can drink, that's why they call me 'Great Thermos Flask.'"

One woman's husband is an army officer. The unseen lawyer says, "That's a problem." She continues: "He often beats me. He's threatened to kill me. I have no money."

Xiaofen's personal life is not so different from those of the unhappy clients. She has a deadbeat boy-friend, who doesn't work, drinks and gambles. A friend works in a tacky strip joint and wants to leave for America. Xiaofen's mother sets her up on blind dates. One owns a factory and, in a restaurant, shows the young woman pictures of it on his computer. The boy-friend comes in and makes a scene, and drink is spilled on the computer. The date explains, finally, that he doesn't care about losing Xiaofen, "but my laptop is ruined."

More disturbing events, about which we hear radio reports or rumors, are going on in the background. A serial killer has murdered 10 prostitutes. A chemical plant is polluting the town. In fact, the plant owner is one of the clients of Xiaofen's law firm. Workers are protesting and suing the company because of three deformed babies born to women employees. The owner, crude and piggish, tells the sympathetic lawyer, "Our plant has to make a profit. We follow Communist Party rules in running the plant." The lawyer concurs, "Economic development comes first."

At one point a news report blathers on: "Today is the birthday of the Chinese Communist Party ... a great and bright day ... a harmonious

society ... our beloved Communist Party."

In the end, the chemical company produces an even bigger disaster.

The Other Half is uneven, overcrowded, sometimes perhaps a little flippant, but perceptive and sensitive. Clearly, the film suggests, something quite terrible is going on in China, both on the personal and political levels.

Wang Bing, born in 1967, takes the work of documenting events and lives with great seriousness. In his 9-hour West of the Tracks, alternately fascinating and tedious, he recorded the devastation of an industrial area and the fate of workers and young people in a district slated to be demolished.

Fengming: A Chinese Memoir works on a far smaller scale, but with equal intensity. The documentary takes the form of one woman, the elderly He Fengming, speaking directly into the camera in her apartment. At the time of the 1949 revolution, Fengming was a student at Lanzhou University. She married Wang Jingchao, a leading journalist in the area, and threw herself into the revolution, which they both welcomed. She also became a journalist, in Gansu in western China.

Some years later her husband fell into difficulty when he wrote an article criticizing the bureaucratic character of the Chinese regime. The couple were caught up in the "anti-Rightist," anti-intellectual campaign of 1957 and sent to different labor camps for "rehabilitation." They endured strenuous interrogation and "struggle sessions." Fengming recounts her desperate efforts to get her case re-opened and join her husband.

She recalls in extraordinary detail the journey she eventually made to take care of Jingchao, having learned that he was ill. Tragically, after a difficult and exhausting journey, including walking miles in the snow, she arrived at his camp only to discover that he had already died. She wasn't even able to see his grave.

Fengming describes the famine conditions of the late 1950s, during the disaster of Mao's Great Leap Forward policy. She eventually went to work for a newspaper and "rehabilitation" came in 1961. Under the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, she suffered persecution again, being sent to her father's home town for "labor reform." She describes one of the supervisors on the farm where she worked, "He was the type who used the Cultural Revolution as an excuse to be a bully."

In December 1978, 550,000 "rightists" were conclusively rehabilitated. A decade later she decided to write a book about her experience, against the advice of family and friends. Her sisters told her that it was "too painful to relive," but she persisted.

The director has his subject speak to the camera, at times uninterruptedly for long stretches (the film lasts three hours). There are several camera set-ups, the work is punctuated by Fengming's leaving the room, answering the telephone (speaking to a camp survivor) and little else. She has much to tell and tells it mesmerizingly. Although the political issues bound up with her persecution are not clear, the despotic character of the Chinese Stalinist regime (which arrested some 1,000 Trotskyists in the early 1950s, shot some of them and kept others locked up until 1978) is unmistakable.

There can be little doubt about Wang Bing's sincerity or dedication, but art demands scrupulous selectivity and abstraction as well. The filmmaker chooses critical issues, but then affects the method of "simply" (naturally, there is nothing simple about it) directing his camera toward the subject matter and leaving it on. Of course every step of the filmmaking process involves choices. The director's choice is not to draw certain kinds of conclusions.

In regard to his previous film, Wang disavowed any element of protest or political activism. He was praised by a commentator: "There's no 'expert opinion,' no economic analysis and no pretense that this is a microcosm of China."

I wrote in response: "Naturally, no work of art, fictional or documentary, could possibly be expected to present an all-sided explanation of any complex social or historical phenomenon. Art cognizes reality by its own means, which are more indirect and roundabout, more linked to the unconscious, the intuitive and the non-rational than those of science or historiography. Nonetheless, if a film, in its overall structure (dramatic plot or organization of documentary material), does not attempt to reflect reality, to bring out the essential pattern of human relationships, then what is its purpose? ...

"Pat, simplistic or self-serving explanations are obviously no use in any sphere of intellectual life, but art cannot possibly flourish if it pledges ahead of time not to try and make sense of the world to its audience." I would stand by those comments.

One encounters the same problems in a work like *Timber Gang*, directed by Yu Guangyi. In 2004, according to the film festival catalogue, the director returned to his home in Heilongjiang in northeast China (formerly Manchuria) after an absence of 20 years. He joined a logging crew heading up into the mountains for the winter to cut down trees. The film records the several months spent in Black Bear Valley.

Yu shows us the physical difficulties and privations of the journey into the mountains, the primitive conditions of life in the makeshift camp, the dangers to men and horses alike of the work, the banter among the loggers, who have little to do at night but drink.

And talk about life back in their villages. We hear their complaints and longing: "City folk look down on us." "I know a girl. I have had only her in my heart for over ten years." They wander around drunk in their underwear.

A horse dies of overwork, and the carcass is cut up for meat. The cost will be deducted from the workers' salaries. On New Years, they visit their families back home, then it's back to work in the mountains.

In the end, we learn that is the final year of logging in the area. The workers have no idea what to do next.

There are some fascinating images, but, if the reader will pardon me, we have here the age-old problem of missing the forest for the trees. The film shows a great deal, a great many individual details, but explains little. What are we to make of all this? A publicist writes, approvingly: "There's no attempt to impose a storyline, no didactic voiceover, in fact no clichés of any kind. Instead the film offers total immersion in a small world that—thankfully—most of us will never experience at first hand."

Again, of course, no one has any possible interest in an imposed storyline, didactic voiceovers or any kind of clichés, all loaded terms, but those are not the only possible approaches. A film, documentary or otherwise, is responsible for imparting meaning, for making the world more comprehensible, for deepening our understanding of the relations between people and their complexities. Pictures, generally, do not speak for themselves.

Foster Child, from Brillante Mendoza of the Philippines, shares some of this passivity. A fiction work, the film has a quasi-documentary quality. In a Manila shanty-town, Thelma and her husband, a carpenter, supplement their income by providing a home to children until they find adoptive parents. Some of the footage is remarkable. Long takes follow one or another character through city streets or slum alleyways: chaos, noise, kids, dirt, shanties. But there's not too much else.

The scene in which Thelma hands over her present foster child, John-John, to a wealthy American couple at a fashionable Manila hotel is memorable. Thelma goes to the spacious bathroom in their suite and looks around in wonderment. It occurs to us: the hotel bathroom is nicer than her house, it's probably bigger than her house.

There's obvious artistic talent at work here, but compelling drama is largely absent.

Love Conquers All from Malaysia's Tan Chui Mui is a valuable and honest work. The story of a girl, Ah Ping, who arrives in Kuala Lumpur and lives with an aunt while working in a food-stand is relatively simple and, ultimately, painful. Ah Ping tries to keep in touch with her boyfriend

back home, but John, who shows up at the food-stand, hangs around and hangs around. He proves to be rather sinister.

At one point John tells Ah Ping about a friend, a pimp, and his methods for turning girls into prostitutes, “Girls are mostly stupid. They are so confident. They think love conquers all.” And he works to prove his point. This aspect of the film is disturbing, but it may be its least interesting aspect. The quiet images of Ah Ping, who conveys strong emotions and considerable dignity, are more effective.

Fujian Blue, a co-winner of the festival’s “Dragons and Tigers Award” for independent Asian cinema, seems over-rated to me. It tells the story in two parts of youth in China’s southeastern Fujian province, famous as the jumping off point for illegal immigration and human trafficking.

The first part treats a group of youth who make money in various discreditable ways, including blackmailing women whose husbands have emigrated (with photographs of their illicit trysts). One nasty, resentful kid extorts money from his own mother in this manner. The second part follows one of the youths as he makes plans to emigrate.

One doesn’t sense that the film, directed by Robin Weng, involves that process of “tortuous searching” for artistic truth that Aleksandr Voronsky speaks of in one his essays. It feels a bit easy, too easy pictures of hedonistic, backward youth, a too-easy picture of family life and emigration. There’s something clichéd about the work.

That a new generation of filmmakers is shy about making political and social pronouncements can be explained by the events of late 20th century and the confusion that surrounds them. Caution may not be the worst thing. There’s no advantage of rushing into the breach without adequate knowledge. Complicated issues have to be thought through. All that’s true, but, in the end, it’s not possible to stand aside or remain neutral on big questions: that is not objectivity.

All the various circumstances outlined above—the hostility to ornamentation and over-formalism, the desire for authenticity, the dedication to bare reality, the lack of resources—make the moods and methods of a certain section of independent filmmakers comprehensible. It’s not the younger filmmakers fault in particular that conditions in the film world are difficult, that their prospects in some regards are limited, that they lack certain kinds of knowledge and experience, that their lives are less cosmopolitan artistically than those of a generation formed under different intellectual conditions. However, the danger lies in making a virtue out of necessity, in creating a program out of the cramped existence, narrowed prospects, smallness of means.

Minimalism and passivity (the refusal to explain or judge) as a program can also come to justify political and social timidity. No one feels entirely confident at first in any field, but remaining in a perpetual state of uncertainty about critical matters is no answer. The world, including history and politics, is cognizable.

Filmmaking needs reality, but photographic realism, primitive realism, has its limitations. Historically, filmmakers developed the close-up, camera movement, editing techniques, professional acting methods and so forth for a reason, to penetrate and represent nature, society and human emotions ever more deeply. All those elements are still needed. Throwing the baby out with the bathwater is always a poor idea. Because mediocrities, or worse, cram their films with stylistic flourishes and technical marvels, often to divert attention from the fact they have nothing to say, is not an argument against spectacle and inventiveness and liveliness of form.

To be continued