Vancouver International Film Festival 2007—Part 3

Some of the old problems, too

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

In the first two articles on the Vancouver festival, we discussed some of the advances visible in the new global cinema and some of its perhaps inevitable new problems. A growing seriousness is evident, in response to events, and, at the same time, a certain narrowness and smallness prevail. We argued that one should not create a program out of minimalism and limited resources. Everything that has been historically developed by filmmakers over the course of more than a century must be brought to bear on life in our time, to illuminate it and to entertain and rouse audiences.

Skepticism about the possibility of changing the world remains a major obstacle to the progress of intellectual and artistic life. The notion that the present state of things is the end-all and be-all of existence is terribly damaging to art. The stock market, the luxury condominium and the cruise missile have not and will not inspire filmmakers or anyone else. We tend to get a present formal tinkering, self-analysis without many interesting results and generally a concentration on matters of secondary or tertiary importance. Art can only develop today in opposition to the established order. There are signs of that. The only poetry inspired by the regime of Bush the younger has been vituperative.

The great filmmakers adopted a sympathetic but critical view toward people and their social organization. Liveliness in cinema is bound up with regarding social life and human behavior as works very much in progress. Nothing could have been more damaging for art than the vile claims made in the 1990s that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, history and social development had more or less come to an end. One might as well have asked the artists to commit suicide *en masse*.

The stupidest and crudest claims have been discredited, but the problems bound up with decades of ideological reaction have hardly been overcome. A new resurgence of the working population will do wonders.

Passivity is one of the unhappy products of political and social defeats and difficulties. Conditions and events that ought to outrage artists often only provoke muted, diffuse commentary. Worse, sometimes, is the school that makes a virtue out of social necessity, finding little triumphs and moments of pleasure even in the most atrocious circumstances. Why should these artists celebrate the *good moments* when it's the *bad lives* that should be represented? Why should one reconcile oneself to poverty, exploitation and cruelty under any conditions? Where are the irreconcilable artists? Few and far between at the moment.

Apart from the works discussed in the first two articles (*Little Moth*, *Bing Ai*, *The Other Half*, *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir*, *Love Conquers All*), a number of other Asian films impressed me less.

Useless from director Jia Zhang-ke (*Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World*) focuses on a number of different sides of making clothes in China. The documentary's opening sequences take place in a giant factory in Guangdong province in southern China: the work is tedious and monotonous, the conditions essentially brutal. We see an empty cafeteria, a sign: "Today's menu...," shelves with personal belongings, then workers bring their pots to the counter and eat standing up. Exhausted-looking men and women visit the plant's doctor. "Any reason you're so tired?" he asks one employee.

In the film's second and central section, Jia introduces us to fashion designer Ma Ke. Presented as the polar opposite of the mass production clothing industry, she makes her products by hand out of rough, textured materials and even buries them briefly to let nature finish the process. At her show in Paris, earth-smeared models stand motionless and unblinking on illuminated cubes in her designs. "It is absurd," she says, "that China is the largest exporter of clothes in the world and doesn't have any well-known brand." Her own brand is "Wu Yong"—i.e., "useless," from which the film derives its title.

In the final segment, the director follows Ma as she ventures into the countryside. She tells us, "Going to remote areas, you recover things you once felt." In a provincial town, a woman making clothes barely gets by. Another tailor has become a coal miner, along with his wife. "Would you go back to tailoring if you could make money at it?" the director asks him. The ex-tailor still dreams about making clothes for his wife. There are remarkable images of coal miners washing up and others standing by the roadside. In the smaller cities, everything seems on the verge of closing down. Among the film's last lines, "Is it true they're going to demolish this place?" "So they say." "I'm looking for a new place."

Jia does everything with intelligence and artistry, but the film is quite weak, directionless. At a press conference in New York, the director explained that he identified with Ma Ke. He indicated that *Useless* is the second of three films (*Dong* was the first) treating the condition of endangered artists in newly industrialized China. "I try to make their voices heard again," he said of the artists. He also explained, "I find that Ma Ke's situation parallels my own, because in China it is commercial films, Hollywood films that can draw audiences and make money. Films like mine are considered useless."

This is a genuine dilemma, but approaching the problem requires some social and historical insight. That the appropriate answer to mass production of clothes (or films) might be a return to methods of handicraft production associated with an earlier century speaks to some of the difficulties produced by decades of stultifying Maoist-Stalinist rule and ideology in China. Ma Ke has hardly solved the problem of impersonal and "soulless" clothing for the masses in China and elsewhere; she has simply sidestepped it, by turning out products for a specialized and no doubt wealthy clientele. That's not her fault, but it remains a fact.

For people to clothe themselves beautifully requires the remaking of their lives as a whole. And the machine is not the enemy in this process, but the social relationships in which the machine performs a function. There is no reason why, under transformed social conditions, clothing could not be made with care and artistically on a mass scale, and machinery could play its part. For that, a small thing has to happen, the end of the global system of production for profit.

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The Chinese textile worker or miner in one of Jia's films is often an object of pity. This is wrong and suggests a lack of knowledge of history and historical laws. One can safely predict the Chinese population will be anything but passive in the coming years. What will the filmmakers do then?

In *God Man Dog*, Taiwan's Singing Chen (*Bundled*) attempts to make sense of a society in spiritual and moral chaos. Various individuals at loose ends—a hand model suffering from post-partum depression, an alcoholic trying to stay dry, a one-legged repairer of religious statues—pursue unsatisfying or misdirected lives. An accident involving a dog brings the stories together. The result is sincere, but too slight, too ahistorical; the situation in Taiwan can't be treated, even addressed from such a narrow basis.

Taiwanese filmmaking has more or less come to a dead halt and will not advance, in my view, until fundamental questions of twentieth century history and society are confronted by the artists.

Unhappily, Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Voyage of the Red Balloon* tends to confirm this diagnosis. Hou has made a tribute of sorts to Albert Lamorisse's *Le ballon rouge* (*The Red Balloon*, 1956), a 34-minute children's film in which a red balloon with a life of its own follows a little boy around Paris.

In the present film, also shot in Paris, Juliette Binoche plays Suzanne, a harassed single mother and actor in a puppet theater. Her son Simon has a new Chinese nanny, a film student. A red balloon appears now and again. Mostly we see the everyday difficulties and confusion of Suzanne's petty bourgeois life prettily filmed. Those who find this fascinating are welcome to it. It is a far cry from *The Boys from Fengkuei*, *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* and *Dust in the Wind*. Of course, artists cannot keep repeating themselves, but they also ought to try and not fall apart completely.

Mad Detective from Hong Kong's Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai is a lively work, but it is the type of film critics tend to overrate.

Bun (Lau Ching-wan) is the "mad detective" in question, a Hong Kong policeman who throws himself into cases and attempts to inhabit the mind and soul of the criminal, or the victim. In our first encounter with Bun, he has himself packed in a suitcase and pushed down a flight of stairs as part of the effort to solve the case of a female student who was stabbed. "The killer is the ice cream shop owner—arrest him!" cries the bruised and battered cop as he emerges from the valise.

After he slices off one of his ears to honor a retiring superior, Bun is removed from the police force. Years later, a young, ambitious detective seeks him out to help solve a perplexing crime—the disappearance of a policeman whose gun seems to be involved in a series of crimes. Bun has a gift: "I see a person's inner personality." In the case at hand, he sees the seven conflicting personalities lodged in the suspect.

There's a good deal of action and paranoia and grimacing and shooting and hamming it up, and the film keeps moving along. But the insights into police corruption and wrongdoing are hardly ground-breaking. The grander claims for To are not justified by this work at least.

This World of Ours (Nakajima Ryo) is an effort, no doubt sincere, to capture something about alienated youth in Japan. Apparently only five years ago, director Ryo was a "hikikomori," a "shut-in kid," who refused human contact and never left his room. As the Vancouver film festival catalogue notes, "He says that the idea of making a film was an expression of his desire to break out of that shell, but the film he has made (he photographed and edited it, as well as writing and directing) could easily be seen as an expression of the feelings that made him withdraw from the world in the first place."

Indeed. The film's subjects include gang-rape, suicide, murder and bullying. Unfortunately, *This World of Ours* is so lacking in artistic or social perspective that it tends to add to the confusion and sensationalism more than anything else.

Iska's Journey is a valuable film from Hungarian director Csaba Bollók about wretchedly poor children in Romania. Iska, 12, scavenges for scrap metal on a dump in the southern Carpathians along with a bunch of others. Her mother is a drunk who beats her if she shows up with no money at the end of the day. Iska begs for food in the miners' canteen.

She ends up in an orphanage of some kind. A kindly doctor (the director's wife, in real life) looks out for her. Iska's younger sister is ill, probably fatally. Ultimately, Iska and a boy head for the sea by train, but she goes to see her sister one last time. A tragic mistake, as she's picked up by a couple of gangsters and forced into prostitution. The final sequences are predictable and stereotyped, but much of the rest of the film rings true.

In an interview, Bollók has some decent things to say. He notes that "if you are becoming rich, that's a tragedy for your creativity.... Orson Welles always gave creativity as opposed to most of the rich and rather blank directors of our time." Asked about the importance of media or critical response to a work, he goes on, "We are always in the middle of a dialogue, even when we are silent. Even then we exchange our ideas and feelings. Media, like TV media most of the time serve those who just want to make money. On the other hand, critics throw lights to very precious works that would not be discovered by commerce. So, it's important" (interview with Jason Whyte).

Saviour's Square from Poland is about real problems, but it treats them too narrowly and timidly. Beata and Bartek are a young couple with two small boys. They invest their savings into buying a condominium on the outskirts of Warsaw. The project turns out to be a disaster, perhaps a swindle—a benefit of the "free market." They move in with his angry, controlling mother, Teresa. The latter torments Beata, who can do nothing right in her eyes. Bartek proves to be a coward and a weakling.

The marriage dissolves, and Beata descends from personal humiliation to homelessness, and, ultimately, tragedy. Director Krzysztof Krauze sees certain things about Polish society, but one feels this is merely the tip of the iceberg. The break-up of the relationship is convincingly done, but everything is reduced to a personal drama. What if the husband hadn't been a swine, would the bankruptcy of the developer and the social disaster in Poland have had less of an impact?

Losers and Winners (Ulrike Franke and Michael Loeken) is a fascinating documentary that speaks to some of the present changes in world economic and social relations. In 2000, after only eight years in operation, the Kaiserstuhl coke plant in Dortmund, Germany, built at a cost of nearly 1 billion dollars and one of the most modern in the world, closed down. Cheaper coke imported from Asia and eastern Europe had made the plant unprofitable.

In 2003, several hundred Chinese technicians and workers arrived in Dortmund to dismantle the plant piece by piece and ship it to China for reassembling. The filmmakers spent 18 months following the process. The film inevitably perhaps concentrates on the smaller dramas that arise: the continual friction between the Germans' insistence on safety issues and the efforts by the Chinese firm to evade them. The Chinese employees work long hours, improvise electrical and other systems, and are obliged to flout various regulations.

The few conversations with the workers, who work seven days a week, are revealing. One explains that he has been away from home all year. He hopes to study some day. "Most important is that my child goes to school, to be more successful than his father."

Another recounts an incident: "I was dripping wet, filthy. The supervisor let me go 15 minutes early. I was taking a hot shower; the party secretary saw me and told me he was cutting 50 euros from my pay. I can never rest. I'll be a worker all my life." The workers earn some 400 euros (US$525 at the time) a month, payable at the end of the project.

The operation's Chinese manager is a crude philistine, with only one dream: owning and driving a Mercedes. He also likes to sing songs about

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Mao. As the number of accidents mounts, the manager responds to the charge that he's risking the lives of his workers: "Chairman Mao taught us that there are always victims on the revolutionary path."

The few remaining German workers are understandably downhearted. One explains, "I am part of this plant. Maybe just a little cog, but a necessary part.... You can't say to hell with it. It doesn't work that way."

If only as footnotes, perhaps, *Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind* and *Anita O'Day: The Life of a Jazz Singer* are worth mentioning.

The former, directed by John Gianvito, draws its inspiration from Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* and consists of shots of the graves or tombs of radical opponents of the American establishment, from Native American warriors and early abolitionists to the many martyrs of labor struggles in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With no spoken commentary, Gianvito intersperses his still shots with lovely images of forests and fields in the wind, in a Shelleyesque tribute to the "Wild Spirit" of social rebellion, "which art moving everywhere." In some ways, a fascinating and intriguing 58 minutes.

Robert Cavolina and Ian McCrudden's documentary about jazz singer O'Day (1919-2006), whose career extended from the 1940s to the new millennium, presents a picture of an extraordinary woman: tough, resilient and enormously gifted. O'Day survived the ups and downs of life as a female in the music business, sexual assault, more than a decade of heroin addiction and a nearly fatal overdose from the drug. The groundbreaking duet with trumpeter Roy Eldridge from 1941 and her famed performance at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival certainly stand out, but there are numerous remarkable clips of her singing and talking. Someone describes her as "a musician who used her voice as an instrument," and fellow singer Annie Ross notes that there was "a whole life in that voice." And it was some life.

The discussion of these questions will continue.

Concluded

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