

San Francisco International Film Festival 2008

Part 3: Not genuinely “close to life”

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This is the third in a series of articles on the 2008 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 24-May 8.

Filmmakers and artists strive, with varying degrees of honesty and depth, to make sense of things. The truth of the world doesn't immediately present itself. It needs to be worked at painstakingly. “Is it easy for the artist to find artistic truth in this complex world of phenomena which he carries within himself and observes in his surroundings?,” asked Marxist critic Aleksandr Voronsky. “The difficulties here are extraordinary and indisputable. We can say with certainty that the chief creative efforts of the genuine artist—his struggle with the material, his doubts, torments, his joys and disillusionment—are bound up with the quest for artistic truth.”

Voronsky continued: “Every epoch, every period of social development, every class, group or layer has its own difficulties and obstacles on the way to artistic truth and, it goes without saying, its own favorable circumstances.”

The specific difficulties and obstacles facing artists in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe are bound up, first and foremost, with the decades of Stalinist rule, which proclaimed itself to be “socialism” under the “leadership of the working class,” discrediting the noblest social ideals and making it very difficult for honest intellectuals to see things clearly.

Confidence in the project of altering the world for the better and humanity's elevating itself to a higher social principle has suffered severe blows in that part of the world. The downfall of the bureaucratic regimes and the reintroduction of capitalist relations have generated a great deal of cynicism, despair and opportunism. But very little insightful or beautiful art work.

The problems are not of the artists' making, but too many proved utterly ill-prepared for the upheavals and all too ready to accept uncritically official public opinion, according to which the “free market” is the natural order of things. Others, in the face of the social chaos and overall regression, have given in to a relatively facile gloom.

These problems are not overcome in a day, or even a decade, especially under global political conditions in which so much confusion still prevails.

Béla Tarr (born 1955) is a Hungarian filmmaker who began his career under the Stalinist regime in the late 1970s and continues to work today. He made his international reputation with *Sátántangó* (1994), a seven-hour, black-and-white film about a small Hungarian village, characterized by long takes and little dialogue. It was proclaimed a masterpiece by a variety of critics. The late Susan Sontag indicated a desire to watch the film every day of her life. Each to his or her own.

In 2001, I noted that Tarr's next full-length film, *Werckmeister Harmonies*, “depicts a world thoroughly sunk in misery, poverty, gloom. More than that, as the opening scene suggests, “A total eclipse has come upon us,” and “It's still not over.”

“A circus has arrived in a small Hungarian town in midwinter. Its main attraction is the hideous carcass of a whale, on display in the back of a truck. Moreover, the circus promises the appearance of a mysterious

Prince, a demagogue who is plotting untold evil.

“A sinister ‘mob’ is gathering in the square—unemployed men, dressed in wretched clothes, congregating around fires. The police chief is conspiring with the wife of a leading citizen, organizer of the ‘Clean Town Movement.’

“When the order comes, the mob in the square goes on a rampage, setting fires, sacking a hospital and beating or murdering the patients... [T]he overriding message conveyed by the film is that humanity is swinish. Everyone is polluted, brutish or manipulative...swinish.” The experience of watching the film is a very unpleasant and unenlightening one.

In an interview published in 2004 by *Kinoeye*, Tarr was asked whether he accepted the “existential idea” that the human condition was absurd. “No,” he replied, “it's not absurd. The world is moving and turning and people are seeing films. This is our film, that's all. We just want to show to you and to everybody how the human condition is. That's all. We don't want to judge anybody. We don't want to make any interpretation. We just want to show something of what's going on.”

Later in the interview, Tarr explained: “In the beginning when we made our first film [*Családi t uzfeszek (Family Nest, 1979)*] we thought, ‘Okay, we have a lot of social problems.’ We wanted to change the world, and we were very powerful and very young.... Afterwards, we made other films, but felt the problem is not only social but ontological, then afterwards cosmic.”

Further still, he commented about his own filmmaking, “I hope we are closer to life than [ordinary] cinema.” And more: “That's one of the reasons why we make films: to show people, their real personalities.”

The transition from an underlying “social” problem to an “ontological” and then a “cosmic” one does not represent an advance. It reflects the process by which objective events have confused, intimidated and demoralized the filmmaker.

The notions that Tarr's films are “closer to life” than most other cinema and “show people, their real personalities”—and there is no reason to doubt his sincerity—are disturbing ones. In his latest work, *The Man from London*, loosely based on a Georges Simenon detective novel, Tarr returns to familiar artistic ground: black-and-white film, long takes, lugubrious action and score, dismal and defeated human beings.

One night, Maloin (Miroslav Krobot), a grim-faced railroad employee in a small French port, witnesses a struggle and a murder. He retrieves a briefcase full of cash from the sea. His home life is dreary and without affection. He barks at his wife (Tilda Swinton, dubbed into Hungarian) and daughter. An English police inspector arrives; it turns out that the case contained 60,000 pounds in stolen cash. Maloin faces a moral dilemma. Holding on to the money comes at a price. Luck proves to be on his side, or does it?

The film is excruciating. Characters move and talk in slow motion, to no particular effect. If the approach is aimed at getting beneath the surface of reality, it fails. The essence of the “human condition” is not brought out

by such artificial and, frankly, irritating methods, but by making an analysis of the relationships in the form of a convincing and moving drama. The problems remain “social,” not “cosmic.”

Tarr is no nearer the heart of things with his lengthy, unmoving shots than a 30-second cosmetics commercial. His method, alas, represents a means of *not* taking a serious look at the present situation in Hungary and its history, including a self-critical look at the role of the intelligentsia itself. This is not close to life, it is not life at all. People are not like this, except in bad dreams, or the disoriented impressions of intellectuals jolted by history.

As for those who convince themselves that any painful and extreme experience must be a rewarding one, what can one say? It’s not true, and it’s rather childish.

Following on his *A Social Genocide* and *The Dignity of the Nobodies*, veteran Argentinean left-nationalist filmmaker Fernando Solanas has made the third of a four-part series of documentaries on the present Argentine situation. Solanas explains that the project “was born out of the economic and social catastrophe generated by the neo-liberalism during the decade of the nineties.”

If the first two parts of the series contained valuable material on the 2001 crisis and the social conditions of wide layers of the population, *Latent Argentina* is guided by the hopeless and ultimately reactionary perspective of a healthy, independent Argentinean national capitalism. The enemy is the population’s or the elite’s supposed “colonial mindset.”

Solanas (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968) asks how it’s possible that Argentina, with great natural, intellectual and cultural resources, suffers from poverty, dependence and backwardness. He interviews scientists, educators, researchers and industrial workers, all of whom testify to the great potential in the country.

In the course of his national tour, Solanas also speaks to Rio Santiago Shipyards workers who recount their struggle against privatization and explain that 70 workmates disappeared under the US-backed dictatorship. “Now they are building cargo ships for Germany and Venezuela.” The director also visits “recovered factories”—i.e., facilities that are being operated by workers after the owner’s departure or the bankruptcy of the firm.

Some of the material on the history of the country’s aeronautical and automobile industries and its rocketry and aerospace efforts is fascinating (Argentina was the fourth country to put a living being into space and recover it alive).

Circumstances in Argentina are indeed tragic: 30 percent of the population live beneath the poverty line, and only one third of the young people graduate from high school. Hunger and illiteracy and social misery are pervasive.

The specific question that Solanas poses, however, could be posed in many spots on the globe, certainly in every large, resource-rich nation, including China, India, Russia, Brazil and, for that matter, the US! How is the phenomenon of dire poverty and inequality in the face of vast natural and human wealth to be explained anywhere?

Not by pointing to the politics of “neo-liberalism,” but by grasping the irreconcilable conflicts at the heart of capitalism: between the global development of humanity’s productive forces and the division of the planet into competing nation-states, and between the mass, socialized means of production and their private, profit-driven ownership.

Nostalgia for the days of economic and scientific independence from foreign domination (if they ever existed), opposition to technological advances, the utopia of national self-sufficiency...none of this is going to help the Argentine population. This is Solanas’s Achilles heel, and the Achilles heel of a considerable portion of the Latin American petty bourgeoisie intelligentsia.

Children of the Sun treats another national social project, the Israeli

kibbutz (cooperative farm) movement, which flourished between 1930 and 1970. Individuals who grew up on kibbutzim recount their memories over home movies that provide images of the families and locales.

The movement’s ideology combined socialist rhetoric and national messianism. As the Toronto film festival catalogue noted: “The Zionist project in the early twentieth century was characterized by unbounded idealism and a strong vision of Israel as a utopian, socialist refuge. The earliest inhabitants of the collective communities had high hopes for a better way of life, and their children were the first to be raised according to these new ideas. They were destined to become the ‘New Man,’ the new face of the Jewish people.”

As Marxists understood, Zionism too was a utopian and reactionary vision. The harmonious development of this national “refuge” within the world capitalist economy was an impossibility.

The deluded nature of the vision perhaps helped lend the kibbutz movement its rather artificial and even repressive character. The “bourgeois family” was to be summarily done away with, apart from wider social and economic processes. Former residents tell of the “forced collectivization” of child-rearing; parents were prevented from having too much contact with their children, or even seeing them after dark. Kibbutz life was a version of “primitive communism,” with the few possessions held in common.

This closed world inevitably broke down under the pressure of Israeli and global development. The policies of privatization, economic liberalization and other measures pursued by the right-wing Likud regime in the 1980s put the final nails in the coffin. The cooperative ethos fell increasingly out of favor with the Israeli elite. In *Children of the Sun*, kibbutz residents watch in dismay as Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin viciously red-baits the “communist” kibbutzim to the cheers of a right-wing mob.

The final note of the film is part elegiac, part bitter. It is worth noting that the tragic fate of the Palestinian people is not referred to once in this documentary dominated by individuals raised in a supposed “communal” and “socialist” atmosphere.

French filmmaker Eric Rohmer, the director of *La collectionneuse* (1967), *My Night at Maud’s* (1969), *Claire’s Knee* (1970), *Chloe in the Afternoon* (1972), *Le beau mariage* (1982), *Pauline at the Beach* (1983), *Summer* (1986), *Autumn Tale* (1998) and numerous other works, is now 87.

Rumor has it that *The Romance of Astrea and Celadon*, based on a seventeenth century text (set in fifth century Gaul), may be his last film. It is understandable why Rohmer should want to retire from directing, but it will do his reputation no good to have this as his final effort. It is a dreadful, silly work, with the unfortunate actors roaming the countryside spouting banalities.

Rohmer will be remembered for his intelligent considerations of the moral struggles (or sweatings) of the French urban middle class in the post-1968 era. His is a universe in which social upheaval lies decisively outside the frame. Rohmer’s first great success, *My Night at Maud’s*, significantly, came in 1969. His works have alternated between the self-involved and trivial, on the one hand, and the emotionally acute and quasi-satirical, on the other. No one, however, has ever questioned his sensitivity and intelligence.

Age is one crisis that befalls everyone, but a few years ago, Rohmer said he had run out of stories to tell. What could that mean but that the “post-1968” period in which he flourished was coming to an end in France, along with the relations and social psychology with which it was associated, and a pre-“something quite different” was emerging?

To be continued



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