

Toronto International Film Festival 2008—Part 3

Mike Leigh's Happy-Go-Lucky, Terence Davies' Of Time and the City: What the filmmakers now see

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This is the third of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-13).

To create a visually appealing and insightful film is difficult. There are many technical problems to confront, as well as the complex task of developing the themes and overall mood of a work in an artistic manner. To withstand various pressures, to tell the truth without flinching, to be true to what is best in oneself—none of this is easy.

A bad political climate, a temporary but serious cultural retrogression, a corrupt industry—none of that helps.

But there is a general and renewed interest among writers and directors in looking at the world in its different aspects and from various points of view. The most self-involved and trivial work stands out more and more like a sore thumb.

A one-sidedly formal approach to filmmaking, which pays inordinate attention to the “purely artistic” elements, ignores the fact that writers and directors, on the one hand, and viewers, on the other, are real, living human beings with psychologies that are social products. What impulses drive the given artists to make films and audiences to watch them are not incidental matters.

Those academic or specialist books on cinema that attempt to associate a specific technique with a specific emotional response are not very useful, by and large, because a particular formal approach can have a different or even opposed meaning under dissimilar circumstances. If criticism is not historically concrete, it is of little value.

As we've said, artists are paying attention to the state of things, to one extent or another, and social realities are sinking in. It is difficult, however, for the overwhelming majority of film writers and directors to pursue a problem or a theme and work it through from beginning to end. Interesting moments alternate with dull or pointless ones; or a director will make one substantial film and follow it up with something trivial. We continue to see far too many disappointing second or third films. Social and industry pressures take their toll on individuals whose power of resistance is not developed or has been weakened.

The strongest moment in *I Want to See* (*Je veut voir*), by the interesting Lebanese filmmaking couple Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (*Around the Pink House*, *A Perfect Day*), comes early in the film. Catherine Deneuve, playing herself, a celebrated actress, is in Beirut for an industry event of some kind.

She announces that she wants to tour southern Lebanon, to see the damage done in 2006 by Israeli bombing. Deneuve is in a hotel room. People, presumably her “handlers,” are buzzing around, and they are arguing against the trip: It's dangerous. She won't get back in time for the gala in the evening. There's nothing to look at anyway, because

“they're reconstructing,” and so forth. She insists: “I don't know if I'll understand anything, but I want to see.”

It's a moving and important moment, because artists have to put themselves in that position, to witness the ravages of war and oppression. Intentionally or not, and Hadjithomas and Koreige are fairly sophisticated individuals, the line echoes the words of Joan Dark, a member of the Black Straw Hats (a Salvation Army-type religious group), in Bertolt Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* (1929-1931). When Joan announces her intention to descend into the slums of Chicago, she's strongly warned against it. The people there, she's told, are “really the scum of the earth.” Joan responds simply, “I want to see it.”

The rest of *I Want to See* is something of an anti-climax, because little of the historical context of the damage in southern Lebanon is provided. It's too much of a travelogue, and the images by themselves can't and don't speak clearly enough. Seeing is important, but understanding is equally vital.

There are many ways in which the world can be approached and its truth registered. It would be wrongheaded to encourage or expect only the familiar approaches.

Happy-Go-Lucky, directed by Mike Leigh, and *Of Time and the City*, directed by Terence Davies. Two films from Britain. Two films about life and people being worth something. Is that too little to ask? Possibly, but these are not sentimental or cheaply “humanistic” works, like certain others at the festival.

In Leigh's film, Poppy (Sally Hawkins) is an irrepressible personality, a teacher in London who looks for the best in people and situations. “I love my life,” she says in response to criticism. “It's hard at times, but that's part of it.” She has a flatmate, Zoe (Alexis Zegerman), also unmarried, also a teacher. They both care a great deal about the children they teach, including the difficult and troubled ones.

But even Zoe has her limits. “You can't make everyone happy,” she complains to Poppy at one point. “There's no harm in trying that, Zoe, is there?”

When Poppy's bicycle is stolen (“I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye”), she decides to take driving lessons. Her instructor, Scott (Eddie Marsan), is a coiled spring, perpetually angry, paranoid, even racist. He constantly harps on Poppy's failings, from wearing boots with heels to her driving lessons (“vanity before safety...”) to teaching and leading her life unsystematically (“You celebrate chaos!”). Her cheerfulness infuriates him—“You will crash and you will die, laughing!”

Scott eventually mistakes Poppy's interest in him, especially her curiosity as to the source of his fury (“Were you bullied at school?”), for flirtation and attempted seduction, with unhappy results.

Poppy's optimism encounters various challenges, including a pupil who beats on his classmates, a tramp reduced to chanting nonsense, her own tense and disapproving married sister. She recognizes pain and misery in the world, and she's not naïve, but she works away at the problems around her.

Leigh has said that he intended audience members initially to be irritated with *Happy-Go-Lucky's* central figure, but he hoped they would learn "to like her, even love her." To a certain extent, this is indeed what happens.

Leigh's methods are unusual. He begins, he says, with "nothing." No script or dialogue, in any case. Over the course of months, through improvisations with his actors, research and discussion, the characters and story emerge. The result is both intense and deliberately exaggerated.

We can take Leigh's comment that he begins, more or less, with nothing with a grain of salt. In any case, he clearly does not have a worked-out subject or theme, in the form of a solid lump. Instead: certain personalities perhaps, certain attitudes toward the world and other people, the interplay of these personalities and attitudes?

He explains: "So here's a film in which the central character Poppy, is a teacher who is positive and she doesn't let things get her down. I chuck all kinds of things at her but she is infallible, she picks herself up and gets on with it." (<http://www.rte.ie>)

Leigh speaks of "this wonderful, nutty, zany but at the same time quite sensible, sussed, focused and ultimately serious young woman, who knows how to deal with life."

He told an interviewer from the *Daily Telegraph*: "It's about education: how we learn and how we teach. It's about responsibility. About trust, about men and women, and about commitment. I felt it would be a good time to make a film that would be, in some way, anti-miserabilist. These are tough times we're in; we are destroying ourselves and the planet, but there are some people who care enough about the future to be teaching kids."

There are numerous teachers, instructors and "care-givers" in *Happy-Go-Lucky*—Poppy herself, her flatmate, her fellow teachers and headmistress of her school, her flamenco teacher; more loosely, a physio-therapist, a social worker, and most unhappily, Scott.

He is the most obvious example of a "bad teacher." Scott attempts to ram his views down Poppy's throat; he has a ridiculous method, for example, of teaching his students how to remember to check their mirrors, which, in fact, is impossible to follow. Worst of all, he's so fixed and frozen in his beliefs that he's incurious, impervious to the influence of other people, incapable of learning. Presumably, the film suggests that only someone terribly desirous to know is capable of teaching others.

It doesn't seem to me that this latest film, notwithstanding its bright, sunny color and the cheerful disposition of its heroine, is insubstantial in relation to Leigh's other works (*Naked, All or Nothing, Vera Drake* and so forth). It's possible to criticize his approach or his views, but the film has a serious intent, as the director's comments indicate.

Happy-Go-Lucky sticks in the memory, as does its central character. It goes against the stream at present, to Leigh's credit, and pays tribute in particular to teachers of children, who haven't allowed the afflictions of the world, and their own personal frustrations, to make them cynical or callous.

Whether any human being can wall herself off from those afflictions and frustrations to the extent that Poppy does is a legitimate question. Again, Leigh, although he begins with real facts and relations, is not a naturalist. All his important characters are maximized, "heightened" embodiments of certain human qualities.

Nonetheless, questions about Leigh's methods and *Happy-Go-Lucky* inevitably arise. The exact nature of the rehearsal-development process is something of a "trade secret," but you do wonder whether this process, which reaches down into very personal and intimate recesses, at times runs the risk of losing the forest for the trees. Individual details and

personality traits emerge quite distinctly, but sometimes at the expense of the contours of the whole society and its historical evolution.

The rather "timeless" air of the latest film is a little unsettling. The British education system has experienced budget cuts and efforts to privatize and deregulate, along with the stupid and brutal testing of children at every stage. A 2007 UNICEF report found that the US and Britain were the worst places in the industrialized world to be a child. Could not some of those broader problems have been hinted at?

Moreover, while it is thoroughly commendable to bring Poppy's dedication to the fore, it is almost inevitable that such a character will encourage the notion that strenuous individual efforts, or even a "positive frame of mind," are adequate when confronting the harshness of the present world. Or, worse, that the little bright spot presented in the film simply turns out to be the other side of a deep pessimism: the overall prospects for humanity are hopeless, everything is going to hell, but we must nonetheless "do our bit." Then there's the risk, heaven forbid, that this will be seen as a latter-day celebration of the average Briton's ability to "muddle through."

I don't believe that any of this is Leigh's conscious intention. Poppy's encounter with the tramp certainly suggests that heroic efforts can't overcome everything, that too much damage can be inflicted. He tries to speak and merely repeats, "It's - it's - it's," and "They - they - they." And, finally, he says, "You know?," and Poppy replies, "Yeah, I do." This seems an acknowledgement of a sadder, darker world, but not one that has defeated her.

In any event, the director points out that "people might assume that my next films will be ever more gleeful and bathed in gorgeous sunlight. But that may well not be the case because there are all kinds of other things to investigate." These seem to me to be eminently reasonable and intelligent remarks.

Of Time and the City is an intensely personal, but also socially perceptive film by veteran director Terence Davies (*The Long Day Closes, House of Mirth*). Davies has made a documentary of a sort, a tribute to his native city of Liverpool, where he lived from his birth in 1945 until he left in 1973.

He has organized black-and-white photos, newsreel footage and contemporary video, beneath a soundtrack composed of classical and popular music, radio programs, oral history and his own intense narration, into a highly individual response to the culture, history and evolution of a major city.

There are many images that appear on the screen, but more than anything else, *Of Time and the City* evokes the Liverpool of Davies' childhood and early adolescence. Raised a devout Catholic, the Church figures prominently in his memories. The narrator speaks of his dream of finding peace in his struggling soul, struggling with his sexuality in particular, a dream thwarted by the Church. About religion, he concludes, "It's all a lie," and notes that he became a "born-again atheist."

Days at the beach ("The world was young and oh how we laughed"), football crowds and football scores on radio, radio programs with bizarre sexual *double entendre* (in the 1950s, when homosexuality was illegal in Britain). Narrow streets, long terraced rows of small houses. Footage from the postwar period of women carrying bundles of laundry on their heads down the street to communal laundries. Women at those wash-houses, chatting and singing, while they scrub out the dirt.

And Davies cites Friedrich Engels somewhere here, a portion of this passage from *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845): "Every great city has one or more slums, where the working-class is crowded together. True, poverty often dwells in hidden alleys close to the palaces of the rich; but, in general, a separate territory has been assigned to it, where, removed from the sight of the happier classes, it may struggle along as it can."

At an early age, Davies discovers the cinema, which replaces the ritual

and splendor of the Church with its own. Gregory Peck arrives at the Ritz Theatre in Birkenhead across the river from Liverpool. “We gorged ourselves on Musicals, Westerns, and Melodramas,” the voiceover tells us.

Rightly so, the soundtrack includes “Dirty Old Town,” with its evocation of factory walls, canals and the gas works. (Although the version by The Pogues is superior to the one used in the film.)

The monarchy appears—the future Queen Elizabeth’s marriage in 1947 and her coronation in 1953. We fear the worst and even prepare ourselves for a somewhat sentimental, national-popular approach on Davies’ part. But he surprises and pleases us when he is quite unsparring on “Betty and Phil and a thousand flunkies.” He notes the vast sums “wasted on the monarchy...privileged to the last,” while the rest of the population, Davies drives home with deep feeling, “survived in some of the worst slums in Europe!”

Those slums are cleared in the 1960s and replaced with high-rise housing estates, which soon become new and perhaps more depressing dwellings. “We had hoped for paradise, we got the *anus mundi* [the anus of the world].” Two young girls push a stroller through a wasteland of rubble, broken glass. He refers in passing to “Municipal architecture—dispiriting at the best of times, but, when combined with the British genius for creating the dismal, makes for a cityscape that is anything but Elysian.”

Of Time and the City is unabashedly, unashamedly elegiac, so much so that it’s almost impossible to be offended. “The golden moments pass and leave no trace,” he declares, quoting Chekhov. Davies has no use for many aspects of the modern city, where “cocktails are consumed in Babylon” and well-heeled diners eat in restaurants located in “deconsecrated churches.”

The film is valuable not because of its carefully thought-through approach to history and social life. No, not at all. This is a poetic version, but genuinely felt and elegantly expressed. What Davies is largely paying tribute to, although he probably doesn’t recognize it, is the socialist working class culture that existed in cities like Liverpool into the 1970s. That “dirty old town” is gone, but so too much of the parochialism and insularity associated with it.

Return to Hansala, directed and co-written by Spanish filmmaker Chus Gutiérrez [see accompanying interview], is an intelligent and sensitive movie. A work of fiction, it began with a brutal fact from modern life: in 2001, the bodies of 37 Moroccan immigrants, economic refugees, washed up on the shore near the Spanish town of Rosa. Their inflatable dinghy had capsized. Thirteen of the victims came from one town, Hansala.

Thousands of desperate Africans attempt to reach Spain every year by sea. And many perish in the attempt, victims of the European Union’s brutal immigration policies.

Gutiérrez’s film centers on two figures: Martin (José Luis García Pérez), the funeral parlor director, whom the police contact when a number of corpses are discovered, and Leila (Farah Hamed), the legally documented sister of one of the drowned young men. She feels a particular guilt because she encouraged her brother to make the hazardous crossing to Spain, against the wishes of her father.

Despite the considerable cost, Leila determines to return her brother’s body back to Morocco, availing herself of Martin’s professional services. They also bring back the clothing of the other dead, to see if they can be identified.

During their trip they talk. “Do you like your job?” she asks, somewhat wonderingly. “It’s what I know. I’m my own boss. Answering to no one is good,” he says, perhaps fooling himself. In fact, his business is in trouble, and he has to answer to his creditors. She puts in, “Our only option is to move to another country.”

They overcome Moroccan red tape, carjackers and other difficulties en route to the remote village. The villagers in Hansala receive Martin with

generosity—“Thank you for bringing our son home.” To pay him, each of the elders’ families must collect 125 euros, an immense sum. “We help each other here.”

Leila attempts to reconcile with her father. “I’m a good Muslim woman and I work hard.” He is unrelenting. Another youth, Said, wants to emigrate to Spain. In this village, there is “no electricity, no water, no money...no dreams.”

Martin is the most interesting figure in the film, the European audience’s point of entry, in any case. He’s not a monster, but he needs to be paid. Leila doesn’t blame him—“Everybody has to make money.” He’s like most people, capable of shortcuts and deceit, but also goodhearted under the right conditions. If he ever was simply an exploiter of other people’s misery, as Leila says in an angry moment early in the film, he’s not by the story’s end.

There is something here, an argument for compassion, an indictment of the cruelty and indifference of governments....

To be continued



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