Vancouver International Film Festival 2008—Part 1

Life in its incontrovertible reality

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This is the first in a series of articles on the recent Vancouver International Film Festival (September 25-October 10).

What was the Vancouver film festival like this year?

On the one hand, I'm tempted to say the obvious, that it was similar to other festivals over the years: full of contradictions. A handful of genuinely good films, numerous interesting or colorful ones, a good many mediocre ones and worse. It was a lively event in its way.

Vancouver this time was a mix for us of fiction and documentary and history, valuable films from China and Malaysia, Central America and elsewhere. Some relatively rich and dense material--some of it amusing, some of it decidedly not. Harsh economic conditions in the Chinese countryside and perhaps worse moral conditions in its cities; a decaying housing project in Malaysia where longing holds sway; a dangerous path between life and death, between childhood and whatever follows, in Nicaragua.

We saw documentaries about artists (Diego Rivera, Louise Bourgeois), musicians in Indonesia and the lives of prostitutes in Cambodia and Laotian exiles, and film footage of life in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which was alternately appalling, intriguing and tragic.

Many things, a variety of images.

Of course the Vancouver festival can't be wrenched out of our time and its peculiarities. The event took place as the global financial order was coming apart. The artists, needless to say, are woefully in the rear on that score. They tend to take for granted life as they encounter it and as it shapes them, along with its social structures. Only cataclysms disrupt that relationship. Such events are surely approaching.

The overall impression? First of all, it's always necessary to point that no critic can watch more than a fraction of the films screened. We saw (or had seen) some 45 of the 250 or so full-length films presented.

What are the good artists doing now, at least many of them? Above all, they're responding to the harshness of present-day life for vast numbers of people with sensitivity. The filmmakers have to think and feel deeply. The state of the world, humanity's suffering, ought to go through them, in Keats's phrase, "like a spear."

Life at present is difficult, and art's job is not to remove itself from that, but also not to lose itself in the painfulness and drown the spectator in misery--that can be another form of evasion. Paralyzing people with hopelessness is one of the worst things that can be done; they need to be on their toes, aware, engaged, alert.

A movie is not a political pamphlet, nor a history lesson, much less a lesson in morality. Dealing with even the most complex and painful--or grotesque--subject, the artist has no reason to dispense with beauty, and grandeur and simplicity. Or even, as long as the concept is not misused, delicacy.

Accepting and knowing life unconditionally, "in its incontrovertible reality." It's not so easy.

With *Good Cats*, following *Taking Father Home* and *The Other Half*, Chinese director Ying Liang (born 1977, Shanghai) has now made three interesting films, each quite different from the other.


Good Cats

The new film's title is an ironic reference to the aphorism attributed to former Chinese Stalinist leader Deng Xiaoping, when justifying the open adoption of the free market: "It doesn't matter if it is a black cat or a white cat. As long as it can catch mice, it's a good cat." Referring to Deng's comment, in his director's statement, Ying says, "In a society dominated by these values, tragedies will be continuous."

The "good cats" currently enriching themselves in China, if one is to judge by Ying's film, are a dreadful crowd.

Luo Liang, a young man pushing thirty, is the driver for "Boss Peng," who owns a real estate company in Zigong, a city in southwestern China's Sichuan Province.

In an early scene, Peng pays a visit to a village whose houses he's attempting to buy up for a development scheme. He makes a little speech: "I'm a businessman. But I completely understand that today's ‘Social Harmony' puts progress before profits. So I can assure you that your well-being will come before my profit!" Needless to say, this is simply for public consumption. Boss Peng is the consummate grasping petty bourgeois, avaricious, tasteless, rather stupid.

Later, Peng comes under attack from the villagers, perhaps egged on by a local mayor seeking a bigger bribe. A crowd with sticks attacks the boss's car, with Liang at the driver's wheel, shouting: "Thieves! Profiteers!" Afterward, Peng blandly comments, "Peasants these days aren't easy to deal with."

Liang is married, but his wife is not happy with his habits. "You reek of booze." He comes from a poor, rural family, hers is slightly more affluent. The in-laws don't think much of Liang, who doesn't have the proper ambition or the right job. When his wife stops having sex with him, he takes up with a bar-girl, who believes in the power of prayer--to Buddha. Meanwhile, despite his efforts, Liang's mentor is deteriorating and finally

comes to a tragic end.

The film at times is quite amusing. The boss and his cronies hang out in a hideously decorated office. In one scene, Peng's right-hand man explains that since "Clients nowadays go for 'high culture'" and since they "like abstract, nebulous things," he's come up with some names for the future units in the real estate development. Among them, "The Great Post-Structural Symphony." "River Seine Paradise," "Halfway to Bali," and "Sicilian Beauty."

When graft and coercion don't suffice, Peng has his men set fire to the houses of the holdouts, killing several.

In the end, the boss proves to have some kind of a conscience, or at least, a psychological weakness. His right-hand man replaces him, boasting to Liang, "If I built a mound of shit, I could sell it."

A rock bank occasionally intrudes in *Good Cats* and offers its generally bleak commentary. The lyrics to one of the songs go: "How should I escape this world? Is corruption endemic? Or is the world just too lonely?"

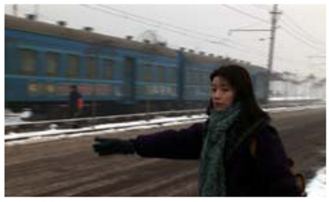
Ying, in this film, often sets one action or character in the foreground and another, simultaneously, in the background. For example, Luo chases away some kids from the boss's car in the lower left-hand and foreground of the frame, while Peng, in the distance, makes his lying little speech to the villagers in the upper right-hand corner of the frame.

Whether Ying is being economical (and he has made his other films on ridiculously low budgets) or has a philosophical aversion to cutting, the effect seems a rebellion against the long and often static takes that have become something of a cliché in independent film circles in recent years.

His comic sense, as well as his use of the band, suggests a desire for something livelier, more eruptive than is the norm at present in much Chinese filmmaking, at least the "artistic" end of it. There are somewhat crude elements here too, the acting is not always polished. But the overall effect is lively and engaging, even as Ying and his screenwriter, Peng Shan, skewer the social types who are getting rich at the expense of the Chinese people. Ying also expresses frustration, in his director's statement, at Liang, whom he describes as "content with being somebody's vassal."

Ying adds, "When I was editing the film, I could not help thinking, 'Is life really the way I describe? Is the film exaggerated or surreal' Unfortunately, life is just what I described in the film."

To the extent that this is true, it's all to the director's credit.



Perfect Life

Perfect Life, from China, is about anything but. Director Emily Tang, a trifle self-consciously, examines the grim existence of a young woman, Li Yueying, who first works in a prosthetics factory. Estranged from her family, alone, she becomes a hotel maid and later falls into a relationship with a lowlife. Yueying smuggles a package for him, but he ends up badly.

The film also follows a second character, a divorced mother of two living in Hong Kong and seeking alimony from her husband. Both women end up in Shenzhen, in southern China. They cross paths, briefly. There are elements of fiction and documentary here. The director says she is interested in the "random collision" of "fact and fiction."

The most interesting quality of this film is its dark, glowing imagery of China's industrial areas, railway stations and city streets in particular. The film presents a very somber picture of life. Jia Zhangke (*Platform*, *The World*, *Still Life*) is one of the film's producers, and there seems to be an influence, both positive and negative. The film is serious and beautiful to look at, but rather passive and immobile in its approach to social life. (We'll consider Jia's newest film, *24 City*, separately.)

The consequences of China's changed economic order are at the center in this film too. In her notes, Emily Tang writes that with the "opening-up policy" in the late 1970s, China underwent a great social transformation. "Many of the huge enterprises under the former planned economy system in northeast China," she notes, went bankrupt "due to the great impact of the new economy. Millions of workers who had previously enjoyed free welfare provided by the state were now made redundant and thrown into the maelstrom of the free market economy. Their children [including presumably Li Yueying] also realized that they could hardly find a job in their home cities."

At the same time, "tens of millions of peasants" left the land and went in search of jobs in the cities, Tang explains. "Together with the laid-off workers and their children, they flood into the coastal cities of South China." Shenzhen today has a population of 12 million, ten million of whom are migrants from others parts of the country.

Tang's intentions and poetic sensibility are valuable, but her conclusion, "Everything has two sides, like a sheet of paper," is rather banal. The film suffers from the conflict between its fascinating imagery and the extraordinary social situation, on the one hand, and the director's limited viewpoint, on the other.

The Malaysian filmmakers continue to contribute some of the more interesting efforts, following on the work of directors such as Amir Muhammad (*The Big Durian*), Deepak Kumaran Menon (*The Gravel Road*) and Yasmin Ahmad (*Sepet*).

This Longing

A real feeling for the world outside the filmmaker's consciousness, that's what's needed. In *This Longing*, an evocative title, writer-director Azharr Rudin, reveals a remarkable gift of insight. He has some special feeling for things, people and events, at least those he chooses to treat in his first feature film set in a decrepit housing project in Johor Baharu, near Singapore.

A young kid, Sidi, lives alone with his father after his mother leaves home. The father spends most of his time with his pals, who go night-fishing and wish they were in much more prosperous Singapore, "so near, yet so far."

Sidi has his longings too, for his mother, perhaps for a cute neighbor girl, to whom he never says a word. He stays away from school, on his skateboard a lot of the time. He hangs out with his friends, and sets one up with a transvestite prostitute. Life is treated casually, but intensely here. Not much happens, but it has an authentic and rich flavor.

About two-thirds of the way through, *This Longing* switches tracks and takes up the story of Riza, a former resident of the same housing estate, returning in search of her father. She has a video camera and seems something of a stand-in for the filmmaker, who was born in Johor Baharu (and who also edited two of Amir Muhammad's films). This section is less interesting and less evocative, although there are hints of murder or suicide in the building that may have something to do with the previous strand of the story. The film ends with scenes of the high-rise project's demolition.

Sell Out! is a very different kettle of fish, and often a very funny one, also from Malaysia. It begins with a send-up of "independent cinema," as a television arts show host attempts to interview a director whose film has just won a prize for 'best Chinese woman's, over-70, short film' (or

something like that) at some imaginary European film festival-the director of course is neither a woman, nor Chinese, nor over 70, and he is preparing the "5-hour director's cut" of the short.

The taciturn independent director explains to the arts show host, Rafflesia Pong, that his short film, *Love is love is not something else*, is "boring, because life is boring and cinema should mirror this boredom."

Rafflesia's show, however, is at the bottom of the ratings heap and she's sick and tired of those "over-rated underachievers we call artists." Engaged in a bitter rivalry with a fellow television glamour girl, Rafflesia comes up with the idea of a reality show that captures people's moments of death. As the director of *Sell Out!*, Yeo Joon Han, observes in his notes, "Unfortunately, she soon realizes that dying people don't grow on trees."

Sell Out!

The other leading character, Eric Tan, is the head of product design at FONY Electronics, whose profit-obsessed bosses bitterly complain when he invents an 8-in-1 soybean machine that has no flaws in it, which would force consumers to buy a replacement. "Go copy someone else's breakdown mechanism!," they insist. The pressure splits poor Eric, literally, into two conflicting personalities (‘practical Eric' and ‘dreamer/creative Eric'), but he loses his job anyway.

The film is also, somewhat unexpectedly, a musical. Various characters burst into song. Eric, despondent, addresses one directly to money: "Money, why do you like rich people? ... Why don't you like poor people? ... You would be better loved by poor, very poor people."

On her new program, "Final Say," Rafflesia manages to catch one man's death on camera. In his last moments, she asks him to sum up his life and he explains his net worth, "1.47 million." "How much of your life was wasted?" "85 percent." "What do you think of our government?" He dies before he can tell her. Rafflesia: "A live death!" Later, however, the same executives, who also own the television station, complain about the segment: "It's the death. It looks fake." They also announce, in passing, that they're canceling the news "starting tonight."

Many silly things go on, some of them more subtle than others. Rafflesia sits by the bedside of a woman who inconveniently refuses to die, even as the show's airtime approaches. "Ten hours, and she's still alive. Should we suffocate her? Poison her?" Her cameraman points out, "It seems unethical." And so forth. In the end, Malaysia will get to vote on whether ‘practical Eric' or ‘creative Eric' should die. The enthusiasm and daffiness are infectious.

El Camino (*The Road*) is a haunting film about life, life for children especially, in Central America, carried off--at its best--with a certain poetic touch. Saslaya, 12 years old, and her younger brother, Dario, live in miserable conditions with their grandfather in Nicaragua. Their father is dead, their mother left eight years ago for Costa Rica, where economic conditions are better, and hasn't been heard from. When the pair are not in school, they scavenge, along with others, in a dump.

El Camino

Molested by her grandfather by night and tired of the generally wretched conditions, Saslaya proposes to Dario that they travel in search of their missing mother. The film follows their journey to Costa Rica, across an extraordinary landscape. They walk, ride buses, take ferries. They sleep outdoors or in whatever shelter they can find. They encounter a homeless boy who steals to survive, a woman in blue, a sinister foreign puppeteer and other immigrants like themselves.

In one scene, documentary-like, aboard a boat, various passengers explain why they're forced to leave Nicaragua. "For a better future for my children," one woman explains. "There are no jobs in Nicaragua." We hear stories about war, landmines and death. A man says, "We have no stability, we're people of the earth." The camera shows us the faces, the infinitely sad faces.

An image recurs, ‘a butterfly crucified in her nest,' ‘beauty nailed to the cross.' In Costa Rica, but not apparently any nearer her mother, the desperate Saslaya suffers a sad fate.

The writer and director, Ishtar Yasin, of Costa Rican, Iraqi and Chilean descent, was born in Moscow in 1968 and received an MA from the State Cinema Arts Institute (VGIK).

She explains, in a note, that Nicaragua is now one of the poorest countries in the northern hemisphere, after Haiti. Thousands of Nicaraguan families have been split apart as fathers or mothers go to Costa Rica in search of work. Many children stay home "and suffer from the psychosocial consequences of their being abandoned by their parents." The number of "suicidal children" has risen considerably, Yasin comments. Most of the 70,000 Nicaraguans who have left "do not have their papers and cannot afford a passport."

One of the consequences of this process has been the emergence of the sexual exploitation of the parentless children on the Costa Rican borders. Yasin writes that Costa Rica is second in the world in terms of "sexual tourism" for minors.

Out of this tragic situation, the filmmaker has fashioned something neither sensationalized nor sentimental. It is an intelligent and artistically graceful work.

To be continued