

“Filmmakers have real responsibilities to their audiences”

Bertrand Tavernier speaks with the WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Veteran filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier visited Australia late last year as part of the “On the Set with French Cinema” program organised by Unifrance, the French Embassy, the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in Sydney and several local universities.

Tavernier, who made his first full-length movie—*The Clockmaker of St Paul*—in 1973, is one of a handful of humane and intelligent filmmakers of the post-WWII generation still working in contemporary cinema. During his career of more than 35 years, Tavernier has directed 20 features and numerous documentaries. His latest movie, *In the Electric Mist*, a crime mystery shot on location in Louisiana and based on a novel by James Lee Burke, will be released in Europe and the US this year.

The filmmaker’s visit was not reported by Australia’s corporate media, nor have any of his most recent films—*Safe Conduct* (2002), *Holy Lola* (2004) and a 110-minute documentary *Histoires de vies brisées: les “double peine” de Lyon*—been screened in Australian cinemas.

Film festival directors in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne have studiously ignored these movies, despite their interesting content and Tavernier’s popularity amongst local film students and enthusiasts. *Safe Conduct*, for example, is about the French film industry under Nazi occupation during World War II; *Holy Lola* is set in contemporary Cambodia and follows the efforts of a young French couple to adopt an orphaned child; and *Histoires de vies brisées* is about the *double peine* or double punishment of immigrants convicted of crimes who, having served their terms, are deported from France.

As well as addressing audiences at the Australian Film Television and Radio School, Tavernier spoke at the University of Sydney where he outlined his artistic approach and the state of contemporary cinema.

Tavernier began by explaining that one of his early influences was American director John Ford and particularly his *Fort Apache* and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* that made him realise that filmmakers could “write with images”. While Ford had right-wing political views, Tavernier said, he was a complex figure whose best movies were at odds with much of the prevailing ideology of American cinema—the idea of the individual versus the rest of the world.

“All of Ford’s main characters are part of a collectivity and this really appealed to me. They are not treated as great heroes but people trying to do their best for everyone under difficult circumstances,” he said. “Ford’s approach to history, of course, is not mine but he is a much more complex figure than commonly appreciated and not as conservative as people think.”

Tavernier told the audience that every artist and intellectual had a moral responsibility to be faithful to his characters and his art and to tell the truth. This outlook, he said, had been instilled in him by his writer father, René Tavernier, who published a resistance literary journal in Lyon during WWII and had provided sanctuary for anti-Nazi intellectuals.

His father always insisted that words were “as important and as lethal as bullets” and that writers, and therefore filmmakers, had real

responsibilities to their audiences in this regard. “I’ve never forgotten that,” Tavernier said

The filmmaker said he rejected those who filled their work with excessive violence. Even socially conscious movies can be wrong in their approach to violence, he said. “It’s not just a question of the right political message, but how you portray ordinary people and women in your movies.” Violence should not become a sort of viewing pleasure or catharsis, he said.

Most of the contemporary purveyors of cinematic violence, he continued, “never show consequences. I always try to show social consequences in my films. This is a challenge, of course, but consequences are always more important than the action itself.”

Another problem, he continued, is that too many contemporary directors are “plot driven” and allow it to “take over the characters”. This means that dramatic emotion is developed through plot and special effects. “They want to produce epics by just using special effects. I always try to root my characters in their environment.”

Asked to elaborate on the influence of US movies on French cinema, Tavernier said: “American cinema has always exerted a global influence. For example, Jean Renoir, Jacques Becker, Jean-Pierre Melville and others were very influenced by it. Conversely, John Ford was influenced by F.W. Murnau and the German Expressionists. This is good. The problem arises though when this influence is not reciprocated.”

Today a new generation of American filmmakers has emerged, Tavernier said, who are “ignorant about the history of their own country, let alone the rest of the world” and so we have action movies “lost in their own technology” and therefore “not influenced by anything [important]”.

“These are movies produced by people who have never opened a book, and it shows”. “They’re dead films,” Tavernier said, because they all “look and feel the same”.

In July 1999, Tavernier spoke with me extensively about his work and his newly released *It All Starts Today*, a contemporary drama about a preschool teacher confronted with a myriad of social problems in northern France (see: “An interview with Bertrand Tavernier”).

Following his presentation at the University of Sydney, I spoke to the veteran filmmaker again. We discussed the impact of the May-June 1968 general strike on French filmmakers, developments in American contemporary cinema and his brief association with the OCI (International Communist Organisation), which had been the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International until 1971, when it broke with Trotskyism and moved rapidly to the right.

I began by asking him about the impact of the Cold War and how that related to the problems of contemporary American cinema.

Bertrand Tavernier: Of course the Cold War had a tremendous impact on the industry. People were driven out and there were a lot of anti-communist films. Most of these movies were very poor, especially on the ideological level.

A lot could have been said against the so-called communists. For instance, the anti-Semitism in Russia, the Moscow Trials and the hunger in the Ukraine; or the gulags could have been dealt with, but no, they only deal with spies or with people who are treated like gangsters.

The Cold War forced a number of directors and screenwriters out of America and it also created a kind of unconscious self-censorship. There were far fewer social films, at least until the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties.

Richard Phillips: You made reference to the lack of consciousness about character development and social consequences in contemporary cinema. Could you elaborate?

BT: The nineties were a very bad period for American cinema and their movies went down hill compared to those during the 1960s and 70s. In the past, even before the studio system had finished in America, films were made for many different kinds of audiences. Suddenly it seemed that most American movies were only being made for young teenagers or people with a mentality of about six or seven years. People like George Lucas were a very, very bad influence with all those *Star Wars* films.

Intellectually, *Star Wars* is as empty as a Hopalong Cassidy movie. The only difference was that the *Star Wars* series had higher production values, multi-million dollar budgets and lasted longer than the Hopalong Cassidy films. Lucas's movies would last about two hours and fifteen minutes but the content was so poor.

Some great American directors survived during this time—Robert Altman was one of those who refused to compromise—but it is true, a lot of American cinema during the Cold War was disappointing.

RP: Could you speak about the impact of the 1968 general strike and its betrayal on you. There were many that claimed that this meant the end of the working class and socially conscious cinema.

BT: It didn't have this impact on me. I had always wanted to react against the establishment and so 1968 was a good influence on me and others. There were things, of course, that I think were not good though during this time. For example, all sorts of myths were propagated in education that students should be equal to the teachers and things like that—a sort of superficial radicalism, a chic radicalism, which can be very dangerous and led to the endorsement of the Khmer Rouge and Mao. This was very bad and created a lot of damage and confusion.

The 1968 general strike though broke down a lot of barriers. Before 1968 there were many laws in France that were anti-woman. These no longer exist. The right to abortion was granted to French women, although this happened, not under the Socialist Party government, but under [President] Giscard D'Estaing. So there were some changes that were interesting and important.

I think it's bad though when people either reject everything in 1968 or consider it some sort of a golden age. It was a time when all sorts of ideas were being thrown around—some good, some bad and some interesting. We rejected a regime that was rigid and stuffy not realising that it could give birth to a government that could be worse.

RP: You became a member of the OCI at some point during this time?

BT: Yes but only very, very loosely. I went to two meetings but was never a member of the party. I was supporting the dissidents—to free the political prisoners—in Russia.

I was mainly involved because everyone in my crew was and so I just came to a couple of meetings. I never took a card or paid anything but I just made donations to help free those that were jailed. I admired what Trotsky wrote and some of the Trotskyists I met were very intelligent—some were brilliant—but I generally kept a distance. At least they were not Maoists. For me the Maoists were just terrible.

RP: When was that?

BT: It was between 1973 and 1975 and it was because my DoP [Director of Photography] Pierre-William Glenn and all his crew were involved in the OCI and so were various other directors.

The OCI was doing a good job fighting against the Stalinists' control of the union. The Stalinists were running the union in a completely obsolete way with very rigid and totally reactionary rules—refusing to face reality. I remember at one point in 1976 or something like that—I was already away from the OCI by that stage—but I quit the union completely because I found what the Stalinists were saying was appalling.

For instance, they were imposing four-person camera crews and trying to dictate who should be my camera operator. I was working with Glenn not only because he was a good DoP but because he was great operator. The union demanded that he have a crew of four. So they were preventing me from working the way I wanted based on rules that were old-fashioned, obsolete and anti-creative. It was appalling.

A lot of films are made in France under a system called “participation” where people put half or two-thirds of their salary or take the minimum wage in order to help make the film. If the film is successful then they are repaid.

One day I said to the union that the existing rules should be changed and that we should find a way to protect the rights of the people involved in “participation” so that when a film is made all of this was worked out by accountants or people who specialised in this sort of thing. If money came in from a TV sale or something like that then the money should be properly controlled and given back to the people.

But the union told me: “We cannot do that because we oppose films being made this way”.

I said: “You can be against it but this sort of thing is already happening. For instance, at the Cannes film festival three out of the four French films being screened were made that way. It is more important to find a way to protect the interests and the rights of those people who took a risk than to say we don't agree.” The union guy responded by saying that he would campaign to forbid those films.

I told him that I was going to produce a film called *La Question*, about the torture in Algeria, and that this film would be impossible to finance and we would have to ask for some money from those working on the movie through participation. The union guy says to me, “If it was in my power I would forbid such a film to be made.”

And so I said to him “You are a communist and yet you are preventing us making a film exposing the torture in Algeria?” He said yes because he preferred that “they work in a genuine film”. I found this unbelievable.

RP: The great movies made in Hollywood emerged in a definite social and cultural context—many of the directors with left-wing views or influenced in one way or another by a socialist outlook. We are now entering a period that many liken to the Great Depression and a period of big social struggles. How do you see things developing today?

BT: Most of those Hollywood directors were not left-wing, there were plenty of right-wing guys, but yes, there was different political environment.

There's been reaction against what is going on in America today from young filmmakers and that's good. I haven't seen Brian de Palma's movie [*Redacted*] but there have been two or three others who have made films against the war in Iraq. Some of these have some interesting ideas and approaches, and there are many documentaries.

There was a long time when the American cinema seemed to be cut off from the social reality. There were exceptions, of course, but generally the best movies, the most interesting work on social and historical issues, would be on HBO pay television. For instance, John Frankenheimer's last movie—*Paths to War*—was a masterpiece and yet it was on television. It was a strange reversal because for a long time much of the material on American television had been fairly reactionary. As the films began to deteriorate cable television started to become more interesting.

I think things are now changing in American cinema and hope that good movies will start being made again. Maybe the Obama election victory is a sign that doors will be opened—that there will be new work and people

will take advantage of the new situation. The period of the Bush administration was so bad, so abysmal, that things have somehow got to be different.



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