

Toronto International Film Festival 2009—Part 4

More human (and artistic) problems

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This is the fourth of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 10-19).

Where are the extraordinary and captivating film dramas, and comedies, that go to the heart of our time?

The question itself of course would be scorned in many quarters. It is almost a given in important portions of the film world that writers and directors can only devote themselves to detail, the particulars of a life, the sights and smells of a specific locale. And some of that is accomplished with enormous skill. In our opinion, however, the filmmakers are not for the most part fulfilling their chief responsibility: illuminating the human situation in its totality.

Film writers, directors, and producers have been pushed, historically speaking, into a corner. Decades of ideological reaction, the relentless blather after 1989-91 about the “death of socialism,” the lurch to the right by layers of the comfortable intelligentsia, the decline in social struggle—and hence in the presence of the working class in social life—as a result of the protracted decay of the old labor movements, this has helped narrow the artists’ field of vision and discourage them. For years now we have too often had small change passed off as art.

One attends any given film festival with hopes of encountering remarkable stories. It goes without saying there is no shortage of drama and comedy in contemporary life. Human beings continue to be as complex, astonishing, and contradictory as they have always been, capable of every possible kind of behavior, “the basest cowardliness and the wildest heroism” (Rosa Luxemburg).

But the most compelling treatment of everyday life, as well as its disruption by social upheaval, requires a perspective on the whole. That phrase may be inadequate. “Perspective” is not merely the result of finding a convenient vantage point from which to look out on things and people, but the outcome of relentless, painstaking mental (and physical) labor over the course of years to establish a truthful picture of reality, in which the artist him- or herself is a participant. It is a difficult, time-consuming, and often frustrating process, as the biography of any major artist confirms.

The documentary, or “docu-drama,” can shed light on many aspects of life. To its credit, in recent years, non-fiction film has probably done the most to enlighten audiences. There is no substitute, however, for the reworking and rearranging of the artist’s impressions in the form of freely invented imagery. The deepest experiences of the artist and spectator or reader alike are found here: the film writers and directors presumptuous enough to stand before their audiences and explain, “This is how I see the world, this is how I see our day and age.”

At present, unhappily, the most ambitious filmmakers are likely to be the most empty-headed, and while the best may not “lack all conviction,” they have largely convinced themselves that artists must not pass judgment.

And when filmmakers do turn to history and society their approach is often informed, not surprisingly, by recent ideological trends. So there is a

tendency, for example, to consider history and social processes as though classes and political movements were little more than the sum total of individual psychologies, as though a representation of social reality could be accurately built up by proceeding from the individual ‘outward,’ or on the basis of supposedly ‘national’ (quasi-unchanging) moods or neuroses.

This criticism could be leveled, with varying degrees of intensity, against a number of films at the recent Toronto festival.

Women Without Men, for example, directed by Shirin Neshat, Iranian-born and currently living in New York, contains some fascinating and powerful material, but, in the end, the film’s approach weakens its impact. Set at the time of the CIA-organized and British-supported coup against the nationalist Mossadegh regime in Iran in 1953, Neshat’s work focuses on five women, including a prostitute, a woman whose life is dominated by her repressive brother, and a wealthy society matron.

Based on the novel by Shahmush Parsipur, the film would apparently have us view each woman as equally unfree and oppressed. Is it possible we should feel the same degree of sympathy for the beaten, bruised prostitute and the society woman whose husband doesn’t understand her? Objectively, are these forms of unhappiness equivalent? In the end, the concrete historical and social critique is dissolved in a “magic realism,” with undertones of self-pity, which seems out of keeping with the subject matter.

The latter problem appears as well in *Prince of Tears*, about the anti-communist terror in Chiang Kai-shek’s Taiwan in the 1950s. The film, written and directed by Yonfan, concerns a handsome fighter pilot torn away from his family by Taiwanese authorities and accused of being a “communist spy” because he once flew a plane, for personal reasons, to the mainland.

The characters and events ring true, but the work is done in a peculiarly slow-moving and all-too-lyrical fashion. The most interesting figure in the film is the mild-mannered, but sinister government official-informer Uncle Ding. The secrets the film hints at turn out to be not especially dramatic, or even seem to miss the point.

I am Love (Luca Guadagnino) is a carefully scripted and constructed Italian work, centering on a wealthy, factory-owning Milanese family. The patriarch of the family announces his plan for the firm after his death, which brings *King Lear* to mind, setting off various unexpected processes.

An Indian company is interested in buying the family’s textile factory, hinting at the transfer of power and wealth to new social interests. The smooth-talking Sikh who represents the Indian firm explains smugly that “capitalism is democracy.”

The hints of Luchino Visconti (*The Leopard*) are intriguing, and Tilda Swinton in the leading role performs impressively, but the film settles far too cheaply and lazily placing at its center the sexual dissatisfactions or preferences of its characters. The denouement, with its further literary echoes (Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* this time), is a moment of almost pure bathos. All the care and seriousness comes to this?

From Sri Lankan writer-director Vimukthi Jayasundara (*The Forsaken*)

Land), *Between Two Worlds* treats the brutality and madness of war in an impressionistic, imagistic manner.

A young man falls out of the sky into the sea. Washed up on shore, he makes his way to a city torn by rioting. Heading out to the countryside, he only encounters new terrors and absurdities. In one of the strongest images, a group of warriors on horseback slaughter a group of young men.

The 26-year-long war in Sri Lanka, recently concluded with the victory of government forces over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), cost tens of thousands of lives and devastated the working class and rural poor.

Jayasundara wants to say something compelling about the suffering, without painting pretty pictures of anyone involved. His young protagonist is not particularly appealing. The filmmaker's symbolist approach, however, has its definite limits. The festival's catalogue asserts approvingly, "*Between Two Worlds* never sets out to explain the conflict, but it does illuminate it."

The film is certainly a slap in the face of official national-patriotism in Sri Lanka, and Jayasundara ought to be defended if he comes under attack from the government or chauvinist forces, but *Between the Worlds* is not a concrete, convincing coming to terms with the current situation in Sri Lanka. There is even the danger that the young filmmaker, if he proceeds along these lines, will veer farther and farther away from that reality.

Mussolini's early career

Marco Bellocchio has a long history in the Italian cinema, dating back to his impressive *Fist in his Pocket* (1965) and *China is Near* (1967). His work did not make its way to North America by and large from the mid-1970s to the end of the 1990s. [See interview]

Vincere (To Win) is a more ambitious work than many of his recent efforts, the story of Benito Mussolini's first wife and son, discarded and trampled on by the fascist leader when they threatened to get in the way of his career and political goals.

The film's dramatic starting-point more or less is Mussolini's act of apostasy, his transformation in 1914 from a fire-eating, left Socialist into an Italian nationalist and patriot. A Socialist Party meeting dissolves in bitter name-calling. Mussolini is denounced as a traitor. ("You're a disgrace! In July you said, 'Down with War!'" "I've changed my mind" "Napoleon!")

Bellocchio uses Futurist imagery and graphics to drive his film. Mussolini (Filippo Timi) is pure brutality, amorality, masculine aggression, self-importance. He achieves his ends, political or sexual, by Nietzschean force of will. Ida Dalsler (Giovanna Mezzogiorno), who bears his illegitimate child, adores him, becomes his victim.

The account, which follows Dalsler into institutionalization and madness, has its fascination, but Bellocchio seems preoccupied with a rejection of coldness, hardness, emotional and political "conquest" as things in themselves. The worship of the machine, of motion, of "cleansing" violence, which characterized Italian Futurism (and which the filmmaker pointedly criticizes), had its roots in the pre-World War I decades, a period "when the air, charged with accumulated electricity, gave sign of impending great explosions. Futurism was the 'foreboding' of all this in art" (Trotsky).

Continuing his argument, Trotsky explained that the Italian bourgeoisie, like its European counterparts, "used extensively the feelings and moods which were destined by their nature to feed rebellion ... [T]he interventionists (that is, those in favor of intervention in the War) were the 'revolutionists' ... Last of all, did not Italian fascism come into power by 'revolutionary' methods, and by tempering and arming them?"

There is too little of a broad historical understanding and too much obvious psychologizing in Bellocchio's film, but it remains a serious and intelligent work.

Cold-blooded murder

Jean Charles de Menezes, a Brazilian immigrant, was murdered by police at Stockwell tube station in London in July 2005. He was a victim of a shoot to kill policy introduced by British authorities, part of the buildup of police-state measures justified in the name of the "war on terror." No police officers or officials have faced prosecution, much less imprisonment, for this heinous crime.

Brazilian director Henrique Goldman has reconstructed the period in de Menezes's life leading up to his death in *Jean Charles*, with the participation of family members (one of de Menezes's cousins plays herself in the film). Goldman, as he explained at a question and answer session following a public screening in Toronto, consciously chose to limit himself to telling a "story of outsiders," i.e., immigrants in London.

As such, the film succeeds. It paints a picture of people struggling to get by in a grey, semi-legal world, of temporary jobs, payments under the table, false documents, a continual cat and mouse game with immigration officials. The filmmakers use the arrival of de Menezes's other cousin Vivian (Vanessa Giacomio) in London to frame the events. We see a different, far less glamorous city than we are used to seeing through her eyes.

De Menezes (Selton Mello) was no saint, according to the film, which seems to do its work honestly. He got in over his head in various transactions, and it all came crashing down on him. "I screwed up," he tells Vivian. He was going back to work as an electrician when his life was cut short by police bullets.

In a final sequence, British officials visit de Menezes's family in Brazil to apologize and offer compensation. Appropriately, they are sent packing by Alex (Luis Miranda), Jean Charles's former roommate in London, who refuses to let his words be translated ("They didn't translate for me [in Britain]. Nice to meet you ... now please leave").

Alex is the one who has expressed what are probably the sentiments of a good many immigrants, especially black immigrants, when the terrorist bombings occur in London. He denounces imperialism, centuries of "slavery and shit," and tells Jean Charles's cousin that the US-British invasions of the Middle East are about oil. This is the closest the film comes to widening its scope. Nonetheless, *Jean Charles* is movingly and sensitively done, one of the more sincere works screened in Toronto.

A new film from Todd Solondz

Life During Wartime from Todd Solondz is the most interesting movie by the American writer-director since *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, his initial feature film. Its working title was *Forgiveness*, and that seems as fitting as its eventual one. Particularly in the light of the Polanski affair, its humanity stands out.

As does its satirical take on the American middle class and suburban living. One relatively short sequence with Ally Sheedy as a narcissistic Hollywood actress is brilliant. When the film opens in North America, we will comment on it at greater length.

Turkish problems

Turkish director Asli Özge [see accompanying interview] has made *Men on the Bridge* with considerable care and sympathy. It focuses on three men, who spend a good deal of time on the Bosphorus Bridge, which joins Europe and Asia in Istanbul.

Umut drives a shared taxi, spending much of his time in traffic. His marriage is a dreary, unhappy one. His wife is dissatisfied, she wants more out of life than their small apartment. “Everything depends on money, and we don’t have any.” They quarrel and hurt each other. Her friend says, “He’s a typical Turkish man,” which is not meant as a compliment, but, in fact, he seems to care about her.

A young Roma, Fikret, has never been to school. He’s never worked either. When he applies for job, he has little to offer. He gets and loses a job in a restaurant. He sells flowers illegally on the bridge, with his father. The family lives in a hovel on a desperately poor street. Fikret and his friend are searched and thrown out of an appliance store just on the basis of their looks. His prospects are pretty bleak.

Murat is a policeman, who shares an apartment with another cop, a real womanizer. Murat goes out on dates with girls he meets online, but he’s from a provincial town and he seems to have difficulty impressing the Istanbul girls. He’s passive in most of his life, but Turkish nationalism makes him loud and aggressive.

The three stories are kept separate, but the individuals share certain common problems, economic pressure and its psychological impact on their lives. They lead cramped, narrow existences, without much joy, without much culture, without much hope.

Özge follows her characters, probes their lives and feelings, considers their difficulties. She has a genuine interest in human beings.

To be continued



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