

Toronto International Film Festival 2010—Part 5

What does it mean to take reality seriously?

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This is the fifth of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 9-19). Part 1 was published on September 23, Part 2 on September 28, Part 3 on October 1 and Part 4 on October 6.

Collectively, the films that take social reality seriously at present point toward a vast social and human crisis. Of course, this is almost something of a truism. Art—good, bad or indifferent—can hardly help reflecting “the world of three dimensions and...the narrower world of class society” (*Literature and Revolution*).

In making such a characterization, we leave aside the large quantity of strenuously self-involved and narcissistic movies, which inevitably reflect their time too...but only how our time is experienced by trivial middle class personalities consumed by image, career, and money.

The issue, from our point of view, is not simply reflecting the world, but reflecting the world in a manner that helps people understand it better, that sheds light on what is not evident on the surface. This undertaking involves the commitment of one’s entire being, body and soul, to establishing the truth about life—convincingly, movingly, entertainingly, accurately, evocatively—in concrete imagery.

Film writers and directors need to answer certain questions for themselves. Does the current painful and threatening human condition stem from the rottenness of men and women, or from the rottenness of the social order? Does individual psychology shape and direct social life, or does social life, ultimately, shape and direct individual psychology? Is the “artistic personality” unsuited by nature to engage with the tumult and complexity of modern life, or should the artist seek to enlarge the presence of the world in his or her work *to the greatest extent possible*? What we think is obvious.

Given the historical and ideological circumstances, writers and directors are inevitably unclear about these issues at present. They are pushed and pulled by different social and psychological impulses, some healthy and others much less so. The great economic and social crisis is not a central fact of life to the filmmakers, its presence is vague, ominous, indirectly expressed, “off-screen.” That being said...

From Iran, a hunted man

Rafi Pitts, from Iran, has written and directed a number of films, including *The Fifth Season* (1997) and *It’s Winter* (2006). His most recent film, *The Hunter*, is about a man who has been to prison and holds a low-paying job as a security guard at night in a Tehran warehouse.

An angry and tense individual, Ali (played by Pitts) relaxes by stalking game in the countryside on his time off, and is something of a marksman. He has a wife and young daughter. One day they don’t return to the small family apartment. Eventually, the police inform him that his wife has been killed in an “accident,” in a cross-fire between the authorities and

“insurgents.” Ali is devastated.

The daughter remains unaccounted for. Ali searches for her, even sleeping in his car one night. Then she too turns out to have been killed, presumably in the same incident. Ali goes over the edge; he takes his rifle to a hill overlooking a highway and sets his sights on a police car. He then goes on the run. Two policemen eventually capture him in the woods—one is brutish and violent, the other explains that he is only in the police by necessity as part of his military service (“I have no choice”), that his colleague is corrupt and “takes bribes,” etc. The “good cop” suggests a way out. Such a story can only have a tragic ending.

What come across more than anything else are the filmmaker’s anger and intelligence. *The Hunter* proceeds firmly and thoughtfully. Its images are crisp and clear. The director is not sympathetic to Ali’s choice of action, but he makes the desperate, antisocial action comprehensible. This is not, of course, merely an Iranian problem.

Whether Pitts is constrained by fears of the censorship or by artistic considerations, he seems to hold himself back from a direct social comment. One simply feels that Ali belongs to an unhappy population, presided over by murderously repressive—and petty—authorities. The movie was shot before the disputed election and the promotion of the Green movement by the Western media. Pitts may well lean in that direction, as many Iranian artists do, but in our conversation, he declared a plague on both the reactionary-clerical government and the bourgeois opposition.

Stopping where *The Hunter* does is to leave *too much* to the imagination, but the film is honest and moving as far as it goes.

In a conversation in Toronto, Pitts explained, in flawless English (born in Iran in 1967, he attended college in London), that he was obliged to take on the part of the “angry, disturbed” lead character in his film at the last moment. Without a performer for the role on the first day of shooting, Pitts had a difficult choice. “When you get a certificate [official permission to make a film]—and it was very important for me to get the certificate because otherwise it would only be shown outside Iran—on it are the names of the director, cinematographer and leading actors.

“The question is: do I go back to get permission by introducing another leading actor, and take the risk of them [the censors] saying you can’t shoot the film? What do you do?... I could not have swapped places with the director of photography, and all the other actors were in the film, so that’s how it happened.”

Pitts explained that *The Hunter* was highly personal, for reasons that he only went into later on in the conversation, but I suggested that the spectator could not help drawing general conclusions, “there’s so much anger, loneliness isolation, alienation on display.”

He replied, “You’re dealing with a country that is 70 percent under the age of 30. Dealing with a country that’s having a hard time. Not even the ministry could have foreseen what was going to happen in terms of the election, otherwise the film would not have been made. So you’re angry as an individual, and you’re shooting something that is impossible to

shoot, an attack on the cops. It's too symbolic and impossible to shoot."

The filmmaker explained that during "the Bush period" he had had an idea for making two films based on the same script, one shot in the US and the other in Iran, about a deranged individual. "Of course," he said, "there would be differences on why they explode, the different backgrounds of the countries, but it was my intention to show civilians on both sides of the world that the madness could happen anywhere. That it was a human issue, regardless of what the governments might be doing, or the hatreds that might be going on. I then wanted to release both films at the same time."

Getting back to *The Hunter*, I suggested that Ali believes, contrary to the police story about a "cross-fire," that his wife was killed by the authorities, "but there is also some sense that the population as a whole is caught in a cross-fire."

Pitts replied, "Yes, he believes the police killed her, but I don't agree with the action he takes. I understand it, but I don't agree with it. Taking this long-range gun, not knowing who you're killing. Killing because of the uniform. Yes, the population is caught in a cross-fire."

I asked why he had organized the tragedy in two stages, first the police tell Ali his wife has died, and then some time later, his daughter.

He responded bluntly, "Because that's what happened to me. I remember when it happened to me—not my wife and daughter, but people who were close to me. I remember the day they announced the death of this friend of mine, nobody knew how he died, it's the emotions I went through. The way I was reacting physically to the situation, that's what I was thinking of when I was going through this. There are various things the film is based on, other cases too.

"So, like any film, you have the literature that inspired it—the individual I dedicated my film to, Bozorg Alavi, was a founder of the Communist [Tudeh] Party in Iran, but was also one of the great writers. Then you have the real story, then you have your own story. If you mix all these different layers together, then it ends up becoming what it is, without belonging entirely to a single one of these elements."

As a final point, I suggested that it was hard not to read the film, especially the episode with the "good" and "bad" cops, as a metaphorical criticism of a rotten regime, on the one hand, and an opportunist opposition, on the other. I noted our hostility to the Green movement.

Pitts: "My character is not a supporter of any movement. You hear the riots, but he's not rioting." Yes, I remarked, the wider population seems largely excluded. "But even if I did belong to the Green movement," the filmmaker commented, "I think the job of the filmmaker is to question and not to give answers."

I agree, I said, but the film would have had a different sensibility if he had belonged to that kind of movement, because those things have an artistic impact.

He went on, "I don't believe in political parties, particularly in my own country, maybe because of what they've been since I was growing up. The only political movement I can go for is to think of my fellow man. That's my political movement. The parties in themselves, I've never been interested in them and I don't think I ever will be."

"The film exudes a sympathy for the population, for those who are suffering," I said.

Pitts commented, "That's what I'm interested in. That is the only small thing I can do. I was just speaking to an Iranian reporter, who asked, 'Don't you think you're making people angry with your film?' And I said, 'It's not my fault if I hold up the mirror and what they see is ugly. It is my duty to hold up the mirror.'"

There were other films we saw in Toronto worth writing about (Hong Sangsoo's *Oki's Movie* from South Korea, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *A Screaming Man* from Chad, Ho Wi Ding's *Pinoy Sunday* from Taiwan, for example), which we will not be able to get to.

It appears likely that the effort to convince the movie-going public that

some extraordinary development is taking place in Turkish filmmaking is destined to fall short. The Toronto festival highlighted Istanbul this year (after the notorious spotlight on Tel Aviv in 2009) and the films failed to impress, or even entice, the spectator.

40, for example, from Emre Sahin, is a shallow and flashy look at three lives in the Turkish capital. The film's recycling of European film clichés (in the manner of Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run*), with little discernible feeling devoted to the characters, is uninspiring. This is cinema intended to advance one's standing in the global industry.

The Turkish writers and directors presented, by and large, seem indifferent to the conditions of the population and determined to imitate their more self-centered counterparts in Paris, Berlin, and Tokyo.

The exception to the rule was the one older film, *Somersault in a Coffin* (1996), about an unemployed man in Istanbul who steals to stay alive, directed by Dervis Zaim, whom I interviewed in Toronto more than a decade ago.

Speaking of his film, Zaim said at the time, "This is a low-budget, no-budget film. No institution helped us. We produced it with friends, by guerrilla filmmaking, and this helped me to think more independently. The market dictates certain kinds of thinking, of aesthetic production. Since I had relatively free conditions, I was able to talk about this guy, his environment, Turkey's environment as well." The Turkish filmmakers whose works were screened this year in Toronto appear not to have been so fortunate.

Passivity and other problems

I Wish I Knew is directed by China's Jia Zhangke (born in 1970), who has made a number of interesting films in the past (*Pickpocket*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World*). Commissioned by the Chinese government to commemorate the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai (whose slogan is "Better City—Better Life"), Jia's documentary records the memories of 18 present or former residents of Shanghai.

Some of those interviewed fled China in 1949, with the victory of Mao's forces, for Hong Kong or Taiwan. There are major business figures among them. A few of the interviewees were supporters of the revolution and remained in Shanghai. The liveliest comments, frankly, come from figures in the pre-revolutionary film industry.

The film is tedious in large measure, because of its passivity and determination to render no judgment on the historical and social processes, or the condition of present-day China. The interviews are more or less balanced between Communist Party and Kuomintang supporters.

In a note, Jia explains that it has recently dawned on him "that the causes of almost all of the problems facing contemporary China can be found taking shape in the depths of its history." This is too nationally limited an explanation, but, in any event, unhappily, the filmmaker doesn't deeply illuminate those "depths," he simply presents a few people's more or less arbitrary memories of and opinions about them.

In the end, the director writes, "What I care about, however, is what lies behind these abstract terms ["revolutionary," "liberation," "cultural revolution," "reform," and "opening up"]: the individuals buffeted by politics, and details of their lives forgotten by time." We have Maoism and the discrediting in China of genuine left-wing thought largely to thank for this kind of superficial view. *I Wish I Knew* is passive and nearly inert, like Jia's *Still Life* and *24 City* before it.

Affected by the same tendencies, only more so, is Wang Bing's *The Ditch*. Based on memoirs and discussions with survivors, Wang paints a harrowing picture of a Maoist "re-education" camp in 1960, during the so-called "Great Leap Forward." Some 3,000 "rightist" intellectuals and

former government officials were sent to the Jiabiangou labor camp—built to hold 50 inmates—in the middle of the Gobi Desert. More than 2,500 starved to death, in ghastly conditions. Weak from hunger, the prisoners were unable even to bury the corpses, which were simply piled up around the camp.

Wang, director of the nine-hour *West of the Tracks* (2003), an occasionally fascinating look at decaying Chinese industry, and *He Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (2007), also about the Maoist camps, is evidently a serious and sincere individual. But earnestness and the willingness to pile atrocity upon atrocity do not necessarily add up to either art or useful history-telling. Again, not through the individual fault of the artist, social and historical perspective is almost entirely missing.

About *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu*, there is little to say, because the filmmaker, Andrei Ujica, says so little himself. The three-hour documentary is a compilation of footage—without any commentary whatsoever—of the Romanian Stalinist leader, covering his decades in power (he became secretary general of the Romanian Communist Party in 1965 and served as president of the country from 1974 to 1989, when he was executed).

Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, appear in a variety of capacities, domestic and foreign, in a series of propaganda set pieces organized by the Stalinist-run media in Romania. Numerous dignitaries make an appearance, France's Charles De Gaulle, Alexander Dubcek, the Czech Stalinist leader, Richard Nixon, Mao....

And it all adds up to what? Pictures alone don't tell us everything, certainly not the important things. Culled apparently from more than 1,000 hours of archival footage, the sequences are fascinating for what they show about Stalinist pretensions and deception, as well as its dreadful pseudo-"proletarian" style. Ceausescu comes across as a provincial hack politician, an ardent nationalist and petty bourgeois, navigating among the various social layers in impoverished Romania and on the world stage, without a single connection to the traditions of the international socialist movement.

But as Eastern Europe, two decades after the re-introduction of the capitalist market, faces the revival of all the old, historically unresolved issues, including the danger of extreme right-wing, authoritarian rule, something more than this fanatically "even-handed" approach—essentially an abdication of artistic responsibility—is surely called for.

From Jean-Luc Godard, the Swiss-French filmmaker of "New Wave" fame, now nearly 80, we receive, and not as something eagerly sought after, *Film socialisme*. This incomprehensible jumble of misanthropy and self-importance has nothing to do with socialism and would represent a step backward in filmmaking were it to be taken seriously.

What one draws primarily from this effort is Godard's disgust with humanity and his determination to force audience members to partake of and, if possible, share his disgust. The film, which takes place on a cruise, in a gas station, elsewhere, is the work of a political crank, who juxtaposes images of historical atrocities (Nazi crimes, the French war in Algeria, etc.) with those of ordinary people, in a casino, on board a ship, in such a manner as to drive home the message: people are capable of, even eager to commit, the most horrible crimes, or simply to ignore them.

There are references to various myths and locales identified with those myths, Egypt, Palestine, Odessa, Hellas, Naples and Barcelona, but nothing is added to our knowledge about any of this.

Images come and go, without rhyme or reason, there is no drama here, no coherent view of anything. The fragmentation is an expression of political cowardice and incomprehension. Godard, a leftist for a few years in the 1960s and 1970s, who was "disappointed" decades ago, is unable to make any sense of things, and this is the result. Enough. *C'est fini*, as Godard likes to say. I have no interest in watching any more of his incoherent slanders against humanity.

To be continued



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