Toronto International Film Festival 2012—Part 8

Drama of modern-day life

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This is the eighth and concluding part of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 6-16). Part 1 was posted September 22, Part 2 September 26, Part 3 September 28, Part 4 *October 2, Part 5 October 5,* Part 6 *October 9 and Part 7 October 12.*

It is not possible to do justice to the numerous worthwhile films presented this year at the Toronto film festival. Some of those will presumably open in North America and elsewhere over the course of the next 12 months, offering other opportunities to comment on them: a film, for example, such as Margarethe von Trotta's *Hannah Arendt*, with Barbara Sukowa, which takes up some important and painful questions.

We apologize to the reader for the length of this series, but it is not entirely our fault. The pace of world events is speeding up. The filmmakers, although far behind, are at least making an effort to catch up. In outline form, with many critical details and features missing, a picture of our reality begins to emerge.

The process is highly contradictory, uneven, unsteady. The social position of the best-intentioned directors and writers, the pressures bearing down on them, mean that even when things are looked at honestly and sincerely, the film artists bring all sorts of misconceptions and prejudices and illusions to bear. And the specific character of the past 30 years, with its generally retrogressive and reactionary cultural climate, its cultivation of historical ignorance, has to be taken into account as well.

Nor is there any automatic, inevitable link between a more profound understanding of social processes and artistic success. We take as a general proposition that understanding reality more deeply will lead, in the long run, to richer artistic effort, but "there's many a slip twixt the cup and the lip. It is one thing to *pose* a certain problem; it is quite another matter to *solve* it" (Plekhanov).

The directors and writers are beginning to identify important aspects of modern life, but do the artists grasp their implications? Far from it, in most cases. One might almost say that there is a certain light-mindedness or flippancy about some of the works. It is relatively easy to summon up disgust for the bankers and speculators. Such feelings are catching on, and that is not a bad thing. All sorts of conclusions, however, can be drawn from even the strongest variety of disgust: that such figures are bad apples, that greater regulation is the answer, etc.

In the first article of this series on the Toronto festival, we cited the comment of the German philosopher Hegel to the effect that the artist "must have drawn much, and much that is great, into his own soul; his heart must have been deeply gripped and moved thereby" before he can create important pictures of life.

Such depth does not simply derive from acute observations or sniffing out this or that trend. The artist "must have done and lived through much." Today, that can only mean the filmmaker having more than a passing familiarity with the conditions and activity of the broad mass of the population.

Not simply with its suffering. The more sensitive artists already grasp that, such as China's Ying Liang, in *When Night Falls*, and Wang Bing, in *Three Sisters*.

The first film is a fictionalized version of a case that took place in Shanghai in 2008. It centers on the mother of a young man, Yang Jia, accused of killing six policeman after suffering harassment and beatings at the hands of the cops. His mother, Wang Jingmei (Nai An), is illegally detained by authorities in a mental hospital for months and prevented from mounting a campaign in her son's defense.

When Night Falls is perhaps not as fully worked out as Ying's other films (*Taking Father Home* [2005], *The Other Half* [2006], and *Good Cats* [2008]); it is somewhat too elliptical and unnecessarily minimalist, but its sense of injustice is powerful and its picture of the Chinese justice system chilling.

Documentarian Wang Bing's latest work, *Three Sisters*, clocks in at only 153 minutes. His *West of the Tracks* (2003), about China's decaying industrial heartland, lasted nine hours. Parts of the latter were fascinating, other parts unendurable. Wang is serious, but sorting out the essential from the inessential, and one suspects, the truth about the history and character of the Chinese state, remains an issue.

His new film takes a look at a remote peasant village in Yunnan Province in China's far southwest. Terrible poverty and deprivation prevail. Images of mud and cold and endless toil stick in the memory. The human beings here live only a slight degree better than the animals they tend.

The mass of the population do not simply suffer, they also *act* in their own interests. The artists have not seen much in the way of resistance in recent decades, as the rottenness of the unions and the so-called workers movement in particular has obstructed opposition, but it should not be impossible to see that the present situation cannot continue indefinitely. The widespread outrage in Greece, Spain, Portugal and elsewhere only hints at what's to come.

So far from seeing in the mass a social force capable of combating the present conditions, a film such as Michel Gondry's *The We and the I* views the collective as a positive obstacle. Gondry (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [2004], *The Science of Sleep* [2006], and *Be Kind Rewind* [2008]) has made a sensitive film about a busload of Bronx teenagers on their way home after school.

The French-born director is one of the few filmmakers who takes people in America seriously. He treats them both generously and critically. There are numerous charming and privileged moments in *The We and the I*, as well as goodly amounts of backwardness and cruelty subjected to criticism, and the non-professional cast is generally remarkable. However, the film unmistakably identifies the group experience with bullying, invidious peer pressure and other ills. One can only suggest that surprises

lie in store.

Capital, from Costa-Gavras (*Z* [1969], *State of Siege* [1972], *Missing* [1982] and more), is a scathing assault on the world of financial speculation. A powerful French bank faces an internal crisis following the heart attack of its CEO. A rising star, Marc Tourneuil (Gad Elmaleh), is put in charge, because leading forces on the board think he's controllable, and expendable.

Tourneuil has his own ideas, and enters into ambiguous relations with ruthless US hedge fund manager Dittmar Rigule (Gabriel Byrne). After promising employees on a worldwide video conference a voice in how the bank is run, the new CEO turns around and destroys 10,000 jobs, demanding and receiving a large "layoff bonus" from the bank's board.

Various plots and counterplots unfold, as different factions slug it out in *Capital* for control of the French bank and supremacy in the global financial markets. At one point, Tourneuil, a latter-day "Robin Hood," proposes a toast, "We'll continue to rob the poor to give to the rich." He also memorably proclaims, "Luxury is a right."

Eventually, a brilliant Asian expert at the bank, Maud Baron (Celine Sallette), is naïve enough to propose that Tourneuil expose the illegal wheeling and dealing in a book. He doesn't take her up on that, but the notion that a zealous crusader could upset the financial apple-cart hovers around the film, as does the suspicion that a good deal of the filthiness on display stems merely from unregulated "neo-liberalism" or "cowboy capitalism."

That unprincipled, greedy men and women are largely to blame for a good deal of the world's problems and that they ought to and can be exposed by crusading individuals (who, an unkind critic might suggest, bear more than a passing resemblance to the figure of the filmmaker him- or herself) is a conception that seems to guide, semi-consciously or otherwise, a number of the current films on the subject of Wall Street and related issues.

Shanghai, from Indian director Dibakar Banerjee, which, coincidentally, draws inspiration from Costa-Gavras' thriller *Z*, takes the same general tack. A reform politician, Dr. Ahmedi (Prosenjit Chatterjee), comes to an Indian city to warn its residents against the plans of a giant conglomerate, IBP, which is developing a massive infrastructure project with the collaboration of venal local politicians.

Ahmedi's assassination, at the hands of thugs hired by the political bigwigs, sets off a chain of events, with far-reaching consequences. As in Costa-Gavras's original, the honesty of an unlikely figure, a well-connected investigator (Abhay Deol), and the determination of one of Ahmedi's supporters, Shalini (Kalki Koechlin), lead to the plotters' undoing. The film is effectively done, but it stays somewhat too easily on the surface, in my opinion, lacking a deep artistic or social commitment.

Italian director Marco Bellocchio made a name for himself with two angry, sardonic films in the 1960s, *Fists in the Pocket* (1965) and *China Is Near* (1967). It was three decades before he came to my attention again, with *The Wet-Nurse* (1999), based on Pirandello. I spoke to him in Toronto at the time.

In 2009, his *Vincere*, about the first wife of Benito Mussolini, was released. Bellocchio remains, despite having received obvious political and psychic blows over the decades, a compelling figure.

His *Dormant Beauty* treats in a fictional manner events surrounding the case and ultimate death of Eluana Englaro, an Italian woman who lay in a vegetative state for 17 years as the result of a car accident. There is an obvious resemblance to the 2005 Terri Schiavo case in the US.

The film's story has various strands, but the central one perhaps concerns a senator, Uliano Beffardi, once a left-winger, but now a member of Berlusconi's coalition, brilliantly played by veteran actor Toni Servillo. Beffardi has to struggle with his conscience as the right-wing government demagogically attempts to make political capital out of the Eluano case.

What's noteworthy here is the absence of easy, somewhat vulgarized villains. Whether such an essentially honest figure as Beffardi could have coexisted with Berlusconi, even for a minute, is almost beside the point. Art bends the truth in order to establish the truth.

I hope that we will encounter *Dormant Beauty* again and write about it with the seriousness it deserves.

***Fidaï*: the Algerian revolution, 50 years later**

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the end of the Algerian war for independence against French colonialism.

Fidaï is a striking and deeply felt film from director Damien Ounouri, the son of an Algerian father and French mother. His great-uncle, Mohamed El Hadi Benadouda (El Hadi), moved to France in the late 1950s to join his sister and became a member of an armed unit of the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front). He carried out operations for the FLN, including an assassination, for which he was arrested by the French authorities and eventually expelled to Algeria following the Evian Accords in 1962.

Ounouri grew up in France and had little contact with his older relative, who, in any case, had spoken to no one in his family in detail about his activities as a FLN member. Ounouri, now a filmmaker and interested in the history of the Algerian revolution, decided to contact his great-uncle and make his story the subject of a film. (See accompanying interview.)

Ounouri constructs his documentary out of interviews with El Hadi, his wife, and other family members. But the former FLN member, a quiet, unassuming man, is at the center of the film. He explains why he joined the independence struggle, having seen the French military's crimes in person as a farm worker, aware of its torture of prisoners and civilians. "My heart is still angry against the [French] army," El Hadi explains.

He made a thoroughgoing commitment. "When I participated, I never thought I would survive. We sacrificed our lives." Later, he adds, "To help the revolution, I left all those around me."

In France, he was ordered by the FLN to assassinate an individual who had apparently betrayed the cause. In the actual location, Ounouri has his great-uncle reenact the events of the killing, urging him to recall the feelings and movements associated with it. It's a painful and troubling scene. How did you feel about shooting a man?, he's asked. He was "a traitor, against the revolution.… I didn't think about it." One doubts the latter claim.

"Do you think you were wrong?," his great-nephew asks him. "No, something's a duty." After hiding from the police for some months, El Hadi was arrested and tortured in a French jail. He left politics in 1962, and Ounouri's father emigrated to France.

We realize that, of course, the killing bothered El Hadi, how could it not? But "In a revolution, all is forgiven.… Colonialism is unbearable."

He is a remarkable figure, both on screen and in person. And Ounouri has made a film that touches on some of the significant questions of our time. We expect and hope to hear more from him.

Concluded

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