San Francisco International Film Festival 2013—Part three

Museum Hours and *The Artist and the Model*: In defense of art and the artistic personality

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This is the third of several articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 25-May 9. Part one was posted May 16 and Part two on May 22.

Each year the San Francisco film festival invites a prominent figure to deliver a "State of the Cinema" address. This year, in his remarks, director Steven Soderbergh made a number of pointed observations about the current film industry. (Soderbergh stated earlier this year that he is retiring from making feature films, although he did not refer to this in his address.)

The filmmaker said at one point: "Well, how does a studio decide what movies get made? One thing they take into consideration is the foreign market, obviously. It's become very big. So that means, you know, things that travel best are going to be action-adventure, science fiction, fantasy, spectacle, some animation thrown in there. Obviously the bigger the budget, the more people this thing is going to have to appeal to, the more homogenized it's got to be, the more simplified it's got to be. So things like cultural specificity and narrative complexity, and, god forbid, ambiguity, those become real obstacles to the success of the film here and abroad."

Soderbergh commented later: "So then there's the expense of putting a movie out, which is a big problem. Point of entry for a mainstream, wide-release movie: $30 million. That's where you start. Now you add another 30 for overseas. Now you've got to remember, the exhibitors pay half of the gross, so to make that 60 back you need to gross 120. So you don't even know what your movie is yet, and you're already looking at 120."

And further: "Psychologically, it's more comforting to spend $60 million promoting a movie that costs 100 [million], than it is to spend $60 million for a movie that costs 10. I know what you're thinking: If it costs 10 you're going to be in profit sooner. Maybe not. Here's why: OK. $10 million movie, 60 million to promote it, that's 70, so you've got to gross 140 to get out. Now you've got a $100 million movie, you're going spend 60 to promote it. You've got to get 320 to get out. How many $10 million movies make 140 million dollars? Not many. How many $100 million movies make 320? A pretty good number, and there's this sort of domino effect that happens too. Bigger home video sales, bigger TV sales, so you can see the forces that are sort of draining in one direction in the business."

Soderbergh was quite right to point to the impossible economics of current studio filmmaking. Unfortunately, nowhere in his comments did he trace out or even allude to the social background of the present problems, or offer any perspective for overcoming them. As a whole, the director's diffuse observations reflected the relatively superficial approach of even Hollywood's "independent" spirits.

In fact, at one point Soderbergh wrong-headedly suggested that audiences were partially responsible for the current malaise: "But the problem is that cinema as I define it, and as something that inspired me, is under assault by the studios and, from what I can tell, with the full support of the audience." As though moviegoers, largely at the mercy of giant conglomerates and a social order doing everything in its power to wipe out culture, had the slightest choice in the matter!

The filmmaker seems upset, and a little bitter, that his own movies have not done as well at the box office as he would have liked. Perhaps if Soderbergh took on big problems and ideas in a more artistic and convincing way, instead of treating secondary and tertiary matters rather unseriously and complacently, he would make a deeper impact on audiences.

Museum Hours

At least two films at the San Francisco festival treated art, the artistic personality, or both, in a compelling fashion.

Jem Cohen's *Museum Hours* is an unusual and intelligent film. (See accompanying interview.)

The story involves a guard, Johann (Bobby Sommer), at the renowned *Kunsthistorisches Museum* ("Museum of Art History," sometimes referred to as the "Museum of Fine Arts") in Vienna, and a foreign visitor, Anne (Mary Margaret O'Hara), who has come to Austria to look after a cousin ill in hospital.

We first encounter Johann seated in a gorgeous room filled with 17th or 18th century paintings. In a voiceover, he explains something about his life. He has worked at the museum for six years. Decades ago, he worked in the music business ("not a 'business' at the time," he points out) as a road manager for various bands. "I like people, and to be of use," he says. His longtime partner has died.

Johann's favorite room at the museum houses paintings by the Flemish Renaissance artist Peter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525-1569), many of whose best-known works (*The Return of the Herd, The Peasant Wedding, The Tower of Babel, The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, etc.) are on display there.

Anne, who has had to borrow money to make the trip, comes in, somewhat emotional and troubled. When she appears again, seemingly struggling with a city map, Johann engages her in conversation and eventually offers himself as a guide, both to the museum and the city.

The pair also spend time in the hospital, sitting with Anne's comatose cousin. In one lovely scene, Anne asks Johann to describe for her cousin some of the paintings in what he calls the "big, old museum." He proceeds to explain that there are three or four self-portraits by Rembrandt, "all very dark and wise-looking." One is especially famous,

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"for his clothes being so poor … he was honest about this." In another painting, Christ is being baptized. St. John is there of course, "young, delicate-looking … blue water under a blue sky … God is there! … He is rather unrealistic compared to the people below."

Anne tells Johann that her economic situation in Montréal is not very good. She has various jobs, in a friend's shop, in a bar. She jokes that she isn't so much "self-employed" as "'friend-employed' … I don't have a lot of work." So Johann takes her on an inexpensive tour of wintertime Vienna, for our benefit too.

Johann, in his narration, recounts that "a punk kid," an art student, once worked with him as a guard. This student commented that when he looked at the paintings, "he mostly saw money," or things standing in for money. For example, in the Dutch still-lifes of the 1600s, he saw the possessions of the newly rich at the time. Today, according to this kid, that would mean paintings of luxury items too.

In our conversation, Cohen (*This Is a History of New York*, 1987; *Lost Book Found*, 1996; *Instrument*, 1999; *Chain*, 2004; *The Passage Clock: For Walter Benjamin*, 2008) noted that in the form of this student's comments he was both paying tribute to critic John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and gently mocking it too. On their own, Cohen's images of the extraordinary art work are an argument in favor of there being a great deal besides possessions and money present.

In one scene, a guide (perhaps a scholar) attempts to convince a group of museum visitors that Bruegel was a unique figure. His times were "restless, brutal." The Netherlands were under Spanish Catholic rule. Repression carried out by the infamous Duke of Alba brought the country to a boil.

According to contemporaries, explains the woman, Bruegel disguised himself as a peasant "to capture the customs" of the lower classes, thus becoming known as the "peasant Bruegel." The speaker suggests that the paintings are "more radical" then they might seem. Bruegel's "truthful depictions were highly unusual." His representations of the peasants are "not sentimental, nor do they judge." She points out that Bruegel, in one painting, focuses our attention on a little boy in an ill-fitting helmet, and in another, on a horse's rear end. Some of her listeners are not persuaded.

Among other things, *Museum Hours* is about life and art, and how they influence one another in many ways, with a great museum as the site of that process. Art here is a heightened extension and expression—and necessity—of everyday life, not a separate rarified realm (and certainly not a lucrative field for investment!). Through looking at and thinking about art, the characters are drawn closer. Through spending time together and learning about each other's lives, including their difficulties, Johann and Anne are impelled once again toward the museum and its art. The work entertainingly considers all this from various vantage points.

Cohen's film is quietly, carefully and honestly made. At times perhaps, one would like to see a few more fireworks in the drama, but an elegant, sensitive film in defense of life and art … how many of those do we have at present?

The Artist and the Model

The Artist and the Model, from Spanish director Fernando Trueba, is a convincing work about an artistic type that seems in short supply at present. The film's central figure is Marc Cros (veteran French actor Jean Rochefort), apparently modeled on Catalan-French sculptor Aristide Maillol (1861-1944).

It is 1943, in German-occupied France, near the Spanish border, and Cros, 80 years old, has apparently lost his artistic drive. His wife (the great Claudia Cardinale) and servant (Chus Lampreave) provide him with a new model, a young woman they find sleeping in a doorway. Mercè (Aida Folch) proves to be a refugee from Franco's forces and an internment camp escapee. She is given the artist's studio to live in.

Much of the film, written by Trueba and famed screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière (who has worked on films for Buñuel, Godard, Schlöndorff, Wajda, Oshima, Forman and Malle, among others), consists of scenes of Mercè's modeling for Cros. The attention paid to the painstaking artistic process, to Cros' struggle to bring life and reality to his sculpture is remarkable and telling. In one scene, the artist goes over in detail with Mercè a Rembrandt drawing of a child beginning to walk, "a masterpiece without pretenses … simple as life."

In his increasing pessimism and depression, brought on by age, but also by events (two world wars, fascism), Cros has turned against life to a certain extent. When Mercè asks him, "Will the war end soon?," his reply is "Men are savages." He wants nothing to do with events, or the Resistance, it's all futile and a distraction from his art. "The best a man to do," Cros asserts, is find "a quiet corner in which to live."

Mercè is very active, in every sense. She helps smuggle refugees, including Jews, across the border and shelters a partisan. At first, Cros responds angrily. "All I wanted to do was work. … Now I'm harboring refugees." The situation becomes dangerous when an admirer of his, a German officer (a professor of art in civilian life) comes to visit and discuss his treatise on Cros.

In the end, the girl, the struggle against oppression and the demands of art combine to revive Cros. He finishes his exquisite final work, the war is over, Mercè is going to leave. He tells her, "When one begins to understand things, it's time to move on." The implication is clear.

The film is a tribute to the struggle for life and reality in art. Whether it is intended as such or not, *The Artist and the Model* is a rebuke to much of what we see today in the art world, either open charlatanry or tiresome self-absorption and trivia.

Tall as the Baobab Tree and other films

Directed by American Jeremy Teicher, *Tall as the Baobab Tree* tells the story of two sisters in a Senegalese village. When an injury stops their brother from working, their father can only see one way out of the financial predicament: essentially selling 11-year-old Debo as a bride in an arranged marriage.

Her older sister Coumba, who has just passed her school exams, sets out to find another solution, by secretly earning the money for her brother's medical treatment. She exhausts herself working in a hotel during the days, while a boy friend minds the family's cows for her. Even when the money is raised, however, the village elder insists on Debo's marriage going ahead. "Keep your word," the elder tells her father.

The film is sincerely and straightforwardly done, but its implication that problems in Senegal can be traced to the weight of tribal tradition and backwardness and that if only the people could be more progressive and modern, and, for example, allow their daughters to be educated and live their own lives, things would improve … is worthy of a slightly patronizing middle class filmmaker.

It does not surprise the moviegoer to learn that Teicher "studied film and theater at Dartmouth College and first went to Senegal when he was 19 to work on a promotional video for an NGO to promote digital literacy," or that the present film "is inspired by Jeremy's ground breaking documentary short, *This Is Us* (2011), which was awarded a prestigious Lombard Public Service Fellowship, supported by Kodak." *Tall as the Baobab Tree* has an NGO-corporate air and feel to it.

The Last Step is a muddled, muddling film from Iran, whose principal

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attraction is the presence of Leila Hatami (*A Separation*). The work, directed by Ali Mosaffa (Hatami's husband), concerns a love triangle involving a movie actress (Hatami), her ineffectual husband (Mosaffa) and a doctor (Alireza Aghakhani), who has been living abroad for 20 years.

The story is narrated from the grave by the husband, dead as the result of a ridiculous accident. There are quasi-comic bits and quasi-tragic bits, but nothing is deeply felt, convincing or very interesting here. Especially absurd is the decision of the doctor to audition for a part in a film so he can be close to his great love.

Chaika, by Spanish director Miguel Angel Jimenez Colmenar, is even weaker. The film tells the dismal and dispiriting story of a prostitute, who works fish trawlers on the Black Sea (her degrading activities are treated in loving detail), and the sailor she connects with. He takes her to a shack in Siberia, where various malevolent members of his family live. Virtually everyone and everything is nasty, unpleasant and brutal. This kind of thing is just as unrealistic and untrue as the worst sort of Pollyannaism.

To be continued

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