

## Toronto International Film Festival 2013—Part 1

# Twenty years of covering the Toronto film festival

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*This is the first of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 5-15).*

This year's Toronto International Film Festival was the twentieth I've attended (the event is thirty-eight years old). Joanne Laurier began writing regularly about the festival in 2000. Between us, we have seen hundreds of films, written dozens and dozens of articles and interviewed filmmakers from every continent.

The experience has been personally rewarding, but our main purposes in covering the event have been to gain a deeper understanding into the artistic and intellectual problems of our time, to shed light, if possible, on those issues and to contribute to the cultural sensitivity and consciousness of those forces attracted to the socialist perspective of our movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

These purposes and the perspective bound up with them have given us a great advantage, in my view, in considering the films screened in Toronto over the years. Our starting point, in the first place, has always been that filmmaking reflects social life and development, of course in particular and contradictory ways. For us, filmmakers and audience members exist in the same social universe, confront the same moral and political challenges, resist or succumb to the same ideological pressures.

More concretely, the dominant global cultural problems over the past twenty years are those that arose, or emerged far more prominently, as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath. The first Toronto film festival I attended in September 1994 took place less than three years after the liquidation of the USSR. Bourgeois triumphalism and a great deal of blather about the "end of socialism" and even the "end of history" still abounded. For the pseudo-left elements who had clung for decades to the coat-tails of the Stalinist, social democratic and union bureaucracies, which had all entered into terminal decline, this was truly "midnight in the century."

We did not plunge into the global film world in the mid-1990s unprepared or unawares in this regard. We did so as participants in a movement that had conducted an extensive, in-depth analysis of the end of the Soviet Union and its far-reaching implications, including its cultural implications.

The experiences of 1989-1991 had painfully brought home the impact of decades of relentless assaults by Stalinism on the political understanding and awareness of the working class, with devastating consequences as well for art and culture. While the objective conditions for socialism, including the social weight of the working class, were far more favorable than in 1917, "the subjective political consciousness of the working class is far less developed today. ... This historical paradox must not be seen as an insuperable barrier to socialist revolution, but as a problem that must be overcome." [David North, "After the Demise of the USSR: The Struggle for Marxism and the Tasks of the Fourth International," March 11, 1992]

A host of issues arising from the convulsions of the 20th century, including, above all, the nature of Stalinism and its alternative, Trotskyism, had to be addressed and clarified.

The Russian Revolution of 1917, we insisted, had been the product of an international socialist culture that had taken root over the course of decades. Our movement dedicated itself to the renewal of that culture, so grievously damaged by Stalinism, in the global working class. We argued that artistic work offering forthright and truthful accounts of life and history would play a critical role in that process, rendering the population more aware, more flexible and more human.

It was with this general understanding that we approached the films in Toronto.

I noted, in the *International Workers Bulletin* (IWB) of October 10, 1994, a striking feature of the Toronto film festival, a feature we have commented upon innumerable times since, perhaps to the irritation of readers: "At such an event the business of art and the art of business are inextricable. Thousands of producers, directors and other industry figures swarm about, pursuing their various aims. The Toronto festival is one of the gathering points of a multibillion-dollar industry." The size of the festival and its centrality to the American film studios in particular have increased substantially over the past two decades.

I was able to see a number of remarkable films in 1994, especially from Iran and Taiwan, and interview several intriguing filmmakers, including Abbas Kiarostami (*Through the Olive Trees*, Iran), Tsai Ming-liang (*Vive l'amour*, Taiwan), Amos Gitai (*In the Valley of the Wupper*, part of *The Neo-Fascist Trilogy*, Israel), Frederick Marx (*Hoop Dreams*, US) and János Szász (*Woyzeck*, Hungary). However, for the most part, it had to be said, self-absorption, social indifference and careerism predominated at the event.

In a subsequent article on the 1994 festival ("Some of the problems in cinema," IWB, November 7, 1994), I commented that "under the present conditions of ideological confusion and intellectual decline," the number of artists who were adopting a serious attitude toward society, art and their own activity "threatens to turn into a handful."

I added, "If one were to single out a feature of the majority of films, it would be the inability to explain anything from the point of view of its origins and development, i.e., historically. This holds for personalities, emotional states or love affairs, as much as explicitly social phenomena. ... This evasion of artistic responsibility is given a name--postmodernism or such--and even passed off as a virtue. All too often one has the impression that the filmmaker is simply bewildered and unable to make heads or tails of people and events."

There is no reason to back away from this comment. And, unhappily, if the erosion of historical and social consciousness still affects the majority of films in 2013 that speaks to the widespread, objective character of the

problems. Undoubtedly, some of the worst of the postmodern and self-conscious flippancy has fallen by the wayside, the victim of generally worsening social conditions and a series of brutal imperialist interventions that could not help but impress themselves on a portion of the filmmakers.

It would be wrong to suggest that all has been bleak at the festival over the years. Certainly not. We have watched many films that moved and affected us deeply. Various humane and empathetic filmmakers have been at work. However, it would not be possible to point to a single figure on any continent who has sustained a consistently high artistic level—in other words, who has worked through the central problems of our time—over the past two decades, a remarkable fact.

We observed at some point in the middle of the 2000s a substantial growth in the attention paid to social ills and the circumstances of the oppressed. However, a serious perspective on history and society, the systematic examination of social and psychological problems, any attention to the question of how humanity finds itself in the predicament it does ... all of this is still largely absent.

Over the years we have pointed to many unappealing features of contemporary filmmaking. One has sometimes had to make a concerted effort to find an interesting manner of indicating problems that cropped up again and again.

The headlines of articles on the Toronto film festival over the years have provided some indication of our attitude, positive or negative, toward the works being screened:

For example, “The importance of knowing something about the world” (October 7, 1999); “Struggling, alive, contradictory...” (October 4, 2001); “Why are there so many disappointing films?” (September 23, 2002); “Even in success, problems” (September 26, 2002); “Encouraging signs” (September 17, 2003); “The problem of producing great works ... and today’s best works” (September 29, 2004); “Some things are sinking in” (September 22, 2006); “Our tumultuous times” (October 3, 2006); “The world is so poorly understood—or is it?” (September 22, 2007); “Glimpses of life, if not the essential facts of the world” (September 18, 2008); “What does it mean to take reality seriously?” (October 14, 2010); “The drama of everyday life” (October 12, 2011); “Filmmakers respond to important events—but how they respond is also important ...” (September 28, 2012) and so on.

It is more obvious now in hindsight than it could have been in 1994 or 2000 that central to the difficulties was not merely the ideological damage wreaked by Stalinism and the decay of the traditional labor movements, but *the decline in the level of social struggle* that resulted in large measure from the worthlessness of these national-based organizations under conditions of global economic integration.

It is no accident that what may have been the weakest twenty years or more in the history of the cinema has coincided with the forcible suppression of the class struggle, leading to historically low levels of strike activity and social protest, especially in the US.

Cinema, which “cut into human life” with such success in the 20th century and became an indispensable part of modern society, is the art form that seems most sensitive to the state of popular sentiment and activity. American movies were nourished, directly or otherwise, by the upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s and, again, although in diminished form, by the Civil Rights movement and the radicalization of the late 1960s and 1970s. Social quiescence starves filmmaking, deprives it of inspiration, liveliness and confidence.

Largely unbeknownst to the filmmakers, an immense social and economic crisis has developed over the past two decades. The artists lag behind social developments at the best of times, tending to take life “as they find it” and basing their efforts on its permanence and immobility. Film directors and writers were especially hampered in recent decades by the prevailing reactionary social and cultural environment, which helped turn their attention away from the working class and the seething anger

building up there over the vast social inequalities, unending war, corporate thievery and government indifference to popular suffering.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and in particular with the outbreak of mass struggles in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, the political tide has turned. A new era of social revolution has opened up. This has not and cannot instantaneously change the atmosphere in art and filmmaking, but change it, it will. The problems remain, but the movement of hundreds of millions will dramatically alter the conditions under which those problems can be approached and overcome.

We saw a number of striking films this year, including *Omar* (directed by Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad), *Standing Aside, Watching* (Greek director Yorgos Servetas), *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* (from Bosnian filmmaker Danis Tanovi?, which we reviewed at the Berlinale earlier this year), *The Selfish Giant* (directed by Clio Barnard from the UK), *Under the Starry Sky* (Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Dyana Gaye), *A Touch of Sin* (from well-known Chinese director Jia Zhangke in something of a return to form), *Salvation Army* (Moroccan filmmaker and author Abdellah Taïa), *Ida* (from Polish director Pawel Pawlikowski), *Giraffada* (another Palestinian work, directed by Rani Massalha) and *Qissa* (Indian filmmaker Anup Singh). We will review some of these films in subsequent articles.

There were also worthwhile moments, or more, in *Wasted Youth* (Greece), *Kids From the Port* (Spain), *Palestine Stereo* (Palestine), *Finding Vivian Maier* (US), *Devil’s Knot* (Canada), *The Daughter* (Greece), *The Summer of Flying Fish* (Chile), *Miracle* (Slovakia), *The Major* (Russia), *Trap Street* (China) and *Rags and Tatters* (Egypt).

Bigger budget films premiering in Toronto included *Life of Crime*, *Bad Words*, *Gravity*, *Labor Day*, *The Fifth Estate*, *Enemy*, *The Love Punch*, *The Railway Man*, *Enough Said*, *Under the Skin*, *Dallas Buyers’ Club* and *Third Person*. We will no doubt be reviewing some of these over the course of the next twelve months. One of the most talked about films was Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave*, which we will write about in another part of this series.

However, the single most enduring image that one takes away from the 2013 film festival occurs in the final moments of *The Square* (Jehane Noujaim), a confused and seriously inadequate film about the ongoing Egyptian revolution, which focuses on a number of middle class activists. Nonetheless, the documentary contains a shot, taken from above, of a mass demonstration in Cairo against President Mohamed Morsi earlier this summer that is simply staggering.

The narrator’s voice suggests that the anti-Morsi protest may have been the largest political demonstration in world history and one is not inclined to argue. Almost unimaginable numbers of people throng the major thoroughfares of Egypt’s capital, stretching out in ever direction. A sea of humanity. Clearly, millions of people are present.

It is fitting then that this twenty-year period of the Toronto film festival, whose films and personalities have often seemed obtuse and self-centered, should close in this manner, with on-screen evidence of “the direct interference of the masses in historical events,” albeit a process still in its early stages. The claims about the final triumph of “free market” capitalism, the end of the working class, the disastrous role of revolution and revolutionary idealism, and so forth, claims that in one way or another deeply influenced and damaged filmmaking over the past two decades, have been refuted by the recent events.

What lies ahead? At what tempo will changes in the cultural atmosphere take place? How will the new complexes of feelings and thoughts that will inevitably arise break through into artistic consciousness? Under what conditions will a new audience, a more demanding and critical audience, emerge? These are a few of the questions that now present themselves.

*To be continued*



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