

FICUNAM 2015: Part one

A remarkable film festival in Mexico City

By David Walsh
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This is the first part of a series of articles on the recent FICUNAM film festival in Mexico City.

On behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site*, Joanne Laurier and I recently attended the International Film Festival of the National Autonomous University of Mexico [Festival Internacional de Cine Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México] in Mexico City, known by the acronym FICUNAM. This year's event, the fifth since the festival's launching, screened some 137 films from 36 countries. It was held February 26 through March 7.

In coordination with the film festival, the Ingmar Bergman Chair on Film and Theater at UNAM invited me to participate in a round-table discussion March 3—along with moderator Roger Koza and Cristina Nord, the cultural editor of *Die Tageszeitung* in Germany—on “Politics and Film Criticism.”

The trip to Mexico proved to be an intense, complex and illuminating experience.

First things first. Mexico City is an immense urban sprawl, a sea of humanity. While the city's official population is 8.8 million, the metropolitan area is estimated to be home to 22.2 million people, making it one of the largest “agglomerations”—and the largest Spanish-speaking city—in the world.

As a country, Mexico is ranked eleventh in the world in terms of population, with 120 million people, almost half of them under the age of 25. UNAM, founded in 1910, is the largest university in Latin America, with some 325,000 students.

The massive and restive Mexican working class confronts a corrupt, criminal ruling elite, whose major political parties and leading institutions are all increasingly discredited. The cold-blooded murder of 43 students in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero in September, a crime and subsequent cover-up in which every party played a role, exposed for all the world to see the brutal character of the country's social relations. American imperialism stands firmly behind the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto in its efforts to implement “reforms” at the expense of wide layers of the

population.

The horrific atrocity in Guerrero remains on nearly every mind. At the film festival's opening ceremony February 25, I was told, the festival director made reference to the killings and the audience of 800 began to count, “1, 2, 3 ...” up to 43. It was understandably a very emotional moment.

A group of more than 40 individuals working for the festival handed a statement to each invited guest, bringing attention to the killings. The statement described the Guerrero event as one of “the crimes against humanity that are occurring in our country,” and argued furthermore that the massacre “is not an isolated incident, that Mexico has a long history of injustices committed by the government against the people.” It accused the Peña Nieto administration of being responsible for thousands of “forced disappearances” in its first two years and two months in office.

One feels the presence in Mexico City of more than the immediate social problems and tensions, as pressing as those are. The legacy of Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary leader who lived in the Coyoacan suburb of Mexico City from January 1937 until his assassination in August 1940, is part of the fabric of the city. Trotsky's last residence, a museum, now alongside a busy highway, remains an attraction for many, especially young people. His desk is still in the condition it was the day he died. There are bullet holes in the wall from a May 1940 assassination attempt.

The significance of Trotsky's heritage came up in numerous contexts, political and cultural, during our stay in Mexico City. It was difficult to go very far in any serious discussion without encountering his name. Seventy-five years after Trotsky's assassination, which was intended as a death blow to revolutionary Marxism, the once-powerful Stalinist parties lie in ruins and the perspective of world socialist revolution fought for by the *World Socialist Web Site* is gaining support and adherents all across the globe. Truly, as the *Transitional Program* argues, “the laws of history are stronger than the bureaucratic apparatus.”

We saw a number of remarkable films at the FICUNAM.

A retrospective of the films of Uzbek-Soviet director Ali Khamraev, born in 1937, was certainly a revelation. Khamraev was present at the festival and remains a vibrant, powerful figure. He began making feature films in the 1960s and worked in various genres, including documentaries, historical films, comedies, “Westerns,” musicals and social dramas. One of Khamraev’s undoubted preoccupations was the struggle against social backwardness and the problem of the “woman of the East” in particular. *I Remember You* (1985), *Triptych* (1979), *Without Fear* (1972) and *White, White Storks* (1966) stand out especially as complex and urgent works.

When Khamraev informed us in a conversation that he was making a new film about an avant-garde art museum in the early Soviet Union, many of whose artist-exhibitors had been murdered by Stalin, and that he had been to visit the Trotsky museum in Coyoacan, we were very moved.

Chaitanya Tamhane’s *Court*, set largely in a lower court in Mumbai and following a case of cruel injustice and bureaucratism, is a beautiful and brilliant film from India. The objectivity and confidence of his fictional work, which follows the various participants in their daily lives, is astonishing for a filmmaker only 27 years old.

Frederick Wiseman’s *National Gallery*, about London’s leading art museum, is also a stunning work. Wiseman (born 1930) has been documenting the goings-on at various social institutions in the US for the most part (mental hospital, police department, dance company, high school, zoo, state legislature, boxing gym, etc.) for decades. To a certain extent, he is a prisoner of his subject matter. Some institutions are more interesting than others. In the paintings and experts at the *National Gallery*, he has found a worthy and fascinating subject.

The Gold Bug from Argentina (co-directed by Alejo Mogueillansky, whom we interviewed) is another remarkable film. It is a rare work, which “dares” to be comic and, what’s more, to satirize feminism and other preoccupations of the middle class.

The films of Sergei Loznitsa, the Ukrainian-born documentarian, are more problematic, or make up a far more contradictory body of work. Some of his pieces, such as *Blockade* (2005), constructed entirely out of film footage shot by Soviet cinematographers during the fearsome and deadly siege of Leningrad (1941-44); *Landscape* (2003), in which an “endless tracking shot” of a Russian village and a bus stop in particular picks up snatches of fascinating conversation; and *The Halt* (2000), shots of nothing but passengers, mostly poor, sleeping in a train station waiting room, are striking and humane.

Loznitsa’s passivity, his “refusal to judge,” however, proves worse than inadequate when confronted by the

2013-2014 demonstrations in Kiev’s Central Square, recorded in *Maidan* (2014). The director presents these protests, which never involved wide layers of the population and were made use of by fascist elements, backed by the US and German governments, as a genuine “revolution.”

A number of trends in contemporary “art filmmaking,” some of them retrograde and wrongheaded, in my view, expressed themselves at the FICUNAM. Various films, such as Pedro Costa’s *Horse Money*, Hermes Paralluelo’s *Not All is Vigil*, Lisandro Alonso’s *Jauja*, Jean-Marie Straub’s latest offerings, *Communists* and *The Algerian War*, and, to a certain extent, Aleksey German, Jr.’s *Under Electric Clouds* and Adirley Queiros’s *White Out, Black In*, all suffer from a bleakness, paralysis and gloom that speak more to certain moods in the intelligentsia than they do to broader currents in contemporary life.

This issue, along with other historical and ideological problems, came up in the course of our March 3 discussion on “Politics and film criticism.” I suggested that the current weakness of global cinema was “very much bound up with a neglect, misunderstanding, ignorance about the great events of the 20th century that have produced our present social and psychological moment, and all of those questions ultimately lead to the question of the Russian Revolution, and one’s attitude toward that, and Trotsky’s fight against Stalinism.”

“In other words,” I continued, “does the degeneration of the [Russian] Revolution prove that socialism is a utopia, that the working class is not a viable social force?”

I argued that a sense of hopelessness “is based on the great falsification of the 20th century, in my view, which is that Stalinism equals socialism, that Stalinism equals the inevitable product of social revolution... It’s a false reading of the 20th century, it’s a false reading of history, there was an alternative to Stalinism and there is an alternative to Stalinism.” There was a strong response from the audience to these positions.

We will have more to say about the films at FICUNAM, some of the problems in contemporary filmmaking, and the March 3 discussion in subsequent articles.

To be continued

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