

FICUNAM 2015: Part 2

The rule and the exceptions—three good films: *Court*, *National Gallery* and *The Gold Bug*

By David Walsh
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This is the second part of a series of articles on the recent FICUNAM film festival in Mexico City. The first part was posted March 18.

From India, a social revelation

There are numerous obstacles lying in the filmmaker's path today. The social atmosphere remains difficult. Everything that comes from ruling circles, or the entertainment-media apparatus itself, works against criticism and genuinely independent thought and feeling. The filmmakers cannot take their lead from official public life in any country—any honest artist would choke on that. Those who do adopt such a conformist course produce only rubbish.

Meanwhile wide layers of the working population lead their own lives, very distant from those of “the opinion makers” and “the people who count,” but they have not yet made a decisive, mass break with the status quo in a fashion that would impress itself on the artists.

The majority of filmmakers at present still go out on a limb with only their intuition and impressions, the products of a largely stagnant political and cultural period, dominated in affluent middle class circles by gender politics and various issues of personal identity. The artists, restless and frustrated, but without much content to their efforts, work away at formal issues and the results are often called “innovative” and even “avant-garde.” As though vocal exercises and stretching one's jaw were a substitute for something important to say.

Above all, the film directors and writers need to know more about the history of the 20th century and its critical, strategic experiences. Ignorance and confusion have never produced enduring art.

That is the general rule at present in “independent” or “art” filmmaking. But then there are exceptions, the efforts of individuals who devote themselves seriously and conscientiously to representing life, not life in the abstract, not “life as a river,” but concrete life, the life of social classes and relationships.

Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* is one such film. In the film's opening scene, in Mumbai, a man who appears to be a teacher is hurrying to a public event. In fact, Narayan Kamble (Vira Sathidar) is a part-time poet, folk singer, political activist, a man legitimately outraged by the current state of life in India. The event he's late for is a protest over a massacre. He half-sings, half-chants, “Time to rise/ Time to know your enemies ...,” before he's interrupted by police officers, who haul him off to jail.

Kamble faces a ludicrous charge: “abetment of suicide.” The prosecution claims that one of his angry songs urged sewer cleaners to kill themselves in protest over their rotten conditions and that one

such worker, Vasudev Pawar, took his advice and deliberately went down a manhole without safety equipment as a means of committing suicide! Except, of course, that Kamble never sang such a song and the dead worker wasn't influenced in the slightest by his artistic efforts.

Tamhane's film follows the court case, which takes months and months to wind its way through the court system, and its various participants. Kamble's lawyer is the young, relatively well-to-do Vinay Vora (Vivek Gomber, also one of the film's producers), who listens to jazz on his CD player as he drives through Mumbai at night, hangs out in stylish bars and argues with his parents over his failure to find a wife.

The public prosecutor (Geetanjali Kulkarni) is a backward, callous woman, who reads out passages from obsolete, Victorian-era laws and blithely hopes the judge will throw Kamble “in jail for twenty years and have done with it.” In her leisure time, she and her equally backward family attend a theater where a nationalist-racist “comedy” urges immigrants be sent packing.

The police, who specialize in producing witnesses to fit each charge; the judge, prepared to consign a man to jail for months while he goes off on his summer vacation at a seaside resort ... all the participants come in for scrutiny.

Tamhane's *Court* reaches its social and emotional peak when Pawar's widow Sharmila (played by Usha Bane, the actual widow of a dead sewer worker) takes the stand. Under questioning, a picture of abject social wretchedness emerges. The dead man drank, and therefore beat his wife and kids, to work himself into a condition where he could go into the stinking sewers every day without safety equipment of any kind.

His widow is clearly intimidated by the court appearance, but she remains dignified and matter of fact—her testimony is unimpeachable. Later, when Vora drives her home, she refuses any money from him. “I don't need money,” Sharmila tells him. “If you have any work, then let me know.” He leaves her, her brother and her child in a miserable slum where birds eat garbage in the street.

The real strength of *Court* lies in its enormous objectivity. Although the director obviously feels strongly about the issues, and his partisanship comes through, every social element is treated with care and accuracy. The film does not pluck at heart-strings, it does not take the easy road. One fears at a certain point that the middle class lawyer will do something treacherous, in keeping with his comfortable and complacent life-style, but that fear proves misplaced. The director is simply presenting the man for what and who he is.

In the end, as the old case falls apart, Kamble faces new frame-up charges resulting from the “war on terror.” This director clearly has a head on his shoulders.

A great museum in London

As I noted in the first part of this series, assiduous documentarian Frederick Wiseman is something of a prisoner of his choice of subject matter. Fortunately, he most recently chose to make a film about the National Gallery in London, and every viewer is the better for it.

A certain type of “radical” blockhead declares that public art museums and galleries are simply elite institutions that ought to be boycotted, if not razed to the ground—but then such blockheads are not good for much of anything in general. Of course, the ruling elite likes to show off its holdings and brag about the “cultural heritage” of the nation, all for reactionary purposes, but that does not exhaust what a museum is or does.

The viewing public makes the art something for itself, independent of the machinations of government and museum officials, creating a more direct connection with the artist and his or her sincerity and depth. People fall in love with paintings and entire rooms of paintings in a great museum, and return over and over again. This changes lives.

Wiseman strives to capture something of the public’s relation to art, and that of museum workers too, who are also part of the public, in his three-hour film, *National Gallery*. We encounter the museum from a number of different sides: in a class for the blind, who interact with a painting by Camille Pissarro; in meetings of administrators, who consider budget cuts and various proposals to draw in a larger crowds; through guides who, with considerable passion, interpret a number of works; through live nude modeling for aspiring painters; in painstaking and fascinating restoration efforts in the bowels of the institution. The comments of the art experts are both instructive and moving.

And there are the glorious paintings, by Leonardo, Holbein, Titian, Rubens, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Caravaggio, Poussin, Turner, Stubbs, van Gogh and others!

While the wealthy and their political representatives like to boast about their cultural hoard when times are good, museums unflinchingly come under the knife when money gets tight, or when continued financing of the arts might cut into the holdings of the super-rich. Museums, along with other public arts institutions, are savagely under attack everywhere.

No wonder then, that Wiseman’s is only the latest in a series of films, critical or otherwise, devoted to the state or preservation of major art museums, following Jem Cohen’s *Museum Hours* (2012) and Johannes Holzhausen’s *The Great Museum* (2014). Mike Leigh’s *Mr. Turner* (2014) made pointed reference to the importance of art being accessible and available to the public free of charge, and in 2013 Detroit officials threatened to sell off the Detroit Institute of Arts until public anger made them think twice.

Satire, melancholy and friendly chaos from Argentina

The Gold Bug (the same title as the Edgar Allan Poe short story), co-directed by Argentinean Alejo Moguillansky and Swede Fia-Stina Sandlund, is a delight, a breath of fresh air in a festival where too many supposedly “cutting edge” works were dreary and drab. The cinematic reference points, according to co-director Moguillansky, were famed filmmakers Jean Renoir and Ernst Lubitsch. (See: “An interview with Alejo Moguillansky, co-director of *The Golden Bug*”)

The credits set the tone, noting that the film is based on Poe’s *The*

Gold and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, *Bug* told the pirates.” In the first wonderful extended comic sequence, a group of Argentinean filmmakers, actors and hangers-on mill around, trying to figure out how they can continue to get financing from European backers for a film ostensibly about 19th century Swedish author and suicide, Victoria Benedictsson, while they actually head off to a town called Alem, in northeastern Argentina, to look for buried treasure.

Somehow or other, they convince their Swedish co-director, Sandlund (playing herself on the telephone), that a film about 19th century Argentinean suicide, bourgeois liberal leader Leandro N. Alem will be just as good. Was he a feminist, Sandlund demands to know? Well, they hem and haw, yes, more or less.

The “pirates” have to keep their Swedish collaborator satisfied with farfetched stories even as they set off after the treasure, in a convoy of vehicles. Meanwhile, one of the actors is tasked with having the map, which is encrypted, decoded by Franciscans. The women in the group, who have their own grievances, contrive to steal the map for themselves. One thing leads to another ...

As Moguillansky explained in our conversation, the film reflects in a comic and madly exaggerated form the actual situation he found himself in, dependent on European funding, at the mercy of Swedish “political correctness.” The absurdities of feminism are satirized, as the narrator describes the various actions of the “Native Sister,” the “Dancer Sister” and the “Director Sister.”

The film is very funny, and fond of its characters, even in their absurd twists and turns. It has a serious theme too. “The Europeans think of us as exotic and peripheral,” one of the characters laments. As I noted in the conversation, the film paints the Latin Americans fighting among themselves, distracted by identity politics, while the European living in New York ends up with everything!

To be continued

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