

Toronto International Film Festival 2018: Part 5

Errol Morris provides Steven Bannon a platform (*American Dharma*), Werner Herzog celebrates Mikhail Gorbachev (*Meeting Gorbachev*) and other appalling developments

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This is the fifth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 6-16). The first article was posted September 28, the second on October 1, the third on October 4 and the fourth on October 8.

Some films or works of art are enjoyable to write about. Others at least have pleasurable or intriguing aspects. But discussing a certain category is simply a painful, if necessary, chore.

Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris's *American Dharma*, about American fascist Steven Bannon, Werner Herzog's *Meeting Gorbachev*, about the last Stalinist leader of the Soviet Union, and Sergei Loznitsa's *Donbass*, about the current situation in eastern Ukraine, fall into that last category. They are works that either conceal critical features of contemporary life, falsify or are overwhelmed by them.

The cases of Morris (*Gates of Heaven*, *The Thin Blue Line*, *The Fog of War*, *Standard Operating Procedure*) and Herzog, one of the principal figures in the New German Cinema of the 1970s and the director of dozens of films, raise certain related problems.

Morris and Herzog both have obvious skills and intelligence. Both have shown the capacity for realizing emotional and, more haphazardly, social truth. Both directors have had a propensity for making works about oddities, eccentricities and marginalized individuals, although Morris has also treated prominent figures such as Stephen Hawking, Robert McNamara and Donald Rumsfeld in his documentaries.

Herzog has cultivated, with vaguely Nietzschean and mystical overtones, an often artificial emotional "extremism" in his films. People in pursuit of "impossible" or even absurd dreams have been a specialty of his. Herzog earned a reputation with a number of striking fiction films, including *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) and *Stroszek* (1977), but he has also directed documentaries throughout his career and become better known for them in recent years.

Interestingly, the paths of Herzog (born 1942) and Morris (born 1948), who remain friends, crossed at a relatively early stage in their respective careers. They first attempted to collaborate in the mid-1970s on a project, tellingly, concerned with rural Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein, one of the inspirations apparently for Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*. Herzog served as something of a mentor to Morris, even providing him with cash toward the making of an early film.

The German director attempted to encourage Morris at this stage, even pledging he would eat one of the shoes he was wearing if Morris completed his documentary about pet cemeteries, *Gates of Heaven* (1980). When the latter film finally opened, Herzog lived up to his promise, an episode immortalized in Les Blank's 21-minute film *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe* (1980).

The incident, whether a publicity stunt or merely trivial, may point to some of the problems bound up with the two directors' concerns and resulting careers, and, what's more, with the artistic problems of the past several decades. Both men, while demonstrating considerable seriousness about their own careers and the filmmaking process, have made a virtual program out of avoiding anything that might be interpreted as "social realism" or identified with political partisanship—i.e., conscious opposition to the existing social order.

Morris is a conventional or, more generously, an unconventional American liberal. In 2008, he directed a series of advertisements for Barack Obama, "People in the Middle for Obama." The campaign, according to *Adweek*, was executed "in typical Morris style: interviews with ordinary people against a white backdrop, with music playing softly in the background. The interviewees are all middle-of-the-road voters who claim to be more concerned with issues than partisan ideology—and who've sided with Obama."

The more flamboyant Herzog, in the words of one sympathetic commentator, "remains controversial because by deliberately stripping historical and political contexts from his films, his focus on the human or natural elements retains a certain romanticised (and potentially politically incorrect) air." The same critic writes, "Herzog's films generally eschew specific historical and political considerations in the face of a universe filled with murder, destruction and the demise of the individual."

But the world changes dramatically, disturbing events pile up and even the politically aloof may find themselves dragged into the maelstrom.

Art, no matter how hard or long some of its practitioners resist realities staring them in the face, cannot "remain indifferent to the convulsions of our epoch," in Leon Trotsky's phrase. Moreover, Trotsky continued, "Does not the 'spirit' of an epoch work imperceptibly and independently of the subjective will? Of course in the final analysis, this spirit is reflected in everybody, in those who accept it and who embody it, as well as in those who hopelessly struggle against it, and in those who passively try to hide from it."

However, it makes a world of difference whether a given artist

“accepts” and “embodies” the essential content or essence of his or her epoch, or has “struggled against” or “hidden from it.” A profound crisis or break in the situation brings to the fore everything intellectually trivial, confused, neglectful, unresolved and retrograde that has accumulated in a previous period.

So, these two films: Morris’ *American Dharma* and Herzog’s *Meeting Gorbachev*.

American Dharma

In *American Dharma*, Morris interviews Steven Bannon, Trump’s political adviser and an American fascist. The interview is interspersed with footage of certain personalities and events, including Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders in 2016; the Charlottesville, Virginia, rally in August 2017 organized by extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi groups; Donald Trump’s inauguration speech; Bannon’s own appearance at a meeting held by the neo-fascist National Front in France; and so forth.

In addition, Morris films Bannon watching clips from the some of the movies he claims to be important to him, such as *12 O’Clock High* (1949), with Gregory Peck, and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), with Alec Guinness.

All in all, Morris treats Bannon with kid gloves. Even mainstream media critics have noted this. Owen Gleiberman in *Variety* observes that “if you walked into” the film “knowing nothing” about Bannon, “you’d probably find him to be a fascinating, compelling, and at times even charming figure.” Gleiberman argues, with some justice, that *American Dharma* “isn’t investigative filmmaking—it’s a toothless bromance.”

How disgraceful is that! In November 2016, when Trump announced Bannon’s appointment as “chief strategist and senior counselor to the president,” the WSWS wrote, quite correctly: “Bannon is a fascist, and fully warrants the label. As a political operative, Bannon is a specialist in scandal mongering, provocation and innuendo. His online rag Breitbart News serves as a platform for white nationalists, anti-Semites, and the so-called ‘alt-right.’ He is a person who manages, with his own biography, to combine nearly all the reactionary trends in American political, economic and social life.”

Bannon traces his own outlook to ultra-right and nationalist, in some cases openly fascistic European trends and thinkers, such as Oswald Spengler and Julius Evola. Under Bannon’s leadership, Breitbart News emitted a steady stream of anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and right-wing conspiratorial filth. Trump’s decision to bring Bannon into the White House was celebrated by former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke. “We appear to have taken over,” Duke told an interviewer.

In the face of all this, Morris essentially provides this scandalmonger and inciter of racial and ethnic hatred a platform for most of the one and a half hours of the film, allowing this multimillionaire huckster and former investment banker to posture as a defender of the American common man and enemy of the elite! The filmmaker occasionally delivers a slap on the wrist, noting, for instance, that Trump’s tax policies are “serving big business and the rich.” Bannon has nothing to say to this, and Morris drops the issue.

Bannon blathers on about *dharma*, which he defines as duty and destiny. He paints himself and his extreme-right ilk as lonely and reluctant heroes, à la Peck and his fellow World War II pilots in *12 O’Clock High* (“Consider yourselves already dead”), responding to the unalterable call of duty. This sort of language comes from reactionary, irrationalist writers and thinkers in the early part of the 20th century, some of them ultimately pro-Nazi figures. Morris challenges none of it.

Bannon is not a fool. He notes that when Hillary Clinton determined to pursue the presidency in 2016 on the basis of identity politics, “I know we had her.” The Clinton campaign was doomed by its indifference to the suffering of the mass of the population, and its obsession with race and gender.

Bannon refers twice to the danger of a “revolution” in America. Morris and the film’s reviewers miss the point of the comments. They choose to interpret them as Bannon’s threatening to unleash his sort of right-wing “revolution.” No, he is *warning* Morris and the American establishment. If the system doesn’t allow the wealth to be spread, he argues, “we’re going to have a revolution” in the US. Again, later, he says, “We’re going to have change or we’re going to have a revolution.”

Having entirely misunderstood the comments, Morris finally asks him about the revolution that Bannon is supposedly *advocating*, and the latter has one more opportunity to present himself as a disrupter of the status quo and an opponent of the “whole system.”

American Dharma is a travesty.

Meeting Gorbachev

Herzog’s *Meeting Gorbachev* consists of portions of three conversation between the German filmmaker and Mikhail Gorbachev, the former Soviet head of state, now 87, held over a six-month period.

Herzog makes his immense admiration for Gorbachev known at the outset, and the toadying hardly lets up. Gorbachev, in the filmmaker’s estimation, is “one of the greatest leaders of the 20th century.” Toward the end of the film, Herzog gushes, “We love you—I love you in particular” because of the former Stalinist official’s role in making a peaceful German reunification possible.

The film is a mass of contradictions the muddle-headed Herzog never stops to try and reconcile.

After a potted, more or less reverential biography of Gorbachev, during which we are told that the “peasants adored him” when he held one local post or another, Herzog offers a superficial account of the final years and dissolution of the Soviet Union.

When Gorbachev became general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in March 1985, he tells Herzog, reform (“perestroika” and “glasnost” collectively) was at the “top of my agenda.” The “desire for change, the need for reform” arose from within “our society,” Gorbachev asserts. “Nothing worked any more” in the USSR. He wanted “more democracy,” but adds, “I also wanted more socialism.”

The imperialist powers quickly took the measure of Gorbachev and the bureaucracy’s drive to restore capitalism in the Soviet Union. George Shultz and James Baker, each a former US secretary of state, offer praise. Baker particularly appreciates Gorbachev’s support for the American imperialist assault on Iraq in 1990-1991. We see British prime minister Margaret Thatcher make her famous comment, referring to the Soviet leader, “We can do business together.” None of this commentary, coming from war criminals and diehard enemies of the working class, apparently troubles Herzog.

The filmmaker extensively and glowingly treats the summit meeting between Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in Iceland in 1986. “We did make a lot of progress” on the issue of nuclear weapons, Gorbachev asserts. Later, he and Herzog are obliged to admit that much of this “progress” has been rolled back and a new Cold War looms between the US and Russia. Gorbachev terms the present situation an “abnormal form of international relations.” As for the end of the old Cold War, Gorbachev blandly claims, “We all won.”

Meeting Gorbachev is an orgy of stupidity, banality and reaction.

Given how marvelously the world situation supposedly turned out for all concerned, Gorbachev’s remarks about the end of the USSR make no sense.

The former Stalinist leader coyly refers to “people [who] were in a rush to seize power” and who “had plans of their own,” apparently meaning Boris Yeltsin and others. Why didn’t Gorbachev stop them? “I should have acted differently.” Does he hold a grudge against Yeltsin? “I’m not vengeful!” Then, “I feel sorry for my own people.” Yeltsin and the others “started a fire and everything burned down. ... I regret it to this day.” This

will come as a consolation to the Russian population. Herzog “loves” Gorbachev, but admits he is “considered a traitor by many Russians.”

The actual, catastrophic consequences of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s conspiracy to destroy the Soviet Union are passed over. Gorbachev and Herzog remain largely silent on the decimation of living standards and lowering of life expectancy for masses of people in the former USSR, the theft of state resources by capitalist interests and the emergence of gangster-oligarchs. Equally, they give no consideration to the impact of the end of the USSR on global geopolitics. Far from ushering an era of peace and prosperity, the events of 1989-1991 set the stage for a volcanic eruption of imperialist violence that threatens a Third World War.

As for German reunification, Herzog is naturally oblivious to the irony that his tribute to the glories of that process coincide with the rapid and menacing re-emergence of German militarism, the entrance into the Bundestag of the far-right Alternative for Germany and an outbreak of neo-Nazi violence on the streets of German cities.

Colossal political blindness and obliviousness.

Donbass

The director of *Donbass*, Sergei Loznitsa, born in Belarus and raised in Ukraine, is a ferocious anti-communist and believer in capitalist “private property.” Loznitsa has made a series of mostly documentary short and feature films over the last two decades. He has also directed a few fiction films, including *Donbass*. (We will comment on one of his non-fiction films, *The Trial*, in the final part of this series.)

Like many right-wing artistic figures from the region, he thoroughly and unquestioningly identifies Stalinism and its crimes with socialism.

Loznitsa’s *Maidan* (2014), a documentary, was dedicated to the protests in 2013-2014 that brought the extreme right-wing, Washington-backed regime to power in Ukraine. We wrote in 2015, “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.’”

The Event (2015) was edited from footage taken in St. Petersburg during the abortive coup attempt in 1991 by elements within the Stalinist bureaucracy. In a comment about the latter 73-minute film, which primarily shows crowds milling around a public square, we noted: “The speakers who address the crowd are without exception reactionary, anti-communist demagogues. Prominent among them is the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, a pro-free market politician and mentor of Vladimir Putin, who left the country in a scandal in 1997. A Russian Orthodox priest also gives his medieval blessings to the protests.”

Loznitsa’s new film, numerous titles inform us, takes place in “Occupied Territory in Eastern Ukraine,” that is to say, the regions (now “People’s Republics”) with millions of ethnically Russian citizens that broke away from Ukraine after ferociously anti-Russian, ultra-nationalist forces came to power in 2014.

Loznitsa stages a series of 13 grotesque, surreal vignettes purporting to demonstrate that the “People’s Republic” is a cesspool of corruption, extortion and political hypocrisy, where obviously Russian troops in one scene pretend to be locals, where mobs set on ordinary enemy soldiers as “fascists,” where “fake news,” including “fake atrocities, is regularly organized by the authorities, etc.

The misanthropy and cynicism on display are corrosive. Nearly everyone involved is a liar, a monster, many of them potential killers.

In his director’s note, Loznitsa asserts, “The action of the film takes place in the Donbass, a region of Eastern Ukraine, occupied by various criminal gangs. The fighting is going on between the Ukrainian regular army, supported by volunteers, and separatist gangs, supported by Russian troops. ...

“The situations and circumstances, which seem to be absurd, grotesque, even comic, and almost impossible to imagine, do happen in real life. ...

They happen because the iron logic of the underworld, which affected all those generations born and bred in the catastrophe, that was the USSR, dictates its own rules.”

Loznitsa blames the war in Eastern Ukraine on the fact that the collapse of the Soviet Union and its “project of the future” could have been followed by either “a fundamental reform and complete re-organisation of the society, or by its continuous gradual decay and destruction.” The first option would mean the creation of “a European model,” including its emphasis on the “protection of private property,” while the second involves “the return to the totalitarian Soviet mode of existence. ... Ukraine, at least the predominant part of its population, chooses the European way, whereas Russia is rapidly moving back to the USSR.”

The reader will probably get the general picture. A miserable outlook here produces a miserable film.

To be continued

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