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In the next issue
‘Christian fundamentalism and the media’ will be the theme of the 2/2005 issue. It will focus on the political and social implications of media usage and ownership by Christian groups North and South.
EDITORIAL

With this issue we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Protestant film organisation Interfilm. Founded in Paris in 1955, its first President was Henri de Tienda, a minister in the navy and General Secretary of the Service cinématographique d’évangélation of the Reformed Church of France.

One of Interfilm’s main activities was – and remains – its involvement in juries at national and international film festivals. In the early days, the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches had separate juries. However, in 1973 in cooperation with the Organisation Catholique Internationale pour le Cinéma et l’Audiovisuel (OCIC), today known as Signis, the very first Ecumenical Jury met at the Locarno Film Festival, where it is still held in high regard.

Ecumenical Juries award a prize (and commendations) to directors of films that have great artistic merit, whose human outlook is faithful to the spirit of the scriptures or serves to stimulate debate on these matters, and which raise an audience’s awareness of spiritual and social values. Such ecumenical openness is a measure of the willingness of festival organisers to have their choices ‘scrutinised’ by people whose prime concern is Christian values rather than entertainment.

WACC is also celebrating the 25th anniversary of Media Development. In 1980 the magazine changed its name from The WACC Journal and four years later inaugurated the covers (individually designed by John Bury) that make it instantly recognisable. Media Development specialises in communication concerns affecting countries and peoples of ‘the South’. It also peers into nooks that other journals tend to ignore.

2005 will see Media Development pursue this course. Apart from the current issue on cinema, space will be given to Christian fundamentalism and the media, new directions in media and gender, and how to communicate ‘communication rights’. As regular readers will remark, a few design changes have been incorporated to signal our 25th anniversary.

We have also invited eight leading communicators to become Editorial Consultants, with the task of advising on themes and contributors. We are very grateful to them for lending their names to the journal.

In most ways 2005 is less of a celebration. Right-wing governments – sometimes mistaken for ‘middle-of-the-road’ – seem to be on the increase. The Bush Incompetence is set to continue for another four years (‘administration’ seems inappropriate for a government whose foreign policy smacks of gangsterism and whose domestic policy is an unmitigated disaster). Serious questions arise about the future of global democracy. The demonisation of Islam in place of the former Soviet Union, serious infringements of civil liberties, and the curtailment of communication rights are all of grave concern.

Global corporate interests continue to swallow up multimedia enterprises. Viacom, Walt Disney, News Corporation, Bertelsmann, Vivendi Universal, Sony and AOL Time Warner are the current media giants of the northern hemisphere. Not content with monopolising and consolidating multimedia interests there, they have their eyes on the South.

According to UPI (5 November 2004) Bertelsmann, Vivendi Universal and Time Warner recently sent representatives to India, alongside publishers such as Pearson and BBC Worldwide, to negotiate profitable deals aimed at its untapped market. And all of them have their eyes on China.

Cinema has become part of this global enterprise. International co-productions are increasingly the norm, digital technologies are expanding potential markets, computer generated animations are blurring boundaries, but issues of copyright and digital piracy remain to be resolved. Paradoxically, the prevalence of DVD and ‘home cinema’ means that audiences no longer have to visit a theatre for the unique experience of seeing a film.

Media Development celebrates the enduring fascination of cinema and looks forward to its future. The silver screen may now be digital, but the magic remains.
Empire building and the movies

James M. Wall

Empire builders don’t watch the right films. This became clear to me as I prepared several lectures that coincided with the 2004 U.S. presidential election. As is my custom in delivering lectures on most any subject, while I was writing, I was also looking for film clips to use, not to illustrate my lectures, but to offer material that would resonate with the theme of the current U.S. empire building project.

The lectures are entitled: ‘Resurrecting Empire’, and they are designed to discuss American foreign policy under the presidency of George Bush. As background reading for the lectures, I asked seminar members to read Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East (2004), a book written by Rashid Khalidi, professor of Middle East studies at New York’s Columbia University.

My film research revealed a disturbing pattern of the use of film as propaganda, and only a few encouraging signs that some film makers have left us with films that utilize cinema to explore racist western attitudes toward non-western populations, the attitudes required for an empire to dominate other populations. The research also left me with the depressing realization that very few western films have been made that honestly explore the inevitable failure of empire building.

It became clear to me that neither the United States government, the movie industry, nor the paying public has supported films that question that U.S. claims to build democracies around the world are, in fact, only a convenient way to control foreign populations for its own imperial purposes. The victim nations themselves have made attempts to address the issue, but rarely do these films gain commercial exposure in the west.

Three films did emerge, however, as examples of past empire building efforts, all films that resonate with our current situation: The Quiet American (the second of two versions), which deals with the U.S. in Vietnam; Lawrence of Arabia, Great Britain’s Middle Eastern empire project; and The Battle of Algiers, one of the very few western films (Italian) made from a non-western perspective that critically examines the final years of a western (in this case, French) empire.

Scathing indictment

Graham Greene’s novel, The Quiet American, published in 1955, was a scathing indictment of the deceptive tactics used by the United States in the early years of the American war in Vietnam. The two film versions based on Greene’s book are illustrative of the degree to which government and public support for empire building affects a film’s content and its distribution.

The second and far superior film adaptation of The Quiet American was directed by Australia’s Philip Noyce and starred Michael Caine and Brendan Fraiser as the novel’s protagonists, Thomas Fowler and Alden Pyle. The picture was scheduled for release in the fall of 2001.

U.S. distributor Miramax screened the picture for distributors on 10 September 2001. The next day’s attacks against the U.S. that resulted in more than 3,000 deaths, eliminated that option. Miramax, after a few trial screenings for the public, pulled the film from circulation. The company concluded that the U.S. public was in no mood to see a film that was critical of American colonialism. The film was kept from general circulation until January 2003. It received critical acclaim but was not a commercial success.

The first version of The Quiet American (1958) a distortion of Greene’s book, was written and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, and starred Audie Murphy and Michael Redgrave. Greene’s sense of moral ambiguity in the novel is eliminated, leaving Murphy, the ‘quiet
American’ as a naive, but well-meaning hero. What the American viewing public did not know at the time of the film’s release in 1958 was that America was beginning to take over the conquest of Vietnam from the French, who had essentially given up on that corner of their empire after losing the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

H. Bruce Franklin suggests the degree to which American media was a co-conspirator in actual events to deceive the public. Greene includes in fictional form in his novel incidents, Franklin writes, that reveal the manner in which the U.S. employed terrorist tactics (while blaming Communists) to build U.S. public support for a war against Communist forces in Vietnam.

Franklin recalls a New York Times headline, ‘Reds’ Time Bombs Rip Saigon Center’ that appeared on 10 January 1952 over a story written by Tillman Durdin, a Times reporter in Saigon working in tight collaboration with the CIA. Durdin tells his Times readers that the bombing was ‘one of the most spectacular and destructive single incidents in the long history of revolutionary terrorism’ carried out by ‘agents here of the Vietminh.’

A blood-chilling photo of the carnage described as a Communist attack ran as the ‘Picture of the Week’ in the January 28 LIFE magazine.’ (Nation magazine, February 3, 2003). Greene, a former British secret agent, with connections with the French security services, was in Saigon at the time of the January 1952 bombing. He later wrote in his memoirs that he suspected a close collaboration between Life magazine and the CIA, a suspicion he incorporated into his novel.

The Mankiewicz version of Greene’s novel is a good example of how a movie, when performing in the ‘service’ of a national policy, acts not as art, but as propaganda. Noyces, in sharp contrast to Mankiewicz, did not need to conform to a U.S. propaganda formula, nor adhere to the preferred version that would be embraced by popular U.S. opinion. Instead he offers a vision that respects Greene’s original intent.

Arrogance of imperialism
David Lean’s 1962 film, Lawrence of Arabia, offers a similar contrast, not between two films, but between different levels of the same film, one of the most acclaimed in modern history. Initially praised for its scenic beauty, tense battle scenes, musical score and superb acting, as well as Lean’s directorial treatment of a complex historical period, the film has its celebratory moments for British imperialism, but it also includes sharply written dialogue that lays bare the arrogance of imperialism.

Lawrence examines the wartime exploits of the tortured, heroic figure of T.E. Lawrence (Peter O’Toole) during Great Britain’s victory over the Turkish army in World War I. In using clips from this film my intent was not to ‘illustrate’, but to share Lean’s vision in order to look behind the scenes of empire building.

Consider, as one example, the sequence in the film after Lawrence has travelled to Cairo to report to British General Allenby on the successful surprise attack Lawrence led against the Turkish port of Aqaba.

Before Lawrence left Aqaba, travelling alone
except for two boys as his companions, he tells Prince Ali that he, Lawrence, must make this journey, rather than send an Arab leader, ‘because they would not believe you.’ Lean’s script reveals at many points like this one that Lawrence is aware that the British attitude toward Arabs is racist, an attitude that assumes that the western ‘white’ world is inherently superior to the non western world.

Racism also emerges in another empire building film, *Khartoum*, which deals with the 19th century war between the British and the Sudanese Muslim leader (Lawrence Oliver in blackface) who called himself the Mahti (chosen one). When the Mahti’s Sudanese army destroys an army of Egyptian soldiers under British command, leaving 10,000 dead, British Prime Minister Gladstone is furious: ‘How could this happen; they were commanded by British officers?’ This is not patriotism; it is racism.

Rashid Khalidi cites a good example of this racist attitude when he reports that a British proconsul in Egypt, justified a cut in the educational budget there by saying he believed that Western education would ‘create a group of intellectuals imbued with national ideals and a sense of frustration over their inferior status.’ (*Resurrecting Empire*, p.18). Seen from the perspective of recent events, the film brings a sharp focus on the recent departure from the Bush cabinet of Secretary of State Colin Powell. Powell, like Lawrence, is a man with a vision about his role as a leader. Both men tried, unsuccessfully, to reconcile personal idealism with the harsh reality of a political environment based on deceit and deception.

Of course, because Lean’s film is a work of art, and not propaganda, its vision leaves room for interpretation. Art is the means through which the artist explores ambiguity and leaves to the viewer the freedom to reach a personal interpretation of the vision of the artist. In the end, both Lawrence and Powell are shoved aside by politicians who used and then discarded them. Powell, the most respected and credible member of the Bush war team, presented what later proved to be a completely false set of claims against Iraq in his speech to the United Nations.

There are echoes of Powell’s UN performance in a scene in *Lawrence of Arabia*, when Lawrence enters General Allenby’s office and encounters his old Arab friend, King Feisal. The King greets Lawrence, but he is clearly disappointed to see that Lawrence has discarded his Arab desert robe for his British army uniform. As he departs the king says:

‘Major Lawrence no doubt has a report to make, about my people and their weakness. And the need to keep them weak (pause) in the British interests and in the French interests too, of course. We must not forget the French.’

General Allenby angrily protests: ‘I told you sir, no such treaty exists.’

Feisal: ‘Yes, General, you have lied most bravely, but not convincingly. I know this treaty does exist.’

Lawrence: (genuinely puzzled) ‘Treaty, sir?’

Feisal: (pointing to Lawrence then slowly turning to Allenby) He lies better than you, General. But then of course, he is almost an Arab.’

When it becomes obvious after Feisal leaves Allenby’s office that Lawrence ‘really doesn’t know’ about the Sykes-Picot agreement, it is patiently explained to him that two ‘civil servants’, one British, the other French, have signed an agreement that after the war France and England would ‘share the Turkish empire, including Arabia’. To gain their loyalty, Lawrence had promised King Feisal and other Arab tribal leaders that the British had no desire to control their lands after the war. Now he sees his promise negated, and angrily shouts: ‘There may be honour among thieves, but there is none among politicians.’

Dryden (Claude Raines), the British diplomat working with Allenby, cuts him off: ‘You may not have known, but you certainly had suspicions. If we’ve told lies, you have told half-lies. And the man who tells lies, like me, merely hides the truth, but the man who tells half-lies has forgotten where he put it.’

This film is not remembered for such insightful, biting dialogue, but rather for its scenic beauty, its music, its narrative brilliance,
and the commanding performance of O’Toole. But it is also through dialogue like this exchange that we see the transcendent power of the film.

Cinema as art persists over the years precisely because it is not limited to the moment of its creation, nor is it limited to the circumstances of the material it describes. Instead, cinema as art resonates over the years as a vision that evokes understanding and insights into successive historical moments.

Lawrence of Arabia is a film that returns to memory as we reflect on Powell at the UN, because it deals with deception as a prevailing tactic of colonialism. An empire, to be successful, must persuade its own people that what it does is in their own best interest. What better way to reach a gullible public than to call on a war hero to persuade a domestic public and potential allies that the cause is a just one?

Repressive colonialism
A third film that resonates with the theme of empire building is a modern film classic, The Battle of Algiers, directed in 1966 by Gillo Pontecorvo, a cinematic breakthrough in looking at colonialist repressive tactics. The Battle of Algiers examines a pivotal moment in Algerian history, when the local population resorted to its own form of terror tactics to fight French military occupation between 1954 and 1957.

The film shows a French-arranged demolition of an Algerian apartment building, followed by terror attacks from the Algerians. In documentary style, Pontecorvo depicts a massive French military force confronting suicide bombers. He describes torture employed to force Algerians to reveal the location of their leaders.

A war that began in rural areas, is shown moving into the crowded urban environment. This forces French paratroopers to fight an elusive army of a highly organized underground Algerian army in the crowded narrow streets of Algiers, virtually a training film for both sides today in Palestine and Iraq.

Drawn from the autobiography of Algerian revolutionary leader Saadi Yacef, who plays himself in the film, The Battle of Algiers follows in close and painful details the cost to both sides as the French try to control an Algerian population that is struggling for self-determination, resisting a colonial enterprise doomed to failure for the simple reason that self-determination is too strong a drive to allow for permanent occupation.

Two moments in the film depict the suffering of both occupier and occupied. In one segment, Pontecorvo photographs a young woman who carries a bomb into a crowded public restaurant. The girl sits at a counter, places her purse with the bomb under her stool and then slowly glances around at the civilians her bomb will kill. The camera pans to see a boy licking an ice cream cone; young couples dancing; and animated dinner table conversations.

In the film’s opening sequence, under the credits, a badly beaten Algerian informer stands before his captors, who have forced him, through torture, to cooperate in a search for an Algerian resistance leader. The impassive soldiers who watch, and the anguish of the informer, whose pain leads him to betray his comrades, is a potent image of both an occupying army and an occupied population.

Striving to avoid any condemnation of the French paratroopers who perform their unpleasant tasks, Pontecorvo also refuses to glorify the Algerian insurgents, even though it is clear that his sympathies lie with the Algerians. He says in a documentary, issued with the film on a new DVD, that he used the same music for both the French and Algerian dead, music with a ‘religious theme inspired by Bach’. He adds that he wants his film to have ‘the smell of truth’ which is why he insisted on using non-professional actors.

The second film version of Graham Greene’s novel, The Quiet American, David Lean’s Lawrence of Arabia, and The Battle of Algiers are three films that show, through the visions of three film artists, the machinations of empires that are ultimately self-defeating. All three cry out as warnings to the current attempt by the United States to resurrect a new western empire.

James M. Wall is Senior Contributing Editor for the Christian Century magazine, Chicago, USA.
Australian films: A long-lived renaissance

Peter Malone

Australian readers were recently asked to nominate their ten best Australian films. I thought I should make my list for myself. It included The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith, Gallipoli and, to my surprise, Muriel’s Wedding. To my further surprise, I discovered that Muriel’s Wedding topped the readers’ list. What was it about this comedy, both broad and subtle, that appealed to so many viewers? After all, wasn’t it just a popular entertainment about a gawky girl who desperately wanted to get married?

Muriel’s Wedding clicked. It had a witty script that combined funny lines with deadpan humour. It was satirical about Aussie pomposity, and about cons and shady dealings. It also featured Abba songs with a spirit of gentle mockery. There was a lot to laugh at and about.

On second and subsequent viewings, however, while I found that the humour is still there, it had become familiar and I did not respond so exuberantly. The sadness underlying Muriel’s struggles, her father’s callous attitudes and her mother’s humiliation and despair tended to emerge.

This response to Muriel’s Wedding reveals a great deal about Australian attitudes and Australian cinema. Comedy is welcome. We enjoy the funny side of life. Overseas commentators note that our sense of humour in so many of our films is ‘quirky’. We enjoy the send-up (mainly when we do it ourselves to ourselves). We can take the serious seriously too. But it should never be deadly serious. The Australian sensibility is a complex of many elements. Some of the most important are: a young outlook, brash responses, an easy hedonism, sympathy for the underdog, extreme competitiveness (think, sport), a ‘fair go’ and having one’s heart in the right place.

It is important to remember that since 1788, when the first white settlers (convicts and marines) arrived in a land previously occupied for more than 50,000 years by aboriginal people, there was a predominantly British and Irish presence. Chinese and a variety of gold-seekers came during the 19th century. However, it was not until the 1940s when post-war European migrants changed the Australian mix. Melbourne is considered the third Greek city of the world (after Athens and Salonika) and there are more Maltese in Melbourne than in Malta. Italians (especially), Poles, the Dutch migrated in substantial numbers.

The Constitution of 1901, establishing the federation of states (formerly colonies) decreed a White Australia policy and did not allow the vote for indigenous aborigines. A referendum overturned the latter, but not until 1967. Asian students from Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia began to come in greater numbers to study at Australian universities during the 1960s. With the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the cutting of Australia adrift from Britain because of the Common Market, the links with Asia became stronger.

Asians migrated. Australians travelled widely in Asia. Although the climate of feeling (more than opinion) currently reflects suspicion of Islam and echoes the US terror of terrorism, the nation is more xenophobic than it has been for some decades. Yet, Australians still see themselves as open and welcoming.

Aboriginal themes
These themes are often explored in cinema, both feature films and documentaries. For instance, in 2002, five feature films on aboriginal themes were released: The Tracker, Black and White, Australian Rules, Beneath Clouds and Rabbit Proof Fence (which also had substantial overseas release). This concentration on aboriginal themes was quite unusual. The Catholic Film Office and Signis (the World
Catholic Association for Communication) gave its annual award to the five films as a group.

The revival (widely referred to as the renaissance) of the Australian Film Industry occurred in the early 1970s and was supported by governments of both political persuasions (Labour and Liberal/National). Government funding offices still support a majority of films (at both federal and state level).

Before 1972, there had been continuous (though sometimes meagre) film production since 1899. The standard text on Australian cinema until 1977 lists 258 films from the beginning until 1929.1 By the mid-1920s, Australia like most countries had experienced the influx and popularity of Hollywood films. Director Ken G. Hall emulated some American models of production and marketing during the 1930s, making 18 films, most of which were popular. However, World War II put an end to this development. While quite a number of films were made in the late 1940s and during the 1950s, they were usually modest and small budget films. British and American companies also came: The Overlanders, Kangaroo, A Town Like Alice, Robbery Under Arms, The Summer of the 17th Doll, The Shiralee, On the Beach, The Sundowners.

The 1960s were the lean years, production money and talent going into documentaries and television production.

In retrospect, it is amazing that Australian cinema had a revival and that so many of the films in the 1970s were of such good quality, found audiences at home and abroad and began to win festival awards. The directors have been in waiting, the talent for the technical side of film-making quickly emerged and within the decade we had some ‘stars’.

Directors with subsequent careers overseas emerged in the 1970s: Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir, Fred Schepisi, Gillian Armstrong, Paul Cox, George Miller. Their films include Breaker Morant, Picnic at Hanging Rock, My Brilliant Career, The Devil’s Playground, Caddie, Mad Max. Had the revival collapsed in 1981, there would still be a strong catalogue of impressive films.

However, the boom continued into the 1980s (although exploitation of tax breaks meant that much mediocre material was produced). Significant films of the 1980s include Mad Max 2, Gallipoli, The Man from Snowy River, Careful He Might Hear You, Annie’s Coming Out, Bliss, The Year My Voice Broke, - and the decade ended with Evil Angels (aka A Cry in the Dark) and Dead Calm.

By this time Hollywood beckoned and Bruce Beresford directed Robert Duvall to an Oscar for Tender Mercies and Jessica Tandy for Driving Miss Daisy, which was Best Film of 1989; Peter Weir had directed Linda Hunt to the Oscar for The Year of Living Dangerously and had been nominated himself for Dead Poets Society. Mel Gibson became a superstar.

Critical and popular success

Looking to the more recent past, we see that 1991-96 produced a range of films of different genres that won both critical and popular success at home and abroad. Jocelyn Moorhouse directed Hugo Weaving and Russell Crowe in a strange tale of a blind photographer, Proof (1991). Russell Crowe was back in 1992 as the leader of a racist skinhead gang in Melbourne in Romper Stomper, although the winning film of 1992 was Baz Luhrmann’s Strictly Ballroom. Australia/New Zealand became Oscar winner in 1993 with The Piano (acting awards to Holly Hunter and Anna Paquin and screenplay to Jane Campion).

Quirky was the adjective for 1994 with Muriel’s Wedding and the perennially popular drag-queens-travel-to-Central Australia comedy, Stephan Elliot’s The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. (Priscilla was the bus they travelled in.) More Oscar nominations in 1995 with Chris Noonan’s delightful Babe. A win in 1996 for Geoffrey Rush impersonating pianist David Helfgott in Shine.

Those can now rightly be referred to as Golden Years. These headliners were not the only ones made, of course, and there were other popular films. But they give an indication of what was happening: offbeat drama, musical, feminist fable, quirky comedy, children’s and family entertainment, biography. These years also saw many of Australia’s actors finding their place in world cinema. One thinks of Judy Davis, Nicole Kidman, Cate Blanchett,
Toni Colette, Rachel Griffiths, Geoffrey Rush, Russell Crowe, Guy Pearce, Heath Ledger, Hugh Jackman – to name some of those most widely known.

If only it were to be like this every year. Nor was it. For the next five years, there were many very interesting low-key films. The major blockbuster was Gillian Armstrong’s *Oscar and Lucinda* (1998). The other films were more genre types, comedies, thrillers, some action films, along with crime capers. In looking at this period, it is clear that there were quite a number of explorations of the darker side of the Australian character and of human nature.

Two films of 1998 embody this: Rowan Wood’s *The Boys*, a frightening portrait of a brother released from prison and dominating his family and *The Interview* where the audience was not sure who was the hero and who the villain when one man intrudes into another man’s home. They were the two major winners of that year’s Australian Film Institute Awards.

The winner for 1999 was in the same vein, a dark comic look at a gang of Sydney criminals. It won Best Film and acting awards for Heath Ledger and Bryan Brown.

What a relief in 2001. The world fell in love with Baz Luhrnman’s *Moulin Rouge*. Nominations and awards galore. At home, the big winner was a film that showed how intelligent, well-written and acted studies of relationships can be strong cinema: Ray Lawrence’s *Lantana* with AFI wins to Anthony LaPaglia and Kerry Armstrong. As has been noted, the aboriginal themes were significant for 2002. But 2003! Sue Brooks’ *Japanese Story* with a moving performance by Toni Collette stood out along with a wry comedy, *Gettin’ Square*, and Heath Ledger, Geoffrey Rush and Naomi Watts coming home for a new interpretation of Australia’s iconic 19th century criminal, *Ned Kelly*.

The rest of that year was slim pickings and, once again, the only way was up. Symbolically, the 2004 AFI winner (in 13 categories!) was the story of a young woman leaving home to find herself and then return. The title, *Somersault*.

This survey is a reminder that it is best for any nation, for any culture, to tell its own stories for its own audiences – and to budget and market accordingly. Any overseas success should be a bonus rather than something to be expected. This survey also serves as a reminder that a nation’s cinema provides a vast resource for self-understanding and for communicating some insight for outsiders in images and storytelling.

**Note**

1. Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australia Film, 1899-1977*.

Peter Malone is an Australian priest who has been reviewing films since 1968. He has taught biblical studies, theology and media studies. At present he heads SIGNIS, the World Catholic Association for Communication.
Egypt is the only Arab country that can boast of a commercial film industry. When people speak of ‘Arabic films’, they are referring to Egyptian cinema. In spite of the centrality of the industry, as the following article reveals, cinema is not exempt from the familiar frictions between art and society.

In 1991, Youssef Chahine, an internationally acclaimed filmmaker, was reviled in the press and later sued for screening his documentary, *El Qahira Menawara Be’ahlaha* (Cairo Illuminated by Its People) at the Cannes Film Festival. The film was banned on the grounds that it ruined Egypt’s ‘reputation’ by depicting poverty. Two years later, Nobel prize winner, Naguib Mahfouz was stabbed and nearly killed, because of his novel *Children of Gebalawi*, a text that some interpreted as atheistic. In 1994, Chahine was once again taken to court for his feature film, *El-Muhager* (The Emigrant). The film borrowed from the Biblical-Quranic story of Joseph – and Islam forbids portraying religious figures on screen. It was banned for a time.

Egyptian cinema in the second millennium can only be analysed against this backdrop. No doubt, commercial factors control and shape the topics and the styles of Egyptian films. Yet, if filmmaking is a mode of self-expression and communication, then most Egyptian films are a broken, stunted, and incomplete dialogue.

Director Hala Galal, one of the founders of Semat, an independent production house, explains the precarious position of filmmakers saying, ‘It’s a juggling act. We want to express ourselves while trying to pass the Censor, not offend viewers, and not tamper with this thing called “Egypt’s reputation”’. Meanwhile we try not to make commercial flops... In the end, we feel like tailors or clowns, and what we do qualifies as anything except art!’

The narrow path that filmmakers are expected to tread is manifest in the layman’s classification of genres. The dream of a commercial production is to be a film *gonbela* (bombshell), a film that is definitely a ‘must-see’, because it is both highly entertaining and inoffensive like the El-Lemby film series. Then there is the film *fi risala*, (a film with a message,) and such a label means that the film is morally constructive and hence ‘forgiven’ for not including sensationalist entertainment. In this classification, there are no misgivings that the message may be a tad too didactic.

To the majority, a film *mahraganat*, (festival film) is a derogatory description that implies depressing subject matter and a subtle and inaccessible subtext. Occasionally at a cinema entrance, people inquire of one another, ‘*qissa walla manazir?’* (story or scenes?) The question refers to whether the film is just a story or if it includes love scenes. The sex scenes are a point of attraction to repressed teenage boys, but they put off the wider, more conservative audience. Finally, there is the newly coined phrase, cinema *nadbifa*, (clean cinema) describing an entertaining film that does not offend conservative, religious sensibilities through promiscuity, obscenity, or critique of religion.

Since the moral epitaphs attached to films are a relatively new phenomenon, some argue that society is regressing into a narrow-minded state. Previously, subject matter was presented with less caution. But then again who was allowed to go to the cinema? Most women and children in the 1920s 1930s, and 40s would probably have never set foot in a cinema. Actresses were considered ‘loose’ women. At the time, the French word ‘artiste’ was appropriated by Egyptians and used synonymously for prostitute! In order to gain ground with a broader audience of families and women, morality was incorporated into cinema. Faten Hamama, known as the ‘Lady of the Arab Screen,’ helped change the public’s negative perception of actresses. Instead of an ‘artiste,’ her insistence on being a ‘good girl’ in most of her roles, endeared her to audience. She gained respect under the scrutiny of almost
every set of frowning Arab eyes. Abdel Haleem Hafez, the most popular singer/actor of his time, also elevated the esteem of his profession. The son of a poor village family, he embodied the Egyptian ‘rags to riches’ story where his perseverance and hard work were rewarded by fame and success. Many of his films were re-enactments of his personal story.

By the end of the 1960s, the off-screen personality of actors and actresses merged with their on-screen personas. This blurring of lines between the real and the fictional served to make cinema less of an immoral menace in the public view.

**Box office milestones**

Arab spectators, like any others, are predominantly drawn by the promise of entertainment and escapism. Most, however, have an unconscious sense of guilt when they realise that they only want to see beauty, action, affluence, heroism and luxury. When people watch a truly enjoyable drama that carries a ‘message,’ they leave the theatre with smug satisfaction. They walk out with a dose of preaching sugar-coated in the entertainment.

The first striking box-office success in the last decade was *Sae’eedi Fi El-Gam’a El-Amrikiya* (An Upper Egyptian at the American University, 1998.) The lead actor was Mohamed Heneidy, a short man whose appeal comes from his naïveté in the midst of a cunning world. In addition to his appeal on screen, his off-screen personality scored him many points. He appears in television programmes to invoke blessings upon his mother. (To do good to one’s parents, especially mothers, is considered the height of morality in Islam.) Whenever he is interviewed during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, Heneidy is proud to say that he is fasting, praying, and going on a pilgrimage to Mecca. He emphasises that art has to be ‘good and clean.’ That audiences not only enjoy Heneidy’s humour, but also wholeheartedly approve of him as a person, is a fact that cannot be overlooked in analysing the commercial success of his films.

*Sae’eedi* cast Heneidy in the role of Khalaf, a naïve villager – traditional and old-fashioned – who is a student at the American University in Cairo. Although he admires its social advancement, he disapproves of the ‘corrupting’ values of American society. He encounters modernity’s many guises: boyfriends and girlfriends, certain dress codes, music, and above all the supposedly pro-Zionist politics of the professors of the American university, with a comic yet morality-laden response. Events escalate to the point that he burns the Israeli flag in a demonstration on campus. In several cinemas, viewers broke out in applause!

In another instance in the same film, Heneidy sings a song called, ‘Chocolata’ (Chocolate.) The chocolate to which he refers is a Sudanese prostitute. He teases her saying, ‘When I turn off the lights, I can’t see you!’ The ‘good girls’ are Khalaf’s conservative yet modern classmate and a veiled girl. They appear in stark comparison to the promiscuous girls of the American University.

Viewers were not critical of the film. The game of opposites: good versus bad and self versus other that is deployed passes largely unnoticed. His next film was *Hamam Fi Amsterdam* (Hammam in Amsterdam, 1999) a film about a young Egyptian living in Holland. Once again, ‘good’ traditional Islamic values are set against the ‘bad’ Western values of Amsterdam. The film’s villain is a Jewish character, a successful tactic that draws upon, and affirms, the reservoir of animosity between Arabs and Jews.

The irony about the nationalist content of mainstream cinema is that the forms are certainly based on the American model. Present-day cinema culture is very much one of popcorn and coca cola at the cinema complexes in malls. According to gifted Egyptian director Dawood Abdelsayed, ‘mall audiences are new breed of people. They are the ones reared in the eighties and nineties under the influence of the petro-dollar culture exported from the Gulf countries. They prefer the superficial, air-conditioned, commercial environment of malls, to the outside world with its hot and cold weather, crowds, and activity.’

To cater to mall-goers, contemporary Egyptian films are modelled on Hollywood productions in strategy and style. But of course, the villains and heroes are reversed.
Hollywood’s Arab terrorists are counterbalanced by Egypt’s unsympathetic and immoral Americans and Zionists. The Arab/Israeli conflict and more recently the American aggression on Iraq have made the resort to this tactic more blatant. Even a director like Youssef Chahine, famous for his complex and thought-provoking work, succumbed to the temptation of resorting to anti-American sentiment to safeguard an audience. His latest film *Alexandria/New York* (2004), shown at the Cannes Film Festival, alongside *Fahrenheit 9/11*, was a more artistic rendition of the simplistic ‘us versus them’ principle.

**Succès de scandale**

The game of playing on the moral sympathies of people is relatively simple when politics are in question. However, opinions and sympathies become more muddled when the issues are family relations, religion, and sexuality. *Sahar El-Layali* (2002), a controversial social drama released in 2002, is a case in point. The plot of *Sahar El-Layali* revolves around four couples whose lives intertwine. The problems encountered by the couples are adultery, commitment-phobia, and sexual dissatisfaction among women. Not sure that it would attract an audience, the producers delayed releasing the film for a year waiting for a ‘good moment’. Contrary to their expectations, the film proved popular and remained in the theatres for six months.

Although there was no truth to the claims, rumours circulated all over Egypt that *Sahar El-Layali* would be banned. The debate was probably more related to the subject matter than to explicit sex scenes. Wives who are not sexually satisfied, couples that live together out of wedlock are not run-of-the-mill subject matter in mainstream Arab cinema. In a society bombarded with values of puritanical morality and with stereotypes of wives and mothers who are selflessly devoted to their families, it is heresy even to suggest that women think about sexual pleasure! To make things worse, all the characters of the film were shown in a sympathetic light as ‘good’ people who make mis-

*From Sahar El-Layali (Sleepless Nights), the commitment-phobic and his girlfriend. Courtesy of Hany Khalife, the director of the film.*

*Sahar El-Layali* (Sleepless Nights), a controversial social drama released in 2002, is a case in point. The plot of *Sahar El-Layali* revolves around four couples whose lives intertwine. The problems encountered by the couples are adultery, commitment-phobia, and sexual dissatisfaction takes.

When the film was shown in London as part of an event called, ‘Forbidden Films in the Arab World’, discussion flared up at home. As a result, *Sahar El-Layali* was in the media spotlight. The general consensus was that it was
indeed daring, but at least it was truthful about ‘what we all know but do not say.’ Spectators saw the director as heroic and admirable for venturing into new terrain. Audiences vouched for the film. In this aspect, *Sahar El-Layali* is unique among many other subjects of controversy that vex both the censor and public opinion.

Other films are not so lucky when it comes to confrontations with either public opinion or the censor. *Baheb El-Seema* (I Love Cinema) was shot in 2001 and screened in 2004. Like *Sahar El-Layali*, it was controversial from the first day of its release. The events takes place in the late 1960s and are told from the point-of-view of Na’eem, the son of a middle class Egyptian Christian family. His father is a religious fanatic who forbids him to go to the cinema. Forbidden by her husband to paint nude figures, Na’eem’s mother makes double-faced paintings to hang on her walls – with nature scenes on one side and nudes on the other. Her paintings mirror the two-faced society in which much is done and hidden and where appearances differ gravely from realities.

*Baheb El-Seema* showed no villains and it is not difficult to sympathise with the characters, even the ‘fundamentalist’ father. Unlike, *Sahar El-Layali*, however, this film did not gain the audience’s overall stamp of approval. In a poignant line, the narrator reminisces about a visit to the doctor and says, ‘I hate all those people who tell us what to do under the pretext that they know better what is for our own good.’ The authority of a father, the rules of a headmistress, and the decrees of religious leaders are all implicated in this statement.

The case of *Baheb El-Seema* was last summer’s hottest scandal. Whereas the pattern has been for Muslim fundamentalists to challenge certain modes of artistic production, *Baheb El-Seema* showed the start of a similar trend among Christian viewers. Because the family around which the story revolves is Christian, the Christian minority in Egypt reacted very negatively. Hardly ever portrayed on screen, the film showed a mother who, suffocated by her husband’s vow of chastity, has an affair. The enraged Coptic audience wondered, ‘Are they implying that Christian women are whores?’

The film also had obscene language and fights that took place within a church. Several Copts gathered to file a collective lawsuit against the scriptwriter and director, both of whom are Christians, against the censor for releasing the film, the Minister of Culture for allowing it, and the Minister of Interior for not perceiving it as a threat to national security and an impetus to sectarian strife and violence.

The scandal was so broad and the anger so tangible that the Coptic community held demonstrations. Ikram Lam’ei, the Protestant pastor in charge of the church in which some of the scenes were shot, was asked for an explanation by the leadership of the Evangelical Church in Egypt. Other than the fighting and swearing in the church, there was a scene where two young people are caught kissing on the church rooftop. In an effort to placate people’s anger, Lame’i was forced to publish an explanation in *Rose el-Youssef*, Egypt’s most widely read current affairs magazine. In it, he said that he was not informed of the film’s content, and that anyway, the kissing scene was not on the rooftop of his church!
The banality of the accusations was matched by the ridiculousness of his response!

The film remained in the cinema for eight weeks. The lawsuit did not succeed in banning it. Not yet, anyway. Many speculate that without the controversy, *Baheb El-Seema* would have not stayed in the cinema half that time. When no controversies arise the majority of artistic productions, like *Baheb El-Seema*, screen at international festivals, and get no attention outside critical circles at home. *Arak el Balah* (Date Wine, 1999) by Radwan el Kachef and *El-Medina* (The City, 2000) by Yousri Nasrallah hardly stayed in Egyptian cinemas for one week!

For better or worse, these notorious ‘festival films,’ appeal to agencies of foreign funding. Invariably, such topics revolve around current affairs: like Islam, women’s status in the Arab world, and the question of Palestine. Yousri Nasrallah’s latest release, *Bab El-Chams* (The Door of the Sun, 2004) is about the Palestinian dispossession. Few Egyptian cinemas will screen it, fearing that if they do, they will be stigmatised as cinemas that show the dreaded ‘festival films.’

‘Lone Ranger’ among directors

Dawood Abdelsayed, renowned for his artistic integrity, makes films that fit none of the pigeonholes. He cannot call himself a director, he says, because by definition a director is someone who can be hired to direct someone else’s script. Nor can he call himself a writer/director because he refuses to be commissioned to write and direct a film. According to his own, well thought-out definition, he is ‘a filmmaker who makes films when I feel compelled to do so.’ Abdelsayed, born in 1946, has only made seven films so far and is currently working on his eighth.

His latest release *Muwaten, Mokhber, Wa Haramy* (A Citizen, Detective, and a Thief, 2003) did well commercially because one of the actors, Sha’aban Abdelrehim was at the prime of his singing career at the release date. Like a true man of the age, Abdelrehim’s album was a bestseller thanks to a song called ‘I Hate Israel.’ His casting in *Muwaten* raised eyebrows: the epitome of popular culture in its basest form, appears in a film by the respected Dawood Abdelsayed?!

In fact, Abdelrehim was beautifully cast in his role as an ignorant thief who had no knowledge of art or culture but became a publisher. He asks a writer to take out the inappropriate parts of the novel, ‘because religion says this is wrong.’ The ironies raised by the thief’s situation, an almost illiterate, yet devout, publisher, are paralleled by the actual reality of the artistic field – contemporary producers may or may not have picked up on the allusion!

Some films get critical acclaim because of the timeliness of their release. Dawood Abdelsayed’s films do not succumb to the temptation of tailor-made relevance. When asked to take up a certain topic geared towards foreign funding, he prefers not to. ‘When you try to answer the unanswerable questions... that is what art is all about. Such questions include the big existential questions like why was I born, why am I here... but also other less grand unanswerable questions. Why and how do we fall in love?’ His work in progress, *Retha’ Ala El-Bahr*, (Seaside Eulogy,) is a romance. Such films do not have an expiry date.

Commercial cinema in Egypt succeeds in the quasi-paradoxical task of entertaining and indoctrinating the unsuspecting viewer. Controversial films are thought-provoking. Yet when it comes to the art of making heart-piercing films, Egypt – no different from the rest of the world – can only boast of a few Diogenes-like filmmakers who persist in the midst of commercialism and controversy to express themselves honestly... regardless. The future belongs to them. n

Maggie Morgan is a producer who works with an independent film company in Egypt and she also teaches a literature/cultural studies class at the American University in Cairo. She wrote her M.A. Thesis on autobiography in literature and cinema.
Nuevo cine argentino con historia

Carlos A. Valle

Llama mucho la atención en estos últimos años la recepción y el reconocimiento tanto como las expectativas que se han creado en centros internacionales con la producción de jóvenes cineastas argentinos, teniendo en cuenta que provienen de una cinematografía que mayormente ha estado ausente del interés internacional. ¿Qué es lo que ha producido este cambio?

Los festivales internacionales han sido un estímulo muy significativo para dicho reconocimiento, pero no ha faltado quien ha argumentado que los criterios de los festivales no comulgan con los del público. Son considerados como un centro elitista que admira lo que se aleja de los cánones más transitados y empuja a los realizadores a orientarse sobre lo extravagante. Por razones auténticas o porque lo novedoso tiene un cierto atractivo atrapante, realizaciones de jóvenes cineastas argentinos de estos últimos años ha encontrado un muy significativo eco en el ámbito internacional logrando importantes premios en los más diversos festivales.

¿Se trata simplemente de una tendencia esnоб que un día exalta a unos para olvidarlos más tarde? ¿A qué apela esta nueva generación que encuentra eco en audiencias que tienen una problemática, un contexto social y económico y una estética diferente? ¿Qué es lo que atrae de esta nueva cinematografía? Su carácter más bien local ¿confirma aquello de que ‘pinta tu aldea y describirás el mundo’? o ¿se trata simplemente de un espasmo creativo que se ha de diluir prontamente? ¿Es posible hablar de ‘un nuevo cine argentino’?

‘Nuestra mejor película es aquella en la que logramos expresar al mismo tiempo, voluntariamente o no, nuestras ideas sobre la vida y sobre el cine’, sostenía François Truffaut. Vida y cine siempre han estado relacionados, aunque, por supuesto, de muy diversas maneras. El cine en general procuró, en algunos momentos, reflejar la vida tal como era en toda su crudeza y miseria, en otros, estereotiparla, dogmatizarla y transformarla en una fantasía inalcanzable pero sublimante. Pero también el cine ayudó develar, por su misma fuerza, las cosas ocultas de la vida, la magia ignorada de la creatividad e incitar a penetrar en el misterio del sueño y la fantasía.

Para describir el cine argentino actual deberíamos comenzar por reconocer que estas expresiones han estado y están presentes. Al hacerlo debemos convenir que no correspondería hablar de un ‘nuevo cine argentino’, en el sentido de que se haya establecido una corriente como la nouvelle vague, que marcó a una generación e imprimió un sello particular a sus filmes. Muchos de los jóvenes directores argentinos no se sienten pertenecientes a ninguna tendencia o movimiento. No obstante, reconocen que las oportunidades que han tenido para su capacitación y para el ejercicio de sus dones han sido de enorme ayuda. Así hoy, entre cuarenta a cincuenta producciones anuales reflejan una variedad de proyectos con gran potencialidad, aunque muchos de ellos solo logran resultados precarios.

Un presente con historia

Para poder comprender está multiplicidad de manifestaciones cinematográficas, que surgen en el seno de un país que sufre enormes problemas económicos y sociales, hay que conocer la importancia que ha tenido la historia de su cinematografía, porque la historia del cine argentino está estrechamente relacionada con la historia del país. Es así como se explica por qué se ha producido esta nueva corriente de expresión cinematográfica.

La Argentina está entre los primeros países del mundo que registra el pánico que hizo presa de algunos espectadores ante la exhibición de ‘La llegada del tren’. Esto ocurría en junio de 1986, solo un año después, de que

Durante el período entre 1931 al 1940, con el advenimiento del cine sonoro y de la industrialización se produce una enorme expansión. Se instalan importantes estudios de filmación como Argentina Sono Film y Luminton. La producción y la distribución alcanzan cifras muy significativas. Hasta la Segunda Guerra Mundial, junto con México, se había logrado un enorme desarrollo que cubría toda América Latina y España.

Pero la Segunda Guerra Mundial repercute en la industria nacional. La película virgen, que se producía en Estados Unidos de Norteamérica, empieza a escasear. El número de filmaciones sufre una fuerte declinación, a la vez que la producción estadounidense se incrementa fuertemente. Las distribuidoras estadounidenses comienzan a dominar los ‘circuitos de exhibiciones’, apoyados por un muy desarrollado aparato publicitario. Las películas del exterior tenían su cuota de pantalla asegurada. El cine nacional empezó así a mostrar su debilidad comercial y económica y no logró un apoyo estatal para su desarrollo.

De todas manera durante el período del primer gobierno peronista (1945-55) la industria se vio favorecida por la subvención que éste le otorgó. Esto le valió que buena parte de su producción estuviera orientada a satisfacer esa línea política. No obstante, es importante remarcar la importancia de algunos realizadores que buscaron producir un cine que identificara las realidades que se atravesaban en el país. Las influencias provenientes del neorrealismo dejaron su marca. Basta mencionar a directores como Lucas Demare (1910-1981) que con su obra Los isleros (1951) busca pintar con acentuado realismo una situación de pobreza y marginación.

Lo mismo se podría decir de Hugo del Carril (1912-1989), un cineasta con una marcada sensibilidad social, que ahonda en esa situación a la vez que eleva su reclamo por una vida más humana en Las aguas bajan turbias (1951). Tampoco puede olvidarse una figura como la de Mario Soficci (1900-1977), quien en buena parte de las 40 películas que dirigió –y en algunas de ellas actuó– mostró una particular sensibilidad para indagar en nuevas experiencias narrativas cinematográficas tal como en su llamativa Rosaura a las diez (1957).

Cine de autor y literatura
Los 1950 son también los tiempos de cine de autor, donde se destaca la obra un director que logró una significativa repercusión internacional, Leopoldo Torre Nilsson (1924-1978), considerado por muchos como el ‘padre de la generación del ´60’. Dos de sus primeros filmes recogen la obra de dos destacados autores nacionales. Primero, El crimen de Oribe (1949) que realiza junto con su padre, basado en ‘El perjurio de la nieve’ de Adolfo Bioy Casares y, luego, Días de Odio (1953), a partir de un cuento de Jorge L. Borges. Pero quizás su obra más reconocida sea La Casa del ángel (1956) no solo por su repercusión internacional sino también por su impacto en las generaciones posteriores.

Las relaciones entre la literatura y el cine están muy marcadas en la década del 1960. Basta mencionar solamente a Manuel Antín (1926), creador en los últimos años de la FUC (Fundación Universitaria del Cine), a quien se le atribuye haber abierto un espacio para la capacitación y la experimentación de este ‘nuevo cine argentino’. Para Antín no hay cine sin literatura, y lo mostró en su fascinación por la obra del escritor Julio Cortazar, que plasmó desde su primer largometraje, La cifra impar (1961) que es una adaptación del cuento ‘Cartas de mamá’. A éste, después, le seguirían Circe (1963) e Intimidad de los parques (1964).

Intelectuales de la imagen
La década del ´60 se caracteriza también por el surgimiento de jóvenes cineastas que se concen-

Cine político, cine liberación
Los repetidos golpes militares al abortar toda salida democrática hicieron su impacto en las expresiones cinematográficas. La censura junto con la imposición de ciertos criterios temáticos tornó a muchas realizaciones en intentos limitados y provisorios al estar carentes de apoyo económico. Otras tuvieron que usar un lenguaje hermético o se convirtieron en clandestinas. Una de esas expresiones emblemáticas es la obra La Hora de los Hornos (1968) de Fernando ‘Pino’ Solanas (1936) y Octavio Getino (—) que por mucho tiempo circuló entre las sombras en sindicatos, grupos comunitarios o barriales. Durante la década del ’60 y ’70 se desarrolló el llamado ‘cine político argentino’, que había comenzado con Fernando Birri con un corto llamado Tire Die (1959) que él llamó ‘la primera encuesta filmada’.

Se pensaba que el cine se expresaba a partir de tres vertientes. Una, en la línea de las mayores producciones al estilo Hollywood; una segunda que nucela a todo el cine de autor y, una tercera, que llamaron ‘cine de liberación’. En esta última línea Pino Solanas continuó desarrollando su propuesta cinematográfica en proyectos internacionales como El exilio de Gardel (1985) y Sur (1987). Después de la debacle económica y social de los últimos años en Argentina su testimonio quedó plasmado en Memoria del Saqueo (2003) porque dijo: ‘Quería dar mi versión de la historia’.

Los herederos de la historia
Pero esta línea de corte testimonial y política se vio desbordada en los ’90 por una multiplicidad de propuestas. La nueva generación emer-
Buenos Aires. Viven en una casa tomada, están desempleados y roban para lograr su sustento.

Desprovista de golpes bajos se presenta como una cruda mirada signada por la violencia, comunicada en un argot cerrado, con el telón de fondo de música de cumbia que culmina como un ejemplo de desigualdad social.

Luego, con Bolivia (2001), trata el problema de la discriminación que debe enfrentar la discriminación y el abuso. A partir de historias de vida descubre los costados sordos de la convivencia social.

Pablo Trapero (1971) con Mundo Grúa (1999) refleja el difícil proceso que atravesaba la Argentina en ese momento, cuando proyectaba una imagen de bienestar y progreso mientras se aproximaba una hecatombe económica de fuertes repercusiones sociales. Parte de la sencilla historia de un hombre que busca empleo y es recomendado para manejar una grúa, una tarea que deberá aprender.

Trapero confiesa que le interesa mucho el mundo del trabajo y se concentra en lo que llama ‘la ceremonia cotidiana que supone cualquier trabajo’. Por eso dice: ‘... la falta de trabajo nos identifica: el Rulo –personaje central de Mundo Grúa– es un tipo especial, que atraviesa un periodo especial y que, evidentemente, no es la misma persona cuando tiene trabajo que cuando lo busca.’ Esta historia personal y cotidiana desnuda, para quien quiera leerla, la agonía social a partir del mundo del trabajo.

Otra historia, otro aprendiz, le permitirá dibujar el intrincado rompecabezas de la corrupción en El Bonaerense (2002). Un joven de una pequeña ciudad se ve obligado a marcharse a una gran ciudad donde consigue un trabajo en la policía local. Allí se verá envuelto en el mundo de la corrupción. La pregunta que Trapero plantea con su película es ‘¿dónde pierde uno la inocencia y cuando es responsable de las decisiones que toma?’ Por cierto que esta no es una problemática solamente local. Una vez más tenemos aquí una reflexión de carácter social, y de muy diversas dimensiones, que no olvida preguntar por las pequeñas decisiones que nos reclama la vida diaria.

Lucrecia Martel (1966) irrumpe en la cinematografía local con La Ciénaga (1999) que relata la historia de dos familias en el noroeste argentino marcadas por el aburrimiento y la saturación en un clima colmado de humedad y calor sofocante. Allí viven en una tensa calma, como el agua estancada de un pantano. Martel logra paradójicamente que ‘lo que no pasa’ tenga una densidad envolvente que captura al espectador para sumergirlo en una atmósfera donde la sexualidad y el racismo se dibujan con trazos esfumados. Se podría hablar de sugerencias, de guiños o de simples trampas en muchos de los casi triviales hechos que se suceden. Martel ganó con este filme el premio Alfred Bauer a la mejor obra prima en el 51º Festival Internacional de Berlín.

Su segundo obra, La niña santa (2004), cuenta la historia de dos amigas adolescentes, alumnas de un colegio religioso católico. Ambas están atravesando un periodo de profunda devoción mística. Una de ellas está convencida de que Dios tiene una tarea para ella, que encuentra en la búsqueda de salvación de
un médico que la ha ‘tocado’ y a quien ella quiere redimir en una mezcla de erotismo sublimado y misticismo difuso. Martel ha dicho que lo que le preocupa es ‘el desamparo divino’, pero en sentido positivo. Por eso afirma ‘La ciénaga y La niña santa tratan de universos donde todavía no se acepta el desamparo. Cuando un doblega su voluntad es porque se la ha cedido a otro, y en un mundo donde el orden es preexistente, uno se la ha cedido a la divinidad. Cuando ese orden desaparece, te vuelve la responsabilidad y la voluntad tiene muchísimo valor.’

Carlos Sorín (1944) tiene una trayectoria muy particular. Comienza realizando su filme La película de Rey (1986) con una llamativa repercusión local e internacional y premios con el Goya de España, en el Festival de Biarritz y a la mejor opera prima en el Festival de Venecia. La película del Rey es la historia de un joven director que ha planeado filmar una película sobre Orllie Amoine, un loco francés que, en 1860, se declara Rey de la Patagonia y pretende establecer con el apoyo de varios caciques locales, una monarquía constitucional.

Su proyecto está a punto de sucumbir porque su productor le ha abandonado. Pero él no se amilana y con un grupo de profesionales se dirige al sur del país a cumplir su sueño de rodar su película. Después de la atroz y sangrienta dictadura que vivió Argentina entre los años 1976 al 1983, Sorín pareciera reflejar en este filme la incertidumbre de un pueblo que debe enfrentar las enormes dificultades para iniciar un nuevo camino.

Pero pasaron quince años, tiempo en el cual Sorín se dedicó al cine publicitario, para que volviera a conmovernos con su Historias mínimas (2002) un singular relato de tres simples historias que se cruzan en el largo y desierto camino del sur del país. Sorín trabajó con actores no profesionales que le dieron el tono de un documental que se ha vuelto ficción o viceversa. En sus palabras ‘Me interesa la relación entre lo real y lo ficticio. Es un acercamiento al documental, pero a un documental falso.’ Es ese tenue trazo de neorrealismo que le permite ahondar en la profundidad y la complejidad de las cosas simples de la vida. Es como descubrir los tesoros ocultos de lo que parece trivial, lo que hace que, para él, ‘filmar se vuelve una alegría.’

Debe reconocerse, una vez más que este ha sido un recorrido parcial y limitado, cuyo propósito es llamar la atención sobre una realidad llena de sugerencias, de frescura, de búsqueda no exenta de frustraciones, limitaciones y desánimos. Sin embargo, una aventura que logra, parafraseando a Proust, que ‘este cine adquiera la dignidad que le falta cuando revela cosas que no existen’.

Notas
1. Dado los límites del presente trabajo, esta muy suscita historia se limita a dar solo algunos ejemplos en cada una de las etapas. Al hacerlo, inevitablemente, se han dejado de lado referencias a muchos pioneros y destacados realizadores que merecerían haber sido mencionados.

Buster Keaton and the art of the ‘wise fool’

Philip Lee

The first public screening of a film took place in 1895, when Auguste and Louis Lumière hired the basement of Le Grand Café on the Boulevard des Capucines, Paris, to show La Sortie des Ouvriers de l’Usine Lumière. That same year, one of the great comedians of cinema was born in the tiny settlement of Piqua, Kansas, USA.

On a relentlessly hot day in July 1898, Buster Keaton, not yet three years old, lost part of a finger in a clothes wringer, had several stitches after a stone thrown into the air gashed his forehead, and was carried off by a cyclone.

Keaton’s parents were appearing in vaudeville in Kansas. At the climax of the act the auditorium door burst open and a voice yelled ‘Cyclone! Cyclone! Hit for cover!’ The theatre emptied. Joe and Myra Keaton ran back to the boarding house where they had left their son. Up to the bedroom, no Buster. Down to the storm cellar, no Buster:

‘At that moment, Buster was sitting in his nightgown in the dusty middle of unpaved Main Street some four blocks away... Just as his parents were scrambling in the front door, the vast vacuum of the tornado’s eye had sucked him bodily right out of the second-story window. Before Joe and Myra were halfway up the stairs, their son was sailing high over trees and houses, too amazed to be afraid, and then coasting down a slow-relaxing ramp of air to land gently in the very centre of an empty street’ (Blesh, 1966: 9-10).

The incident is legendary. It set its stamp on a man who literally tumbled into the lives and affections of millions. Buster Keaton went on stage with his father as a child star in a ‘rough-house’ act in which he was bodily thrown into the wings and against the stage backdrop without ever coming to harm. He learnt how to trip and fall and do all the visual gags that later served him so well in his films. Early on he discovered that a deadpan face – never smiling, never blinking an eye – would get the audience’s attention. It was the mask of the tragic clown.

Commedia dell’arte tradition

Buster Keaton’s character and style were a throwback to commedia dell’arte in which masked actors improvised on traditional themes. Such performances flourished in Italy from the 14th to the 17th century. In practice the plays did not originate in the inspiration of the moment. The subject was predetermined, the characters named, their relations to one another established and the situations clearly identified beforehand.

The chief characters in commedia dell’arte were an old man (Pantalone), a learned pedant, a swashbuckling soldier, serving maids and comic servants, of which the best known are Arlecchino (Harlequin) and Colombina. In the 18th century the commedia dell’arte tradition began to infiltrate the satirical plays of the Paris fairs, where unlicensed theatres performed pièces en vaudeville (plays in dumb show – because dialogue was forbidden) parodying the famous Comédie-Française. The format was imported into English as Harlequinade, an early kind of pantomime. Here Harlequin often figured as a persecuted lover befriended by a good fairy. Commedia dell’arte, Harlequinade and pantomime metamorphosed into vaudeville, the loose collection of variety acts that entertained people in the days before cinema, radio and television.

The plots of commedia dell’arte were mostly concerned with love intrigues, clever tricks to get money or to outwit some simpleton. An important part of the action were the humorous interruptions, calledazzi, which often had nothing to do with the story itself. These might
be acrobatic feats, juggling, pantomime acts, or wrestling. The stock characters in commedia dell’arte wore masks, which told the audience what to expect. There is a strong parallel between the physicality and characters of commedia dell’arte and Buster Keaton’s comic ‘persona’, including his mask-like face and the simple characters he plays in his films.

The wise clown
The influence of commedia dell’arte can be traced in the plays of Shakespeare, who saw actors improvising plots and who used material from translations of the 16th century Italian playwright Lodovico Ariosto. Shakespeare altered the tradition by using his comic characters to comment on serious or romantic action as well as to add entertainment value.

Shakespeare’s ‘clown’ was often a caricature of a rustic buffoon who nevertheless embodied common sense. In contrast, the ‘fool’ had his origins in real life. In Elizabethan times, ‘natural’ and ‘wise’ fools were kept in great houses, the former providing involuntary entertainment through their mental incapacity, the latter more sophisticated entertainment in which the appearance of folly was part of the act. On stage:

‘Shakespeare’s fools are mostly wise; they hover on the edges of the play’s action, enabled by their classlessness to move easily between high and low characters, glancing obliquely in anecdote, jest, and song at the follies of their social betters... No one could be more sympathetic than the apotheosis of Shakespeare’s use of the character type, the Fool of King Lear, whose very namelessness assists the sense of disembodied intelligence existing purely for the sake of his master’ (Wells, 2002: 140).

This is not a far cry from the character of the wise clown that Buster Keaton develops in his films. Audiences everywhere recognise the individual who confronts the mundane aspects of daily life. The seeming fool lifts the veil of authority, pointing out that the Emperor has no clothes, unmasking the more unpleasant aspects of power, encouraging society to reflect on and laugh at its own foibles. The loner triumphs over adversity, which, in Keaton’s case, often involved a machine. Among the many that he made, two films in particular reveal Keaton’s innate understanding of the human condition and the comic possibilities offered by fate: Cops and The General. A third, at the end of his career, marks the homage paid to a great comic actor by a great playwright: Film.

Cops (1922)
The story is that of an easygoing youth (Keaton), getting nowhere in particular, whose girl (the mayor’s daughter) gives him an ultimatum: ‘Either become a big businessman, or lose me.’ He finds money in the street and uses it to go into business. He pays a sharpster, who does not own them, for a horse and wagon that are not for sale. Next he pays a con man for a houseful of furniture. The youth now sets out on the wagon, aiming to sell the furniture at a handsome profit. Then he will be what his girl wants him to be – a success.

Buster and the wagon somehow stumble into the annual police parade. He is swept along a crowd-lined street towards the mayor and local dignitaries on a reviewing stand in front of City Hall. Just as Buster and the wagon approach, the scene cuts to a nearby roof where a bunch of anarchists are lighting the fuse of a bomb. They toss it over the parapet and it lands on Buster’s wagon seat. Oblivious, Buster lights a cigarette with the burning fuse and carelessly throws the bomb onto the sidewalk in front of the reviewing stand.

The bomb explodes, catapulting Buster into the air, shattering the wagon, tipping over the stand and flattening the marchers. A quick shot shows the people on the stand shaken, but uninjured. Cue thousands of cops in pursuit of one small man. But these are not Keystone Cops; these are real and the chase is on, swirling through the city. Finally, Buster flees into a great open doorway before the camera pans to a sign above that reads ‘Central Police Station’. A few moments elapse and slowly the great doors open and a policeman backs out. Locking the doors he turns and reveals his face: Keaton.

Even so there is a last laugh. At that very
moment the girl Buster loves walks past. He looks at her; she tosses her head and walks away. Sadly Buster retrieves the key to the Police Station and opens the door. A dozen grasping hands drag him inside. The final shot is a tombstone. Engraved on it are the words ‘The End’. *Commedia finita est*, and that’s the way real life so often goes.

**The General (1926)**

The story behind the film is true. In 1868 William Pittenger published *The Great Locomotive Chase*. It told the stranger-than-fiction tale of an incident in 1862, during the Civil War, when a handful of Union raiders operating behind Confederate lines tried to steal a locomotive and nearly got away with it. The film is, therefore, more or less one long chase, with ‘The General’ (the stolen locomotive) being endlessly pursued by Keaton.

Refused enlistment in the Confederate army because he is considered indispensable as a civilian railroad engineer, John Gray (Keaton) has two loves, a beautiful old locomotive and his girl, Annabelle Lee. When the locomotive is kidnapped (along with Annabelle) John follows the train northward in one comic sequence after another. That night, in territory held by the North, he arrives at Union headquarters to reclaim both his loves. Snatching Annabelle up and boarding ‘The General’, John heads south pursued by Northern soldiers in another locomotive, ‘The Texas’... The film is too good to spoil with the rest of the story!

The real-life drama of ‘The General’ ended with the scattered flight and capture of the raiders, the hanging of some and the long imprisonment of others. A thrilling story to read, but not, one would have thought, material for comedy. But Keaton had moved away from comedy for comedy’s sake to explore a deeper level in which his fate-ridden characters...
exhibit a kind of noble pathos. The result in *The General* is a masterpiece of cinema, whose mix of bravura and heroism tinged with sadness established a new genre of comedy:

‘At this stage, laughs had become secondary – at least in the sense that easy laughs would no longer do. The character had to tell his story, a real story told so that all must believe. Now, neither thoughtless nor thoughtlessly provoked, laughter wells up from a deeper place’ (Blesh, 1966: 270).

The genre that Buster Keaton inaugurated is reflected in the work of a later great film comedian, Jacques Tati. Keaton was already a star in France, where he was known as Malec, when he began to appear live at the Cirque Médran. An acknowledged disciple of Keaton, Tati’s films – *Jour de fête* (1949), *Les Vacances de M. Hulot* (1953) and *Mon Oncle* (1958) – are:

‘remarkable for their economy of style and gesture. Using a minimum of dialogue and maximum of visual effect and natural sound, Tati creates an observant satire on contemporary France as it moves into becoming a society of consumption’ (Hayward, 1993: 185).

Social commentary was not Keaton’s principal aim, but he succeeded in showing how ‘serious comedy’ could still be used to observe society.

**Film** (1965)

A year before Keaton died, Barney Rosset of Evergreen Theatre invited Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and Samuel Beckett to write the scripts for a feature-length trilogy. Beckett wrote *Film*. His first choice for its lone protagonist was Irish actor Jack McGowran, who was unavailable. So were Charlie Chaplin and Zero Mostel. Finally, Beckett agreed that Buster Keaton would be ideal.

*Film* was shot in black and white and directed by Alan Schneider under the personal supervision of Samuel Beckett, who may only have been there in person because of his declared admiration for Keaton’s work:

‘It has even been suggested that the inspiration for *Waiting for Godot* might have come from a minor Keaton film called *The Loveable Cheat*, in which Keaton plays a man who waits endlessly for the return of his partner – whose name interestingly enough was Godot’ (Waugh, 1995).

In *Film*, the camera follows Keaton through the streets from behind so that the audience never sees his face. People in front gasp in horror as they catch sight of him. The character eventually reaches the apartment where he lives and goes inside. He shoos his cat and dog from the room and covers up the goldfish bowl. After tearing up family photos, the camera finally traps Keaton into looking into the lens and two points of view are revealed: Keaton’s look of sheer anguish (at being seen) and the camera’s (transformed into Keaton’s alter ego) look of intent curiosity.

Asked what *Film* is about, Beckett said:

‘It’s about a man trying to escape from perception of all kinds – from all perceivers – even divine perceivers... But he can’t escape from self-perception. It is an idea from Bishop Berkeley, the Irish philosopher and idealist, “To be is to be perceived”. The man who desires to cease to be must cease to be perceived. If being is being perceived, to cease being is to cease to be perceived’ (Brownlow, 1996).

The first European screening of *Film* took place at the 1965 Venice Film Festival. At 75 years old Keaton received a standing ovation and was visibly moved. ‘Fighting back tears he told a correspondent: “This is the first time I’ve been invited to a film festival, but I hope it won’t be the last.” But it was. Three months later, Buster Keaton was dead’ (Blesh, 1966: 373).

In silent movies, action is more important than words. In silent comedy, slapstick is often used to caricature life’s hardships and human fallibility. The tragic clown’s ability to survive against the odds and to recover from life’s blows – physically and psychologically – are presented as universals. Laughing is a means to reflection.
Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton are the giants of silent film comedy. If Chaplin forces us ‘to see through the veils and fictions of the socialist order to a deeper level of humanity’ (Hurley, 1978: 105), ‘Stone Face’ Keaton invites complicity in the kind of misfortune that befalls everyone. Keaton evokes sympathy for the individual pitted against conspiracy and machine:

‘He was the only major comedian who kept sentiment almost entirely out of his work, and he brought pure physical comedy to its greatest heights. Beneath his lack of emotion, he was also uninsistently sardonic; deep below that, giving a disturbing tension and grandeur to the foolishness in his comedy, there was a freezing whisper not of pathos but of melancholia. With the humour, the craftsmanship and the action there was often, besides, a fine, still and sometimes dreamlike beauty’ (Agee, 1949).

Keaton’s mask is Shakespeare’s mirror, whose purpose is ‘to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image’ (Hamlet). The heroic endurance of Keaton’s characters reflects everyone’s struggle to find meaning in life. Glimpsing our true nature – even on screen – can be disheartening. More often than not it is exemplary and morally rewarding. Therein lies Keaton’s greatness.

References

Philip Lee joined the staff of the World Association for Christian Communication in 1975, where he works on the Global Studies Programme and is co-editor of the international journal Media Development. Recent publications include Requiem: Here’s Another Fine Mass You’ve Gotten Me Into (2001); and Many Voices, One Vision: The Right to Communicate in Practice (ed.) (2004).
Fifty years of Interfilm

Julia Helmke

The international church film organisation Interfilm will be 50 years old in October 2005. Why was it founded and how did it develop? Where did it succeed, where did it encounter difficulties? Fifty years is a long time for an international organisation that is exclusively voluntary and has neither permanent employees nor an office of its own. The following article gives an inside view of Interfilm, an organisation that always felt connected with WACC, but that nevertheless insisted on diversity and independence.

Berlin, Cannes, Locarno, Montreal, Karlovy Vary, Riga, Gothenburg, Zlin – there are church film prizes in all these places and more. Across Europe and beyond they host film festivals to which church juries are invited – and in some of these cities, this tradition has existed for over 40 years. Usually this no longer takes place according to separate religious denominations, but ecumenically, in alliance with Interfilm and Signis (previously known as OCIC).

It is an open question whether the men – and few women – from five Western European countries could have dreamed of such a development when they met in Paris in 1955 to talk about the challenge that film represents for the church. As a result of their discussions, they founded the international Protestant organisation Interfilm on 22 October 1955.

In the early years they wanted above all to ‘protect’ people from bad films and to promote the emergence and distribution of good films. To do so, they hoped for a close relationship with the World Council of Churches (WCC). But the mass and art films did not completely fit into the WCC’s existing tasks such as mission, world responsibility, theology, and the like. The variety of possible approaches to film also quickly became evident: France pursued discussions about well-made commercial films, Germany strengthened its own Protestant film journalism, and the Anglo-Saxons promoted clearly religious productions.

Commitment was great, but so was Christian responsibility in relation to film and society. Film is the mass medium, and cinema attendance had exceeded church service attendance. Thus the questions arose: What can the church do? How can it act and react? First it wanted to become acquainted with others and exchange ideas, to increase the number of its members and to exert a stronger influence with combined forces. That applied both to church leaders, who often did not exactly know what church and film had to do with one another, as well as to the film industry and interested Christians.

New members and leaders
The number of members grew quickly: in 1956, one year after its foundation, Interfilm already had 16 member organisations from Norway to Austria. Church organisations from the United States joined soon after. One of the key figures was John Taylor, a North American artist and photographer who, as Director of Communication Services at WCC, accompanied Interfilm from the outset and made important contacts. Another important figure was the Swiss Friedrich Hochstrasse, editor-in-chief of a Protestant television, radio and film journal. He presided over Interfilm from 1959 to 1970.

On the German side, there was a whole set of men who influenced international film work: Film Commissioner Werner Hess, then Hermann Gerber, and the journalist Dietmar Schmidt. One person sticks out, however: Jan Hes, theologically-interested sociologist who founded, among other things, the Film Centre in Hilversum/ Netherlands, and from 1955 until his death in 1991 untiringly and continuously worked as Secretary-General of Interfilm.

In 1960, Interfilm decided to give up the dream of producing its own films or influencing film policies. It decided that this should be
done as much as possible by individual members locally in their own countries. Instead, Interfilm turned consciously to the appreciation and promotion of current film work. Film was perceived as part of culture and art and supported from this perspective.

After the inauguration of its own Interfilm prize, the step to participation in international film festivals was very small. The first Interfilm jury prize was awarded at the Berlin Film Festival in 1963. It went to the American comedy *Lilies of the Field* with Sydney Poitier. Not an undisputed decision, but the International Catholic Jury, which had been active at the Berlin Film Festival since 1956, made the same choice. A few years later, this contact was intensified. The atmosphere after the Second Vatican Council promoted the realisation that Protestant and Catholic film work were in agreement about basic assumptions. In addition, around 1968 an atmosphere emerged that put in question not only the concern of the church with film but the church itself – given this situation, it was good to co-operate. Beside the development of jury work, ecumenical cooperation became one of the most important and steady bedrocks of Interfilm. The Protestant founders probably would not have dreamed of that either.

In 1969, a further premiere in Interfilm history took place: the first Protestant jury at the most important film festival, a temple of glamour and business – Cannes. The jury awarded its prize to *Easy Rider* and proved thereby its impartiality and its feeling for films that move human beings. The first guidelines which Interfilm set up in 1971 as criteria for film evaluation and prize assignment express this very well: ‘For directors of films of high artistic quality […] which in a special way express a human attitude appropriate to the gospel or which stimulate a discussion of it.’ These are open criteria which are neither arbitrary, nor neglect film as a sign of the times nor the self-understanding of church jury work.

In 1973 and 1974, the first ecumenical jury in Locarno and then in Cannes, took place. It was an experiment which proved satisfactory and which has developed over the years. Today, in Cannes, for example, a voluntary group is busy the whole year round spreading the work of the ecumenical jury beyond the festival. It prepares for this event, makes full use of it, does publicity work and tries to anchor the connection of church, ecumenism and film in the context of the local congregation and society. All this means church film work in a secular environment!

Through such experiences, Interfilm learned how important it was to formulate film evaluation in a professional manner and to speak a generally understandable language. Church juries, in part earlier than others, have developed a feeling for film trends that are on the margins and which deserve to be given more attention. They discovered films from other continents. They advocated social criticism in film and recognised that the contents of film not only exhibit a proximity to the Biblical message, but can also themselves represent an important inquiry into church and theology. Films were seen as seismographs – the 1970s were turbulent times.

The 1980s were also exciting. At last more films from Central and Eastern Europe came to the film festivals. They combined politics and spirituality, realism and poetry in a unique way. The gateway to another world, which is neighbouring and nevertheless strange, opened. The director Andrei Tarkovsky ranks among the most frequent prize winners. Many contacts with film creators developed through the prizes and film and culture were perceived as a means of communication, as ‘eye openers’.

**Studying film and society**

Interfilm was not only active in jury work. It always gave importance to exchange and thematic study of church and film as well as society and contemporary history. Interfilm’s work on film studies began in the 1960s. In the beginning, it was carried out together with the Protestant Academy in Arnoldshain near Frankfurt, Germany. Topics included ‘Art and Morality’, ‘Christ in Film?’, ‘Traces of the Gospel in Film’. One of the most influential conferences took place in Bern in 1978: ‘Social-Critical Elements in Christian Film’.

Soon an Interfilm Academy was founded, which, under the direction of Pastor Eckart
Bruchner from Germany, worked in many European countries and with many partners. One emphasis was to arouse the interest of younger people and another was to strengthen the role of women in media. Among other things, Ekart Bruchner founded the ‘One Future Prize’ at the Munich Film Festival after the nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl in 1986, and led seminars on unknown film countries in order to strengthen consciousness and tolerance.

1980 was not 1955 however. Film was no longer the only medium of moving pictures. Television, the first forms of video, and other electronic media had gained more and more influence. Interfilm tried to open itself up to these currents. Here contact with WACC continued to grow.

Internal challenges and difficulties must also be mentioned. Interfilm was poor – poor in financial resources and poor in (wo)manpower – at least regarding the many projects which were waiting for Interfilm in the fields of cinema, ecumenism, and cultural work. Interfilm did not completely succeed in divorcing itself from the hierarchical structures centred on Western Europe put in place at the beginning. Nor did it succeed in becoming a sizable institution on an international level. Nevertheless, Interfilm held a general assembly in New York in 1979 at which WCC General Secretary Philip Potter spoke. At the beginning of the 1980s, the organization consisted of different departments (Interfilm Europe, Interfilm America, Interfilm Asia) and had contacts in Africa and the Middle East. However, communication did not always succeed: (film)cultural and religious differences were too big.

Nevertheless, Interfilm also possessed the strength to change and to further develop. A seminar in Colombo, Sri Lanka, took place in 1986. The inter-religious topic came up and here, as elsewhere, not only the content of a film, but also its aesthetics began to move into the foreground.

By the end of the 1980s things began to thaw behind the iron curtain, and Interfilm did not remain dormant. Owing to good Catholic contacts, an international ecumenical jury met at the Moscow Film Festival even before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Orthodox jurors took part and participation in festivals in St. Petersburg and Kiev followed. Interfilm also engaged itself to work in East Germany and participated in the Documentary Film Days in Leipzig, and later in the festival in Cottbus focusing on Eastern Europe.

The unexpected death of Jan Hes took place in the middle of this atmosphere of change. His contribution to Interfilm cannot be overestimated; his absence left a large gap. He was a driving force, had been the publisher of the Interfilm journal, and often acted as a communicator and moderator. Interfilm needed some years in order to rearrange itself. Starting from the middle of the 1990s, however, a new departure was to be felt within Interfilm when WACC began to support Interfilm in the form of communication projects. That meant concretely, for example, that the presence of women and people from Central and Eastern Europe was actively promoted in the ecumenical juries.

**Interfilm rediscovers Europe**

Under the presidency of Hans Werner Dannowski (1989-2004), it was decided to give up the goal of being an organisation acting worldwide and to strengthen instead work in the new and larger Europe. Naturally, this did not mean that no contacts with other continents were maintained, but a clear focus was set. In 1995, a set of conferences began which had Europe and European culture as their topic. First, contact was sought in Northern European countries. The film medium was understood as a mirror of social processes, disclosing strangeness and showing familiarity in a new light. How do films illustrate the social, cultural and religious contexts of these countries and how do these contexts affect the films? The narrative quality of films was thereby emphasised. These impulses were fruitful in Scandinavia: in 2001, the Culture Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden awarded a film prize at the Festival in Göteborg; one year later, the Danish church followed with its own film prize.

In 1998, the focus turned to the South, to the more strongly Catholic-influenced
Mediterranean countries. In the southern French city of Nîmes, the agenda emphasized the topic of film, theology and culture in a desecrated post-modern world. One year later, a jump to the Northeast followed, to Riga/Latvia. Under the title ‘Integration and Disintegration’, the seminar was clearly political. An explicitly ecumenical perspective was present in a seminar in Mannheim 2001 with the title ‘(Dis)Regarding the Image’, which debated the difference between Protestant and Catholic ‘afterimages’. Most recently a conference was organized in the Orthodox Academy on Crete in late 2004 to discuss Orthodox understandings of images. These have all been all path-breaking events. According to Interfilm, church and culture, ecumenicity and education, politics and spirituality belong together and can question, enrich, and mutually strengthen one another.

Interfilm dialogues with theology and culture
A topic which received strong impulses from Germany among others, but which in the USA and in Anglo-Saxon countries had for a long time been viewed under the auspice of religious and cultural studies, was dialogue between film and theology. In the mid-1980s, Hans Werner Dannowski provocatively asked why concern with church and film had so strongly focussed on social and parochial aspects, but had never got involved with theology or theology with film. The question went along with the observation that the church as an institution had to a large extent lost contact with culture and the arts. This harmed it doubly: on the one hand, what is missing is an ally in a world which is globalised, post-modern, and which no longer asks the question of meaning. On the other hand, what is missing is a critical opposite number to hear and understand the world’s questions.

Interfilm confronts these questions, which are also methodically and fundamentally discussed. From the mid 1990s onwards, we can thus observe a scholarly and interdisciplinary discourse on theology, religion and film. Interfilm members now write doctoral dissertations on topics such as ‘Redemption in Film’ or ‘The Cinema Meaning-Machine’.

Beginning in 1988, with the appointment of Swiss pastor Hans Hodel as Jury Co-ordinator of Interfilm, jury work was further professionalized. New juries were added. Contacts with festival directorships and with interested local groups in film, media, culture and the church were intensified. Juries not only awarded prizes to films. They also communicated what their background is, and why they are participating in a film festival. Some ecumenical juries in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia, could not be continued due to a sensitive political-religious situations. But inquiries came from younger film festivals in Central Europe, like Bratislava or from the Children’s Film Festival in Zlin, which gladly welcomed an ecumenical jury. New ground was broken.

A further innovation was the ‘European Templeton Film Award’. The prize is awarded annually at the Berlin Film Festival in partnership with the Conference of European Churches and the John Templeton Foundation. Since 1997, the first time the prize was awarded, not only has the prize money increased, but also public attention.

Interfilm turns 50. Who would have dreamed of that and what dreams are yet to come? Much has changed, some things have remained the same: fascination for film artworks, passion for an encounter between church and film in this world. In future it will be necessary to communicate even more persuasively, to find more partners, and to increase the lastingness of the initiatives and commitment.

Julia Helmke (PhD) is a Pastor and Interfilm member. After her ordination, she studied film criticism in Munich. After working in the Ecumenical Office, she taught film and religion in Christian journalism at the University of Erlangen. For her doctoral thesis, she researched Protestant and ecumenical film jury work between 1948 and 1988.
Hans Hodel – President of Interfilm

Hans Werner Dannowski

Interfilm has a new president as of April 2004. He is someone who had already contributed to the life of Interfilm for 15 years and who had expanded its work. When Hans Hodel was offered the presidency, he stressed that he would accept the office for a transitional period only, in order to give younger people the opportunity to grow into responsibilities and functions. The following affectionate words are offered in tribute to his commitment and work.

In school teaching and in advanced teacher training, Swiss theologian Hans Hodel was fascinated by film. It brought a range of important intellectual and spiritual topics into personal, social and political discussions. The idea of film as a seismograph of our mental and social condition provided a lot of explosive material for long discussions into the night. Such enthusiasm for film does not remain hidden.

Thus it was a surprise, but highly plausible, for Hans Hodel, when he was asked to succeed Theo Krummenacher as Director of the Office of Reformed Media and Film Commissioner in German-speaking Switzerland. It was a challenging job. Not only did it involve advanced training activities, documentation and parish contacts, but also a film distribution business and funding by the Swiss churches. Nevertheless, soon after taking up the office of Film Commissioner, Hans Hodel turned to Interfilm. My personal recollections of him begin from that moment.

A slender, well-dressed gentleman. One could not miss the Bern intonation in his speech. But if he really let loose with his Swiss German, one did not understand a single word! He knew what he wanted. International contacts were important to him; ecumenical work was a matter of course. He demanded a clear profile from Interfilm. But one thing was clear to all of us after only a few meetings: this man was an ingenious communicator. Whoever met him would never forget him. His *raison d’être* was constantly to search for and make new contacts. For him this has been a necessity of life.

Thus we very quickly made him the Jury Co-ordinator for Interfilm. To organise the juries at the many ‘A’, ‘B’ and national festivals requires a lot of intuition and a thorough knowledge of people’s eligibility. WACC-Europe, of which he was a member, also quickly made use of Hans’ easily recognised skill in this area, for instance, in its nominating committee for elections. And then we began send-
ing ecumenical juries to more and more festivals.

This happened like this. The President of Interfilm at that time, if he attended a reception at the Berlin Film Festival, or of a group of distributors, or of a country, would leave after a short time. The Jury Co-ordinator, however, would stay diligently, not for the sake of the (usually) excellent meals and beverages. He indulged this vice on other occasions. He held conversations deep into the night until the morning. The next day he would report, for instance, that he met the Festival Director of Tokyo and of Buenos Aires, who had shown interest in the work of Interfilm. And that he raised the question if, eventually, Interfilm might succeed in organising an inter-religious jury at the Jerusalem Film Festival.

Thus Interfilm’s work at festivals grew from year to year. Hans Hodel repeatedly requested clear criteria for the jury decisions. We still do not have them even today and instead rely on the theological and aesthetic competence of the Interfilm members whom we appoint to juries. The local conditions at the different festival cities are also different. Sometimes there are only tangential points of contact between Cannes, Kiev, Moscow, and Montreal.

Broadening outreach

Another main area of work that increased enormously with the strong support of Hans Hodel. The majority of Interfilm members (and most of its financial support) came from Germany and Switzerland. At that time we agreed to intensify work in other European countries where work in church film exists. This could only take place by means of a deepened content-focused, film-aesthetic and theological discussion. Thus emerged, under the banner ‘Faces Of Europe – Europe’s Face’, a series of annual Interfilm seminars, which seven today show results. We started in 1997 in Bad Segeberg near Lübeck. In 1998 we were guests in Nîmes and in 1999 drove to Riga. In 2000 we journeyed high into the North, to Örebro, Sweden.

Through the eastward extension of Europe, the great interest of Eastern European countries in the work of Interfilm became ever clearer. In addition to the Karlovy Vary Festival, juries were started at the festivals in Bratislava and Zlin. The seminar in Romanian Iasi resulted in a first contact with the Orthodox Church (2002), which was deepened and intensified in a marvellous meeting in the Orthodox Academy of Crete under the title ‘Orthodox Iconography and Its Relationship with Film’ with many participants from the orthodox area.

WACC assisted Interfilm in these investigations into unknown terrain and, here again, Hans Hodel was the crucial man on the Interfilm side establishing good and friendly contact between the two organisations, something that has deepened over the last few years.

Thus close these few observations that can only give an approximate picture of the new President of Interfilm. At his official departure from his principal office with Reformed Media in July 2003, which characteristically took place on a steamer on a three-lake cruise against the background of the Swiss mountains, I praised him as an impressive representative of an ‘ontology of attraction’. To this day, I would not take back anything I said then.

Every institution lives on the basis of the law that human beings cannot exist without other human beings, and that a basic law of sympathy connects the part with the whole. Hans Hodel will, I am sure, continue to give many ideas to the world of cinema. He will maintain existing contacts and will establish new ones with people who, together with him, will continue the exciting dialogue between church and film.

Translated by Dr James Slawney.

Hans Werner Dannowski was President of Interfilm 1989-2004.
Phantom of the future: Cinema in a digital world

Karsten Visarius

We are ill prepared to make out the future. We only know that it will be different from how we imagine it today. Realising this, it is astonishing to observe the number of future prognoses, scenarios and development studies being published, discussed and used as the basis for decisions. This strange future certainty is a late descendant of a rose-tinted Enlightenment that believed in the power of reason in history – even if, in the meantime, many forecasts revealed a difficult, gloomy or catastrophic tomorrow. As always they are determined by hopes and fears, by desires and interests. And this also applies to the comparatively harmless question about the future of cinema.

Even if I have described the prognosis industry rather simplistically, I myself maintain a sceptical attitude towards forecasts about the future. The history of the Enlightenment gives good reason for this. The cinema itself is full of images of the future. At any rate, films do not conceal the fact that they play on our fantasies.

One of the most recent examples is Roland Emmerich’s The Day After Tomorrow, a vehement plea to the American government to sign the Kyoto Protocol. In Emmerich’s film, global warming leads to a reversal of the Gulf Stream, and by doing so brings about not a sneaking change in the weather, but a sudden climatic subversion, an Ice Age in the northern hemisphere. A Gutenberg Bible is one of the few cultural goods spared by the heroes searching for heating material in their struggle for survival in temperatures adequate to humans.

Emmerich’s film is one of those that the cinema quickly consumes. More interesting are future scenarios of the second order, as I would like to call them – films that, in their stories, draw consequences from our imagination and expose them to aesthetic (thus to ethical and political) reflection.

With his ‘noir’ science-fiction films A.I. and Minority Report Steven Spielberg, one of the most important film auteurs of contemporary cinema, has achieved this model. In A.I. a second anthropogenesis takes place: the technical production of a creature which not only possesses human skills, but also feelings and a soul, and which is sensitive to love, longing, pain and the fear of death. Using this creature as a mirror (like Pinocchio it wants to become a ‘real boy’), the director shows us the failure of human beings who react to the Other with racist reflexes.

Even more gloomily Minority Report tells of a world that believes the future is at its disposal. The interaction of prophetic gifts and the most advanced visualization techniques is supposed to make it possible to foresee crimes and, therefore, to prevent and simultaneously pass judgement on them. The lure of being able to abolish evil produces an insane control and manipulation system, a technological fascism. In both cases, technical solutions are put forward to which our morals are unaccustomed. The fairy-tale ending of both films provides little consolation for such a prospect.

Digital image processing

Emmerich’s and Spielberg’s films, like many others, emerged by making use of the latest cinematic technology, in particular, the possibilities of digital editing methods in post-production. In this phase of film production, the fusion of traditional, analogue and new digital techniques has already taken place. Digital image processing possibilities have furthered this process, especially since the transformation of analogue, photo-chemical film shots into a
digital master without quality loss is no longer a problem today. Currently being discussed is whether in the future the photo-mechanical movie camera, which has been used with its basic technical components for one hundred years, will be replaced by digital cameras. Thus, analogue film production based on optical, mechanical, and chemical processes would be completely changed.

Most experts agree, however, that the day when digital technology can achieve the qualities of traditional 35mm-film standards is still far away. They consider that a hybrid technology, a combination of analogue and digital elements of film production, will be the most probable variant for a long time. This applies to the cinematic feature film and the particular qualities the audience expects regarding the cinema experience.

For artistic creators of film, for directors and cameramen, easy-to-manage digital cameras already represent an alternative to classic recording technology today. Smaller crews and shortened production times permit shooting with smaller budgets and open up new opportunities for young film directors and a better chance to realise riskier projects. Auteur films, which are able to make do without expensive stars and the suggestiveness of complex effects, benefit from the new technology, at least at the moment. The idea of being able to use the camera as a personal means of expression like a pen – the caméra stylo that the French director Alexandre Astruc once dreamed about – seems, today more than ever, within close reach.

Wim Wenders, who has always experimented with new techniques, recently completed such a film with Land of Plenty. In a deliberately reduced, narrow format, Wenders’ narration comments on the new poverty, religious fundamentalism, and political paranoia in George Bush’s America. Technical progress is often identified with growth and increase. This is also true of cinema with more effective pictures, more unimpeded enjoyment, more options, higher ranges and rates, etc. Films like Wenders’, on the contrary, demonstrate the freedoms that come from limitation.

Future of cinema

Most considerations of the future of the cinema revolve around the integration of the analogue ‘island’ of 35mm-films into the mega-trend of digitalisation that is prevalent throughout the entire range of communication technologies, especially entertainment. They concentrate less on the field of film production than on the screening of films. Above all, the economic interests of the distributors – who hope for cost savings in the reproduction and transportation of copies – and those of the IT-industry – which hopes for market development, convergence effects and prestige gains – drive this development.

In the future, cinemas, instead of obtaining expensive single copies through a complex dispatch system, are supposed to call up films from central servers and to project them either on-line or over a buffer system. By comparison with the quality losses and damages incurred through the processing and projection of analogue copies, loss-free data communication is considered to be a technical advantage.

Even so, a set of obstacles prevents the implementation of this conversion process which, in part, has already been given concrete deadlines. These obstacles once again throw light on the advantages that made the motion-picture a leading cultural medium against which other audiovisual media must be measured.

A circumstance that, in retrospect, seems amazing should not be underestimated: already in the early period of cinema a uniform standard for the underlying technology, specifically 35mm-film, won out. The cinema had thereby a global format that made its universal dissemination possible. Already before the First World War, it formed a global communication network, although with a few blind spots, above all in Africa. With subtitles and dubbing the cinema developed solutions to the linguistic obstacles that resulted from sound film.

In the end, this first global communication medium proved so flexible that it was able for more than a hundred years of cinema history to come to terms with all the technical innovations that emerged. The electronic medium television never succeeded with such standardisa-
tion, and the same applies to digital formats. The quantum leaps in the development of information technology lead us to expect platforms that will continue to change and compete with one another. The hitherto existing global range of films will be limited by digitalisation if compatibility between the different formats cannot be achieved. Economic competition makes such a solution more difficult and, presumably, a cartel of global players will form to secure their own interests.

Seen from a cultural-political perspective, the global standard of cinema did not cause, but it did support the dominance of Hollywood film in many regions of the world. At least no technical barriers stood in its way. Conversely, the same conditions made it possible for smaller cinema nations to win the attention and interest of the public beyond their own borders. Japanese cinema, long time an insular phenomenon, suddenly became a leading power in film art in the 1950s. The Iranian cinema miracle of the last one-and-a-half decades – with directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, or those from the Makhmalbaf clan – has conquered the silver screen and shown the world a picture of a country beyond the rule of the Mullahs.

New Asiatic cinematographies like that of South Korea – with Kim Ki-Duk – or Taiwan – with names like Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang or Tsai Ming-Liang – are gifts. Without these creative innovations, the flourishing film-festival circus would be inconceivable. In spite of the mainstream orientation, cinema has always held the doors open to cultural expansion and ‘outsiders’. Who would have thought that countries like Finland, through Aki Kaurismäki, or Greece, through Theo Angelopoulos, would become beacons on the cinema map? But because digital cinema technically favours the control of distribution by the strongest economic powers, this open exchange is endangered. In addition, the dominant market forces will not come from the film industry itself, but from the IT industry.

Audiences and theatres
The needs and desires of the audience will play a crucial role in the future of cinema. However, cinema’s least worries are the interests of the consumer. The multiplication of different means of communication (for example, cable and satellite channels on television), developments in home cinema through the success of DVD, as well as new markets, particularly in China, have broadened the use of films and will continue to increase the need for new productions. In any case, cinema has not had to fear the replacement of its own specific perceptual sphere that lets us sink into an imaginary world.

Only there, in the cinema, does a public take shape that further develops possibilities of utilisation. Until now, it has been only cinematic apocalypses like Kathryn Bigelow’s Strange Days or Paul Verhoeven’s Total Recall that have dreamed of a more effective and comprehensive deception of the senses, of a more dangerous drug than cinema itself – all the more dangerous because the detoxification of the addict no longer seems to be guaranteed.

The largest obstacle to the introduction of digital cinema are the theatres themselves. They are confronted with an investment expense that they cannot shift onto the spectators. The replacement of conventional, analogue projection by digital equipment costs many times more than the capital spent so far. In addition, the service life of digital technology is substantially shorter due to innovation cycles. The cost of replacing equipment lost through wear and tear is difficult to calculate, whereas a conventional film projector with orderly maintenance is guaranteed to be useful for many decades.

In addition, digitalisation does not necessarily promise an increase in use value. At best, it guarantees an equivalent to the accustomed standard measured under optimal conditions involving fresh copies and trouble-free projection (with regard to image quality and definition, purity of optics). After all, the performance reliability of digital projection techniques in view of the data quantities to be processed is hardly proven. Whoever deals with computer problems on a daily basis will most likely distrust the promises of the specialists.

As the introduction of sound films showed in an exemplary way, the key to winning general acceptance for new technology lies with the producers. The coexistence of silent movies and
sound films could only be maintained for a few years. Charlie Chaplin was the last great figure of the silent movie to submit himself, in the famous singing scene of *Modern Times*, to the new demands. A similar time limit for the establishment of digital cinema can be foreseen as well.

New business models that make provision for the participation of cinema operators in the profits of manufacturers and users are supposed to eliminate, or at least reduce, resistance of front-line film marketers to the audience. Nevertheless, producers still shrink from a crucial hurdle. The crisis of the pop music industry stands as a warning sign. In contrast to an approximately two-and-a-half-to-three kilometre long copy of a film, the reproduction and dissemination of a digital file, no matter how extensive it may be, cannot in principal be checked.

Even codings offer only limited protection against abuse – what is coded can and will be decoded, provided that interest is strong enough. Legal sanctions are effective only in a limited sense on the world market. Thus the flow of film utilisation back to the studios and, as a consequence, their production capacity, is called into question. The introduction of digital cinema thus depends on the economic risk producers, primarily the American major studios, are prepared to take.

**A transitory creature**

What does the digitalisation of film mean for our global culture? To answer this question, one must clarify the fundamental difference between analogue and digital images. Analogue film is a ‘write-once’ medium. A classical film image inevitably includes a concrete, unrepeatable space-time moment. No reproduction or handling changes anything of the uniqueness of the film image. The temporal art, film, therefore corresponds to our self-perception as a transitory creature subjected to time – it corresponds to our memory, our openness to the future, our consciousness of the volatility of each present moment.

Luchino Visconti, the director of *Rocco and His Brothers* and *Death in Venice*, therefore spoke of an ‘anthropomorphic cinema’. Only a single film genre that can be almost endlessly manipulated has freed itself so far from these conditions: animated film. It is the most entertaining Hell that art has acquainted us with. Digital technology achieves this unleashing borrowed from comics even more radically. Digitalisation dismantles the film image into discrete data points without dimension. In data space, about which we can speak only metaphorically, there are no longer any space-time moments, but only exchangeable, in principle computable, information units. Where such data points can be located at any time is completely unimportant. Of course, this dismantling takes place beyond our perception.

In digital cinema, we will also believe that we are watching the development of a story with a beginning and an end, with moments of happiness and misfortune. We will still see laughter and tears. But we will no longer encounter ourselves, only our phantoms. The cinema of the future has a consolation for this loss: we will not notice it at all.

*Translated by Dr. James Slawney.*

Karsten Visarius chairs the Film-Cultural Centre of the Protestant Church in the Gemeinschaftswerk der Evangelischen Publizistik (GEP), Frankfurt/Main, and is Managing Director of the international church film organisation Interfilm. He wishes to acknowledge substantial inspiration and information from the publication *Digital Film - Digital Cinema*, edited by Peter C. Slansky (Konstanz, 2004).
Recent Ecumenical Jury prize-winners

Interfilm and Signis, in cooperation with WACC, appoint an Ecumenical Jury to the world’s major film festivals. Taking into account the artistic talent and technical skill manifested by the director, the jury encourages films that contribute to human progress and raise audience consciousness of the transcendent dimensions of life or that portray spiritual, social and human questions and dramatise human values. These values are in harmony with those of the Gospel.

Ecumenical Juries give special attention to themes of Christian responsibility in modern society concerning: respect for human dignity and human rights; solidarity with all kind of minorities, disadvantaged and oppressed people; support for processes for liberation, justice, peace and reconciliation; preserving creation and the environment.

Films that receive awards have a universal impact and are not confined to their national or local context. They reflect their local culture and help audiences to respect the language and the images of that culture.

Recent winners of major Ecumenical Jury prizes were:

1. *Diarios de motocicleta* directed by Walter Salles, Brazil, Cannes 2004 (below).
1. *Ae Fond Kiss* directed by Ken Loach, United Kingdom, Berlin 2004 (below).
1. *Yasmin* directed by Kenny Glennaan, United Kingdom, Locarno 2004 (below).
1. *The Syrian Bride* directed by Eran Riklis, Israel, Montreal 2004 (following page).
1. *Gaz Bar Blues* directed by Louis Bélanger,
The Syrian Bride (an Israel-France-Germany co-production directed by Eran Riklis) won the Prix du Public at the Locarno Film Festival in 2004. That same year it picked up four more awards at the Montreal Film Festival - the Grand Prix des Amériques, the Ecumenical Jury Prize, the FIPRESCI Prize (international film critics) and the Air Canada People’s Choice Award.

Canada, Montreal 2003.
1. At Five O’Clock In The Afternoon directed by Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran, Cannes 2003.
2. In This World directed by Michael Winterbottom, United Kingdom, Berlin 2003.
4. La Cage (The Cage) directed by Alain Raoust, France, Locarno 2002.
9. Safar and Gandehar (Kandahar) directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Iran, Cannes 2001.
10. Italian For Beginners directed by Lone Scherfig, Denmark, Berlin 2001.
14. Botín de Guerra (Spoils Of War) directed by David Blaustein (Argentina), Berlin 2000.
15. Goya In Bordeaux directed by Carlos Saura (Spain), Montreal 1999.
16. La vie ne me fait pas peur directed by Noémie Lvovsky (France), Locarno 1999.
17. Todo sobre mi madre directed by Pedro Almodóvar (Spain), Cannes 1999.
18. Ça commence aujourd’hui directed by Bertrand Tavernier (France), Berlin 1999.
Tribute to Ken Loach

Cinny Aste

The Ecumenical Jury at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival honoured British director Ken Loach for his more than 40 years work in television and cinema. ‘The whole of Ken Loach’s work shows that he is on the side of human beings who suffer but struggle; who have every reason to despair but still hope; who believe that solidarity and caring for each other are values capable of opening ways of hope.’ The citation indicates why his films have received a large number of prizes and commendations from juries at different international festivals.

Ken Loach was born in Nuneaton, Warwickshire, in 1937. He went to the town’s King Edward Grammar School, did National Service and then studied law at St Peter’s College, Oxford. He began his career as an actor with a repertory company in Birmingham before joining the BBC in 1963 as a trainee television director.

Loach’s early directorial work was on episodes of the police series Z Cars, but he first attracted serious attention working with story-editor turned producer Tony Garnett on a bleak portrayal of working-class life in Clapham, South London. ‘Up the Junction’ (1965) was broadcast in the innovative ‘Wednesday Play’ slot. It depicted three young women, alternating between humour and grim drama. Its most famous sequence – daring for the time – showed a back alley abortion.

Loach and Garnett went on to make Cathy Come Home (1966), a powerful study of the effects of homelessness and bureaucracy on family life. Its final scene, in which social services take away Cathy’s children, remains harrowing. The film sparked off a public debate that led directly to the development of Shelter, a charity for the homeless still operating today. It also confirmed Loach’s commitment to social justice through political action:

‘We went to the housing minister, Anthony Greenwood, and he said that it was a very important film about understanding homelessness and we said “What are you going to do about it?” And he said, “Well, it enables us to understand the plight of these people”, and talked in that vein and it became clear that actually nothing was going to change. So it was that kind of experience that made us feel, well, you just have to look to the left of social democracy to actually make these changes’ (Hattenstone, 1998).

Garnett and Loach formed their own independent production company, Kestrel Films, to make Kes (1969), the dark and moving story of a Yorkshire lad who trains a kestrel to escape his surroundings. Abandoning the handheld camera, jump cuts and abrupt sound cues characteristic of BBC films, Loach adopted the natural, yet controlled visual style evident in his later films.

At the end of the 1970s, Tony Garnett left to pursue a career in Hollywood. In the UK the

On making acting believable

‘You try and find people who have something in common with what you want them to show so that they can relate to it in some way and they can find something in them that allows them to make that part live. And then the important thing is that they are then telling me how it should be, you know. It’s not the director telling them this is what you should do, it’s them telling me.’

1980s saw the rise to power of Margaret Thatcher and the conservative policies that eroded social services and broke the back of union power. Loach’s response was to focus on documentaries that critiqued the political nightmare. In 1983 the BBC declined to broadcast Questions of Leadership, a documentary on the miners’ strike, because of its ‘lack of balance’. The South Bank Show, under Melvyn Bragg, commissioned a film about folk music arising from the same strike, Which Side Are You On? (1984). But when Loach included footage of police brutality, Bragg refused to show it.


Ken Loach turned next to the theme of immigration and its cultural consequences in a divided Britain. The Ecumenical Jury at Berlin 2004 gave its award to Ae Fond Kiss, a love story between a young Muslim of Pakistani descent and an Irish Catholic school-teacher living in Glasgow. The title comes from a poem by Robert Burns:

‘Ae fond kiss, and then we sever; 
Ae fareweel, alas, for ever! 
Deep in heart-wrung tears I’ll pledge thee, 
Warring sighs and groans I’ll wage thee!’

The film tells of Casim, a Pakistani man due to celebrate an arranged marriage, who falls instead for a local Glaswegian teacher and goes to live with her. The family is devastated because Casim’s father, the owner of a grocery shop, is building a comfortable annexe for him and his new wife. Casim’s sister, who has accepted an arranged marriage, now finds her intended husband’s family withdrawing in horror. The idea of a Muslim going off with a Christian is abhorrent and everyone suffers. Then, according to one commentator:

‘To keep things even and politically correct, Loach and his writer Paul Laverty have the teacher thrown out of her Catholic school by a parish priest who objects to her living in sin, especially with a Pakistani who is not of the faith; and we are left with the feeling that the triumph of true love as the film ends may not be the true finish of the story. Ae Fond Kiss is excellently acted and directed with real sympathy for both its Pakistani and British characters – the Pakistanis are seen not as fundamentalists but simply as a Muslim family unable to cross the cultural barrier. But one does wonder how many parish priests would act as this one does’ (Malcolm, 2004).

Ken Loach’s credo is that the political can be changed through social actions that value human dignity. His most successful films explore those aspects of life where the personal meets the political. Loach typically dramatises this conflict by presenting a single protagonist with a simple but overriding goal: in Cathy Come Home, Cathy fights to keep her family together once they become homeless; in Kes, Billy adopts and trains a kestrel as a positive counter to his failing family and school; in Riff Raff, Stevie abandons his criminal past and

On changing society through film

‘We shouldn’t have any illusions about what film can do. I mean, it’s just a film. When all’s said and done, everybody gets up and walks out of the cinema. So, the best thing you can do is to leave people with a question or to leave people with a kind of sense of disquiet.’

takes an assumed name to get work on a building site; in *Raining Stones* Bob struggles for the money he needs to buy his daughter a communion dress; and in *Sweet Sixteen* Liam sells drugs only to earn enough money to rent a flat for his mother after her release from prison.

Nevertheless, Loach has been criticised for ‘observing’ too much, rather than getting genuinely involved; for the kind of documentary approach that dwells on the grim realities in which people live; and for relying on melodrama as a means of articulating impossible choices, misjudgements, coincidences, and a rather simplistic sense of cause and effect.

‘But what separates Loach’s work from conventional melodrama is the way it discourages too strong an emotional identification with the characters while insisting on the economic and social underpinnings of their actions. In this way the impossible dilemmas and choices are seen to derive less from personal traits or moral shortcomings than from economic circumstances’ (Hill, 1998: 20).

Another commentator thinks that Loach’s image of the working class today is narrow and anachronistic, pointing to the absence of real figures of capitalist authority, the apparent exclusion of black characters, a lack of interest in the problems facing women workers, and a fixation on locating the working class in the very north of Britain:

‘I admire his determination to make challenging movies about the working class. My point is that his image of that class is now so limited that it undermines both the vitality of his movies and their political relevance’ (Light, 1999: 68).

Internationally acclaimed, Ken Loach’s films provoke strong responses in audiences and politicians alike. Maybe that’s why the Ecumenical Jury at Cannes paid homage not just to his artistry, but to his tenacity and humanity – qualities that set him apart.

References

Feature films directed by Ken Loach
Poor Cow (1967)
Kes (1969)
Family Life (1971)
Black Jack (1979)
Looks and Smiles (1981)
Fatherland (1986)
Singing the Blues in Red (1988)
Hidden Agenda (1990)
Riff Raff (1991)
Raining Stones (1993)
Ladybird, Ladybird (1994)
Carla’s Song (1996)
My Name Is Joe (1998)
Bread and Roses (2000)
The Navigators (2001)
Sweet Sixteen (2002)
Ae Fond Kiss (2004)
El taller de cine de la Central Sandinista de Trabajadores

Arturo Zamora

En 1980, pocos meses después del triunfo de la Revolución Sandinista y del derrocamiento de Somoza, se inició en la Central Sandinista de Trabajadores la primera experiencia de cine militante obrero. Ese proceso fue parte de las acciones desarrolladas por el Comandante ‘Modesto’ (Henry Ruiz) desde el Ministerio de Planificación, contó con el apoyo de Naciones Unidas y fue dirigido en su etapa de formación por el cineasta boliviano Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, a quien entrevistamos.

Arturo Zamora: ¿De dónde surgió la idea del programa de capacitación en cine que dirigiste en Managua a principios de los años 80? ¿Cuales eran los antecedentes de esta iniciativa? ¿Como asumió la dirigencia revolucionaria esta idea?

Alfonso Gumucio Dagron: La historia es una suma de incidentes y a veces casualidades. A fines de los años setenta yo acababa de regresar a Bolivia como director de cine graduado en París, en el IDHEC (Instituto de Altos Estudios Cinematográficos). En Bolivia comencé a trabajar con comunidades campesinas y obreras. Tuve dos oportunidades interesantes: por una parte, Liber Forti, Asesor Cultural de la Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), me invitó para que diseñara con él un programa de capacitación en cine para los trabajadores mineros; por otra parte, empecé a trabajar como asistente de Alain Labrousse en el documental que dirigió sobre la ‘Huelga de Hambre’ que precipitó la caída de la dictadura de Bánzer, y en CIPCA (Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado), filmé documentales en Super 8 en comunidades campesinas. Allí dirigí ‘El Ejército en Villa Anta’, ‘Comunidades de Trabajo’ y ‘Domitila, la mujer y la organización’.

A principios de 1980 me invitó el cineasta Rafael Rebollar a un festival de cine Super 8 en México y al regreso decidió pasar por Nicaragua -donde la Revolución había triunfado meses antes- para visitar a mi amigo Jaime Balcázar, que era el Representante de Naciones Unidas. Estuve en la plaza cuando se lanzó la Campaña de Alfabetización, el día que partieron miles de jóvenes alfabetizadores hacia todos los rincones de Nicaragua. Fue una mañana de marzo en la que mi alegría se mezcló con el dolor, ya que la noche anterior, en Bolivia, habían asesinado a mi amigo y colega periodista Luis Espinal. Durante mi estadía en Managua, a través de Jaime Balcázar conocí a algunos de los protagonistas de la Revolución Sandinista, a comandantes como Dora María Téllez y Henry Ruiz, ‘Modesto’, entre otros.

Modesto se interesó en la experiencia que yo estaba llevando a cabo en Bolivia con campesinos y obreros, y al poco tiempo de regresar a Bolivia recibí una invitación para viajar a Managua y conversar con él. Me explicó los alcances de la Campaña de Alfabetización Económica y la voluntad que él tenía de que contara con la participación real de los propios obreros. Era importante que ellos entendieran por qué se tomaban ciertas medidas en el país y que defendieran esas medidas que se tomaban para contrarrestar las presiones de Estados Unidos. Estuve solamente una semana en Managua, en el mes de junio, y dejé en manos de Modesto el proyecto de un taller de cine, sin pensar que yo mismo lo iba a desarrollar más adelante.

AZ: ¿Qué pasó después? ¿Cómo fue que se estableció el programa de capacitación?

AGD: Como la historia da muchas vueltas, dos meses después de regresar a Bolivia ocurrió el golpe militar del General García Meza, un mili-
tarote bruto y corrupto que conculcó todas las libertades. Yo era miembro de la redacción de ‘Aquí’, un semanario de izquierda que había denunciado sus planes golpistas. Nos persiguieron y tuvimos que pasar a la clandestinidad, cada quien por su cuenta ya que éramos independientes y no teníamos un partido político que nos protegiera. Mientras yo estaba oculto, empezaron a llegar telegramas (esa palabra ya suena rara hoy) donde solicitaban que viajara a Nicaragua para hacerme cargo de un proyecto de Naciones Unidas. No lo supe en ese momento, puesto que estaba incomunicado, pero cuando lo supe más adelante entendí que fue la manera que se dio Jaime Balcazar para protegerme. Luego de pasar unas semanas en la clandestinidad y otras asilado en la Embajada de México, escapé de Bolivia en una acción rocambolesca que no viene a cuento aquí. Lo importante es que finalmente, a principios de 1981, pude presentarme en Nicaragua.

Durante un par de meses hice los preparativos para el programa de capacitación en cine Super 8. En esa época el video no era tan corriente como ahora, y el Super 8 ofrecía mucha independencia y un costo muy bajo de producción. Mi idea fue crear una unidad de cine en la Central Sandinista de Trabajadores, con absoluta autonomía y a un costo muy bajo. Lo del costo era muy importante, porque se quería que la experiencia fuera sostenible, en un país que atravesaba una situación económica crítica debido al bloqueo de Estados Unidos. Todo el equipo de cine Super 8 costó unos 3 mil dólares, mientras que en esa época, un equipo de cámara y edición en video costaba diez veces más. Trabajar en Super 8 tenía una ventaja adicional: era una manera de acostumbrarse a trabajar con un formato cinematográfico, con todo lo que esto implica como actitud profesional. No como ahora, que los jóvenes que empiezan directamente en video, graban horas y horas de material sin tener una idea clara de lo que quieren hacer.

AZ: ¿Qué instituciones nacionales e internacionales dieron apoyo al programa y cual era su objetivo?
AGD: Como señalé anteriormente, la iniciativa fue del Comandante Modesto que era entonces el Ministro de Planificación, quien inmediatamente recibió apoyo de Jaime Balcázar, es decir, de Naciones Unidas. Luego, mi propuesta era incluir en el taller a la Central Sandinista de Trabajadores, a compañeros de otras organizaciones sindicales, de la ATC, de AMLAE, etc. En toda la etapa de capacitación, que transcurrió hasta mediados de 1981, no tuvimos ningún otro apoyo, ni tampoco lo solicitamos. Lo que queríamos era precisamente demostrar que con poco dinero y pocos recursos se podía hacer algo innovador y creativo. Yo mismo sabía que luego me quedaba sin trabajo, así sucedió. Quizás por ello, cuando Modesto hizo la inauguración oficial del Taller de Cine Super 8, en el local que acondicionamos en la CST, dijo que el Taller de Cine era el proyecto más barato de su ministerio, pero el que más satisfacción le producía.

Recuerdo que visitamos a otras instituciones para establecer vínculos de solidaridad y contarles lo que estábamos haciendo. Una de esas instituciones fue INCINE, que en esa época destinaba muchos esfuerzos para hacer grandes producciones de prestigio, que permitieran a Nicaragua sobresalir en foros internacionales. Eso a nosotros no nos interesaba. Estábamos empeñados en hacer cine obrero, un cine mítante, que sirviera internamente, no en el exterior. Por ello, quizás, no pudimos establecer ninguna cooperación con INCINE. Uno de los directivos, no recuerdo si fue el propio Ramiro Lacayo, me dijo que ellos estarían interesados si es que el equipo que habíamos adquirido, se quedaba en INCINE. La idea de ellos era que cada vez que los militantes de la CST quisieran hacer una película, tenían que ir a INCINE para pedir prestados los equipos. Yo no compartía esa manera centralista de ver el desarrollo del cine en Nicaragua.

AZ: ¿En esa época existía en el continente, un programa similar?
AGD: No estoy seguro de ello. Yo acababa de publicar ese año un libro muy voluminoso que preparé con el crítico de cine francés Guy Hennebelle: ‘Los Cines de América Latina’. Trabajamos muchos años para reconstruir la historia del cine en el continente, desde sus orígenes hasta 1980, con colaboradores de primer
nivel en cada país. De todas las experiencias que están descritas en ese libro, quizás las más próximas a un cine de participación obrera y militante, son las del Grupo de Cine Liberación, de Solanas y Getino, los autores de ‘La Hora de los Hornos’, y otras experiencias en Argentina y Uruguay. Pero aún en las que conozco, no había una participación directa de los trabajadores.

Mientras se desarrollaba la experiencia del Taller de la CST en Nicaragua, se me ocurrió una locura: escribir un libro sobre la experiencia, a medida que esta transcurría. Yo sabía que si el libro no se publicaba en el marco del proyecto, iba a ser muy difícil que se publicara más tarde, por falta de recursos. Además, queríamos que saliera con el sello de la CST. Entonces, me metí a escribir los fines de semana, narrando la experiencia y estableciendo al mismo tiempo una metodología de trabajo. Cuando las pruebas de página del primer capítulo ya estaban impresas, y el segundo estaba en composición (en una imprenta que trabajaba todavía con moldes de plomo), yo estaba ya corrigiendo el tercer capítulo y escribiendo el cuarto. Fue un desafío maratónico; el libro salió con el título ‘El Cine de los Trabajadores’. Un año después se volvió a publicar en Caracas por iniciativa de un gran amigo y promotor de la cultura, Pepe Ballón.

AZ: ¿Cuántos alumnos iniciaron el programa, de donde provenían, cual era el criterio de selección de los mismos?
AGD: Ahora me parece que fue un error confiar en que todas las organizaciones sindicales iban a designar a personas motivadas y comprometidas. Al final, solamente la CST, la ATC, AMLAE, la JS, y alguna que otra organización comprometió su participación. De todas maneras, no estábamos en busca de un grupo grande, pues contábamos solamente con una cámara, y con una pequeña máquina para editar. Queríamos calidad antes que cantidad. Algunos abandonaron el taller porque no estaban motivados, y al final nos quedamos con un puñado de participantes que llegaron hasta el final, y de los cuales me siento orgulloso. Yo no hice la selección, sino que cada organización propuso a los participantes, algunos tan jóvenes como Oscar Ortiz, fue Francisco Sánchez o Amina Luna.

Tuve un caso interesante: Américo González. El día que íbamos a inaugurar el taller y que se esperaba al Comandante Modesto, llegó en la tarde un hombre en uniforme verde olivo, del Ministerio del Interior, y pidió hablar a solas conmigo. Yo pensé que era un militar de la seguridad de Modesto, pero cuando empezamos a hablar me llevé una sorpresa. Me dijo que había leído en ‘Barricada’ que se iba a inaugurar esa noche el taller de cine, y que ‘por favor’, lo admitiera entre los participantes, que el cine era la pasión de su vida y que nunca había tenido una oportunidad. Américo era ya un hombre mayor, sin embargo tenía un entusiasmo juvenil que nos motivaba a todos. Era además un hombre de extraordinaria creatividad, un inventor. Una vez en su casa me mostró un prototipo para cine de animación que había fabricado él mismo. Su hijo, que tenía apenas 10 años de edad, hacía los dibujos sobre celofán, y fijaba la tinta con clara de huevo. Me quedé con las ganas de hacer un documental sobre Américo y su hijo.

AZ: ¿En qué consistió el Taller de Cine de la CST?
AGD: Mi idea era hacer un taller de cuatro o cinco meses que permitiese a los participantes disponer de todos los elementos necesarios para emprender un proyecto de cine documental, desde la concepción del guión, hasta la edición final. Para lograrlo, los participantes no tocaban siquiera la cámara Super 8 hasta que estaban bien familiarizados con el manejo de la imagen. Como teníamos pocos recursos y no queríamos desperdiciarlos, los dos primeros meses trabajábamos exclusivamente con fotografía fija. Para mi era importante que ellos pudieran leer bien una imagen, que supieran bastante de composición, de iluminación, etc. En uno de los ejercicios, cada participante disponía de un rollo de 36 fotos, y debía preparar un guión, y cada foto era como el plano de una película. No se podía disparar fotos impunemente, cada quien tenía que tener certeza de lo que quería. Cada quien revelaba su rollo, hacía las impresiones, etc. Trabajar en esas condiciones era lo apropiado en momentos...
en que la revolución tenía que hacer el mejor uso posible de sus recursos.

Veíamos muchas películas que nos prestaban, desde Chaplin hasta películas militantes latinoamericanas. Para que los participantes se acostumbraran a distanciarse de la pantalla, yo les pedía que en cada cambio de plano hicieran sonar sus dedos. Durante los primeros minutos se escuchaba el sonido, pero al cabo de cinco minutos la pantalla se los tragaba a todos. Fue un proceso largo hasta que pudieran mirar las películas con un ojo crítico, y una de las tareas que les daba era escribir comentarios sobre todas las películas que veíamos.

En una segunda etapa, empezamos a preparar cortos individuales de cinco minutos. Cada participante desarrollaba una idea, y los demás contribuían como camarógrafo, sonidistas, asistentes, etc. Cada uno disponía solamente de tres rollos de película Super 8, de tres minutos cada uno. Aquí también, cada guión se planificó en el máximo detalle. No solamente se investigó cada tema seleccionado por los participantes, sino que se hicieron dibujos de cada secuencia, se indicaron las posiciones de cámara, etc., como si se tratara de un film de ficción. Lo importante era la disciplina y el rigor para poder trabajar con recursos limitados. Esos cortos de cinco minutos fueron los que vio Modesto el día de la inauguración oficial del taller, y por ello afirmó que era el proyecto más económico y a la vez el más ambicioso de su ministerio.

En la última etapa, hicimos una semi-ficción de unos 40 minutos, rescatando el personaje que era el símbolo de la Campaña de Alfabetización Económica: Clodomiro. Fue una hermosa experiencia colectiva, que desarrollamos con la mayor seriedad y empeño, como si estuviéramos filmando en 35 mm. La película se llama ‘Cooperativa Sandino’, y es una parábola de Nicaragua en esos años, con sus problemas, sus amenazas, y esa gran voluntad de salir adelante contra viento y marea.

AZ: ¿Había otros cineastas latinoamericanos participando en este empeño?
AGD: Claro, muchos cineastas pasaron por Nicaragua en esos años, pero no todos tenían las mismas ideas sobre el tipo de cine que era importante para el país. Nuestra opción no era solamente hacer documentales, sino demostrar que jóvenes de las organizaciones populares eran capaces de hacerlo. El proceso participativo me interesaba más que los productos. Quizás con quienes mejor relación tuvimos fue con el grupo de Wolf Tirado, un cineasta chileno, y Jackie Reiter, su compañera. Ellos ya trabajaban en video, y eso permitió que cuando yo dejé Nicaragua, los participantes del Taller de Cine Timoteo Velásquez de la CST, pudieran conocer el video y colaborar con Wolf. Hicieron varios documentales juntos. En nuestro taller también participó Lázaro Bildt, como actor en ‘Cooperativa Sandino’.

Quiero añadir un comentario sobre algo que sucedió cuando yo terminé mi trabajo. Una cineasta de Estados Unidos pasó unos meses después por Nicaragua, y trabajó también con los cineastas del Taller de la CST que yo había capacitado; pero luego regresó a su país diciendo que ella los había capacitado, y que ella había creado el Taller de Cine de la CST. Como ella tenía los contactos para publicar en revistas de Estados Unidos, la verdad sobre el origen de esta experiencia se distorsionó, y fue recogida de manera distorsionada incluso en un libro de mi amiga Dee Dee Halleck, a quien le llamé la atención por ese hecho. Como sucede muchas veces, hay gente que tiende a apropiarse de los méritos ajenos. Es una de las debilidades del género humano.

Véase también: http://www.geocities.com/agumucio/index.html
Haiti – cinema revival

Charles Arthur

A remarkable event took place in a small south coast town in Haiti in July 2004. Over ten days from 9 July, the first Jacmel film festival featured 195 projections of 85 films shown free-of-charge at six different venues, including a large open-air public space for night-time screenings. More than 20 directors attended, with delegations travelling from as far as France and Spain, as well as Cuba, Jamaica and the United States, and some of these visiting directors hosted workshops on various aspects of film-making.

Offerings at the Festival included historical documentaries, short features, and full-length movies, including The Comedians, a 1967 classic based on the Graham Greene novel set in Haiti and starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. However, the accent was on Haitian-made films, either by local directors or those living abroad. There were also a large number of documentaries about Haiti, covering topics ranging from art to politics, health to religion.

The staging of the event was remarkable for several reasons, not least that it happened at a time when the country was still experiencing significant political upheaval in the aftermath of the overthrow of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his government at the end of February 2004. The implementation of the concept owed much to the courage and determination of the festival’s two main organisers, the Jacmel native, Patrick Boucard, and the US-born resident, David Belle.

Boucard, an artist from a notable local family, recently returned to his home-town after years studying and working abroad. In October 2003, he and his wife opened the Jacmel Art Centre in a converted coffee warehouse on the seafront. Belle visited Haiti for the first time in 1993 while filming a documentary about the military coup regime in power at that time. He subsequently decided to stay on and relocated to a village outside Jacmel, from where he has made a series of documentaries.

The festival benefited too from the absence of politically-motivated violence in Jacmel which remained relatively tranquil while much of the rest of the country was convulsed by clashes between protestors and police, and attacks on police stations by rebel forces.

As Belle explained to one of the numerous foreign journalists who covered the event, ‘There’s never been a proper film festival in Haiti, and never anything on this scale.’ The US$125,000 costs, which were met partly by Boucard’s own money but mainly relied on funds supplied by corporate sponsors, foundations and friends, were high because the organisers were determined that the films would be free so as to enable as many people as possible to view them. The vast majority of Haitians exist on an income of little more than a dollar or two a day, and spare cash for entertainment is an extreme rarity.

For Boucard, the idea of accessibility was a key one. He said, ‘We’re trying to get as many people to see (the festival) as possible. We’d like to change their idea of films, to show them that films are more than action movies.’

Capacity audiences

In the event, the public response – an estimated daily audience of around 3,500 people over the ten days – was hailed by the festival organisers as ‘overwhelmingly positive’. The New York-based photojournalist, Tequila Minsky, who attended the festival, said that venues for nearly all the screenings were full, and that the audiences were keenly attentive and engaged. Over the two weekends of the festival, many visitors came from the capital, Port-au-Prince, a two and a half-hour drive, and all the hotels and restaurants were reportedly full to overflowing.

During the week though, it was local people who filled the audiences. ‘Every night the main street of Jacmel, which was blocked to traffic,
showed two or three films on a huge screen,’ Minsky recalled. ‘The street was always full with curious Jacmelians’.

Local people were thrilled in particular to see documentaries featuring local people. At one screening at the town’s French Institute building, the well-known Jacmelian Vodou priestess, Madame Nerval, viewed the 1999 documentary about her and her life made by the French director, Charles Najman. Another notable instance of participation was the screening of *La Vi Ka Bel Pou Tout Moun* (Life Can Be Beautiful for Everyone), directed by the Haitian, Laurence Magloire. The documentary – which is a compilation of testimonies of the stigma experienced by those trying to live a full life with HIV/AIDS – was followed by a discussion involving a woman in the film who fielded questions from audience.

For many in the audiences, these were the first films they had ever seen. Jacmel’s only cinema closed down several years ago, and there are few theatres in any towns other than the capital. Boucard stressed that one of the aims of the festival was ‘to show films to people who have never seen movies before’, and to this end, he and Belle even commissioned two taxis to drive into the surrounding countryside to bring people into town. Minsky remembers one example, ‘The two films about HIV/AIDS were viewed by an audience that included a group of 20 teenagers who were brought in from the remote fishing village of Cayes-Jacmel’, she said. ‘That’s an hour’s drive along the coastal road to the east of Jacmel.’

In a country where official estimates of adult literacy are around 50% but those involved in the limited number of non-governmental literacy campaigns cite a figure of 20%, film has obvious merits as a vehicle for ideas and information. A further obstacle to communications, even by use of cinema, is the linguistic barrier experienced by the vast majority of the population whose only language is Creole – the educated elite traditionally communicate in French, thereby effectively excluding an estimated 90% of the population.

The first film drama made in Creole – and one that was shown at the Jacmel festival – was Rassoul Labuchin’s *Anita*. Made in 1980, it tells the story of a young servant girl who leaves Haiti’s countryside to work for a rich family in Port-au-Prince. *Anita* was one of the first Haitian films to assert a cinematic language rooted in the recurring themes of Haitian culture: the rural exodus, domestic life, class relations and the significance of Vodou.

Despite the example of *Anita*, during the 1970s and 80s most Haitian films remained what Haitian director and producer, Richard Senecal, described as ‘intellectual films’, ones inaccessible to the larger population. In part this was a consequence of the brutally repressive Duvalier dictatorship that forced many aspiring directors into exile. The dictatorship would not tolerate the few films made by those who stayed if they appealed to the masses.

**Using the Creole language**

Films made by foreign directors and producers would have been able to escape the strict censorship but few, if any, used the Creole language. Leah Gordon, is a British film-maker, who co-directed the 1997 documentary, *A Pig’s Tale* about the 1973 eradication of the country’s entire pig population, a probably unnecessary response to an outbreak of swine fever which delivered a terrible blow to the rural economy and the two-thirds of the population who worked in it.

Asked why her original intention to make a Creole-language version for screening in Haiti never happened, she replied, ‘The film was funded by British and French television companies, and they weren’t interested in a Creole version. We couldn’t find the money. It was as simple as that.’ However Gordon is proud to relate that although the voice-over is not in Creole most of the dialogue is, and as French or English sub-titles are used, there would still have been much to engage the Creole-speakers who viewed the film when it was shown at the Jacmel festival.

Clearly the only answer is for cinema made by Haitians for Haitians, and the Association of Haitian Filmmakers issued a special communique to commend the Jacmel Festival for being an important incentive to the local film industry. The president of the association is Arnold Antonin, a pioneer of politically motivated cin-
ema, who spent 23 years in exile in Europe and Venezuela. He returned to Haiti in 1986, and since then has helped nurture a new wave of Haitian directors by organising film shows at the centre he runs in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Petionville.

In a recent interview with the Associated Press Antonin said, ‘Our cinema is embryonic, but full of potential. Haitians don’t want to be invisible. They want to see themselves and their problems portrayed on the screen.’

Antonin claims that the digital camera has transformed filmmaking in Haiti in recent decades. He told the *Miami Herald*, ‘Before there were no financial means to produce movies in Haiti. Film was expensive in itself and you had to have it developed in a lab overseas.’ The advent of cheaper technology coincided with massive increases in the urban population creating a vastly enlarged potential audience. Director Reginald Lubin took advantage of this conjuncture when, in late 2001, he released his digital-video feature *La Peur d’Aimer* (The Fear of Loving), about a young woman’s unplanned pregnancy. This film’s sensational success was due in no small measure to its use of techniques such as good cinematography and a strong script that up until then had been largely absent from Haitian cinema.

In the wake of Lubin’s success, other filmmakers began to follow suit.

After making a series of documentaries, Antonin Antonin tackled his first feature-length film in 2001. The satirical comedy, *Piwoli and the Gangster*, with a script written by Gary Victor, one of Haiti’s most prominent novelists, was released to critical and popular acclaim in 2002, and was one of the hits of the Jacmel festival. It was shot in two weeks but took three months to edit because of Haiti’s notoriously unreliable electricity supply.

Another director featured in Jacmel, and who is making waves in the rest of Haiti, is Senecal. He has recently made two very popular feature films, *Barikad*, the 2002 feature about the problematic relationship between a servant maid and the son of the head of the house, and another problematic romance, *I Love You Anne* (2003).

For Seneca, the problems of raising finance...
for Haitian-made films remains pressing. He told the Miami Herald, ‘Banks and other businesses, obvious choices as prospective financiers, rarely invest in films. And when they do, they demand that the filmmakers feature their businesses in the storyline.’

The other constraint is the limited size of the Haitian cinema-going audience. There are, according to one estimate, just 100,000 Haitians out of a population of over eight million who can afford to go to the cinema. Bearing in mind that patrons pay 60 Haitian gourdes – about US$1.50 at today’s exchange rate – at a top cinema such as the Imperial in Port-au-Prince, and about 50 US cents at others, there is clearly little in the way of a profit margin. The decline of the Haitian economy over recent decades has hit the industry badly, with seven theatres closing down, leaving only four open in a city with a population of around two million people.

In this context, subsidised film festivals in provincial towns like the one held in Jacmel in 2004 can provide an essential boost to both existing directors, and to those who might be inspired to creativity in this medium in the future. Boucard and Belle are vowing to try and repeat their success in 2005, with a longer-term plan to get government support to turn it into a regular annual event.

Charles Arthur is a specialist on Caribbean politics and economics, a correspondent for Latinamerica Press, and a contributor for the Economist Intelligence Unit. Following his first trip to Haiti in 1993 when he served as a human rights monitor for the United Nations, he has returned to that country many times. Since 1994, he has been the main consultant for the UK-based Haiti Support Group, a development education and solidarity organisation. He is co-editor, with Michael Dash, of "Libète: A Haiti Anthology" (1999), and his most recent book is "Haiti in Focus: a guide to the people, politics and culture" (2002).

Peace journalism in the Holy Land

Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick

‘The citizen is completely helpless. He does not hear any other voice; and if everybody says the same, it must be true.’ The lament is from Uri Avnery, veteran leader of Israel’s peace movement, in our Peace Journalism video, News from the Holy Land, on coverage of the conflict with the Palestinians.

A Jerusalem bureau is a top posting for any ambitious reporter in international news, and it attracts some of the brightest and best in the profession. The Middle East is seldom out of the headlines; and yet there is now startling evidence of how ill-informed the viewing public has remained on some of the basic facts.

Everybody does say the same; or at least, the voices raised in print or on the airwaves are from a very narrow band of perspectives, and the questions they are asked don’t much vary. It leaves huge gaps where chunks of the explanation should be, for what is going on.

As a result, more British people believe ‘the settlers’ are Palestinian, than know they are Israeli; substantial numbers think it’s the Palestinians who are occupying the occupied territories, and many have only the vaguest idea of where ‘the refugees’ come from. ‘Afghanistan’ is not an infrequent guess.

These findings come from Greg Philo and Mike Berry, of the Glasgow University Media Group, based on polls and focus groups which saw them interview 800 people over a two-year period. They also analysed more than 200 news programmes, and their book, Bad News from Israel, spells out the exact match between patterns of omission and distortion in the cover-
The most glaring of these omissions is any explanation of Israel’s military occupation of the Palestinian territories – its illegality in the eyes of the world; why it’s there; when it started; the form it takes and its effects on daily life for Palestinians.

In News from the Holy Land, we suggest this originates in the best of intentions. Journalists concerned to avoid allegations of bias ‘tend to stick to safe stories like big bangs and the agenda set by political leaders’.

But television, in Britain as in many other countries, operates under public service obligations. One of them, enshrined in the BBC Producer Guidelines, stipulates that ‘all views should be reflected to mirror the depth and spread of opinion’. News from the Holy Land shows how this could be done. It would entail hearing from Israeli peace activists, like Avnery himself, who are much more in line with global public opinion, than the present Israeli government.

The Guidelines also say that audiences should receive ‘an intelligent account that enables them to form their own views’. The Glasgow findings show this is not happening, but we provide seven examples of news-length stories which could make good on this promise, starting with two different treatments of a violent incident, a suicide bombing in Jerusalem last year.

The first carries a familiar message – it’s all the fault of fanatics; prospects for peace lie in ruins. The second is an example of Peace Journalism, showing how the conditions of everyday life for Palestinians - held up at checkpoints, shot and harassed with impunity – feed into a cycle of violence that is steadily corrupting and killing both societies.

It shows Palestinian casualties – who still outnumber those killed on the Israeli side, in the violence of recent years, by three to one – and it shows activists from Checkpoint Watch trying to reduce tension on the frontline. News from the Holy Land comes complete with comprehensive teaching notes, so groups of school students, undergraduates or postgraduates, as well as peace activists, can work through it and enhance their understanding.

Philo and Berry find a strong appetite for such material, among members of their focus groups. ‘They never really tell you the in-depth reasons behind it’, one man complained. ‘This guy went in to bomb a pizza restaurant – why? The Israelis are going to attack – why?’ ‘What pushes them to that extreme?’ another wondered.

These questions lie at the heart of what has become a struggle for context in representations of political violence. Neoconservative guru Richard Perle has said ‘we must decontextualise terror’ because ‘any attempt to discuss the roots of terrorism is an attempt to justify it. It simply needs to be fought and destroyed.’ This is part of the shared understanding between the right wing of US and Israeli politics.

In Israel, it is impossible to understand it without allowing for the existential fear transmitted from centuries of persecution, culminating in the Holocaust. One respected analyst, Professor Gerald Steinberg, of Bar Ilan University, appears in News from the Holy Land to explain that, since attacks on Jewish civilians have been a fact of life for so long, the occupation cannot possibly be the explanation for terrorism – so ending the occupation would not remove the danger.

But we also interviewed the pollster, Dr Mina Zemach, who for many years has asked Israelis if they would be prepared to give up illegal settlements on occupied land, as part of a peace agreement. The proportion assenting to that proposition has steadily risen, she says, to 62% – an indication that most Israelis do see a just peace with the Palestinians as the key to their security.

In the US, the Perle analysis chimes with fundamentalist Christian interpretations of Scripture, in which the ‘greater Israel’ project is a prelude to the Second Coming. These believers in ‘the Rapture’ may account for as many as 15% of the US electorate, and their staunch support has just helped to ensure four more years for the Bush Administration.

Their political influence was manifest in thousands of angry emails to the White House when the President criticised Israel’s military incursion into Jenin, in the occupied West...
Bank; but it also affects the media climate. According to Bill Moyers, the veteran PBS presenter, ‘journalists who try to tell these stories, connect these dots, and examine these links are demeaned, disparaged and dismissed. This is the very kind of story that illustrates the challenge journalists face in a world driven by ideologies that are stoutly maintained despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality.’

The rest of the world generally does accept as reality the converse of the Likud/Republican view – that the intifada cannot be understood except as a response to the daily humiliations and privations of life under military occupation. But this struggle for context puts journalists where many least like to be – on the spot. On this, we either side with the Right of American and Israeli politics – which happens to be in the ascendancy, in each case, at the time of writing – or we side against them.

The film explores the connection with political process in Britain, too. Until the public grasps the nature of the occupation, the territories and the refugees, there will never be a groundswell in favour of any really effective third-party intervention. Tim Llewellyn, a former BBC Middle East correspondent, likens the conflict to the struggle against Apartheid – the difference being that ‘everybody knew that Apartheid was wrong… an offence against moral and international law.’

A clear understanding of these issues would, for instance, build political collateral for initiatives presently being discussed by ‘track two’ groups of activists – and presented to ministers in private – based on establishing an international protectorate for Jerusalem and the West Bank.

As Roy Greenslade, reviewing the film in the Media Guardian said, ‘There is more than one way to be a war reporter, and [Lynch and McGoldrick] have produced a video to prove that it can be done peacefully… They show how the concentration by the media on violence tends to prolong disputes rather than solve them’.

That’s why reports that omit context, instead presenting us with a blow-by-blow narrative of tit for tat, merit the title, War Journalism. They leave the conflict opaque – we cannot see what needs to change, in order to remove or ameliorate the causes of violence, so they unavoidably strengthen the case for ‘fighting and destroying’ instead. There is now an urgent need, we argue, for more Peace Journalism.

**Giving peace journalism a chance**

What are the chances of that? Among those who spoke to Philo and Berry were a number of prominent television journalists, including George Alagiah, who presents the Six O’clock News on BBC1. Journalists now go about their job, he tells them, with a fear in the back of their minds that the viewer, remote control in hand, will simply switch channels, if there is not something to grab their attention in the first 20 seconds of any given report.

It’s a ‘hardy perennial’ in debates about the BBC, its role and its future – the need to boost ratings to justify the licence fee. But there are broader obligations to democracy, and big changes are needed, in the way this story is reported, if they’re to be met.

The first step to bringing about change is to appreciate what’s missing, in the prevailing patterns of omission and distortion – and that’s where News from the Holy Land is intended to help.

The next is to take up this cause as a matter of urgent public and political concern, and there’s a message for peace activists and grant-giving bodies everywhere – don’t just campaign through the media, campaign on the media, too.

**Orders for News from the Holy Land:**


Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick are experienced journalists and media activists. They have developed and campaigned for Peace Journalism over many years, mainly through the think-tank, Reporting the World (www.reportingtheworld.org.uk).
Post-election thoughts

William F. Fore

It is a rare thing in human history that one can experience the rise and fall of a great nation in one’s own lifetime. It took more than a thousand years for ancient China to come and go, six hundred for Rome, perhaps two hundred each for Spain and England. In the case of America, it has happened in about fifty years.

Immediately following World War II, we were the most powerful nation on earth. Our technology was unrivalled, our production unprecedented, our self-image secure, and we were held in high respect by the peoples of the world. Today, we are on the way down. Our standard of living is decreasing, our output is diminishing, our self-image is in tatters, and we are the most disliked, if not outright hated, nation in the world.

What has happened? I think it comes down to three things: a loss of our spiritual grounding, a breakdown of our political system, and the results of irresponsible spending. As my father used to say, if we live too high on the hog for too long, eventually we are going to have to pay for it.

Loss of spiritual grounding

This does not mean we are any less ‘religious’. What it does mean is that too many of our citizens have been content to lapse into false religions. The huge interest in astrology, the lottery and other forms of magic is bad enough. But the real problem is that large numbers of Christians have simply begun to worship false idols – belief in Biblical literalism, thus making the Bible itself an idol, belief in a false God who can be persuaded by us to do something if we do something in return (a vision rejected by Judaism and Jesus more than two millennia ago), and belief in our own superiority which we justify to ourselves by claiming to be the only ‘children of God.’

When Thomas Althizer and Harvey Cox announced the ‘death of God’ in the 1960s, they were really calling people to reject the old, magical, God-with-a-beard-in-Heaven kind of God. At that time, most people in Europe understood what was being said and refused to go along with the false Christianity that had held sway there for hundreds of years. They left the churches in droves. But in America many people instead retreated into the refuge that the false God provides – certainty in our own righteousness, bliss in our own ignorance, safety if we blindly follow the God of wrath and judgment and Laws. Today more than 75% of Americans claim to believe in the virgin birth and a physical Heaven and Hell, and almost as many insist their God created the earth in seven days.

The result is a nation deeply divided between people who are concerned about real-life issues – war and peace, social justice, the health and welfare of the people – and people who are concerned, instead, about ‘values’ – by which they mean dependence on a magical God, adherence to ancient taboos, the necessity for everyone to believe as they do, and safety in raw (though often hidden) power. Such a nation cannot prosper, because its prevailing religion is internally corrupt, divisive, and an offence to the God of love and justice.

The breakdown of our political system

A fundamental principle of American government has always been that a genuine unfettered flow of information and public discussion is essential to its success. Jefferson famously remarked that ‘an enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic.’ And Edward Carrington, a friend of Jefferson, told him that if people become inattentive to public affairs, ‘you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, judges and Governors, shall all become wolves.’

Today citizens depend almost completely on the mass media – radio, TV and the press – for their ‘enlightenment’. But most of the mass media are now controlled by about six huge
conglomerates. Whereas in 1920 we had more than 700 cities with two or more competing newspapers, the number today is less than a dozen. Instead of information being open to many voices, today it is carefully, subtly, and quietly constrained by the demands of the marketplace and the opinions of the owners. There is no effective countervailing power in Washington. Business is in control of government. We have become ‘one market under God.’

In addition, television – the process, never mind the ownership – has fundamentally changed the way people perceive the world. We are now in the third TV generation. More than 90% of people living in America today grew up with television. Neil Postman points out in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that TV persistently trains people to *feel* rather than to *think*. Heart replaces mind. Attitude replaces cognition. A number of commentators on the recent election have pointed out that Kerry supporters tend to be conversant with facts and issues, while Bush supporters rely on how they feel. ‘Bush makes me feel secure’ is the mantra chanted by millions.

Thus the wolves have crept in. Politicians are replaced by celebrities. Appeals to facts are replaced by appeals to emotions. People elect movies stars. The President creates and acts on the basis of a whole world that is at odds with the facts – and so do the voters. Thus 75% of Bush supporters continue to believe that Saddam Hussein had a role in the 9/11 attacks, and 72% believe that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction – even after the President himself admitted it isn’t so.

With the communication media under control of a handful of multinational corporations, and with much of the public trained to think less and feel more, the political system cannot be expected to meet the needs of its citizens.

**Irresponsible spending**

Wall Street analyst Raymond deVoe updated Karl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum about politics and war to hold that ‘economics is war by other means’, and we can begin see that America has allowed itself to become economically vulnerable. The barbarians are at our gates, only now in the guise of the iron laws of economics. The United States has the largest negative balance of trade in the history of the world – almost $2 billion going out every day. We have the largest total debt in the history of the world – a shift from a surplus of $2 trillion four years ago to a deficit of over $3 trillion today. This amounts to $27,000 for every man, woman and child in the nation. And it does not include the Social Security monies that the Congress has stolen and spent, which would raise the individual debt to about $100,000 for each citizen. Finally we have the largest individual debt in history, as we buy goods at an amazing pace, financed by mortgages and credit cards.

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Back issues of *Media Development* can be bought singly or in bulk (when available). A single copy costs £3 including postage. A 50% discount will be given for orders of 10 or more. Make cheques payable to ‘WACC’. Order from: WACC Publications, 357 Kennington Lane, London SE11 5QY, United Kingdom.
No nation, no matter how wealthy, can do this for long. We have been content to spend an avalanche of borrowed money, which our grandchildren will have to repay. At present, China and Japan are covering our daily outgo of $2 billion by buying a similar amount of US Treasury notes – promises to pay – which allows the banks and the Fed to print more money daily, a conveyor belt not unlike the drug lords washing their money. China and Japan do this so we can keep buying their cheap goods.

But now China is beginning to show its power. It is beginning to put its money into Treasury notes of European nations instead of the US. And people around the world are starting to shy away from our Treasury notes because of the low interest rates. What happens if we don’t get that $2 billion every day?

We face two equally bleak prospects. Either we keep interest rates low, in which case people around the world will completely stop buying US Treasuries since they can get better rates elsewhere (and the money-producing conveyor belt will stop); or we raise the rates, in which case businesses and people at home will no longer be able to borrow money for almost nothing, which in turn will slow both production and consumption – and increase unemployment. The alternatives are deflation and collapse of the dollar, or inflation and collapse of the economy.

Meanwhile, China, whose population is far larger than ours and willing to work for far less than we will work, and with at least as much natural resources as we have, is waiting at the gates. The barbarians are meaner and leaner than we are, and this time it is war by economic means – and we have begun to lose it.

A flawed vision

The day following the election New York Times commentator Thomas Friedman asked himself why he is so upset by this current Bush election, when he wasn’t as upset about Bush’s first election or the election of his father. I know why I am upset. It is because the electorate came out in record numbers, after each candidate had clearly stated his position, and they consciously and intentionally validated Bush’s view of the world and the role of America in it. I am upset because this election endorses a vision of the nature and role and soul of America for many years to come which I find deeply flawed and downright scary.

It is a vision of America trying to control the rest of the world, a vision that is couched in black and white – either you are for us or against us. It is a vision of True Believers, who have the religious and political Truth, and want to make everyone, in America and overseas, bow to that Truth.

It is a vision that justifies any means to achieve our ends. It is a vision that bows to a God of mammon and power, then calls it the True God. It is a vision that refuses to understand that other people may have other definitions of ‘freedom’. It is a vision that creates a Fortress America against the rest of the world. It is a vision that finally pits all against all.

And for these reasons, America will fail. We have had our time in history. We have had our opportunity to bring about peace and justice, to help feed the hungry of the world, to spread the wonders of technology in ways that would give everyone – not just ourselves – a better life. We have failed in all that. Now we will see other nations rising to the task, while we take an ever smaller role in the affairs of the world. One of the ironies of history is that empires have always started to fall at just the moment of their greatest apparent glory.

4 November 2004

William F. Fore studied at Yale University Divinity School (BD), was ordained in the United Methodist Church, and received his PhD from Columbia University and Union Theological School (1971). He was Executive Director of the Broadcasting and Film Commission of the National Council of Churches (1964-89). He served as chairperson of the Advisory Council of National Organizations of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (1972-75) and as President of the World Association for Christian Communication (1982-88).
Pradip Thomas leaves WACC to go ‘down under’

‘An editor is one who separates the wheat from the chaff – and prints the chaff,’ said the American lawyer and statesman Adlai Stevenson. This is not true of Pradip Thomas who, as editor of Media Development from 1994 to 2004, was adept at the lost art of winnowing. Pradip left the staff of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) at the end of last year to take up a post as Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. We bid him farewell.

Pradip N. Thomas studied at the University of Madras, India (BA and MA in English Language and Literature) and at the Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester, UK (PhD). His doctoral thesis was on development communication, locating it in the larger, historical context of development and underdevelopment in India. The study compared and contrasted two models of development communication, one mainly informative and the other transformative.

Pradip was Associate Professor at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, Madurai, India (1987-90), where he taught communication theory and practice for an MTh course. He also helped with a post-graduate diploma course in communication offered by the Ramaraj University in Madurai.

In 1990 he joined the WACC staff at its international headquarters in London as the person responsible for coordinating communication projects in WACC’s Asia Region. In 1995 he was appointed Director of Studies and Publications, an extensive area of work that in 2003 became the Global Studies Programme.

Over ten years he contributed a number of articles to international publications as well as chapters to several books. He is editor of Refugees and their Right to Communicate: Perspectives from South-East Asia (2001), co-editor with Michael Richards and Zaharom Nain of Communication and Development: The Freirian Connection (2004), and co-editor with Zaharom Nain of Who Owns the Media: Global trends and local resistances (2004).

At a farewell dinner held in London on 10 December 2004, WACC presented Pradip with a copy of John James Audubon: The Watercolours for the Birds of America, marking his passion for wildlife and his role as Coordinator of the WACC North American Regional Association, and a copy of The Times Book of English Verse to mark his interest in English literature and the many years spent in the United Kingdom.

Pradip Thomas (left) with WACC General Secretary Randy Naylor in less familiar roles.

For WACC’s series of booklets ‘In search of common values’, Pradip wrote Communicating Difference. The booklet’s final words sum up his communication philosophy as well as that of WACC’s Global Studies Programme: ‘There is a need to listen to and be aware of the more nuanced understandings and explanations of the human condition. The sustainability of long-term justice and peace may well be dependent on the acknowledgement of and commitment to a larger understanding of diversity.’
Riga, Latvia 2004

The International Film Forum ‘Arsenals’ has taken place biennially since 1986 in Riga, the capital of Latvia. In 2004 it ran 18-26 September. The Forum offers a challenging and innovative spectrum of films (around 150) made in the last two years and consists of an international competition, a Baltic film competition, a panorama of world cinema, thematic programmes, and a retrospective.

The selection criterion of the international film competition is originality. The selection committee is looking for films that are remarkable for their content or for the means of expression. Consistent with the philosophy of ‘Arsenals’, each of the Forum directors is awarded a Magic Crystal prize with the engraving ‘Best Director’. All of the Forum works are unique and, in a sense the best. Therefore, the winner of the Main Prize of the Forum ($10,000) is decided not by some prestigious jury, but by sheer luck: one of the Forum directors finds a golden button, cut from the coat-tails of Arsenals’ President, August Sukuts, slipped into his or her wine glass during the closing ceremony!

Since 1994, the films of the Arsenals Competition have been judged by a jury of five members of FIPRESCI, the International Federation of Film Critics; the Baltic Film Competition by a Baltic Competition jury of three members; and in 2004 for the first time an ecumenical jury of three members of INTERFILM was invited to award its prize to a film of the International Forum Competition and a documentary film in the Baltic Competition.

The INTERFILM-Jury consisted of: Hans Hodel (Switzerland), Anita Uzulniece (Latvia), and Christine Weissbarth (Germany). The Jury awarded its prize in the International Forum Competition to the Hungarian feature film Hukkle, by Gyorgy Palfi, Hungary (2002). This first feature film is a sensitive and humorous cinematographic portrait of the reality of everyday life in a Hungary village. In poetic images it shows respect for human beings, animals and nature.

Hukkle gets its title from one of its characters – an old man, who is sitting on the bench in some Hungarian village and has hiccups. At the same time, different events are going on: men drink in the bar, a beekeeper gathers honey, a man follows a shepherd girl, two persons proudly watch their prize winning dogs copulate, a cat and a young girl die having eaten from the same dish…The film is intertwined with the investigation of mysterious murders, the result of which, perhaps, will turn village life upside down. There is almost no dialogue, which proves once again that images in cinema are more important than text. Interestingly, also, landscapes and animals play as important a role as actors.

In the Baltic Competition, the INTERFILM-Jury awarded its documentary film prize to Keep smiling! by Askolds Saulitis, Latvia (2004). The film tells a tale of four friends searching the forests of Latvia for traces of soldiers missing since the Second World War. The director’s camera observes events from a personal point of view, confronting the viewer with the past and with the need to recall history and give signs of reconciliation.

Keep smiling! is a story of men who spend their free time in the forests digging muddy earth. They search the spore of wars, namely, soldiers, who have been and would be considered to be missing – but for the quest of the heroes of this film. Sometimes they dig out a tank or plane, sometimes they help a tragic love story to become true, letting a wife ‘meet’ her husband, who 60 years ago went to war and did not return. This black-and-white film with a well woven story reminds us that war is war – no matter where, in Europe or Iraq, a long time ago or nowadays. If we ignore our past, we ignore our future, says the director of film,
which is based on the novel *Diggers* by Viktors Duks, nominated for the EPPI Award in 2003.

**Lübeck 2004**

On the occasion of the 46th Nordic Film Days Lübeck 2004 the Jury awarded the INTERFILM Church Film Prize amounting to 2,500 Euros to *Uno*, by Aksel Hennie, Norway. The film tells how a young man breaks out of a vicious circle of violence and revenge by refusing to accept the traditional values of the people who surround him. In making this decision he accepts responsibility for himself and his family. The film is convincing in its depiction of the young man and his mentally handicapped brother. The protagonist’s process of maturing is sensitively and at the same time recognizably depicted for the viewers.

The jury also commended *Lad de små børn* (Aftermath) by Paprika Steen, Denmark. The film treats the difficult topic of parents who have lost a child with respect and empathy. It helps to better understand the situation of those involved and shows that it is possible to succeed in remaining a couple while living through this difficult crisis.

**Cottbus - Festival of East European Cinema**

At the 14th Film Festival Cottbus (2-6 November 2004), the Ecumenical Jury gave its award to the film *Kontroll* (Control, Hungary 2003) by Nimród Antal. ‘The Budapest Metro becomes a gripping parable of the hidden dimensions of human existence - regarding social as well as psychological aspects. The director connects the blackest depths of our society with those of the human soul. Sharply plumbing their perils, he never loses touch with the hope for deliverance,’ said the judges (Bernadette Meier, Switzerland, Angelika Obert, Germany, and Petr Siska, Czech Republic).

During the festival, Interfilm and the John Templeton Foundation organised a special screening of last year’s winner of the Ecumenical Award in Cottbus and of the European Templeton Film Award, *The Return* by Andrei Zvyagintzev. The Russian director met the public after the screening and discussed his film.

For more information on the European Templeton Film Award: http://www.gep.de/interfilm/englisch/interfilm10632.htm

**Mannheim-Heidelberg 2004**

The Ecumenical Award at the 53rd International Film Festival (18-27 November 2004), with prize money of D1500.- provided by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the German Catholic Church, went to *Mila ot Mars* (Mila from Mars) directed by Zornitsa Sophia (Bulgaria, 2004).

The film follows a young woman on her difficult path towards finding her own identity in a solitary place through her encounters with other human beings. This multi-facetted debut feature plays with traditional Christian motives. Image composition, montage and the actor’s performance are compelling. The film also received the Rainer Werner Fassbinder Award of the International Festival Jury.

The story follows a 16-old girl running away from a dangerous man and arriving at a distant village near the border. Soon she finds out the only inhabitants there – nine old men and women – make their living by growing marihuana and the village is actually an illegal plantation belonging to the man she is running away from. However, she decides to stay there and nothing remains the same. The girl is afraid of her past, which both disgusts and attracts her. She is afraid of her present, which both suffocates and gives her wings. And she is afraid of the future as it projects both her nightmares and her dreams.

In addition, the Ecumenical Jury decided to give a commendation to the film *Nema Problema* (No problems) directed by Giancarlo Bocchi (Italy, 2004). The film uses stringent imagery to depict the difficulties of journalistic work during times of war. It spotlights the interplay of mutual manipulation and reminds us that the quest for truth must always be the unconditional concern of any democracy.

Armed conflict is one kind of violence. There are others, such as state violence (e.g. racial and class violence, violence against people in prison, forced evictions for land conservation schemes, etc.), structural violence (hunger, the sustained impoverishment of large parts of the world by means of global monetary policies, etc.), violence against women (domestic violence, rape, female genital mutilation, etc.), violence against children (sexual violence, child soldiers and workers), and ecological violence.

Then there is the violence replicated in films, animated cartoons and computer games; the violence inherent in nationalist and fundamentalist language (in particular, hate speech); the violence embedded in misplaced patriotism, national histories, literatures and myth-making).

The net effect is complicity in a culture of violence that people hardly notice any more, so conditioned are they to the status quo. And often, the mass media are part of the problem instead of part of the solution. Instead of exposing violence, they remain silent. Instead of denouncing injustice, they tacitly condone it or actively support it. What is to be done?

S. Wesley Ariarajah’s response has been to write an important new book that discusses how a society that tolerates violence, a nation that is built on perpetrating violence on others, anywhere, anytime, is on its way to ruin.

After a brief introduction on the theme of ‘Do not weep for me’ (Luke 23), the book consists of six parts. Chapter 2 is ‘A Time to Reflect’, examining Christian responses to the ongoing Iraq conflict. The questions posed here frame the the rest of the book:

: Can Christians justify war? Are there ‘just’ wars?
: What are the possible understandings of the relationship between church and state? Should Christians always support their elected governments? What does ‘patriotism’ mean in a democratic nation?
: What is the role of religions in violence and war?
: What does the Bible say about war and violence?
: What are possible Christian approaches to overcoming violence and war?

Chapter 3 looks at ‘The Violence of Warfare’ and Chapter 4 ‘War, Patriotism and Democracy’. Ariarajah is aware of the significant role played by the mass media in terms of public debate and vigilance. And he is invariably critical:

‘There was a time when this all-important task in keeping a democracy alive was the responsibility of the free press and the mass media. But today much of the mass media submits in slavery to big money. Public television networks and truly independent media are unable to compete with them on the scale needed to affect public opinion. Thus the most powerful democratic country also has the most controlled media’ (p.43).

Chapter 5 covers ‘Religion and Violence’, Chapter 6 ‘Violence and War in the Bible’, and Chapter 7 proposes an ‘Axis of Peace’. Ariarajah argues that we can ‘undo this culture of violence, if only we have the will and the passion to do so’ (p.109).

He proposes building institutions to promote reconciliation and to help people better understand the benefits of just peace, developing further international instruments to mediate between nations, and even outlawing war. The caveat is that ‘such revolutionary changes cannot be brought about by governments... change must be implemented by the people’ (p.137).

An interesting and provocative book.

Review by Philip Lee, WACC.