

HARD FOCUS: features on filmmaking

The Practice of Courage

World Cinema vs. A World in Crisis

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In the late 1960s, after he'd endured Siberian prison camp, somebody asked Nobel-prize winning novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn if there was a logical explanation for why the Soviet Union so ruthlessly persecuted its writers. He replied, "A great writer is a rival government."

Given the power moving pictures have over people, especially in the United States, one can feel the evolving truth of Solzhenitsyn's remark in every pulse of the TV, for we are now nothing if not governed by "image." Even our so-called leaders are slaves to their need for good spin. In such a climate, what Solzhenitsyn said of writers applies many times over to filmmakers. To harness the power of the moving image to any truth that contradicts the official line is to automatically pose a threat.

Happy to say, here in the United States we have a Michael Moore for every John Ashcroft. Yet with so much at stake now in terms of simple truth and clarity, any filmmaker who aspires to Solzhenitsyn's noble calling — *speaking the truth to power* — would be wise to reckon with the brave examples set by several of the documentary makers in this year's Sundance World Cinema section.

Russian filmmaker Andrei Nekrasov's *Disbelief* dares to re-examine the 1999 bombing of a Moscow apartment building that the Putin government blamed on Chechnyan rebels, and instead explores the possibility that the Russian government itself was behind the atrocity, to justify its later invasion of Chechnya. As Nekrasov told an audience at Sundance, Thursday: "If Russians can kill over 20 million fellow citizens, as they did during the times of Lenin and Stalin, why would it be so hard for them to kill 300 people now, if they think the cause is just?"

His deadliest enemy is less the vengeance of his government than it is the sheer apathy of so many of his countrymen. "People simply do not want to face what is going on around them. They'll tell you, 'This is my country and I have to live with it,' or, 'That's our history. What's the problem?' Well — it is a very big problem if you live in that country!"

A sense of humor is a truth-teller's greatest ally. "If you're going to tell people the truth," wrote George Bernard Shaw, "You better make them laugh; otherwise they'll kill you." Advice Amir Muhammad took to heart when fashioning *The Big Durian*, his satirical take on a painful bloodbath in the recent history of his native Malaysia.

"You are wrong to label my film a 'mockumentary,'" he teased when sitting down with us Friday. "Mockumentaries are 100 percent fictional, like *Spinal Tap*, or Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds* broadcast. What I'm presenting in *The Big Durian* is a documentary, one hundred percent factual. I merely used certain fictional tropes that are obvious to anybody watching." He cited Orson Welles's cinematic essay, *F for Fake*, as a source of inspiration.

Were the authorities amused? "There was no pressure," Muhammad replies. "The most insidious pressure is self-censorship," he reflects. "Malaysia is not a dictatorship, but there are clear rewards if you toe the line. As in Hollywood, if you break too

many rules you don't get to work. The danger comes when you persuade yourself that the compromises you've made are what you 'really' wanted to do anyway. That way lies madness. What saved us from trouble in *The Big Durian* is that we favor no one. Even though we're critical of the government, we're not supporting the opposition, either. That rescues me. I've nothing to gain or lose, I'm just saying what I think."

Several dramatic features in the World Cinema section also sink their teeth into variety of compelling political themes, yet it is in the nature of drama to adopt more poetic and indirect

strategies in the name of "truth."

"We are not making a film about Iran," says Iranian born Bahman Maghsouglu of *Silence of the Sea*, which he produced for director Vahid Mousaian. The film's hero is trapped on an island off the coast of Iran, to which he cannot quite return. Ironically, Maghsouglu himself left Iran before the revolution and can't return either. "I tried once and was nearly arrested." In a further irony, director Mousaian was not able to come to Sundance because (post 9-11) getting a U.S. visa in Iran is monumentally difficult. Maghsouglu's reaction to these travails is stoic. "*Silence of the Sea* is about an issue by no means limited to Iran. Lithuanians, Poles, Albanians, South Americans, Turks in Germany — so many



The Silence of the Sea.

people suffer exile. Our film is about them as well. We aspired to be complex, lyrical, and universal. To Mousaian's credit he is never sentimental, yet people are moved to tears, whether they are in Germany or in Sundance, because we have presented the agony of a man stranded between nations, truthfully, without manipulation."

Similarly, director Bronwen Hughes found herself feeling an unlikely empathy when she first read the story of Andre Stander, the South African police official who quietly went mad with guilt after committing an atrocity on behalf of *apartheid*. At least, he went mad with style: embarking on a brazen crime spree that he would no less boldly turn around and "investigate" in his role as detective. "A fascinating character," says Hughes. "I knew right away that I wanted to tell his story. For here was a man who has been robbed of his ability to define himself. Despite that he is in a favored position, as a white man, the system of *apartheid* has robbed him of the man he might have become." His story pierced Hughes' heart because, as she had to admit to herself: "If I had been born into that system, I'm sure I would have gone as crazy myself, and done something like he did."

To find the mirror image of one's own weakness — one's own potential for madness — in the sufferings of another human being requires moral courage. The same is true of a refusal to be bitter about one's exile. To pursue the truth of one's own history, and that of one's nation, as Nekrasov and Solzhenitsyn have so fearlessly done, requires a courage so breathtaking as to seem superhuman. Courage is the one thing money can't buy, no matter how big your movie-budget. Courage can't be taught (except indirectly perhaps, by the examples of the superhumanly courageous) but clearly it can be learned. One can only hope more of our filmmakers will find it in them to learn courage — whatever that might require. The world certainly requires it of us, now more than ever.

Again, to quote Solzhenitsyn, "Talent is an extraordinary burden. You need skill to bear it." ~~~



The Big Durian.



Disbelief.