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IN SEARCH OF CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY: THE 1991 TRAVELLING FILM FESTIVAL

The Travelling Film Festival, a hand-picked selection of the year's finest foreign and/or fringe films from the Sydney Film Festival, is a refreshing change from the Hollywood block-busters and low budget comedies usually offered by the big commercial cinemas. The Festival generally offers one or two films in English and four or five "foreign" films, allowing provincial movie goers access to the art and culture of regions which are rarely seen at such close range by Australians. With this in mind, it could be suggested that the selectors feel the need to "bring the world back home" or to broaden provincial Australia's "world view". However, it also suggests another phenomenon, which encourages a *narrowing* rather than an expansion of the Festival's "world view".

Films from Germany, Britain, Burkina Faso, Argentina, the United States and Iran were offered this year. A brochure which outlined each of the films in the Festival promised a well-rounded international selection, a cross section of First, Second and Third World issues and cultural attitudes. The usual critical "raves" accompanied the titles: "Verhoeven is possessed of a stylistic elan ...", "hailed as the great discovery of the year", and "photographic compositions of remarkable beauty" were typical examples. The brochure seemed to be at great pains to convince subscribers that they would see the genuine article — that is, that a film from Germany would be convincingly "German", and so on. For example, it describes the German film *The Nasty Girl*, which was based on a true story (for added authenticity), as "wonderfully vicious" and quotes the director who claims, "the attitudes I satirise here can be found in any West German town." Similarly, the Argentine film *Secret Wedding*, "recall[s] the style of much Latin American writing in its use of fantastic imagery and occurrence." And *Yabba*, the film from Burkina Faso, "shows us much about the life of the village" and is an "exquisitely simple tale." The brochure adds, "... the film leaves you with the impression that you have heard an ancient tale over a small fire in the middle of the African night."

My point is that the comments on the brochure, and in some cases the movies themselves, offer slices of “culturally authentic” viewing — vicious Germans, tribal Africans, irrepressibly oppressed Argentinians — which, no matter how good the intention, can be read as symptomatic of a cultural imperialism which encloses native societies in our Western world view.

In a post-colonial and multi-cultural world it almost seems impossible that a discrete and entirely traditional culture might still exist. Yet the object of much ethnographic, literary and linguistic study is still to find the “authentic” in regional or racial communities throughout the world. Renato Rosaldo, an American anthropologist who has recognised this syndrome, has examined some of his colleagues’ attitudes to the awakening interest in hybrid cultures and the move away from the notion of the hermetically sealed cultural group:

Louis A. Sass cites an eminent anthropologist who worried that recent experimentation with ethnographic form could subvert the discipline’s authority, leading to its fragmentation and eventual disappearance: “at a conference ... on the crisis in anthropology, Cora Du Bois, a retired Harvard professor, spoke of the distance she felt from the ‘complexity and disarray of what I once found a justifiable and challenging discipline ... It has been like moving from a distinguished art museum into a garage sale.’” The images of the museum, for the classic period, and the garage sale, for the present, strike me as being quite apt, but I evaluate them rather differently than Du Bois. She feels nostalgia for the distinguished art museum with every thing in its place, and I see it as a relic from the colonial past. She detests the chaos of the garage sale, and I find it provides a precise image for the postcolonial situation where cultural artifacts flow between unlikely places, and nothing is sacred, permanent or sealed off... The image of the garage sale depicts our present global situation. Analytical postures developed during the colonial era can no longer be sustained. Ours is definitively a postcolonial epoch. Despite the intensification of Northern American imperialism,

the third world has imploded into the metropolis. Even the conservative national politics of containment, designed to shield "us" from "them", betray the impossibility of maintaining hermetically sealed cultures. (Rosaldo, 44)

The danger of privileging the "hermetically sealed culture" is, of course, that the world's massive hybrid populations become widely regarded as the scraps of the Third World. To Western science their cultural and geographical transmigrations represent "fragmentation" and dilution. Their creative input and potential go largely ignored, and their maltreatment at the hands of the West can be excused because they no longer represent a distinct and therefore "valuable" cultural heritage. An isolated tribal community in Botswana, for example, might attract well meaning anthropologists from around the Western world, but the urbanised and hybridised population of Soweto holds little promise of radical cultural discovery in Western anthropological terms. Or, to use a local example, Aboriginal writer Colin Johnson can change his name to Mudrooroo Narogin in order to intensify his "Aboriginality," but when he criticises Sally Morgan for not being Aboriginal enough he is accusing some elements of the Aboriginal movement of being "unauthentic."

It is the Euro/African production *Yabba* which is of most interest in these terms. This "exquisitely simple tale" of "typical" village life in north-western Africa is a Burkina Faso/Swiss/French co-production. I assume Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) was a French colony, because the language spoken in the film is a mixture of Moorea and French. However, the film creates the impression that the inhabitants of this village have never been colonised, in fact have never come into contact with Western influences before. Their clothes, food, tools and houses are all traditional; not even a plastic bucket or that most insidious of Western influences, an empty Coke bottle, can be detected. Yet the characters speak a mixture of Moorea and French. So even in the most isolated parts of Africa, colonial influence must have been felt. In order to reduce the visible influence of colonisation, the authentic African tale could be told. That the bulk of the country's population live a less than traditional lifestyle on the streets of Ouagadougou is of no interest to this film crew.

It could be argued that films such as *Salam Bombay* and its Iranian counterpart, *The Runner*, redress this imbalance as they concentrate on urbanised and hybridised populations. But these films tend to be presented as the negative image of traditional societies, concentrating on

the evils rather than suggesting the positive possibilities for these emerging border zone cultures. The Argentine film, on the other hand, seems to have fooled the selectors. The brochure compares the film to "the style of much Latin American writing in its use of fantastic imagery and occurrence." In the quest for the authentic Latin American, a stereotype has been imposed on the film which it refuses to bear. The reviewer was apparently recalling the fantasy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *The House of the Spirits*; but the review of *The Secret Wedding* is really about what he or she would *like* to have seen in a film from Argentina.

Yabba is an example of the power of the Western gaze and its ability to shape the presentation of a native population to Western expectations of a culturally authentic ideal. But there have been attempts to disrupt this one-sided treatment of other societies. *Cannibal Tours*, by the Australian documentary film maker Dennis O'Rourke, turns the camera's gaze from the tribal people of New Guinea onto the visiting Western tourists. The tourists become the anthropological subjects as the native people are asked to offer their opinions on "our" culture. Western culture is thereby robbed of its transparency and is subjected to the same critical gaze which characterises classical ethnography. The New Guinea natives "answer the West back," which results in a loosening of the Western monopoly on the power of the gaze. They resist the imperialising power to scientifically describe and enclose them in a Euro-centric grid of knowledge.

Renato Rosaldo's concern is that the "garage sale," the flow of cultural icons and practices across rapidly eroding cultural boundaries, is viewed by Western academics as symptomatic of a corrosion of the world's cultures and, to a lesser degree, their disciplines. Rosaldo, however, views the movements across and into these border zones as potentially fertile and creative. He points to the exciting possibilities of being "both mobile and cultural" and this mix has recently produced some very thought-provoking work from writers who are successfully blending cultural practices in "an interdependent late-twentieth-century world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries" (Rosaldo 217).

WORKS CITED

Rosaldo, R. *Culture and Truth*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.