

## WHY I GO TO THE MOVIES, WITH LILLIAN

Further reflections on the Festival de Cine Internacional de San Juan  
October, 2011

### SUBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION

Trying to make sense of the films we've seen during this year's festival, I created a list of subjects: food, clothing, shelter, money, music, art, love, hate, sex, fear, pregnancy, birth, death, travel and multiculturalism – tracking them in the films we watched.

One notable surprise this year was the prevalence of bathroom scenes, primarily showing a female character sitting on the toilet. Usually this is intended to create a feeling of intimacy with the character, not unlike scenes of sexual activity. However, in one film, the Peruvian *Octubre* directed by the Vega brothers, the toilet scene was important to the development of the story. Sophia (the woman next door for whom Clemente, the protagonist moneylender has only a mercenary interest – he uses her to care for a baby left on his doorstep by one of the many prostitutes he frequents) puts a spell of seduction on Clemente by wiping herself with her underpants and soaking them in a pitcher of drinking water. She then serves a glass of water to Clemente who drinks it down with gusto, unaware of its magic charms. It works, almost. Clemente is under her spell, but remains resistant to her sexual entreaties, preoccupied with finding the *puta de madre* of the baby left in his care. It should be noted that the baby steals every scene in which it appears on screen - or off - when all you hear is its crying and all you can think is “take care of that baby!”

### COMPETENCIA CARIBENA

A puertoriccan film, *Yesterday is Here*, written and directed by Santurce native Alfonso Lozada scored well on my list, although Lillian found it wanting and voted with her feet, leaving before the film had ended. *Yesterday is Here* was filmed in New York and tells the story of Thomas, a young man whose immigrant parents left him a considerable inheritance. Thomas is being evicted from his Losida fifth floor walkup apartment because he has squandered that inheritance. In his desperation, he arranges with a pair of menacing puertoriccan hoodlums to drive a “package” from New York City, upstate to Pougkeepsie. The delivery includes an old German eccentric and his young daughter, lover, caretaker – their relationship is not clearly defined – along with the “package”. As they drive north in a blinding snowstorm, it turns out that they are headed for Buffalo, not Poukeepsie. As native New Yorkers familiar with the upstate geography, Lillian and I know that Buffalo is almost six hours west of Poukeepsie and the road they are on will never get them to Buffalo. We're right, but not for reasons of geography. Confusion ensues, as if the map were being read upside down. In the middle of an upstate forest the car crashes, the passengers escape, the car and the “package” are engulfed in flames, the trio stumbles through the snowy woods and end up in a motel room. How? Where? We're not sure. Lillian leaves before she can find out. The website for the film says this is “a story about the absence of ambition, fear of change, consequences of actions, silence of regret and the opportunities of risk.” I stayed to the end. I recognized absence, fear,

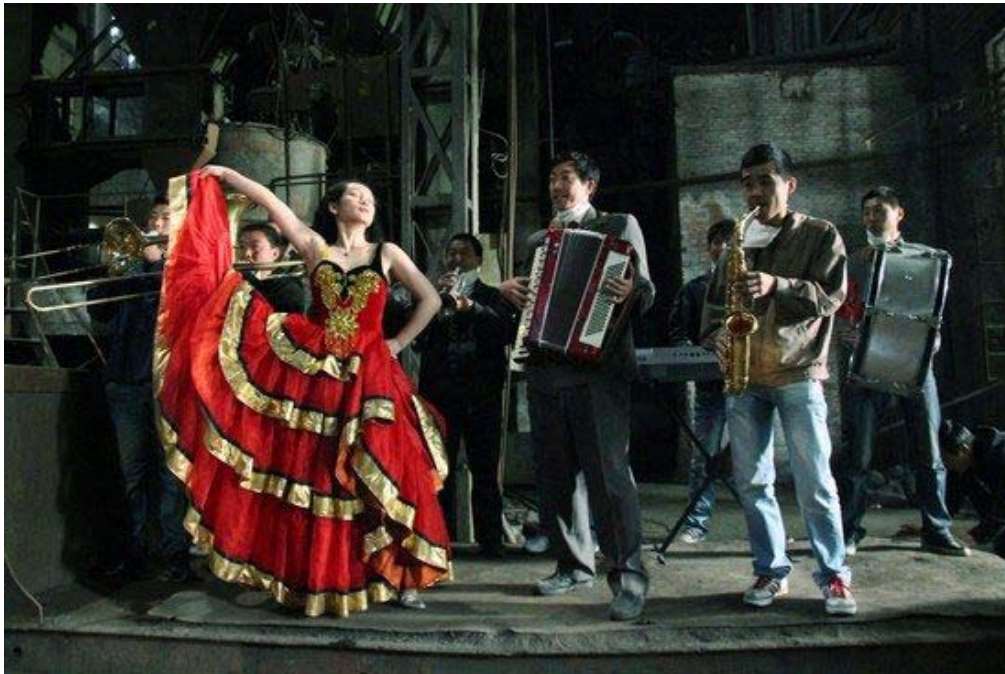
actions, regret and risk. “So, what happened,” Lillian asks me later in the lobby. “Well,” I tell her, “Thomas ended up in the motel room doorway, looking out, trying to figure out if he was in Buffalo, or not.” He wasn’t.



*Yesterday is Here*, Puerto Rico and USA, script and direction: Alfonso Lozado, Intangible Badge Studios, 2011.

## MUESTRA DE CINE MUNDIAL

*The film that scored highest on Lillian's list was the Piano in a Factory (Gang de qin) a Chinese movie directed by Zhang Meng. The story depicts a period two decades ago of social, economic and political upheaval, when many Chinese state-owned factories were closed and workers lost jobs on an unprecedented scale. Set in the industrial northern province of Liaoning in the early 1990s, the movie is a whimsical tale about former steelworker Guilin, a father whose life goes upside down when his estranged wife reappears, asks for a divorce and wants custody of their daughter Xiao Juan. The girl announces that she will live with the parent who is able to provide her with a piano, an easy task for the mother who is a successful owner of a shady pharmaceutical business. Guilin, on the other hand, makes a hardscabble living playing the accordion for parties, festivals and weddings. First Guilin makes a pretend piano for Xia Juan from a piece of wood and a stack of books and he tells her to play and play "from the heart." This works until the mother shows up and takes Xia Juan away. Guilin then attempts to steal a piano, and in a series of comic missteps ends up in jail. Finally he recruits his girlfriend and a group of friends, also former steelworkers, to commandeer their abandoned steel factory to construct a piano from scratch, using scraps and tools that have been left behind. Guilin finds a Russian textbook on piano manufacture and enlists a Russian speaking engineer friend to draw up the plans. The work crew diligently follows instructions, using steel and wire for all parts of the piano, except the keys – made from Majohng tiles and the strikers – made from the soles of old felt shoes. When finished, the piano is a one-ton sculptural masterpiece. When played it sounds like a tin box. Never the less they use the piano to play tango and flamenco music with great energy and we are treated to musical numbers with the Chinese cast in full Andalusian costume. "Ole!"*



*The Piano in a Factory*, China, script and direction: Zhang Meng, Etiole Studios, 2010.

The film which scored highest on my list was acclaimed director Bella Tarr's 146 minute long, Hungarian masterpiece, *The Turin Horse*. Of all the films in the Festival de Cine, this is the one which deserves the designation cinema, as opposed to film, by which I mean that film aspires to the Hollywood tradition of movie making and story telling, while cinema attempts to use the tools and techniques of movies to create high art. A sub-genre of international high-art cinema is something called by the critics, "Slow Cinema," a form of austere minimalist cinema which has developed internationally over the past ten years. Bella Tarr is ranked with directors such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Chantal Akerman, Miklos Jansco and Andrei Tarkovsky. Slow Cinema celebrates the passage of time by adhering to the depiction of real events in real time such that time becomes the most important element in the story. This is doubly true in *The Turin Horse*, which takes place over a period of six days, starting on 3rd January, 1889. Obviously it does not take six days to see this movie, but many of the events of the story, trivial in the importance – heating water to boil potatoes; dressing, undressing and dressing again against the winter's cold, inside a stone cottage; going out into the eye of the "malocchio" wind to fetch two buckets of water; drinking two shots of brandy to start the morning – are performed and depicted in real time, all the time it takes to complete these tasks. These same events are repeated for each of the days of the movie, except on the final day, when the routine is broken. The protagonist goes to the well dressed only in long underwear and a hastily donned coat and discovers that the well has gone dry, having been cursed by a band of gypsies whom he refused a drink of water from that well. Later, he drinks three shots of brandy, the last straight from the bottle. The fire in the stove having gone out, cannot be relit, also because of the malocchio Gypsy curse. We witness a heart-wrenching scene where the protagonist and his daughter have their last meal together. This scene comes as if directly from Van Gogh's painting of "The Potato Eaters" about which Van Gogh said: "You see, I really have wanted to make it so that people get the idea that these folk, who are eating their potatoes by the light of their little lamp, have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labor and — that they have thus honestly earned their food. I wanted it to give the idea of a wholly different way of life from ours as civilized people. So I certainly don't want everyone just to admire it or approve of it without knowing why." And so it is with Bella Tarr. We need to have spent these hours watching the small details of everyday life, in real time, to appreciate the horror and the loss that has descended on them. Now the light has gone out and the potatoes are cold. Tarr says, "The daily repetition of the same routine makes it possible to show that something is wrong with their world. It's very simple and pure... I can just say it's quite heavy and I don't know what is coming, but I can see something that is very close – the end." We've seen it too, and the depiction is filled with chiaroscuro, character and force, every bit as masterful as *De Aardappeleters* as painted by Van Gogh.



*De Aardappeleters*, 1885, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) Oil on Canvas, 82 X 114 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam