Mickey and Mallory: The film shows them doing the most horrible things, but it does so excitingly if not beautifully. Murder is horrible but we sometimes gape with pleasure when we see it. Some of the situations in the film (Mallory killing her pump (icy) because he was too easy and gave her the worst head she's ever had in her life; Robert Duvall's eagerly becoming a killer) elicit the same kind of nervous laughter as do films such as Reservoir Dogs and Blue Velvet. Yet, in order to engage with more interest in representing the culling of the old order than in imagining the construction of new and blander ones.

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There was a curious tendency towards the exotic impulse: advertising copy that offered cinema from "far away lands"; press conferences that were heavy on atmosphere; music walking through air purgative with the smell of sensuous; but very short on substance; program notes that evoked "caravans and coquilles and sun-tanned flesh"; introductions to films that invoked a colonial legacy (Neil Cowan introducing the film Bollywood to the audience as "the jewel in the crown" of the program). Then there was an inexplicable lack of work from women filmmakers—or the twenty-three directors represented, just two were women—an embarrassing ratio given the number of women now producing exciting new work in India. And ultimately there was nothing particular exciting about the work presented. This was surely not the best that India has to offer. I do believe the programmers, though, when they say they choose "the very best films we could find." The question is a matter of who was doing the looking.

What the India Film festival did offer, as programmed, was a representative sampling of the types or genres of work that are now being produced in India. Separated into three rather broad categories, there was the commercial, mainstream cinema as seen in the work of Mani Ratnam, the independent art cinema, as in Goutam Ghose (The King) or Adoor Gopalakrishnan (Swayam; and finally the independent documentary scene, the best known exponent of which is probably Anand Patwardhan (Father, Sun, and the Holy War).

On the commercial front, for the past couple of decades India has been leading the world in film production, with the commercial film still reclaiming an average of eight hundred films a year. Consider that, on any one day, a film star in the...
commercial film industry will go from a moribund stage for one film, to an afternoon shoot for another, and a night shoot for the third. The next day will see a similar schedule for a completely different set of films. Commercial films have become the normative of Indian popular culture, both in India and in diasporic Indian communities from Nairobi to Frankfurt. Bombay, centre of Hindi production, is still the centre of the commercial film industry in spite of the fact that films are now being made in all the major languages used in the country, and the southern states, including Tamil Nadu, produce the largest number of films.

It is a credit to the programmers of the festival that, in a field dominated by Hindi production, they should choose to focus on the work of the prolific and accomplished Tamil filmmaker Prabhu Deva.

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The independent cinema—the art house cinema circuit—is, as in the independent arena anywhere, an attempt to provide an alternative, in this case, to the dominant “song-and-dance” film. Raising its inspirations from the auteur school of filmmaking to a social-realistic imperative, the films are seen as a site both for formal experimentation and for social critique, a cinema of social significance and artistic sincerity. In her recent book, National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1957-1987, Sunila S. Chackravarty says of the “new cinema” that it has an interest in narrative, “realist; mise-en-scène” psychological portrayal of character, the “motivated” use of songs and dances and when required by the content of the film, explicit shock tactics of sexual violence, and a dissonance with the workings of the Indian political/social system. She also notes that “one of the ironies of India’s new cinema is that while the filmmakers belong for the most part, to a middle-class English educated elite, the audience they wish to reach is rural and/or urban working class.” While there was a strong showing of independent work in terms of numbers at the festival, the selection was a mixed bag which worked with varying degrees of success. Gautam Ghose, for instance, whose exquisite Boomerang on the River Padma screened at last year’s festival, disappeared with this year’s entry Paatajali (The Rite) despite the presence of a renowned trio of actors: the talented, Hopkinsian duo of Shabana Azmi and Om Puri, here with Indian heartthrob, Shashikumar Sahu. Azmi plays a cleaning woman, a widow who has the misfortune of being the mother of a local gang (Om Puri). Her teenage son, Sona—country naiveo personified—spends his days flying his kite above the grey smog of the airless new town. Things get complicated when, as Sona gets drawn into the gang’s activities, a new police inspector (Shasikumar Sahu) comes into town determined to clean it up and a swarm of politicians get caught up in the resultant machinations. As with Boomerang, Ghose’s film works best in its character study, in the early part of the film as it focuses on the lives of the widow and her son and the small defeats and victories of their lives.

Unfortunately, a third of the way through, the film changes its scope, attempts a satirization of small-town bureaucracy and gets mired in a melodramatic tangle that never quite sorts itself out.

On the other hand, (Rachel Grenier’s) Buddhapada Dugpa’s film, is eminently more satisfying. Again working within the premises of a rural/urban dichotomy, Character is a sensitive, affecting story of a handcrafter in rural Bengal Lasker, in the best rural tradition, (see Sinima, above) is a simple, honest, naive man. He is the descendant of generations of handcrafters who catch rustic birds in the forests of Bengal to sell in Calcutta markets. Deeply affected by the death of his only child who bared a dead tree to bear “buddha tree’ the day before he died, Lasker begins setting free more birds than he sells and his love and more attached to the birds he is supposed to capture. Faced with impoverishment and unable to understand his preoccupation with birds, his wife begins an affair with a motorcycle-driving womanman and eventually leaves Lasker. Alone, he begins to retreat into his world of birds until, in the final ethereal scene, he is enveloped by his family of birds. Bear that the blend of lyricism and realism of the best of the poetic realist tradition. Shots are languid, the lighting moody, there’s lots of evocative play with light and shadow.

Other films were a great deal less sentimental or nostalgic in their depictions of rural life, opting instead for depictions of lives of casual and often dehumanized brutality, portraits of the dark undercurrents that permeate village life. K. P. San’s (Ilavazha Nilavu Leaves and Thorns) is a case in point, though it suffered a great deal from its overwhelming earnestness. San gets points for subject matter: an examination of the oppressive patriarchal life of a small village. Like Ghose, his strength lies in capturing the small details of village life and in the details of character. Using the beautiful Kerala landscape as a backdrop, the film focuses on four young women who work in the same weaving centre. Close friends, they have their small rebellions against the relentless version of the world they inhabit: sabotaging a potential arranged marriage, fighting back at the sexual harassment by local laharakus. But as Sani shows, it the traditions of patriarchy are so ingrained and so pervasive that the women are completely complicit in it. One of the women goes through with her arranged marriage, is abused and kills herself. Outraged by the village for acts of petty rebellion, two others are also driven to suicide. There is obviously an issue at stake here, and there is a story to tell, but the sheer relentlessness of the message makes it difficult to respond to the film. San’s attempt to sideline the film by imposing a code that has the men go through an attack of remorse is ultimately unconvincing. Assuming that systemic oppression is guilt in the perpetrators is simplistic on one end of the scale, optimistic on the other.

Much more nuanced and far more interesting is Tiodor Gospodinov’s Servile, winner of the international critics’ prize at the International Film Festival of India. Gospodinov’s earlier film The Wall: a poignant tale of a romance between an imprisoned writer and a woman heard but never seen on the other side of a wall, was screened at the 2000 Toronto Festival. Set in a small village in Kelava, Servile is a study in character, character shaped to a large part by caste, economic and power structures. Tommi is a migrant living out his father’s existence, until he is forced into becoming the godfather for a local landlord—a man given to drunken rages and extreme physical brutality, including the continued rape of Tommi’s wife. When things look like they cannot get any worse, the landlord gets Tommi involved in a plot to kill the landlord’s own wife and uses him to help in what is ultimately a botched escape. Servile is a fascinating film on a number of levels. It is an abysmal look at the hierarchical dynamics of village life and at the development of power relationships. Particularly interesting is its focus on a pro- tagonist who is alternately repulsive and pathetic, train as the abuse escalates, and his own life becomes more and more fraught with danger, Tommi seems to get increasingly attached to the woman he serves, sympathetically grateful for the small kindnesses offered him. Among other things, this dynamic makes for an inter- esting metaphor for colonial relationships.

Speaking of colonial relationships and another take on the rural/urban dichotomy. As a preface to Dev Benegal’s English, August, I would like to offer two quotations. The first one is from Mahboob Maraj, who, in a commentary on Harshad Satish and My Bengali/Ash (Laurette, Apr/May 1986), says, “New Indian literature best describes the way the Asian community is incor- porated within contemporary culture by Asian intellectuals who have been launched by the British university system.” The sec- ond is a quotation from the essay by Utpalana Chatterjee on which the film was based. The speaker is a character in the novel named Sathe, a political cartoonist. In the novel he is a sarcastic voice of reason: in the film, however, he comes across as being something of a cynical buffoon. Sathe describes a cartoon he is drawing, which shows a man sitting at a typewriter with the Statue of Liberty in the distance. “I wanted to suggest an Indian writer writing about India, after having spent many years abroad, or living there. There are hundreds of them—well, if not hundreds, at least twenty-five. I end them in the fall of 1920 with one mixed-up culture and writing about another, what kind of audi- ence are they aiming at? That’s why their India is just not real, a place of fantasy, or of confused metaphysics, a sub-continuent of puns. All their Indians are caricatures. Why is that. Because

Leaves and Thorns. Directed by K. P. San.
The most prominent casualty at the Jewish Community Centre is the Leah Posluns Theatre, whose entire 1994-95 season has been axed. The theatre, formerly designated as North York’s official theatre, has been shut down indefinitely for the first time in at least 17 years.

The main reason is that ICC directors have spent a $2.4 million endowment fund set up for the theatre to pay the operating costs of the centre. Bernie Ghet, president of the Jewish Federation, which is trying to sort out the centre’s financial situation, says that without this support, the theatre has now become a serious financial burden. ‘... Sources say staff at the Leah Posluns Theatre are outraged at what has happened. They claim the theatre has always been solvent, and the endowment fund—capital raised or donated by businessman Wilfred Posluns—should never have been touched.

(Henry Miekiewicz, Toronto Star, August 9, 1994)