

ART«»ENTERTAINMENT

FILM

Partisan critics get bad reviews

By Valerie Ellis

The old adage, if you can't say something good don't say anything at all—an all too prevalent attitude among critics of independent and left artistic work—got the prize for most-favorite whipping boy among the film and videomakers, critics and media professionals at the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC) conference held in Minneapolis this summer.

"I think that this belief, almost ideology and certainly dogmatism, has had a terrible effect on criticism for independent film," commented B. Ruby Rich, *Village Voice* critic and film program director at the New York State Council on the Arts. "This kind of criticism has very little effect because I don't know what reader in his right mind would believe a critic who never says anything bad."

The lack of rigorous criticism is at least a partial explanation for the small audiences at showings of independently produced films and video and for the economic troubles facing distributors of these works. This critical vacuum does little to generate new audiences. But the problem really goes deeper: a lot of bad work passes for good primarily because it isn't getting seriously reviewed.

"What's keeping these movies in the incubator," said *Village Voice* critic Carrie Rickey, "is that while most of us are cultural democrats we are aesthetic plutocrats. We believe in a trickle-down theory of aesthetics. Any ideas in mass culture come from the intellectual elite." The notion that the masses can't take what the avant-garde dishes out may not be as accurate as we thought, she suggested. Being outside the mainstream creates a kind of safe intellectual haven where the criticism that goes along with commerce doesn't exist, but neither does the chance to reach the general public.

Critics' snow-blindness.

But the mere existence of critics and criticism for independently produced work wouldn't solve the problem of defining what makes "good," "bad" or "significant" film and video. Just as important is whether or not a critic has the background, awareness and sensitivity about the unfamiliar cultures and traditions that many independent works come out of.

Rich identified "snow-blindness" as a central mistake critics make. They can't see anything but white. "Although it's not as big a problem as it once was," she said, "it still exists. It's a very deep aesthetic problem because they [critics] can't in fact see what's there and, even worse, they don't know that they can't see." This problem applies not only to non-white and Third

World film and video but also to works made by feminists, lesbians and gay men.

Rickey suggested that the lack of critical writing on non-white works is partially the result of poor packaging. "These films are not packaged in a way that I can review them for an audience," she said. "It's very difficult to get editors to take reviews of just one black film and one that isn't showing enough times. There's no opportunity or context to review work. We need to be able to create trends, excitement, because that's what good journalism is all about."

Denise Oliver, executive director of the Black Filmmaker

Foundation, said the problem goes beyond poor packaging. "Critics don't review independent films made by non-whites at all.... They talk about Third World films, but I haven't met more than two American critics who've seen more than 10 black films when there's a body of work that now exceeds 120. I've never read any hard-hitting criticism of black film in America; I've only seen this in Europe."

Money talks.

Money was, of course, the main topic at NAMAC, but the critics on hand tackled the subject in a different way from others. Rich explored the connection between criticism and distribution. She argued that the link between the two should be obvious and cited a recent example from the *Village Voice* to make her point. Several months ago, she and J. Hoberman did a front-page spread for that paper on Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman. "By 10 a.m. the next morning," she said, "Chantal Akerman received a call from a distributor who hadn't picked up her films for 10

years and within 24 hours Film Forum had been called by *New York* magazine and *Newsweek* requesting press screenings of the film."

Linking criticism and distribution is essential, Rich noted, therefore artists need to learn how to deal with critics (what

their deadlines are, limitations in what they can do, etc.) in order to get their work reviewed. Films need to be written about and read about by a wide audience in order to "live and breathe," she said.

Valerie Ellis is a film critic in Minneapolis.



Film critic B. Ruby Rich called reviewers who offer only praise for independent movies dogmatists.

FOLK MUSIC

Old, new songs in Nicaragua

By Gregory Landau

When I was a year old, in 1956, Pete Seeger slept on a couch in my parents' apartment in Madison, Wis., after he had sung a benefit performance for the Labor Youth League (LYL). I admit that I do not remember the concert, but I learned his performance provoked the university to suspend the LYL for "violating

the music monopoly" held by an official campus music group. Seeger, it seemed, had sung for more minutes than he had talked and therefore his performance was officially declared music, and since the LYL was a political organization, that meant it had violated the rules.

In Managua 27 years later, Seeger performed many of the same songs at the *Festival de la Nueva Cancion* (New Song Festival). At

63, he projected the image of an enthusiastic adolescent, singing and talking his way through the history of a musical movement that few people know about.

"Throughout history, many peoples have sung songs of struggle, but one might say that the New Song Movement in the U.S. began about 43 years ago," he explained, "when a young man named Woody Guthrie came to New York from Oklahoma. There he met a man who was singing songs to organize black and white farmworkers in the South. His name was Lee Hays. I had just dropped out of Harvard and together we formed the Almanac Singers, and we sang for unions all over the country."

I translated for Seeger as he traveled through Nicaragua meeting musicians and chatting with workers who were discussing whether they were moving too slowly or too quickly toward socialism.

During his performance at the New Song Festival, the stage that floats on Managua's volcanic lake actually began to rock from the thunderous applause. With his gringo Spanish and plinking banjo, Seeger communicated a message that Nicaraguans wanted so much to hear: that the people of the U.S. and Nicaragua can be brought closer by methods such as music, despite the Reagan administration's undeclared war.

Carlos Mejia Godoy, Nicaragua's most popular singer, who combines traditional song forms with revolutionary messages and folk humor, embraced Pete after hearing Seeger sing his songs.

The audience grew very quiet as Pete sang "Cristo Ya Nacio En Palacaquina," a modern Christmas carol written by Godoy, in his aging but still sweet and compelling voice.

Seeger then sang "If I Had a Hammer," "Where Have All the

Flowers Gone" and "We Shall Overcome." The audience listened and then sang along. Seeger explained how each song arose. "Lee Hays came to me with the lyrics of a song but he didn't have a melody—a kind of gospel type of lyrics, since few words change in each verse. Our original recording of 'If I Had a Hammer' became a collector's item, which means that only collectors were able to buy it.

"I didn't like 'Where Have All the Flowers Gone' when I first wrote it. I added an Irish melody to lyrics based on a Ukrainian song and then I sang it at a university and the president of the local folk club heard it and showed it to the Kingston Trio, who then recorded it and made it famous. Then I realized it was a good song.

"And 'We Shall Overcome' was taught to a white woman by tobacco workers in the South in 1945," he said. "She showed it to me and we published it in *Sing Out* magazine in 1947. In 1960 a young white man brought it back to the South and within three months it had become the hymn of the civil rights movement."

As Seeger talked and listened, on and off stage, he offered a sense of optimism to the Nicaraguans, showing them how many Americans feel.

"The defeat of American forces in Vietnam was a defeat for the Pentagon," he declared, "not for the American people, just as the defeat of the CIA-backed invasion of Nicaragua will be a victory not only for the peoples of Latin America, but for the American people as well. As singers we have to make people aware of the situation and try to stop these CIA criminals." Then he began to pick his banjo.

Gregory Landau is the lead guitarist for Grupo Mancotal, a Nicaraguan band.



Pete Seeger picked and sang his way through Nicaragua, telling people that many Americans oppose Reagan's policies.

INPRINT

The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat

By Ryszard Kapuscinski

Translated by William R. Brand and Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 164 pp., \$12.95

By Pat Aufderheide

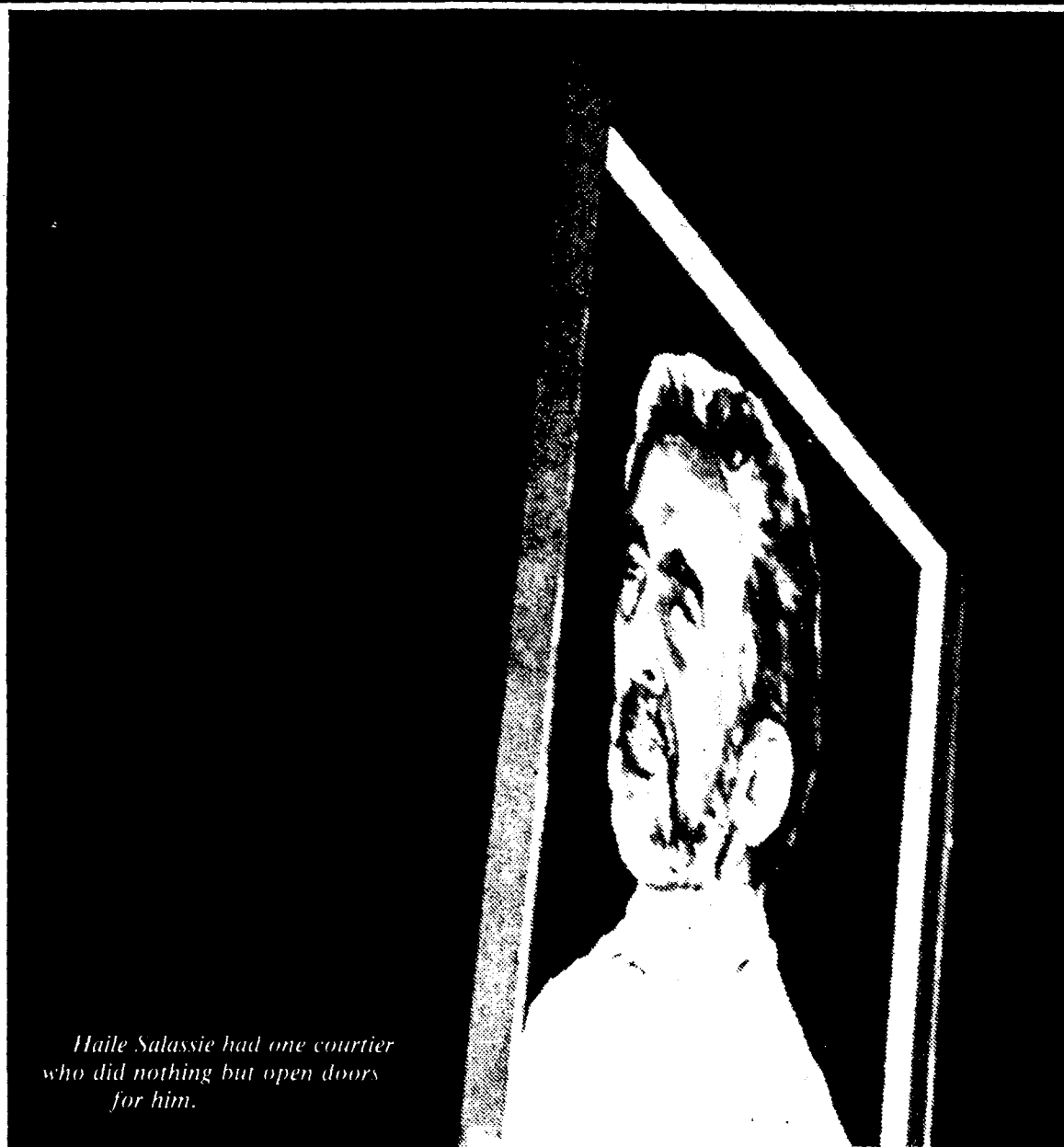
When Ethiopian army officers finally brought an end to the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuscinski already was an old hand on the scene. Not only had he previously covered Ethiopia for the Polish Press Agency, he had travelled throughout the Third World for decades, always getting the stories behind the story.

This time, he had a rare opportunity—to interview the courtiers of an instant *ancien regime*. *The Emperor*, which appeared in Poland in 1978, is the result.

Avidly read all over Poland, it was seen as an allegory to Polish politics—a cautionary tale for dictators. But it's much more than that. It is an insider's view of hierarchical society, of the terms of authoritarian power, of the cost of underdevelopment and of the origins of revolution. There are insights here about authoritarian stratagems of multinational corporations, for instance, and rich material for anyone looking to understand the roots of Central American peasant revolt and military coups. For those who study state formation—the growth of bureaucracies and the development of elite factions around centralized power—it's a riotously colorful case study.

All of this goes without even mentioning the entertainment value of scenes from a history that keeps threatening to turn into a madly magical realist novel.

The glory days of Haile Selassie's court were structured around some simple axioms. The emperor cultivated loyalty first and last, and discouraged competence. As one courtier puts it, "The King of Kings preferred bad ministers....he liked to appear in a favorable light by contrast." He expected and even en-



Haile Selassie had one courtier who did nothing but open doors for him.

ETHIOPIA

All the emperor's men

couraged corruption among his minions—it was the spoils of loyalty.

Minister of pillows.

One official had nothing more to do than to open the door at just the right time for the emperor. Another's function was to bow distinctively to signal the end of a reception hour (they called him the emperor's cuckoo clock at court). Still another was in charge of 52 different-sized pillows to slip under the emperor's feet on different-sized thrones, so that his feet would never touch the floor. The emperor knew the value of appearance, and the subversive power of humor—he forbade jokes at court.

When things began to fall apart, they did so in ways that betrayed the terms of the old order. A 1960 coup, led by foreign-educated officials embarrassed by the stagnancy of Ethiopian economy and society, failed. But when, prompted by the warning sign of the coup, the emperor attempted to add economic development to his imperial agenda, he planted the seeds of his own fall. His development projects fostered a new group of technicians: the opening of a university produced dissident students; in order to quell disorder, the army size was increased.

The old terms of power clashed with the new. Officials sabotaged the development reforms, and generals absconded with the army budget—the spoils of loyalty, after all. The emperor's carefully cultivated "nest of mediocrity" at court divided into three

equally ineffective factions arguing over how to restore order: "talkers," who wanted to negotiate; "jailers," who wanted repression; and the biggest group, "floaters," who just wanted to go with the flow.

The crisis wasn't precipitated by oppression—that had been around a long, long time. As the emperor himself explained to over-greedy tax collectors, a poor person can tolerate immense burdens, but will not stomach a sudden new one. He feels, one courtier recalls, that "you have trampled what remains of his already strangled dignity, taken him for an idiot who doesn't see, feel or understand. A man doesn't seize an ax in defense of his wallet, but in defense of his dignity."

That's what happened when the army revolted, too, over the issue of funerals. The officers had a right to be buried, but bodies of common soldiers were abandoned to vultures, and as combat deaths increased, that became intolerable.

Outraged students.

The outrage of the oppressed was matched by demands from the newly favored, not just students but ambitious young officers. Joining them were frustrated clerks and technicians, who the old courtiers despised.

"Who destroyed our empire?" rants one. "Neither those who had too much, nor those who had nothing, but those who had a bit."

These reminiscences unself-consciously present the world-

"A man does not seize an ax in defense of his wallet, but in defense of his dignity," Selassie said before his fall.

view of those who serve established power. The royal purse-bearer—someone who has had daily experience with royal non-payment of debt to the working poor—has contempt for the masses: "Wherever His Majesty went, the people showed their uncontrolled, insatiable greed."

Another courtier blames foreign journalists—who can never be incorporated into the web of loyalty—for fomenting trouble by reporting on famine. "Death from hunger had existed in our empire for hundreds of years, an everyday, natural thing," he protests. After all, he says, "it is not bad for national order and a sense of national humility that the subjects be rendered skinnier, thinned down a bit."

These people cannot imagine change without total destruction, and they can't see why any change was necessary. "Our empire had existed for hundreds,

even thousands of years, without any noticeable development. All the while its leaders were respected, venerated, worshipped."

Creative quoting.

The voices are eloquent, even elegant and sometimes spiced with an elegant wit. But are they authentic? Just how much has this journalist, whose own eloquence is manifest in introductions and asides, crafted his own style and even his own political insights into their remarks? There is a pervasive poetry to everyone's commentary, and a shared tendency to use certain stylistic forms—metonymy of body parts, for instance.

There is also a savage irony in their remarks that echoes his style. One man, describing the rising tide of informers, says that people learned to speak in code, and that "we simple and uneducated folk suddenly became a bilingual nation."

But suppose the journalist has refined his speakers' comments into a condensed, more poetic form. The voices still present a distinctive perspective, and what they have to tell us is well worth thinking about.

The journalist's art and craft transform these reminiscences into unforgettable, movie-like scenes—scenes that encourage one to generalize from Joan Didion's recent perception that Garcia Marquez' "magical realism" is actually social realism. For instance, at one point Kapuscinski leaves an opulent banquet for foreign dignitaries. Walking out to the back of the palace, he hears the sound of "shifting, murmuring, squishing, sighing and smacking" rising and falling with the ends of course in an interminable meal. It is the sound of massed beggars feeding on scraps that waiters relay to them.

Or consider this example of managing dissent with old-style ritual: after student unrest, one prince stages a pro-emperor student demonstration, dressing police up as students. Real students counterdemonstrate, a student is killed and a huge funeral turns into another anti-emperor demonstration. More deaths and massive arrests result, and the emperor closes the university for a year—"thus saving the lives of many young people," says a courtier gratefully.

Accidents of history.

The last days of empire have a macabre humor. Courtiers become afraid to go home, since army officers are picking them off one by one. They abandon their former concern for rank and status, bedding down helter-skelter in the palace, squabbling over curtains they tear down to use for blankets. In the mornings they must all perform calisthenics, which the emperor has ordered and even imported Swedish physicians to conduct. The emperor retreats finally to his office, where military officers show up to hunt for hidden wealth. They lift up the Persian carpet to reveal another, green carpet beneath it composed of rolls of dollar bills.

These are the implausible realities of a way of life that, once it was over, seemed fabulous even to its own participants. "Wasn't it just yesterday?" says one. "Yesterday, but a century ago. In this city, but on a planet that is now far away." Maybe that once-upon-a-time quality to the reminiscences is no artistic recreation. It may legitimately belong to the courtiers themselves, who are now accidents of history. ■

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