

film

The making of Brazil's 'Pixote'

Below are excerpts from an interview with Hector Babenco, director of the film "Pixote." The interview was conducted by Maria Thereza Alves.

Obviously you made "Pixote" because you were angry at the situation of the poor children not only in Brazil, but in many other Latin American cities. What prompted you to make the film?

Many people are tired of seeing these children that conglomerate in cities such as Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Poor kids beg and we either close the car window or we give them some money so that we will be in peace with our conscience. We never question where they go at night, or with whom they live, or in what conditions they live. We don't ask why they are in this condition,

and what will become of them when they grow up. Much less do we ask what the child thinks of us, what he thinks of himself and what does he want to be when he grows up. These were the reasons I was motivated.

What kind of experience was it to work with the kids in "Pixote"?

These kids from the slums compared to kids from middle-class neighborhoods are mentally blocked. Even their bodies are closed off to the world; their bodies are hard and aggressive, and they deliberately make themselves insensitive.

But as soon as you show that you have confidence in them and what they can do, then they can free themselves from this process. But they also realize that to be something will depend on them and not on promises that you make.

The church in Brazil and other Latin American countries is moving to a more radical and progressive involvement with the people. Has this in any way affected poor people, especially children like those in your film?

Without a doubt the progressive movement within the church is one of the most important phenomena in Brazil. The church is doing work of great importance. It is the type of work that is not linked to the future, but with the present. The church, especially in Sao Paulo, has transformed itself from a temple of god down to a place of assistance of the people. Where people once had gone for miracles, they now go to deal more directly with their problems.

How has the "democratic opening," begun by the Brazil government in 1979,

affected the film industry?

Brazil has changed. My film had no censorship cuts done, a film which five years ago was impossible to think even of making. I don't know how good President Jimmy Carter's government was for the U.S., but for Brazil it was good. It obliged the government to take certain steps regarding the rights of the citizens on liberty and freedom to create. . . . [At the same time, there have been continuing actions against the press, and 23 journalists have been indicted since 1979 under the National Security Law.]

How has the U.S. film industry affected Brazilian films?

The U.S. has monopolized the film industry for 50 years. It is more than a structure to finance their films, but also to impose the advantages of "American happiness" on the whole world. About 95% of the films in the last two or three years are about good winning out over bad. There are moral and political connotations subtly or unsubtly in these films. In this way they have colonized the spectators of the third world.

We can't forget that the first time we learned to read was with American films. Today, we believe that the hero is really in love with his sweetheart when he says "I love you" in English, instead of saying it in Portuguese. But now we are beginning to open the door of the film market in the U.S.

What is the responsibility of the filmmaker in today's society?

I think that filmmakers are all the time more responsible for the society they live in. My responsibility is with the Brazilian public and not the American or European one.

I make films that fit into my critical vision of the world. If it is successful in other markets then that is good, because more people can see my point of view. And if it's a commercial success then it will ensure the making of other films.

'Pixote': Brazilian society in focus

"PIXOTE"

A Brazilian film directed by Hector Babenco
Starring Fernando Ramos da Silva as "Pixote"

By MARIA THEREZA ALVES

"Pixote" is a powerful film exploring the life of a 10-year-old thief who is just one of 3 million poor children in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil.

The film is a damning indictment of the corruption of Brazilian society, and a compassionate exploration of the emotional needs of the poor, young thieves known as "pivetes." It opens with a police round-up of the pivetes, and follows their lives in

the reformatory and on the streets, a not-always-pleasant movie laying bare the reality of violence, death, rape, corruption, and bribery that is taught to the children at a young age.

But it is also a film of compassion, a demonstration of the children's hunger for affection and love as they attempt to keep in touch with their own humanity.

Pivetes are also the scapegoats of Brazilian society. A futile investigation of a crime (many criminals are never apprehended because they bribe the officers) will end with the pivete as the perpetrator. They are quickly eliminated, so that society can feel assured the po-

lice are efficient. Criminals use them to carry out dangerous tasks, since besides a brief imprisonment in the reformatory (or sometimes death), nothing much will happen to them legally until they are 18.

Life in the reformatory, however, is also rough. One of the boys who had been a friend of Pixote, for example, is gang-raped in the reformatory and two other friends are beaten and tortured to death by the police. When several pivetes plan an escape, one handicapped boy refuses to leave with them because, as he points out, for him it is better inside the reformatory than out in the world, where he would not only be handicapped

but also homeless.

Dispersed throughout the film are sharp insights and attacks against bourgeois Brazilian society, along with sympathetic portrayals of prostitutes and homosexuals. Two scenes that deal with the church illustrate the role that religion plays in the lives of poor people. Babenco clearly points out that religion and the church have failed miserably to address social conditions.

By the end of the movie one is deeply involved with the lives of these children—left wondering what will become of Pixote and his friends and angered at bourgeois society for the mutilation of their lives.