

Documentaries and semi-documentaries at the San Francisco film festival

The camera never lies ...

David Walsh
21 May 1998

The conception perhaps still exists in some circles that the making of a documentary, or nonfiction film is a more honorable undertaking than the creation of a fictional one. The former has about it the respectable and weighty aura of fact. Furthermore, a documentary is nearly always assumed to be, to one degree or another, socially progressive. There is something a little frivolous, even illicit, about the 'merely' fictional film. This, unfortunately, has the dual effect of hindering some from appreciating genuinely penetrating and complex imaginative work and of encouraging others to adopt an indiscriminate cult-like attitude toward all forms of fictional cinema merely on the grounds of its slightly disreputable status.

Does a similar problem arise in the consideration of other art forms? Does the documentary theatrical piece have a corresponding relationship to the drama, or the nonfiction prose work to the novel? It doesn't seem so. Prose and drama are assumed to be the work of the imagination, but a camera, a mechanism with a solid objective existence, records or ought to record unvarnished reality, or so the thinking goes.

This last sentiment may indicate, on the one hand, a certain lack of confidence, deserved or otherwise, on the part of sections of the general public in creative artists (or perhaps the commercial film industry) and, on the other, a somewhat naive faith in the ability of technical hardware to capture objective reality, but it also contains a grain of truth. It cannot be accidental that these two tendencies--fiction and documentary--have coexisted within cinema as a whole since the days of the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès in the 1890s, and, uneasily or not, within the bodies of work of some of the finest filmmakers.

At the San Francisco film festival I saw 34 feature films, 10 of them nonfiction, and 7 shorts, 4 of them classifiable as documentaries. Of the 10 feature-length documentaries or semi-documentaries, three involved a greater or lesser amount of dramatic reenactment.

One of the most honest nonfiction films, aside from *The Farm: Angola, USA*, which I shall treat separately, was Yamina Benguigui's three-part *Immigrant Memories--The North African Inheritance*. The film recounts the experiences of North African immigrants brought to France in the post-World War II period to work in factories, construction sites, mines and fields.

In the film's first section, men, many of them in their sixties and seventies, tell their stories. The first who speaks sets the tone. It wasn't his fault that he emigrated, he explains, 'it's the economy's. It's poverty's.' Companies like Renault, the automaker, needed cheap labor after the war and they turned to the impoverished populations of France's colonies--Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

A former recruiter notes that his employers preferred to import workers from rural rather than urban areas; presumably they would be less educated, less politically conscious, more manageable. He explains his principal method of selecting suitable recruits for French industry: a

handshake, during which he felt for calluses.

Loneliness and sadness pervaded the lives of the men who left families behind. Moroccan miners lived six in a hut, two in a room. 'There was no life, only work,' one man observes. Another breaks down and cries remembering the coldness and harshness of life. 'They've always humiliated me,' says a third. Until I was 18, another man remarks bitterly, I was an immigrant worker, struggling to get a place to live, an education, to get away on holiday; at 18, and therefore eligible to serve in the army, I was suddenly French.

The film's second section consists of interviews with the women who came later; and the third, with the children of the North African immigrants.

To its credit, the film is not simplistic. The immigrants have at least ambivalent feelings about the country to which they came. One worker explains that he gained a respect for French culture and the right or willingness of the French 'to say 'shit' when they don't like something.' There is a certain level of political sophistication. Even in response to the anti-immigrant measures that began in the late 1970s, with economic contraction and political crisis, another remarks that what he feels is 'not hatred of the French, but of a system.'

French government officials, whether of the Right or the 'Left,' provide their justifications and rationales for what was essentially a trade in human beings with a somewhat more cultured veneer than their counterparts might in the US. But the objective and brutal consequences of their policies shows them to be what they are, the hirelings of large corporations.

Immigrant Memories, inadvertently or not, sheds some interesting light as well on the nature and evolution of bourgeois nationalism. The film makes clear that during the Algerian war for independence the French employers carried on their import of Algerian labor. Their attitude, according to the film's narration, was 'the FLN [the Algerian nationalist movement] is not our problem.' As soon as independence became a reality, the French capitalists signed a labor agreement with the new Ben Bella government.

Most intriguingly, the film points to the role of the Algerian Workers Society, an organization in France apparently set up or encouraged by the Algerian authorities. While indulging in Left rhetoric--the film shows one of its speakers half-heartedly proclaiming 'Long live socialist revolution!' to a meeting of immigrant workers at what appears to be a factory in France--the society was encouraged by the French ruling class because of its ability, in the words of the narrator, to 'control Algerian workers.'

Many of those interviewed, of both the older and younger generations, are understandably concerned with the problem of identity. Are they French? Or are they Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian? Some of the older people are insistent about being buried in their original homeland, others are thoroughly assimilated. One professional woman declares, 'I was a

child of Descartes.' A spirited teenage girl proclaims, 'I am Algerian,' but one has the strong sense that she will never live in that country.

The film stops short of examining certain complex problems. Mention is made of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the French neofascist and anti-immigrant fanatic, but there is no discussion of the economic and political circumstances that have contributed to the growing support for his National Front. Nor is there a single reference to the fate of Algerian nationalism, for example, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

In any event, *Immigrant Memories* provides precisely that, memories of arriving friendless in a strange country, working long hours and living in poverty, all in the service of profit.

Two films about artists

Two documentary films examined the lives of serious artists.

Eisenstein: The Master's House, directed by Marianna Kirejewa and Alexander Iskin, from a screenplay by Naum Kleiman, is an intelligent tribute to the Soviet film director, Sergei Eisenstein, on the hundredth anniversary of his birth and the fiftieth anniversary of his death.

The film traces the critical episodes in Eisenstein's life: a childhood in Riga, where his father--the last person ennobled by the tsar before his fall in 1917--had a lucrative career as an architect; the October Revolution of 1917 and the artistic ferment it set off; Eisenstein's relationship with the famed theater director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, who took him on in 1920 as a student; his first films-- *Strike* and *Potemkin* --and the success they won him; his international travels--to Europe and America--which brought him into contact with film artists of the day--Chaplin, F.W. Murnau, Fritz Lang and Walt Disney, among others; the tragic failure of Eisenstein's American and Mexican projects in the early 1930s; his growing disfavor with the Soviet bureaucracy; the 'triumph' of *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), including the winning of the Stalin Prize; Stalin's fury with his *Ivan the Terrible, Part Two* and the director's last unhappy days.

The film includes some remarkable footage. We see Eisenstein speaking, directing and clowning around. We see, naturally, clips from his films, including the uncompleted Mexican work. We see a short sequence from a Soviet film, clearly made at the height of the Stalinist terror, in which 'workers' are denouncing 'enemies of the people.'

The film's approach to its subject seems even-handed. Its creators are sympathetic to Eisenstein's artistic efforts, while making clear the monstrous role of Stalinism. Trotsky appears in one clip and his banishment is identified as a significant political event.

The tone of the film's narration is a problem. It is unnecessarily sardonic and lapses continually into a sort of cynical familiarity. The first segment, for example, is called 'Papachen's House,' the second, 'Mamachen's House.' At some point after the revolution, the narration tells us, 'Mamachen panics' and comes to get her son. Later, we are told that 'Meyerhold becomes a tyrant like Papa.' What's the point of this?

One can't help feeling that the misplaced irony is too often a substitute for an analysis of difficult issues. A critical evaluation of Eisenstein's aesthetic theories and his films is long overdue. It will not be found in *The Master's House*, despite its many fascinating moments. (See: An appreciation of the life and work of the great Soviet film director Sergei M. Eisenstein)

Charles Mingus: Triumph of the Underdog, directed by Don McGlynn, is a film portrait, apparently the first serious one, of the remarkable jazz bassist, bandleader and composer. McGlynn spent years collecting the archival material, which includes performance footage, unpublished photographs and clips from private interviews. A variety of musicians and musicologists--including John Handy, Dannie Richmond, Wynton Marsalis and Gunther Schuller--comment on Mingus's life and artistic legacy. His two wives contribute what they can to an understanding of this complex figure.

Mingus, born in 1922, apprenticed with figures such as Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton and Charlie Parker before gaining prominence on his own in the 1950s. After more than a decade in which he made his mark as an innovative and adventurous player and composer, Mingus suffered from a decline in his popularity and the popularity of jazz in general. The death of his close collaborator, Eric Dolphy, in 1964 added to his miseries. Mingus's psychological difficulties led to his being institutionalized for a period of time.

In the following decade, Mingus's fortunes took a turn for the better and interest in his music and sales of his records increased dramatically. This artistic revival was cut short when he contracted amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's Disease. Sadly, Mingus died in 1979.

The picture of Mingus that emerges from McGlynn's film is of a difficult, complicated, tortured, extremely serious and thoughtful man, easy neither on himself nor on others. Musically, Mingus lived and breathed within the jazz tradition, but he had also studied, for example, Schönberg and Stravinsky. He made efforts, whether successful or not, to bring various musical forms and traditions together and create something new from them. Gunther Schuller compares Mingus to the American composer Charles Ives.

His own background perhaps encouraged this approach. As Mingus introduces himself at one point, 'I am Charles Mingus. Half black man. Half yellow man. Not even yellow, nor white enough to pass for nothing but black.' He seemed to have no fetish about race or ethnicity. The majority of the musicians interviewed by McGlynn are white. According to his son, on hand for the screening of the film in San Francisco, his father told him, 'You have no color,' just before his death. The overriding concern of Mingus's life was the purity and depth of the music.

More than anything else, *Charles Mingus: Triumph of the Underdog* obliges one to ask: where are the comparable figures today?

Amsterdam Global Village

There are people who film everything in the hope that they will capture truth, as if the latter were an animal that could be snared through a combination of persistence and dumb luck.

Johan van der Keuken's *Amsterdam Global Village* is four hours long, for no apparent reason. The film treats the lives and activities of--among others--a Chechen businessman, a Moroccan courier, an elderly Jewish singer and a Bolivian musician--all living in Amsterdam. The filmmaker apparently wants to make the case that these people are bound together by some necessary and compelling connections. One feels, however, that their lives have simply been placed side by side in the film and the spectator has been left to draw whichever more or less arbitrary conclusions he or she chooses.

Aside from the reality that poverty and historical circumstances have forced many people to take refuge or seek employment in a handful of relatively prosperous countries, such as the Netherlands, it is not clear to me what van der Keuken is trying to say.

A trip to Grozny, in ruins after the Russian army's invasion, and a visit to a Bolivian village--by two of the film's 'protagonists,' respectively--hold one's interest. The highlight of the film is the conversation we witness between the Jewish singer and her son, then a child, about their experiences in Nazi-occupied Holland. The woman--the daughter of a Communist Party member--is still wracked by guilt because, when the Germans came for her, she went into hiding instead of joining her husband, who was already in a camp. She hates to think of him dying alone, pining for her. Her son argues with her, 'What else could you do? We wouldn't be here today if you hadn't made that choice,' and she knows he's right, but her pain is genuine.

Such interesting and even enlightening moments in *Amsterdam Global Village* seem somewhat accidental. Train a camera on any group of people

long enough and something remarkable is likely to happen. Doesn't art involve something more than that?

All in all, the film has no right to be so predictable. For example, this is Amsterdam, so aside from the inevitable picturesque canals, drugs and pornography have to be introduced. And why a thoroughly unenlightening encounter with several members of a rock band? Well, this was 1996 and the musicians were from Sarajevo.

Films about Haiti and Rwanda

The Disappearance of TiSoeur: Haiti After Duvalier, directed and produced by Harriet Hirshorn, is a film about events in Haiti that avoids confronting any difficult questions. It contains remarkable footage of the 1985-86 mass movement that led to the removal--aboard a US military C-130 transport plane--of Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier as Haitian head of state after nearly three decades of bloody rule by the Duvalier family. Popular expectations were great: now would come the real settling of accounts with the dictatorship, the 'dechoukaj'--the uprooting.

This did not take place. The poverty and misery of the Haitian masses worsened under a series of military or military-backed regimes: now there was Duvalierism without Duvalier.

The purpose or at least the effect of Hirshorn's film is to cultivate illusions in Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the populist priest, who won an overwhelming victory in the December 1990 presidential elections, lost power in a military coup on September 30, 1991 and regained his office, thanks to a US military occupation of the island, in September 1994. The film recounts Aristide's political ascendancy and describes him as a 'godly and Christ-like man.' A man, however, who proved to be firmly under the thumb of Washington and whose policies did not make the slightest dent in the oppression of the Haitian people.

The film ends with someone commenting vaguely, 'After all the sacrifices, we hope things will get better.' This is not going to help anyone.

Spirits of the 1000 Hills, a 38-minute documentary about the genocidal conflicts in Rwanda and Zaire, directed by Italian Isabella Sandri, will not be of great value either. The film does convey some of the horror of the situation, in which hundreds of thousands lost their lives, through the testimony of survivors. One woman recounts how she lost seven children to malaria as a refugee in Zaire. 'The only thing a refugee can do is die,' she says. Another woman, who was obliged to go into hiding, calmly describes cutting off her own infected arm to save her life.

Sandri, however, and her colleagues provide no analysis that might aid the spectator in making sense of the events. Not a single reference either to the history of the region, to the economic circumstances under which people were living at the time of the outbreak of violence, or to the maneuvers of the great powers. Whatever the filmmaker's intention, such an approach encourages the notion that the genocide in Africa is either inexplicable or, worse, that it was the product of man's innate and inevitable inhumanity to his fellow man.

Selective memory about the defeat in Chile

The September 1973 military coup in Chile that overthrew the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende was a terrible defeat for the international working class. Tens of thousands of socialists, leftists and militant workers died in front of firing squads or at the hands of CIA-trained torturers.

Contrary to myth, the Allende government was neither 'Marxist' nor socialist, it was a bourgeois regime dominated by Allende's Socialist Party, in alliance with the Communist Party. It defended private property, carried out raids against workers' neighborhoods and did everything in its power to demobilize and politically disarm a combative and radical

working class. In the end the Chilean popular frontists invited the military into the government, thus hastening their own overthrow, as well as the bloody repression that ensued. On the very day of the coup the Italian Stalinist daily paper published a comment by Chilean CP leader Volodia Teitelbaum asserting that the 'vast majority' of the army 'remain loyal to the deep sentiment of their constitutional mission.'

In Patricio Guzmán's *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, the director, a political exile, returns to his native country to screen his pro-Allende film, *The Battle of Chile (1973-79)*, to groups of students. Many of the young people are moved and shaken by this introduction to events about which they obviously have no knowledge. The film also includes interviews with surviving members of Allende's personal bodyguard. His chambermaid tells the interviewer that the late president 'meant the world to me. He was the joy of my life.'

Guzmán explains at one point that 'we are making a film about memory.' But the filmmaker and those he interviews have quite selective memories. Many of them suffered horribly, or lost family members. Unfortunately, one has to be quite brutal about this. The suffering endured cannot be allowed to obscure the fact that it was the Chilean reformists and Stalinists, the forces to whom Guzmán remains oriented, who paved the way for catastrophe.

When the former public relations director of the Popular Unity regime starts waxing poetic and declares, 'It was a noble dream,' with the implication that the Allende regime was a lofty social experiment wasted on fallen humanity, one wants to take drastic measures.

Guzmán is no doubt quite sincere in his views. But these are serious historical issues. Instead of contributing to a revival of a critical and politically-conscious memory, *Chile, Obstinate Memory*, in its own way, strengthens the grip of political and ideological amnesia.

Semi-documentaries

Several films included both documentary and fictional elements.

Father, Son and Holy Torum, by Estonian director Mark Soosaar, recounts a particularly ghastly episode in the history of the 'new Russia.' The film examines the fate of the Khanty people in western Siberia who have been more or less swindled out of their ancestral lands by Russian oil and gas companies.

A couple, Shosho and Tohe, lives deep in the forests, getting by in traditional fashion. Their son, Petja, however, has become the director of the oil and gas companies' department of indigenous peoples, the department 'for fooling people,' as he describes it himself. Three oil companies, including Komsomol Oil, have divided the Khanty families among them. The task of individuals like Petja is to get the families to sign away the rights to their land, for a few hundred dollars. One man in a hospital bed signs his land away, for no payment at all.

A public meeting held to discuss the situation is simply demoralizing. The Khantys themselves, confused and dwindling in numbers, are no match for the companies. 'Bring in better booze,' is all that one man asks.

Shosho and Tohe treat their son as an errand child. They scold him for not visiting more often. They turn to their supreme god, Torum, and pray for deliverance. 'Why do the evil go unpunished?' they ask. 'Let those filthy ones be destroyed!' Meanwhile Petja goes on making deals on his cell-phone. Unfortunately, the generally filthy environment seems to have an impact on the film itself, encouraging at times something of a cynical tone.

Divine Body, the title of Belgian filmmaker Dominique Loreau's film, refers to the body of an automobile, an old black Peugeot, imported into the West African republic of Benin. The car changes hands, in this meditation on culture, progress and tradition, several times. First, a group of Europeans operates it, until it breaks down; then it is used as an illegal taxi; local garage mechanics work on it tirelessly in an effort to keep it on

the road; left by the roadside, the car is finally turned into a work of art, a sculpture commissioned by village wise men and dedicated to the voodoo god of night watchmen.

Loreau's film is pleasant enough as a kind of anthropological travelogue, but too innocuous to have much of an impact on one's consciousness.

Paulina, directed by American Vicki Funari, tells the story of a Mexican woman who was essentially traded away by her parents in the 1950s to the *cacique*, the local boss, in exchange for land rights. She was raped by him at 13 and held against her will as his mistress for two years. She found refuge from her hellish life in fantasy. 'The dead took me flying at night,' she explains. Paulina eventually escaped to Mexico City and found work as a maid.

At the center of Funari's film is a visit Paulina pays to her hometown during which she meets with various members of her family and neighbors in an effort to come to terms with her history. The film also includes the recreation of certain episodes.

The story is a terrible one and entirely deserving of treatment. The film's problems lie in the manner of the treatment and the social and ideological assumptions that underpin it.

The emphasis in Funari's film is on the psychological evolution of her protagonist, the latter's arrival at some degree of self-acceptance and self-awareness. At the end, she declares, 'I think that I'm whole.' Naturally, one is sympathetic. But what of the social structures and relations that produced her tragedy? Let's say, charitably, that *Paulina* gives them short shrift.

The film, in fact, threatens at times to become an exercise in finger pointing, in the manner of a daytime talk show. However Paulina herself may feel about her mother and father--who give evasive answers to interviewers' questions--and their reprehensible treatment of her, it is surely incumbent on the filmmaker to adopt a broader social view. The essential cause of Paulina's unhappiness is to be found in the economic and social relations prevailing in rural Mexico, of which nearly all those interviewed in the film are victims.

Are we seriously supposed to feel some degree of satisfaction in this woman's coming to terms with her life history, when we can see with our own eyes that the rest of her family and everyone in her village continue to live in conditions of misery and backwardness? Here one sees and feels the intellectual impact of various forms of identity politics, which, in the end, divert attention from great social issues and encourage narrowness and selfishness. *Paulina*, and this is not to flatter it, could not have been made at any other time in this century.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact