

David Walsh on the San Francisco International Film Festival--Part 2

Conversations with three filmmakers

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While in San Francisco I spoke to Aktan Abdykalikov, the director of *Beshkempir--The Adopted Son*, a sensitive film from the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan. Abdykalikov, an unassuming and intelligent man, explained, through a Russian translator, that he had grown up in a village some 20 miles from the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek and still lived there.

I asked him if the tradition depicted in the film, by which a large family offers a newborn to a childless couple, had any special significance for him. "Indeed," he said, "that is what happened to me. I was adopted. It may be a good custom, but it is very shocking when you learn as a teenager that you were adopted."

Abdykalikov began his artistic life as a painter in the former Soviet Union. Why did he take up cinema? "I found it improved my painting," he said. "Oh," I said stupidly, "so you still paint?" "Yes, in my films."

He referred to Kyrgyzstan's economic difficulties. The republic has a population of only 4 million and relatively few natural resources. Investors are not as excited about the possibilities there as they are about those in some of its oil-rich neighbors.

The director spoke candidly about the state of cinema in Kyrgyzstan. Before the collapse of the USSR, the Kyrgyz film industry produced four feature films a year, and numerous documentaries. His film, *Beshkempir*, is the first feature produced in seven years. There is no state support for filmmaking and private investment is scarce. The political censorship has been replaced by the "censorship of money." This is a refrain one hears often from film artists from the former Stalinist-ruled countries.

Why do you make films? Abdykalikov responded, "If you have pain in your life, you need, at some point or other, to express it. The things you suffer from are the substance of art."

I spoke to two directors primarily about the conditions in their respective countries.

I asked Jean-Marie Téno, director of *Chief!*, a documentary from Cameroon that concerns itself with the worship of authority, what had inspired his film. It begins with scenes from a celebration in honor of a former local strongman, followed by a brutal encounter between villagers and a boy who has been caught stealing a chicken.

He explained, "This film is the first one that simply fell on me, so to speak, that I hadn't planned out. I went to a village to film dances that are not performed very often. I became very frustrated because I didn't expect that everything was being done in honor of a former chief. When people started telling me why they were erecting a statue to honor him I was very upset. This man was someone who collaborated with the colonists, who was praised for his political wisdom because he always managed to be on the side of those in power.

"When the next morning I came across this scene of vigilante justice where a 16-year-old boy was afraid that he would be killed because he stole one hen and four chicks, I started questioning myself. How is it that in a country where so many people steal state property, and everyone wants to emulate them, how could people suddenly want to kill a 16-year-

old boy when he had stolen almost nothing? So that was the starting point.

I said, "That scene with the kid is very disturbing. I think you explain in the film there is an enormous frustration that comes out of misery. The people surrounding him are not rich."

Téno responded, "No, they are not rich. Even the healthier elements are frustrated because when the police arrest someone who has done wrong, if they take him to the police station, they are not even sure that they are going to get justice. The frustration comes from the misery and the injustice of a system that doesn't work."

I asked him to describe the social conditions in Cameroon.

"The situation in Cameroon is very difficult," he began, "because things are getting worse from day to day. You can see the changes physically. Things that were wrong in the 1970s are still there, only in a worse state. There is a government that never tries to improve anything for people's lives. Whether it's education, social services, roads, even the civil service, nothing is working. And it's as if no one even cares. There is an enormous lack of responsibility, which begins at the top. And when people realize that those at the top couldn't care less about what is going on in the country, that comes down gradually until it reaches the lowest level, so nobody is now responsible for anything.

"It started with education. Cameroon used to have one of the best educational systems in Africa. Suddenly they stopped paying the teachers or putting any more money to improve the conditions in the classrooms, to buy equipment. Things started decaying, and because the teachers were not even being paid they started accepting money from the students to pass them on to the next grade. Teachers started asking children to bring money into school so they can teach, so they can have something to eat. After a while the people in power stopped sending their kids to school in Cameroon, because they have the money to send them abroad to study in the US, in Europe. The rest of the country is just left there, with no education.

"The health situation is the same. The public hospitals don't function any more. And when people leave the hospitals with a prescription they don't have the money to go to the pharmacy to get the medicine. People don't have money. Particularly with the devaluation of the CFA franc [Communauté Financière Africaine--Cameroon's currency], it makes things so difficult. And the state reduced the wages of the people also. All these things come at the same time.

"The road situation is the same story. You have the same roads as you had in the 1970s, but now the population of Yaoundé, for example, has probably tripled. The number of cars has increased five times. No one collects the garbage. Nothing is working. The World Bank, two years ago, had to provide some loans so that the garbage could be collected in the bigger towns.

"So when people begin to act with such violence, aimed, for example, at a boy or someone who has stolen something, it could be the beginning of something very dangerous. A few days before that I was watching the

national television news and they showed images of thieves beaten to death and the commentator, approvingly, said something like, 'Look, this is what happens to you if you go out and steal.'

"The state has renounced administering justice and given it into the hands of the people and says if someone steals, you are entitled to kill him. Tomorrow they might say we have problems in the country and it is the people with black eyes or those who are bald who are responsible for your problems. People will go out and start lynching other people."

I asked, "Is there a sector of the population that has gotten rich in the last 20 years?"

Téno said, "Yes, of course, all the politicians and those close to power are getting richer and richer. They are making deals with the French and those who are exploiting the riches of the country. A very small percentage of the population is getting rich, getting so extraordinarily rich. They have bank accounts abroad, own homes abroad, send their children to school abroad. For the rest of the population nothing is improving."

"They have their own neighborhoods where you have all these fancy houses. Some of them are even called 'Santa Barbara,' 'Beverly Hills.' In every city you have these very wealthy parts with guards to prevent people from going inside."

I questioned the director about Cameroon's natural resources.

He said the country had oil, wood, rubber and various agricultural products, coffee, bananas, cotton. "The three big foreign oil companies," he went on, "are combining their operations in Chad and they are building a big pipeline to cross Cameroon and to empty at one of the best beaches in the south of the country. They are trying to make a corridor through the country which will carry oil to the sea. ELF, Exxon, Texaco. It is going to be an ecological catastrophe because of the oil leaking into the ground. It is going to be passing through some of the oldest forests in the country."

"Many people are trying to fight to prevent this project. The World Bank is lending money to Cameroon to finance this project. Who's going to be benefiting? These companies, and not the people. And they will create ecological problems. There is complicity between the people in power and these companies. They jeopardize lives and they pocket the financial aid that was supposed to go to so-called development."

"Are there any ethnic differences that are potentially dangerous?"

"No difference is dangerous if the state does not begin stirring it up and making it into a problem. A country like Cameroon has perhaps one hundred ethnic groups, five or six of them are large. When the state cannot work for the good of all the people, it looks for a scapegoat, people who are to be blamed. What happened in Rwanda, however, has made people very careful."

Srdjan Dragojevic was born in Belgrade in 1963. He described himself as the child of "middle-level Communist nomenklatura in Serbia. My father was the head of a big newspaper. And my mother was a French translator. I spent a quite peaceful childhood and teenage period." He directed *We Are Not Angels* in 1992 and *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* in 1996. His newest film is *The Wounds*, about two teenager gangsters in Belgrade. He told me he makes films about "My nation's demons."

Dragojevic, a self-proclaimed "dissident" and opponent of Slobodan Milosevic, noted that his latest film would probably be his last in Serbia. He has signed a deal with Miramax and wants to be a successful Hollywood director.

When I asked him about the bombing of Serbia, which he had left several weeks before, his first comments were about its political impact.

"I'm so depressed by the fact that this bombing will establish Milosevic probably for another 10 or 20 years. My idea, no matter how paranoiac it is, is that Milosevic is strongly supported by American and Western European administrations."

I asked again about the impact of the bombing.

Dragojevic commented, "What is the worst thing is that many friends of mine who grew up on American culture, American music, now want to

get rid of their records and have become extremely xenophobic. That's what I'm really afraid of, that a whole nation, even its well-educated people, will become xenophobic and closed. This is normal. I was against the proposal to forbid all American films for distribution. It's not Goofy and Mickey and Indiana Jones who are bombing us, I said, it's NATO.

"Of course, it's very easy to be open-minded when you are sitting in San Francisco as I'm doing. If I were there, I might be quite xenophobic too. If you are in a shelter every night, and listening to sirens and so on.... It's quite normal behavior. It's really shameful that most of the people I know and most of the people were against Milosevic, but now we have no more opposition."

I asked specifically about the physical results of the bombing.

"Generally people there are not afraid so much about the physical destruction of the buildings," he said, "they are extremely afraid of the destruction of the chemical factories. It's really ridiculous to hit big factories around Belgrade, it can create a huge catastrophe in the entire region. A friend of mine told me that they can't even drink water from the tap, because the Danube and the other rivers are polluted after factories were hit. That's what I'm really afraid about. For my friends' kids. And these missiles with the depleted uranium. It's truly frightening."

I asked, "What do you think about Clinton's arguments?"

"It's a little bit hypocritical, because we were fighting against Milosevic for five or six years, but our main problem was that the American administration established him as a factor of stability in the Balkans, so we couldn't do anything against him. Milosevic was recognized by the Western countries. For me, it's quite hypocritical this thesis that this is not a war against the Serbian people, it's a war against Milosevic. I really can't accept that."

Was it strange, I wondered, to be in a country that was waging a massive propaganda campaign against his own?

He interpreted the question slightly differently, as a query about the role of the media in general. "It's the same. I was fighting for many years against Serbian television officials. Here when I saw what was on television it was quite similar. They are equal in their vulgarity, simplification. It's propaganda, let's be realistic. They're doing their job."



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