

2000 San Francisco International Film Festival— Part 1

Everything must be done to restore hope

David Walsh
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This is the first of a series of articles by WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival. Subsequent articles will appear in the coming days.

This year's San Francisco International Film Festival (April 20-May 4) was particularly interesting. Some remarkable films were screened and some remarkable individuals were present.

A highlight was the presence of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, on hand to receive the festival's Akira Kurosawa Award for lifetime achievement in film directing. Five of Kiarostami's films were presented—*And Life Goes On...* (1987), *Close-Up* (1990), *The Traveler* (1974), *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999).

The Iranian director is generally recognized as one of the leading film artists of the present day. A deep regard for human beings and reality and art suffuses his work. His comments at a festival press conference and an interview with this writer will appear in a subsequent piece. Kiarostami's latest work, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, is opening in the US this summer, an event worthy of note.

One of the finest works screened in San Francisco was Daniel Schmid's *Beresina or the Last Days of Switzerland*, a malicious and enormously funny look at the Swiss establishment. Schmid, Swiss-born, belonged to the generation of European filmmakers that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. They believed the world could and should be changed. Schmid—who went to school with the future German foreign minister Joschka Fischer and directed R. W. Fassbinder in *Shadow of Angels* (1976)—still does. An interview with Schmid is also forthcoming.

We previously reviewed veteran German director Volker Schlöndorff's film *The Legends of Rita* (*Die Stille nach dem Schuss*) when it appeared at the Berlin film festival. [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/mar2000/bff4-m03.shtml>] The work treats the fate of those Baader-Meinhof gang members, radicals who carried out terrorist attacks on West German business and political leaders in the 1970s, who were harbored by the East German regime.

Schlöndorff's film, scripted by East German writer Wolfgang Kohlhaase, is an intelligent and honest work, within its limitations. It suggests, unfashionably, that while Stalinism and terrorism were false solutions, it's not wrong to want to change the world. It is disgraceful that such a film does not have a North American distributor at this point. We will publish an interview with the talented lead performer in the film, Bibiana Beglau.

Sicily! by Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet, adapted from Elio Vittorini's 1939 novel *Conversazione in Sicilia* (banned in Mussolini's Italy), is an intriguing film. Straub and Huillet, who have been artistic partners since the 1950s, are known for their left-wing views and almost relentless formal rigor. These are people who took Bertolt Brecht's theory of the "alienation effect" to heart many years ago (perhaps one-sidedly) and have never relinquished it. At times their work has been quite dry and nearly inaccessible.

Sicily! is a 66-minute film, composed of a series of dialogues. Stories of

poverty, betrayal and corruption are delivered with aggression and fury. The language is shouted or perhaps sung by one unmoving performer to the other, creating an unearthly effect. This is a fascinating and surprisingly *emotional* effort. "God bless the world," says one poverty-stricken man to another, and they proceed to enumerate its marvelous qualities.

Claire Devers directed *The Thief of St. Lubin* as part of a series on the contemporary political situation for a French television channel. It tells the story of a woman, employed part-time, who steals meat to provide protein for her children. She is an ordinary woman, who even considers the right-wing National Front as an alternative, but is repulsed by its racism.

Her case becomes a national news item when a judge acquits her, basing herself on a century-old French legal precedent that allows for a "state of necessity," i.e., the right to steal food under certain economic conditions. The film is extremely honest and clearheaded, as is the director in conversation. We will also post the discussion with Devers.

Two fine films that we have previously written about appeared in San Francisco: Chang Tso-chi's beautiful *Darkness and Light* from Taiwan [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/oct1999/tff3-o02.shtml>] and Yesim Ustaoglu's *Journey to the Sun*. In fact, we've written about the latter film twice before [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/mar1999/berl-m04.shtml>] and [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/oct1999/tff4-o05.shtml>]. Ustaoglu's film is an extremely courageous examination of the Kurdish problem and the conditions of the Turkish people themselves. An interview with the director will appear in a further article. Her film will be opening in the US this fall.

Another remarkable work was *The Lady of the House*, written and directed by Indian filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh (born in Calcutta, 1961). An unmarried, middle-aged woman lives more or less alone in a large, dilapidated house, her prospective bridegroom having died years ago two days before her wedding. In need of company and cash, she reluctantly agrees to permit a film crew to shoot on her premises. Inevitably she's drawn into the life of the production, developing feelings for the sophisticated and articulate director and even accepting a small part in the film. Almost as inevitably she's betrayed and her feelings trampled on.

Ghosh says, "The issue is not gender-sensitive ... but rather one of universal vulnerability to the predatory instincts of the creative person.... It's an issue I wish to explore because I am not quite sure where I stand on it." Even allowing for the existence of these "predatory instincts," i.e., the willingness of the artistic personality to devour everything and everyone in the interests of his or her work, the concrete form they take on in such a corrupt milieu as the film industry must have some social significance as well. In any event, Ghosh's film is intelligent and perceptive. It has the leisurely pace and density of a well-written novel.

The Closed Doors is a film from Egypt, by Atef Hetata, longtime assistant to the well-known filmmaker Youssef Chahine. Like Chahine's protagonist in *The Other* [<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/oct1999/tff4-o05.shtml>], Hetata's has

a strong attachment to his mother. During the Persian Gulf war a teenage boy channels his repressed sexual feelings into Islamic fundamentalism, with disastrous consequences. The film is unremitting in its exposure of the Egyptian bourgeoisie as well.

It seems legitimate for Chahine and Hetata to consider some of the psychological sources of the growth of religious extremism in Egypt. It might be useful as well at some point if they examined some of its *historical and ideological* roots—the bankruptcy of Nasserite nationalism and the crisis in perspective created by the crimes of Stalinism and the demise of the USSR.

Critic Andrew Sarris once pointed out, in a generally sympathetic comment on American filmmaker Samuel Fuller, that it was somewhat absurd for the director to attribute the depredations of Indians and neo-Nazis “to some universal juvenile delinquency.” Likewise the tendency of Chahine and Hetata to explain the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and various other problems of Egyptian society largely by reference to their characters’ unresolved Oedipal complexes seems a trifle narrow. Nonetheless, their films are vivid and provocative.

The festival featured two films about Lebanon. *Civilized People*, by Lebanese-born Randa Chahal Sabbag, is an absurdist look at conditions during the civil war that cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Set in Beirut in 1981, the film is peopled by those who remained in wealthy neighborhoods at that time, mainly immigrants and servants. Sri Lankan maids go about their daily routine, oblivious to the fact that the apartment building they work in has been largely abandoned. A chauffeur in the Christian half of the city holds two young Moslems hostage, in hopes of exchanging them for his sons, being held by the enemy. A Christian girl falls in love with a Moslem militiaman, and so forth.

The film is sharp in some respects and makes no bones about the horror of the situation, but this “black comedy” approach to tragic circumstances seems lacking in the end and even runs the risk of trivializing events. One is reminded of films with similar sensibilities made about the Balkan events. These brutal communalist wars have much of the absurd, chaotic and irrational to them, but in the end the task of artists, despite everything, is to make the process somehow *rational*. It’s not clear that the spectator would leave the cinema after seeing *Civilized People* with a clearer understanding of the events than he or she had upon entering.

Nonetheless, Shabbag’s film deserves to be seen. The position of the Lebanese government that some three-quarters of an hour of the film is objectionable, on account of obscenities used, is another attempt at state censorship. The government effort needs to be opposed and *Civilized People* immediately released for public viewing in Lebanon.

Around the Pink House, directed by Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas, examines postwar Beirut. Bombs have been replaced by bulldozers. The entire center of the city, much of it reduced to rubble by the years of fighting, is being razed to the ground and reconstruction is under way. The poor are being excluded, along with memories of the past, emotional attachments and the possibility of a society not based on the power of money.

Two families have squatted in a shell-scarred mansion for the duration of the fighting. Now a developer announces plans to demolish the house (keeping the facade) and turn it into a commercial center. Rifts develop between the two families. A television reporter enters the scene, encouraging the conflict and staging its various episodes before the camera. A “militia” offers its assistance to one side, before being bought by the developer. The film portrays a society that has in no way resolved the issues that led to the civil war and lives largely in self-delusion. We will be posting an interview with co-director Joreige.

From the sociological point of view, the more perceptive films in San Francisco, whether social issues were their primary focus or not, suggested that certain generalized conditions are making themselves felt in many parts of the world. A picture emerges of a globalized society in

which a small number are prospering and the vast majority suffer, alienated and inarticulate; common or similar psychological and emotional circumstances flow from this condition. A French, Turkish or Lebanese filmmaker may use virtually identical terms to describe the situation in his or her country. This obviously has some significance, as does the willingness of filmmakers to discuss at some length and in some depth contemporary life and its contradictions.

The artists at this point are more advanced on the level of intuition than that of conscious analysis of the present state of social life and its implications. The nature of artistic cognition guarantees that this will be so to one degree or another, that art “will always lag behind,” but the gulf is unnecessarily acute at the present moment. A given filmmaker is capable of the most astonishingly perceptive insights into the deplorable economic and moral conditions under which people live, and capable, at the same time, of the most woefully inadequate and unsatisfying explanations as to why this is so and what’s to be done about it.

This intellectual gap makes itself felt particularly sharply in documentary filmmaking. The San Francisco festival has always placed considerable emphasis on the latter. The documentary filmmakers whose work was presented this year chose the most varied and often fascinating subjects to examine. Unhappily, a certain superficiality marred most of them, above all, the absence of any *historical perspective*. We will discuss this question further.

The festival brought together a number of extraordinary people and works. Seeing a large number of films in this fashion is always a complex, dense and occasionally exhilarating experience. The “roots of poetry are in life,” as Kiarostami said at his press conference, and it seems clear that film was the art form closest to life in the last century and remains so in the new one. At its best it has a universally truthful and enriching quality.

Even in inadequate or limited films, if they are honest and not simply narcissistic, there are faces one remembers, moments, delights, subversive elements, something about our lives. We need that, to understand ourselves better and to think better of ourselves, as opposed to the usual idols worshipped by the media: corporations, machines, shares, armies, weapons. It’s very difficult today, as Daniel Schmid suggested in a conversation, for many people, especially young people, “to defend their identities.” The best filmmakers make every effort to defend the human personality, and that struggle, if its logic is pursued, must coincide with the more general struggle to transform existing reality in all its dimensions.

There’s no pleasure unmixed with pain, however, especially at this moment in history. The greatest cause for sadness is that so few filmmakers, so few artists in general, have confidence at this point that the world *can* be changed for the better. The knowledge that this intellectual state of affairs has definite and almost glaringly obvious roots in certain historical problems provides little consolation.

It remains a disturbing fact of modern life that for so many highly cultured and perceptive people, the present reality, more or less, is accepted as the limit of what might exist. Without hope, art too withers. Everything must be done to restore and revive hope. In the final analysis, a change in mood depends on the working class demonstrating its politically creative and creatively destructive capabilities. That is not to say, however, that nothing can be done meanwhile and, in any event, the spadework must be carried out that will make such a movement possible.

One of the ways we have at our disposal for creating the conditions by which things might look differently is to point out and encourage the critical and serious artists, while exposing the charlatans and opportunists. This is the approach we take to this year’s San Francisco event and every other.



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