

2001 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

Some limited but honest films, and the social role of pessimism

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There are filmmakers with limited aims and perspectives, but whose works nonetheless honestly reflect aspects of life.

In *Cock Fight*, a 14-minute film directed by Sigalit Liphshitz (Israel), an Israeli chicken farmer and a Palestinian soldier who used to work for him confront one another at a Palestinian Authority checkpoint closed temporarily on orders from above. The farmer is concerned for his poultry, who are roasting in the desert's afternoon heat, while the soldier remembers that the Israeli used to make him "live with the chickens." The farmer's new employee is a Romanian, who pleads with both of them. The film tends to reduce the conflict in the Middle East to a clash of masculine egos, but it is not bad as a tiny snapshot of the misery of everyday life in the region.

Diamonds and Rust (directed by Israelis Adi Barash and Ruthie Shatz) is a documentary about a diamond mining trawler, owned by De Beers, operating off the coast of southern Africa. The crew on board the aging vessel is a mix of Namibians, Cubans and white South Africans, overseen by an Israeli martinet whom everyone dislikes. Racial and political tensions abound, as the generally dissatisfied crew waits for long-delayed relief.

One black crew member tells the filmmakers, "We are Namibians, and they force us to work, like slaves, in our country.... This is the same colonialism and we don't like this." Two of the white South Africans are openly racist. The search for diamonds is a sordid enterprise, that apparently devours much human material. The film would be stronger if its social viewpoint were sharper and its tone angrier. The filmmakers, like so many contemporary documentarians, mistake passivity for "objectivity."

Save me (directed by Christian Vincent) attempts to give a picture of a community of working class friends in Roubaix in northern France getting by at dead-end or illegal occupations. Mehdi, driving a gypsy cab, is at the center of the story. He falls hard for an eccentric Romanian, Agatha (Rona Hartner), whom he picks up at the train station. She stumbles into and then out of his life. The film, scripted by a writing workshop for the unemployed, tries to touch too many bases without going deeply enough into any of them, but Roschdy Zem as Mehdi in particular is affecting.

Samia (directed by Philippe Faucon) treats the situation of Algerian immigrants or their descendants living in France. Samia is a teenage girl in Marseilles whose unemployed brother, angry at his own circumstances, tyrannizes her life. Her father, seriously ill and generally exhausted after a life of hard, poorly paid work, demands that traditions and the traditional role of women in particular be respected. His son sees himself as the righteous defender of his sister's virtue. The film is intelligent, but hardly breaks new ground.

The Harem of Madame Osmane (directed by Nadir Moknèche), is a somewhat more complicated work. Set in 1993, at the beginning of the

civil war between the Algerian government and Islamic fundamentalists, the film focuses on Madame Osmane and the residents and tenants of her corner house in Algiers. Osmane, whose husband is in France in the company of his French mistress, torments everyone around her: her daughter, her half-mad maid, a French-born young wife.

In the film's central sequence, Osmane and the other women, modishly dressed, drive to a wedding party along the coast. Osmane manages to ruin her daughter's marriage plans by insulting the latter's prospective mother-in-law, a peasant woman dressed in traditional garb.

On returning from the disastrous party, Osmane's daughter, Sakina, and the young married woman, both drunk, defy a curfew and go out on the town. Sakina is killed. We learn later that she was shot by the army while attempting to run a roadblock. Days later the army arrives with the coffin, pompously and lyingly informing the family that "the deceased was the victim of a terrorist attack."

The film is quite good in its portrait of the Algerian petty bourgeoisie and its futile attempts to lead a "modern," "Western" life in the midst of general misery and the onset of a brutal internecine war. Osmane, appropriately, is a former resistance fighter against the French. Full of delusions of grandeur, Osmane leads, in fact, a life increasingly hemmed in on all sides. Her impotence and frustration, which help bring about tragedy, have more than a personal character.

In a conversation about the larger political and social issues in Algeria filmmaker Nadir Moknèche, unfortunately, seemed entirely taken in by surface appearances. He rejected the notions that the accords reached by the Algerian FLN (National Liberation Front) with French imperialism at Evian in 1962 had been a betrayal. He described the "left"-talking regime of Ben Bella, the first after independence in Algeria, as "socialist" and Soviet-like, implying that because this government had failed, socialism was a dead issue in Algeria. He asserted that the "Islamist" character of the country was a kind of historical barrier one could never, never get around or overcome.

The filmmaker generally exhibited absolutely no taste or perspective for a struggle against either threadbare bourgeois nationalism or religious fanaticism. His film, however, within definite limits, gives one a picture of something real.

One of the Hollywood Ten (written and directed by Karl Francis) is an account of the blacklisting of Hollywood director Herbert Biberman (Jeff Goldblum) and his wife, actress Gale Sondergaard (Greta Scacchi), and their efforts in the mid-1950s to make an independent film, *Salt of the Earth*.

Refusing to name names to the House on Un-American Activities Committee, Biberman, a member of the Communist Party, is sent to jail for six months. He and Sondergaard, unable to work in Hollywood and hounded by the FBI, develop *Salt of the Earth* along with a number of

other blacklisted film industry colleagues (Paul Jarrico, Michael Wilson). The latter work, released in 1953 and essentially blocked from distribution, dramatized a strike by New Mexico mineworkers.

Francis's film is earnest and serious about its subject matter, but it seems less concerned with illuminating the era and its immense contradictions, a complex task, than with celebrating Biberman, a far easier one. He gets all the best lines—at least what the writer-director obviously considers the best lines (“I’m an American, no one is going to run me out of this town”—and receives an education in humility from his proletarian *Salt of the Earth* cast that seems a little contrived. (Francis generally treats the “pro-American” rhetoric of the US Stalinists without criticism.) Goldblum does a good job, but the character and his story as written are without sufficient complication.

Landscape (Martin Sulik, Slovak Republic) aims to be a “sly, delightful” film of the type turned out in Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s. A good deal of water has flown under the bridge since then. The film, the story of the last century or so told in 10 episodes set in a small village, is amusing at times, and clever at times, and disappears from memory almost before the final credits.

The world is a difficult place, and many tragedies have befallen mankind in its upward climb from savagery, some of them quite recently. An artist with an unfurrowed brow and a carefree air might very well seem out of place. Artists, as well as other people, have the right to take things seriously and say what is. Painting pretty pictures has never helped anyone. “Saying what is,” however, if it is to be a helpful and genuinely truthful activity, needs to include revealing that human misery is socially, not divinely or “naturally” produced, and that human beings can alter the outmoded and destructive social structures other human beings have created.

Lack of hope plays a damaging social role. Not believing that the world can be changed *objectively* weakens the resolve and the position of those who need it changed. The basis for renewed hope, however, is not blind faith, but a scientific understanding of historical laws and social processes.

Despair can come into fashion like anything else. It can become a cheap and marketable commodity. It often tickles the fancy of essentially complacent layers of the population. Few accountants, professors of literature or civil servants ever lost a night’s sleep because a film or novel reminded them of the “meaninglessness of existence.”

One has to be concrete. Under certain circumstances, a bleak picture can provoke thought and action. There are numerous artists today who lack any confidence that social life can be improved and yet sincerely want to criticize and change the world around them. Nicolas Klotz and Elizabeth Perceval, the director and writer of *Pariah* (France), seem to belong to this category. The film is a dark, two-hour examination of the lives of homeless people in Paris.

Victor, 18, abandoned by his father at the age of four, loses his scooter, his job and his apartment almost at the same time. He finds himself on the streets and even has his shoes stolen off his feet. He finds a girl he likes, Annabelle, and promptly gets into a fight with her boyfriend. Eventually he hooks up with the guy who stole his shoes, Momo, something of a grifter. The latter is taking part in an immigration scam; he will wed an Algerian girl to help her get her documents. On New Year’s Eve, the homeless are gathered up, willingly and unwillingly, and transported to a shelter. One of their number is dying from the effects of alcohol and poverty.

Pariah treats the lives of the marginalized quite objectively and honestly. But even here the lugubrious tone begins to wear on the spectator. Is the chief difficulty at present that no one is aware that homelessness and poverty exist? Or is it, rather, that so few believe anything can be done about the problems? In any event, it is clearly the creditable intent of *Pariah*’s makers to arouse anger.

One of the chief sources of artistic gloom these days is eastern Europe

and the former Soviet Union. And clearly a catastrophe has taken place. None of the artists in the former Stalinist countries, however, are yet capable of giving this catastrophe a name: the restoration of capitalism.

The difficulties with *Happy Man* begin with its heavily ironic title. Written and directed by Małgorzata Szumowska (born Krakow, 1973), the film is about Janek, a 30-year-old who has no job and no prospects in post-Stalinist Poland. He majored in the “Theory of Culture” and nothing could be more useless in the new dog-eat-dog society. His old friend is an unscrupulous entrepreneur and slum landlord. Janek lives with his mother, who still works, in a small apartment and feels sorry for himself. He starts a relationship with a factory worker, Marta, but dumps her when he finds out that she has a child.

When they are informed separately that Janek’s mother has come down with a fatal illness, both mother and son ask the doctor not to tell the other. Janek takes up with Marta again so that he can fulfill his mother’s desire that he marry. The heavy-handed irony of the title is matched by the heavy-handed irony of the denouement.

The lugubrious tone here seems almost entirely likely to encourage complacency. There is no anger, no passion, just a sort of dull and muddy gloom that extends over every aspect of the film. Things are terrible, but the filmmaker doesn’t seem in a particular hurry to get to the bottom of the situation.

If the chief sources of artistic gloom these days is eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union as a region, Hungary is surely the single most dedicated supplier. This is not to make light of the social conditions for masses of people in Hungary which, again, are disastrous. One has the right, however, to entertain at least the notion that, in some cases, the gloom of the film artists in the ex-Stalinist countries is rooted less in these disastrous conditions and more in the discomfort caused by an end to the generous subsidization of the film industries provided by the old bureaucratic regimes.

In any event, Béla Tarr (*Sátántangó*, 1994), who began making films in the 1970s, is the best known Hungarian filmmaker at present. His new work *Werckmeister Harmonies* deserves to be sharply criticized, in my view. (Andreas Werckmeister was a musician and music theorist who invented the equal tempered scale—the octave divided into 12 equal half steps—in 1685.)

The film depicts a world thoroughly sunk in misery, poverty, gloom. More than that, as the opening scene suggests, “A total eclipse has come upon us,” and “It’s still not over.”

A circus has arrived in a small Hungarian town in midwinter. Its main attraction is the hideous carcass of a whale, on display in the back of a truck. Moreover, the circus promises the appearance of a mysterious Prince, a demagogue who is plotting untold evil.

A sinister “mob” is gathering in the square—unemployed men, dressed in wretched clothes, congregating around fires. The police chief is conspiring with the wife of a leading citizen, organizer of the “Clean Town Movement.”

When the order comes, the mob in the square goes on a rampage, setting fires, sacking a hospital and beating or murdering the patients.

The film is one repetitive horror after another. About the hospital scene, the critics exclaim, “What a tour de force!” Almost no one seems to notice that it continues to be far easier to stage such atrocities than to explain why they take place in reality. And, in fact, so much time and energy is devoted to their staging precisely to evade that more difficult question.

The film is full of affected bitterness, self-pity. There is nothing spontaneous in the performances, nearly everyone has simply been directed to be as menacing and loathsome as possible. Slow, mannered, self-important, Tarr’s film is neither original nor penetrating. *Werckmeister Harmonies* does not represent a warning about the dangers of nationalism, fascism or any other concrete social phenomenon. Tarr has

“transcended” such mundane concerns.

Whatever its conscious themes—about the dangers of artificially-constructed systems and who knows what else—the overriding message conveyed by the film is that humanity is swinish. Everyone is polluted, brutish or manipulative ... swinish. Again, the filmmaker does not seem especially angry about the conditions in which people are forced to live—it is humanity that disgusts him. This is an irresponsible and superficial view, and only makes the actual source of social tragedy that much more difficult to grasp.

Tarr has obviously entered the ongoing competition to see who can depict humanity in the worst possible colors. He has numerous rivals for the prize. Let us leave them to it.



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