

## Toronto International Film Festival 2004—Part 5

## Limited range

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*This is the fifth and final in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival. Part Four was posted October 7.*

Many of the recent Toronto festival's films focused attention on or criticized various aspects of social life. In a number of cases the effort was weakened by the obvious belief that there exist no realizable solutions to the problems at hand—and the bigger the social problem, the more inconceivable the solution.

With the exception of John Waters's anti-establishment farce, the films discussed below, from several continents, were marked—despite sincere intentions in some cases—by a general lack of vision and hope. Taking this a step further were those that expressed a certain paralysis or even pessimism. A few descended into outright misanthropy. The least serious or committed of all simply threw in the towel and played around with the trivial, under a variety of artistic and historical guises.

The “Great Lakes Region” of Africa, rich in minerals and natural resources, is claimed to be one of the birthplaces of humankind. *Darwin's Nightmare*, the documentary by Austrian filmmaker Hubert Sauper, is set in Tanzania where the exportation of Lake Victoria's Nile Perch—highly lucrative to its operators—has helped produce an extreme level of poverty and disease within the local population.

To make matters worse, the perch, which was introduced into the lake as a scientific experiment some 40 years ago, is a voracious predator that is killing off the native fish species and destroying the lake's ecosystem—a developing catastrophe for masses of people whose existence is dependent on the lake.

The fish make their way out of the country and into global markets in the belly of cargo planes built in the former Soviet Union. These planes fly into the country loaded with illegal ammunition slated for the African continent's innumerable wars.

Sauper's film is a visual catalogue of the devastation wreaked upon the local people by the giant fisheries, in combination with the black market munitions trade. Chronicled is the plight of the region's people, as well as the Russian pilots seeking to counter the hardships of their own economy by involving themselves in illicit weapons trafficking. Some of the film's most disturbing images are of homeless children sniffing glue, extracted from maggot-ridden fish carcasses, so as to remain unconscious during the inevitable sexual assaults they endure.

“I tried to transform the bizarre success story of a fish and the ephemeral boom around this ‘fittest’ animal into an ironic, frightening allegory for what is called the New World Order. I could make the same kind of movie in Sierra Leone—only the fish would be diamonds, in Honduras—bananas, and Libya, Nigeria or Angola—crude oil.... It is, for example, incredible that wherever prime raw material is discovered, the locals die in misery, their sons become soldiers, and

their daughters are turned into servants and whores.... After hundreds of years of slavery and colonization of Africa, globalization of African markets is the third and deadliest humiliation for the people of this continent,” states the director in the film's production notes.

Although the powerful recording of the effects, both social and ecological, of innumerable crimes committed by the colonial powers forms the basis of the movie, *Darwin's Nightmare* tends to meander and fails to weed out the essential from the inessential. This weakness is surely bound up with the filmmaker's feeling of impotence in the face of what the production notes describe as “the ungodly alliance on the shores of the world's biggest tropical lake: an army of local fishermen, the World bank agents, homeless children, African ministers, EU-commissioners, Tanzanian prostitutes and Russian pilots.”

Director Sauper believes that capitalism, “in a Darwinian sense,” has won out in regard to the “old question [of] which social and political structure is the best for the world.” Guided by this deeply mistaken outlook, the film is marred by a certain degree of respect for the various political authorities, as well as confusion and a sense of hopelessness in the face of the monumental tragedies that Sauper's camera documents.

Lebanese-born director Ziad Doueiri's *Lila dit ça (Lila Says That)* is set in a poor neighborhood in Marseilles, inhabited predominantly by people of North African descent. The film occupies itself with the relationship between Lila, a 16-year-old, sexy, sexual fantasist and Chimo, a talented teenager of immigrant parents. Chimo, unlike his dead-end neighborhood cohorts, is good to his mother and beloved by his teacher.

The film's working-class orientation seems promising, but the director quickly shows his true colors: an unfortunate adaptation to French cinema's current obsession with sexual explicitness. Real issues certainly present themselves in Muslim and Arabic-speaking communities all over the world, particularly after the Bush administration's manipulation of the events of September 11, 2001 (Chimo's pal: “Here nothing works—they blew up New York and we're paying for it.”).

Apart from the opening sequences, which show something of the harshness of life in France's poorer working class quarters, the film tediously offers up sexual quirkiness as its mainstay. This is combined with the retrograde message that smart—and beautiful-looking—exceptions like Chimo should “go for the gold.” Furthermore, the film implies that the method of realizing this ambition involves brushing aside the great social problems and focusing on one's self. For those—the majority—who cannot climb out of the ghetto by their individual efforts, the film holds out little hope.

Another film set in Marseilles,

*Mon père est ingénieur* (*My Father Is an Engineer*), is directed by veteran French left filmmaker Robert Guédiguian. Natasha, a pediatrician, has suddenly become comatose—although still ambulatory—suggesting a psychological rather than physical malaise. In an attempt to discover the source of Natasha’s physical and emotional shutdown, physician-boyfriend Jeremy looks for clues in Natasha’s office, located in a poor, immigrant area.

Jeremy discovers that Natasha was raped. Beyond that, he learns that she had become deeply disillusioned by the racism and general lack of solidarity that she perceived dominated the quarter—despite all her best efforts at organizing protests against evictions and other injustices.

The film is essentially a rant, typical of a demoralized ex-leftist (the director was a longtime member of the French Communist Party) against a humanity that is blamed for its own victimization and wretchedness. Apparently, the sufferings of the oppressed can be causally linked to an insufficient respect for moralizing, middle-class reformers à la Natasha.

Veteran South Korean filmmaker Im Kwon-taek opens his latest film—the director’s 99th feature film—with the 1945 partition of Korea. *Low Life* ostensibly spans the period from the division of the peninsula through several decades of US-backed autocratic regimes in South Korea. Most of the film takes place in the 1960s, following the military coup led by Major General Park Chunghee.

This history, a worthy subject for a film, is announced by a few images and intertitles. However, the peppering of historical facts throughout the film—disconnected from the plot and extraneous to the drama—proves to be a rather paltry attempt to provide a lackluster project with a veneer of substance.

*Low Life* turns out to be nothing more than the average boilerplate gangster movie, albeit with a slick, art-house look. The story rambles through the violent exploits of its protagonist—a thug turned businessman—who eventually concludes that joint business ventures with the corrupt, militarist government are financially risky and goes straight.

In *Vento di Terra* (*Land Wind*), a film by Italian director Vincenzo Marra, tragedy after tragedy is heaped upon Vincenzo, a Neapolitan teenager who is the central character. His father dies of a stress-related heart attack; his mother faces eviction and is driven to a nervous breakdown; his sister leaves town to find work and is molested by an uncle; and, finally, Vincenzo enlists in the army, is sent to Kosovo and becomes debilitated from the effects of depleted uranium.

Despite its best intentions, the film is grim and formulaic, devoid of hope. The innocent, but passive Vincenzo is defeated at every juncture, never uttering a word of protest, much less assimilating anything from his experiences.

The argument for the amelioration of inhuman conditions cannot be made in such a contrived and unbalanced manner. Capitalist society not only oppresses, it also produces its own gravediggers. Under the harshest of circumstances, resistance and consciousness surface in one form or another. This element is entirely lacking in *Vento di Terra*.

French-Moroccan director Ismaël Ferroukhi has created a road movie, *Le grand voyage* (*The Long Journey*), about a Moroccan-Islamic father and his secular son, Reda, who journey from their home in a French suburb to Mecca. They begin as incompatible co-travelers, each having a different approach toward the various obstacles and experiences they encounter.

As their odyssey unfolds, the father’s wisdom—quasi-mystical in nature—begins to dominate. The pilgrimage terminates with the father

dying in Mecca and Reda predictably returning home with a reborn respect for his father’s religiosity and Muslim traditions. The film leaves unanswered whether Reda will adopt his father’s faith.

Very much in keeping with current moods, *Le grand voyage* basically is an attempt to reconcile the non-believer with the religious mystic, adapting itself to and even promoting a return to cultural and religious backwardness.

Turkish director Ahmet Uluçay’s debut film is a quasi-autobiographical work about his youthful obsession with becoming a filmmaker, growing up in the rural village of Tepecik. According to festival catalogue notes, the decade of the 1960s was a golden period for Turkish cinema, an auspicious time to come of age artistically.

*Boats out of Watermelon Rinds* has moments of charm and artistry. Nonetheless, it is a thoroughly complacent piece, permeated by the director’s obvious satisfaction that creative precocity and ingenuity can overcome humble origins and lead to a promising film career. Despite being an imaginatively assembled piece, the film would have benefited from a more substantive and less narcissistic subject matter.

The new comedy, *A Dirty Shame*, from writer/director John Waters is aptly described in the film’s production notes as having a “generous heart and a dirty mind.” The movie is set, as are all of his works, in Waters’s native Baltimore. With his characteristic over-the-top tastelessness, the director takes aim at the anti-sex fetishism of the “moral majority” and religious right, a significant constituency of the Bush administration. The film stars Tracey Ullman, Selma Blair and Johnny Knoxville.

Head concussions are inexplicably transforming ordinary people into sex-addicts, to the shock of the neighborhood’s “normal” undersexed citizens—or neuters—who respond with increasing hysteria (“My daughter is a good girl—she hates sex”).

Decency rallies organized by the neuters mark the “End of Tolerance,” culminating in a demonstration for “Vaginal Restoration,” a reference to one of the latest outrages promoted by religious fanatics—a surgery that restores “virginity.”

As the final battle between the sex-addicts and the neuters unfolds, head injuries multiply, heralding the orgiastic dawn of the neighborhood’s sexual—and genuinely moral—awakening.

By way of his “carnal concussion comedy,” Waters is trying to drown out the shrill cries of the hypocritical and reactionary advocates of “family values,” many of whom can be found slithering around on Capital Hill.

*Concluded*



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