

San Francisco International Film Festival 2006—Part 3

Political exposures and more ... or less

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This is the third part of a series of articles on the 2006 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 20-May 4. The first part was posted May 13 and Part 2 May 19.

On Friday, October 29, 1965, Mehdi Ben Barka, a prominent Moroccan bourgeois nationalist and opponent of the regime of King Hassan II, had an appointment at the Brasserie Lipp in Paris. He thought he was going there to discuss the preparation of a film about the national liberation movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America, which would be shown at the opening of the Tricontinental Conference, sponsored by the Castro regime, in Havana in January 1966.

The rendezvous was a trap. Ben Barka was ‘disappeared’ by French police and never seen again. The episode was a major international political event at the time, which continues to resonate in Morocco and France in particular.

French director Serge Le Péron’s *I Saw Ben Barka Get Killed (J’ai Vu Tuer Ben Barka)* is an extraordinary ‘docudrama’ reconstruction of the Ben Barka kidnapping and murder. The film is narrated by Georges Figon, who speaks from ‘beyond the grave’ to describe the events that led up to his own killing.

Figon, a lowlife connected to organized crime, whose anti-bourgeois rhetoric gives him a pass with intellectuals such as filmmaker Georges Franju and writers Marguerite Duras and François Mauriac, plays a critical role in entrapping Ben Barka and ends up dead himself for knowing too much.

Riddled with debt, Figon (Charles Berling) is an easy dupe for gangster Georges Boucheseiche, whose prostitution operations in France and Morocco go unimpeded because of the shady services he performs for people in high places. Boucheseiche offers Figon a chance to start producing films, a proposition which the latter pitches to his actress-mistress as an opportunity to put them in the red and also jump-start her not very promising career.

Figon’s first project—thanks to financing from the enigmatic Chtouki, who turns out to be an agent of the monstrous General Oufkir, Morocco’s minister of the interior—is to be a documentary about decolonization for which Ben Barka will be hired as a historical consultant. A meeting is arranged in Cairo with Ben Barka, who resides there under the protection of the Nasser regime. Whether Figon knows from the outset that the ‘film project’ is part of a kidnapping and assassination plot is unclear, but he certainly must catch on quickly.

After Ben Barka agrees to the film idea, Figon sells the venture to Franju (Jean-Pierre Léaud) and Duras (Josiane Balasko), as director and scriptwriter, respectively. Ben Barka arrives in Paris to finalize the deal. A few days after the Moroccan leader goes missing, Figon is found murdered. Franju and Duras realize they were Figon’s bait in the abduction of the nationalist leader and the filmmaker returns to his pattern of alcohol and near dementia. A video shows President Charles De Gaulle denying the involvement of French police in Ben Barka’s disappearance.

Le Péron’s stylish film about Mehdi Ben Barka’s still officially

unsolved murder adopts the darkly comic tone of the con-artist, hustler Figon. With a gift of gab and prepared to do anything for a buck, the latter is the perfect middle man for a politically foul scheme and, as a small fry, inevitably ends up a victim as well. Le Péron’s highly-conscious characterization of Figon allows the film to infuse the various personal intrigues with broader political and artistic themes, adeptly navigating the genres of historical docudrama and political thriller.

In so doing, *Ben Barka* establishes a complex, truthful picture of that postwar moment when the Great Powers (particularly Britain and France) were obliged to grant a form of independence to their colonial territories (for Morocco, this took place in 1956), at the same time as they conspired to retain political and economic control over their former colonial slaves.

The imperialists have more than their share of allies within the national bourgeoisie. Sinister figures like General Oufkir move about with impunity in French society. With the helping hand of the French police and secret service, they are given free rein to repress political opponents such as Ben Barka. Torture and murder in elegant Parisian villas are not out of bounds. The film captures the essence of types like Figon, all too willing to be tools—or patsies—in a state conspiracy, as well as soft-minded intellectuals, like Franju and Duras, who so thoughtlessly and recklessly play the fool. (In particular, the vanity and political blindness of ‘left’ figures like Duras would make a story unto itself, but the director largely passes over this issue.)

The joint responsibility of French and Moroccan police for Ben Barka’s tragic fate is well-established, but other foreign agencies were also involved, according to Ben Barka’s son, Bachir, in a 1999 interview.

After explaining that the Moroccan authorities had issued two official death sentences against his father and had made several attempts to assassinate him, Bachir Ben Barka says: “The Moroccan regime was not alone in this affair. It was helped from within the French secret services and by the crooks who worked for them. Coordinated action between French and Moroccan police had already been used against the Moroccan opposition in France. There was also involvement by the [Israeli] Mossad which gave at least ‘logistical’ support to the Moroccan secret services in the perpetration of the crime ... One can also assume that the CIA was involved in one way or another” (www.newyouth.com).

In fact, the US government acknowledged in 1976 that the CIA was in possession of some 1,800 documents involving Mehdi Ben Barka. Le Péron’s film has adroitly brought this important episode, with all of its implications for the present, into dramatic focus. It is one of the better films of the year.

American director James Longley made his debut documentary feature, *Gaza Strip*, in that embattled territory in 2001. He began work on a film about Iraq in early 2003 when it became clear that the United States was planning to invade. Longley visited Iraq twice before the second war and, following the US invasion in March 2003, returned to the country and lived and filmed there until April 2005, recording 300 hours of material. The result is the fascinating *Iraq in Fragments*.

“Iraq is such a unique place and for so long nobody could easily make films there,” states the 34-year-old filmmaker. “I could barely constrain my desire to document everything. I wanted to film ten stories at once, all in different parts of the country. In the end, I only filmed six different stories. Three of those stories made it into the final film. What emerges in *Iraq in Fragments* is a film in three parts, cut roughly along the lines that define how most of us see Iraq: as Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds. It would be easy to paint a simple picture of an Iraq divided along these lines, but the reality is more difficult.”

Longley’s documentary begins its first segment focused on Mohammed, an 11-year old mechanic in Baghdad, who is several years behind in school. The film’s production notes explain that the boy was being looked after by his grandmother and had dropped out of school to support his family. “Mohammed’s was a very common story in Iraq, a country which has suffered decades of foolish wars, despotism and suffocating economic sanctions [imposed by the US and the United Nations after the Persian Gulf War in 1991],” says Longley.

In the opening portion of the film, men banter knowingly in the Baghdad repair shop about the US invasion: “It’s for the oil, no more no less. Why didn’t [the Americans] burn the oil ministry? They take care of Basra and Kirkuk because there is oil.”

Mohammed, whose father was imprisoned for talking against Hussein, idolizes his gruff boss, now the boy’s primary caretaker. Barely eking out an existence, the older man complains: “Only the working class got hurt. Only the rich will benefit. Where was the Dawa Party? They didn’t get rid of Saddam. Now everything is handed to them on a silver platter,” referring to the Shiite party’s position in the American puppet regime.

In a classroom, a teacher tries to motivate her students: “I want you to be the pride of the New Iraq. This step will help us push out the imperialists that control our country.” The desire to rid the country of the American occupation force is omnipresent.

The second part of *Iraq in Fragments* was filmed inside the Shia fundamentalist movement of Moqtada Sadr that operates in the southern part of the country. On the march between Nasiriyah and the holy city of Najaf, young members of Sadr’s Mehdi Army militia practice self-flagellation. It is a gruesome spectacle. Suspected petty alcohol vendors are imprisoned while their impoverished families beg for mercy. (“We’ve returned to Saddam’s times again.”) Wounded men being taken to the hospital cry out: “Where is the democracy? They took out Saddam and replaced him with 1,000 Saddams,” referring to the Shiite clerics. Meanwhile, ironically, Moqtada Sadr denounces US oppression, demagogically telling a mass rally of his disciples: “If the Americans were defeated in Vietnam, we can do it here!”

The film’s production notes assert, “As the United States provokes an armed uprising among Sadr’s followers, moderate views are swept aside.” Longley spent several months in Najaf during the rebellion against the occupation forces in 2004 and the film records interviews with fighters and civilians. The director notes the growing difficulties for journalists and filmmakers in Iraq after Al Jazeera, the Arabic television channel, broadcast scenes of the US siege and destruction of Fallujah, as well as the surfacing of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. “In an effort to contain the unrest, the United States closed down unfriendly media and handed Iraqi ‘sovereignty’ to an interim government headed by a former CIA asset,” comments Longley.

When the risks became too great and the work too difficult, Longley filmed his last material in Baghdad in September 2004 and headed to the Kurdish-controlled northern part of the country. The most articulate of the people interviewed in the film’s third segment is an elderly farmer, whose teenage son tends sheep and dreams of going to medical school. Concerned about his family’s fate, the farmer complains: “Now the Kurd leadership has grown fat, while the poor people are moaning from hunger ... Now the war is over. Today everything is controlled by the

Americans.”

A young boy angrily tells the camera: “Iraq is not something you can cut into pieces.”

Longley’s film establishes the disastrous character of the US encounter with Iraq and the almost universal hatred felt for the American occupiers.

Fernando Solanas’ *The Dignity of the Nobodies* [*La Dignidad de los Nadies*] “was conceived out of the social catastrophe that Argentina went through at the beginning of the 21st century: 25 percent unemployed and 60 percent became poor or indigent. We were able to feed 300 million people and a hundred people died a day due to hunger and curable diseases. There were more people dead every year than there were disappeared due to state terrorism. The tragedy pushed me to preserve memory against oblivion,” the veteran Argentine filmmaker explains.

The film is the second in a proposed series of four documentaries about Argentine conditions. *The Dignity of the Nobodies* and *A Social Genocide* (*Memoria del Saqueo*) (2005) are to be followed by *Latent Argentina* (*Argentina Latente*) and *The Roused Land* (*La Tierra Sublevada*).

The Dignity of the Nobodies begins with the Argentine events of December 2001, when a massive popular revolt led to the downfall of the government of Fernando de la Rúa. The demonstrations were sparked by the government’s plan to cut public spending as part of an emergency financial package demanded by the IMF. Twenty years of IMF loans and structural adjustment plans left Argentina with a ruined economy and the highest debt per capita in the world. Various governments fell during the crisis. Soon after, the new administration of President Eduardo Duhalde also came under fire from the population.

Solanas’ voice-over informs us that de la Rúa was brought down without the population having created an alternative. “What I’m going to tell you are the stories of the ‘nobodies,’ of men and women, like so many Argentines, with no resources and with no name, those who have always suffered deprivation and adversity.”

Interviews with the unemployed, young and old, the impoverished middle class, and farmers create a picture of a population surviving—and resisting—through a variety of improvised, grass-roots methods. A soup kitchen springs up in a destitute neighborhood near Buenos Aires; a camp of jobless block a highway in protest (the so-called ‘piqueteros’); a female farmer organizes her peers to defend their farms against the banks; medication is distributed by young people to those neglected by a collapsing health system; workers occupy and run a tile factory, having stopped, with the help of the community, five evictions.

One of the most heartbreaking segments treats Margarita and Colínche, homeless and unemployed, with nine children. The family endures fantastic hardship. Despite having nothing herself, Margarita’s greatest anguish is that she cannot send her children to school. If these are the circumstances in Argentina, considered the most prosperous country in South America, one can only guess at the conditions of life in the poorer regions of the continent.

Solanas’s nationalist-reformist politics are the weakest element of the film. He describes *The Dignity of the Nobodies* as part of his effort to track “the devastation and looting of the neoliberal model [and record] the reconstruction and the alternatives of a new project capable of recovering the violated rights and of democratizing democracy.” While Solanas’ is genuinely committed to exposing the horrific plight of Argentina’s poor, his films never mention the word socialism. The director’s hope that somehow Argentinean capitalism will be transformed by a vague people’s power movement is chimerical.

Last year, in a review of *A Social Genocide*, we wrote that Solanas, who has been making films since the 1960s, is a “left nationalist, but he is neither a charlatan nor a hack. He is a serious figure (he was shot six times in the legs when he denounced [Peronist Carlos] Menem’s dismantling of Argentina’s nationally owned oil company, YPF. The horrifying conditions for broad masses of the Argentine population are a reality; the

filmmaker's outrage is legitimate. To concentrate one's efforts, however, on exhorting the national elite to adopt a more populist and patriotic course is a futile enterprise. Tied to world imperialism by a thousand strings, terrified above all by the population beneath it, the Argentine ruling class 'can do not other,' no matter how much pressure is applied to it."

The final installment in Danish director Per Fly's trilogy about contemporary life in Denmark (following *The Bench* and *Inheritance*), *Manslaughter (Drabet)* centers on Carsten, a middle-aged, high school teacher, angst-ridden and bored with his marriage and staid existence. ("We don't live anymore, we just move around.") He is having an affair with former student Pil who is active in anarchist politics. When Pil is involved in the vandalizing of a munitions factory that ends with the killing of a policeman, Carsten successfully argues her case in court and helps her emotionally overcome the traumatic episode before his own life disintegrates.

The film begins as an interesting look at a rudderless middle class man in love with a youthful version of his former left-wing self. Its high point is a speech by Carsten pleading for mercy for Pil: "We have companies like Bovar [the arms manufacturer] making gun pods for F16s that fly off and kill thousands of people. We sign WTO [World Trade Organization] treaties that wage war on millions of poor. That's also violence. We have a dead police officer on one hand and a child who gets leukemia in Iraq from the EU warheads on the other. Two victims of the same war Denmark is fighting."

But the distraught policeman's widow shakes Carsten's political views and, in any case, Pil (rather facilely) turns out to be a cold-blooded murderer. Returning to the fold, Carsten's only conclusion from his messy, unconvincing (post-murder) liaison with Pil is: "I thought my life would be true, but all I did was build up a new lie." Is the director implying that his protagonist's indictment of capitalism and his earlier humane views were simply self-serving and fraudulent? The film is not entirely clear, but one suspects the worst.

Perpetual Motion by Chinese director Ning Ying is a visually lush, but self-indulgent film about four successful women celebrating Chinese New Year. The party's host, a Beijing fashion magazine editor, tries to determine which of her friends is sleeping with her husband. The women have endured the vicissitudes of the Maoist Cultural Revolution and apparently emerged triumphant. Although the director may have intended to criticize the unsavory middle class layer created by China's market economy, any insight is overwhelmed by the trivial and pointless.

About her movie, dubbed China's first "feminist" film, director Ning quipped: "Men need to have some courage to see this film. They think it's all right for them to talk openly about sex but they don't like to see women doing the same." Is the ability to speak openly about sex a real achievement in socially-polarized China?

Adam's Apple, a 'black comedy' and more misanthropic (and unpleasant) than humorous by Danish director Anders Thomas Jensen, is essentially a conformist parable apparently extolling the virtues of old-time religion amidst incomprehensible social chaos. This disoriented and somewhat hysterical return to God seems popular in Scandinavia, where the formerly complacent Social Democratic or radical intelligentsia has lost its way ... badly.

Despite claims and perhaps pretensions to the contrary, French director Xavier Beauvois's *Le Petit Lieutenant (The Little Lieutenant)* is a mediocre, boilerplate police drama. The considerable talents of Nathalie Baye are largely wasted.

To be continued





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