

Toronto International Film Festival 2006—Part 5

John Lennon vs. his celebrators

Joanne Laurier
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This is the fifth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 7-16).

The U.S. vs. John Lennon, a documentary written and directed by David Leaf and John Scheinfeld, recounts the efforts of the Nixon administration to deport the rock legend as part of its campaign to derail the movement against the Vietnam War.

In the early 1970s, top echelons of the FBI increasingly began to view John Lennon and his wife, Japanese artist Yoko Ono, as political threats. The new film brings together footage of Lennon and his struggle against the American authorities in the decade 1966-1976 with commentary by former antiwar radicals and Nixon aides.

The FBI launched its campaign of harassment against the songwriter/musician, which eventually included wiretapping, surveillance and deportation orders, at the time of a concert in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in December 1971, organized to protest the jailing of John Sinclair, member of the radical Detroit rock group MC5 and head of the state's "White Panther" movement. Essentially a political prisoner, Sinclair had been sentenced to 10 years in state prison for selling two marijuana joints to an undercover police agent. Lennon's presence and performance at the benefit concert focused international attention on the Sinclair case, and the musician was released shortly thereafter.

The documentary includes footage of the "Free John Sinclair" concert, attended by some 15,000 people. The show in Ann Arbor was Lennon's first performance in the US since the Beatles' 1966 tour. He shared the stage with Jerry Rubin, a founder of the Yippie movement, and Bobby Seale, chairman of the Black Panther Party, both members of the "Chicago Seven," who were being prosecuted for their role in organizing antiwar protests outside the Democratic Party national convention in Chicago in 1968.

"We came here to show and to say to all of you that apathy isn't it, that we can do something. Okay, so flower power didn't work. So what! We can start again," Lennon tells the gathering, as he begins to sing *John Sinclair*. The film states that following the concert, "the FBI began to see the power of John and Yoko." (The singer's period of radicalization arguably began in 1966, when he defied Beatles manager Brian Epstein and publicly denounced the Vietnam War.)

After establishing residence in New York City, Lennon and Ono devoted themselves artistically and politically to the antiwar cause, with the former Beatles song "Give Peace a Chance" adopted as its anthem. He began discussing with Rubin and Seale, as well as Abbie Hoffman, also of the Yippies, plans to organize a national concert tour that would focus on appealing to young people to register to vote in advance of the 1972 presidential election. They talked about finishing the tour in a protest rally and countercultural festival outside the Republican national convention in Miami, where Richard Nixon would be renominated in August.

In response, South Carolina Republican Senator Strom Thurmond sent a memo to Nixon's attorney general, John Mitchell, which concluded: "If Lennon were to be deported, it would be a strategic counter-measure."

The Nixon White House was particularly concerned because 1972 was the first year 18-year-olds would be able to vote in the US. These youth represented a constituency of some 11 million new voters, which in its majority was moving to the left.

The concert tour was stopped cold by Nixon's deportation orders. The film describes Rubin's provocative announcement—made without Lennon's consent—that the artist would perform outside the Miami convention. The claim put Lennon's fight against expulsion at considerable risk, and he was obliged to disassociate himself publicly from Rubin.

In a 2000 interview with democracynow.org, Jon Wiener, a contributing editor to the *Nation* and author of *Gimme Some Truth: The John Lennon FBI Files*, revealed that the FBI had some 400 pages of files on John Lennon, all dating from 1971 and 1972. Wiener also contributed commentary to *The U.S. vs. John Lennon*.

Lawyer Leon Wildes represented John and Yoko from 1972 to 1976 in their battle against deportation, eventually securing permanent residency status for them. Impressed with the pair, he movingly describes John in the Leaf/Scheinfeld movie as "a man of great principle." Film clips show Lennon being asked by reporters moments after his victory whether he would hold a grudge—to which he replies in his typically caustic manner, "I believe time wounds all heels."

The film's roster of talking heads includes ex-radicals who were targeted by the FBI, among them former US Communist Party leader Angela Davis, Seale and Yippie Stew Albert; two former FBI agents who participated in the bureau's surveillance operations; former Nixon White House staffers, G. Gordon Liddy and John Dean; and George McGovern, Nixon's unsuccessful Democratic Party opponent in the 1972 election.

The comments of Tariq Ali and Robin Blackburn, both notorious and longtime "left" opportunists in Britain, together with those of the Stalinist Davis, are notable for their lack of political and historical insight. Compared to Lennon, brimming with passion and vitality, they come across as genuine has-beens (insofar as they "ever were"), offering tidbits on what they view as a passé era. Noam Chomsky's comments are also bland and unenlightening.

Particularly irritating throughout the film are the musings of Geraldo Rivera, whose brief radical stint as a lawyer for the Puerto Rican activist group, the Young Lords, has been for decades an irrelevancy. Rivera's current employment as a reporter and program host for the far-right Fox News Channel was apparently not objectionable to the documentarians. In another affront to Lennon's memory, former New York Democratic Governor Mario Cuomo is promoted as a "left-wing" critic of the Nixon years. (Leaf enlisted Cuomo by telling him, "We want you to be our Cicero. We want you to talk about the Constitutional issues.")

Leaf and Scheinfeld have based their documentary in and around a milieu that is essentially the left flank of the political establishment today, or worse. This accounts in large measure for the failure of their stated aim of contributing a work "relevant to the dialogue in America today." How

could such people, who gave up a struggle against the powers that be decades ago, provide genuine insight into someone like Lennon? Leaf and Scheinfeld's notion of relevant dialogue omits any *anti-capitalist* views, as John Lennon's legacy warrants.

The film is tame in nearly all but its footage of Lennon, who despised the brutality of war and the hypocrisy of those who perpetrated it. The one exception to the generally low level of the present-day commentary in *The U.S. vs. John Lennon* is offered by the novelist-historian Gore Vidal, who, toward the end of the film, proclaims, "John Lennon represented life; Mr. Nixon and Mr. Bush represent death."

A young girl riding a horse in a wild gallop on a crowded Cairo street opens the remarkable documentary *These Girls (El-Banate Dol)* by Egyptian-Canadian filmmaker Tahani Rached. The rider appears totally uninhibited, as if jockeying for position in a country horse race rather than urban chaos. This is Tata, one of the street teens who are the subjects of Rached's film.

Tata, Maryam, Abeer, Reda and Donya live in cardboard boxes and abandoned cars, sniff glue for comfort and take care of each other and the children they conceive—either the products of rape or a need for affection. Left on their own by an unmerciful social structure and at odds with parents who are in many cases more oppressed than their children, the girls, captured unsentimentally by the film, are strong, creative and bold. Without education and guidance and, at times, with senses dulled by pills and glue, the girls crave a normal existence.

Their world is one in which the roles of lover and abuser are often interchangeable, yet they express vulnerability and openness ("I can love and be loved," and "When I love someone, I really love them"). Scarred, damaged bodies are the vessels of still-tender spirits.

Rached spent four months probing a neglected universe, winning the trust of its inhabitants. "Most people don't see these girls, they give them a pound and half a glance, and that's it," Rached told *Al-Ahram*. "I was intrigued.... I went to see these girls every day and I just hung out on the street. One girl, Tata, was my guide. She would walk beside me and carry my bag. I felt safe and secure with her. I was ignorant and keen to learn, and they taught me. They could easily have chosen not to teach me. They could have dismissed the whole thing and taken it lightly. But they didn't do that and they took me in and taught me."

The girls wanted people to know and understand them, said the documentarian. "The responsibility was shared between us—it was not me that was making a film, we were working on something together."

The abandoned teens understand more than one might expect, given their circumstances. This is expressed when one of them achingly tells the camera, "You can't hide what's in your heart, you could burst! You have to talk. You see, people are not all the same, if people were all equal, then we wouldn't have been on the street, my brother would not have been arrested."

Given the fact that any imminent improvement in conditions of life in Egypt is unlikely, there is always the danger that a film like this will end up making a virtue out of necessity. In other words, to suggest simply, "They live in such misery, but how vibrant they are!" No, outrage is called for, and it would be better to order one's thoughts in this fashion: "How vibrant they are...but they live in such misery!"

On March 24, 1976, a military junta overthrew the Argentine government of Isabel Perón and remained in power until 1983. Israel Adrián Caetano's laudable *Chronicle of an Escape (Crónica de una fuga)* recounts the escape of a group of young men from a detention center known as Seré Mansion or Attila, where every day for four months, they were physically and mentally tortured.

Inspired by a book written by one of the escapees, Claudio Tamburrini, the film shows the horrors inflicted by the military regime. During the junta's rule, the Governor of Buenos Aires, General Ibérico Manuel Saint-Jean, chillingly boasted, "First we will kill all the subversives, then their

collaborators, then the sympathizers, then the indifferent and finally the fearful." The portrayal of this mandate is well executed by the filmmakers.

Repression enters a phase that has "no natural or moral limits," according to the fascist Lieutenant-Colonel Pascarelli. Rendered in detail is the brutal mistreatment of Claudio, Guillermo, Gallego and El Vasco. How they survived the abuse until they summoned the strength and morale to carry out an escape is the core of the movie.

Rodrigo de la Serna, who plays Claudio, was born the year of the coup. In the film's production notes, he explains that of the 30,000 "disappeared" people, only the fate of some 10,000 are known. The actor points to the role of the CIA, noting that the government unquestionably "received a great deal of logistical help with its program of 'disappearance.'"

Says de la Serna: "Without any doubt, the entire youth of the 1970s was politicized. This was the best-educated generation since the universities were opened to the working class in the 1940s. The coup d'état was a program to eliminate the children of this generation, so hungry for change. We are still paying the price. As a child of this generation, I know it only too well...."

"Claudio was a witness in the trials of the Military in 1985, but they were trials of the most visible faces, the most exposed: the commanders-in-chiefs and other senior officers. But for the entire labor force that implemented this grisly plan, we don't know their names...and there are a lot of them. That's why I repeat this idea of 'the whole truth.' Who were they? Where are they?"

The danger represented by the military in Argentina has far from disappeared. Any examination of the 1976-1983 period is the opposite of an academic exercise, but rather a perpetual *warning* about the measures to which the Argentine ruling elite in crisis will resort and the urgency of constructing a new revolutionary socialist leadership. The exposure of the horrendous crimes of the Argentine bourgeoisie, carried out by its military hirelings and with the assistance of American authorities, remains a critical political and intellectual task of our day.

In 2006, the government of Chad granted amnesty to all those responsible for war crimes committed during a civil war that took the lives of more than 40,000 people. In *Daratt (Dry Season)*, a fictional account of the aftermath of this amnesty, 16-year-old Atim is given a gun by his blind grandfather and told to exact vengeance for the killing of his father.

Leaving his village for N'djamena, Atim quickly tracks down and comes face to face with his father's assassin, the war criminal Nassara. The latter, now a baker, unwittingly takes Atim on as an apprentice. Atim's dilemma grows as Nassara assumes the role of father figure, becoming more intent on treating the youth as a son. At times—for example, a scene where Atim considers killing Nassara while the older man is praying—one assumes that the film intends to bring Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to mind.

Elegantly and precisely made, *Daratt* is marred by its rather abstract and ahistorical theme of forgiveness. In the film's production notes, director Mahamat-Saleh Haroun offers a more grounded perspective: "The civil war in Chad had been going on since 1965, claiming countless victims. I knew a great many of the 40,000 killed or missing under the reign of Hissène Habré.... I know many of the players in this tragedy, and have even rubbed shoulders with a few. They have killed, raped, burned, sacked and brought sorrow...attacking the most vulnerable who, ultimately, are society's rejects."

"Yesterday's executioners have become today's men of power, strutting about with impunity.... How do we react faced with such impunity? Resign yourself to it or choose to mete out justice?" Unfortunately, the description of these men in power, "strutting about," does not jibe with the presentation of Nassara, a poor baker of bread, who has not apparently benefited from any crimes he committed. What are we

to conclude?

Although an individual may try to resign himself or herself to injustice, as Atim eventually does, this is not an advisable path for the mass of the population in any country today.

A new recolonization of Africa is underway, with the former colonial powers such as Britain and France seeking to reassert their interests, while America is also intervening aggressively. Chad, as an important oil producer, figures into these machinations.

Prominent Iranian filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Mohsen Abdolvahad co-directed *Mainline* (*Khoon Bazi*), which deals with the issue of drug addiction. Sara (played by Bani-Etemad's daughter, Baran Kosari) attempts to overcome a severe heroin dependency before her wedding. Her fiancé is soon to arrive from his studies abroad, and what tortures Sara is that he is unaware of her problem. He keeps asking why her face is covered with so much makeup in the videos they exchange.

Sara's mother struggles with the bride-to-be's reckless and self-destructive behavior. She also worries that her daughter will be unmarriageable, if exposed. When Sara needs a fix, prostitution is not out of the question. The film makes clear that having a privileged background is not insurance against alienation and hopelessness. In fact, Bani-Etemad stands out in Iranian cinema for her portrayals of the country's various social classes. In *Under the Skin of the City* (2001), she exposed the harshness of working class life in suburban Tehran.

Filming in a black-and-white, neo-realistic tradition, Bani-Etemad and Abdolvahad draw on research undertaken for a 1995 documentary about widespread drug use among Iranian youth, who constitute some 70 percent of the population. A well-made and sensitive film, *Mainline*, however, seems both somewhat narrower than Bani-Etemad's recent films and burdened with an air of discouragement that may have its roots beyond the undoubted scourge of substance abuse.

The narrow focus may have something to do with the generally difficult conditions facing Iranian filmmakers, under constant scrutiny by the authorities. But the film also seems somewhat resigned to an unhappy reality. Last year in Toronto, when we spoke with co-director Bani-Etemad, she said, "I would say that we as filmmakers in Iran are swimmers in a huge ocean who are struggling very hard to keep afloat." There is perhaps something of this struggle in *Mainline*.

Picketing workers near Naples are protesting the loss of jobs from the closure of a steel mill. Further, the factory's blast furnace is being dismantled and moved to China. This sets the stage for *The Missing Star* (*La stella che non c'è*) directed by veteran Italian director Gianni Amelio. Based on the novel *The Dismissal*, the film sensitively treats the process of globalization and its effects on the bond between a middle-aged Italian man, Vincenzo, and a young Chinese woman, Liu Hua.

Vincenzo is the soon-to-be-redundant maintenance manager of the Naples mill, who realizes that the furnace has a technical flaw that could potentially result in the loss of life. Determined to rectify the situation, he travels to China, unaware that the machinery has changed hands and been sold to a steel mill deep inside the country's industrial heartland. He seeks out the aid of Liu Hua, a translator and, at first, it appears that the arrangement will be mutually beneficial. But under the weight of personal and economic pressures, Vincenzo and Liu Hua's relationship becomes more complex as they travel across a country beset by vast social problems.

With beauty and skill, the film touches on the dimensions of China's massive and rapid industrial transformation. "Five years ago, there wasn't even a grocery store," says Liu Hua as she and Vincenzo enter a bustling village. A young boy asks if Italians are Iraqis. *The Missing Star* is an aesthetic look at the power of globalization and its socially destructive impact under capitalism.

To be continued



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