

Toronto International Film Festival 2006—Part 6

Where death threatens to be more real than life

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This is the sixth and final article in a series devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 7-16).

The conditions of life for broad layers of the population of Africa, left essentially for dead by imperialism, are catastrophic. Thirty three percent of sub-Saharan Africans are under-nourished, a figure that rises to 55 percent in the countries of central Africa.

It is estimated that by the year 2020 a full twenty percent of the agricultural workforce in southern African countries will have succumbed to AIDS. Africa is now home to two-thirds of those suffering from the disease. Only a fraction of this HIV/AIDS population has access to treatment that can prolong life. The debt crisis—African governments, even after the fraud of ‘debt cancellation,’ continue to pay tens of billions of dollars annually to creditors in the advanced countries—renders decent health care for masses of people an impossibility.

Bamako (named after its setting, the capital city of Mali), directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, takes the form of a trial of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank held in the courtyard of a communal dwelling. One set of lawyers argues for “African society,” another in defense of the financial institutions. The trial of course is invented, but the lawyers and judges are real.

In the courtyard, picking their way around the hearing, people go about their daily activities. Those who work do work—a group of women dyes material, for instance. Those who have no work, look on or listen to a radio broadcast of the proceedings, sit and discuss their difficulties, stare and say nothing, make money as they can, consider leaving.

Individuals, some with names, appear in the foreground from time to time. A young singer, Melé (Aïssa Maïga), is threatening to leave her husband, Chaka (Tiécoura Traoré), and move to Senegal. Falai (Habib Dembélé), a cameraman, makes videos for wedding parties and the police; he prefers filming the dead, he says, because “they’re more real.” A man lies alone in one of the rooms off the courtyard, apparently terminally ill. A couple gets married. Everyday events interrupt the mock trial’s speeches and testimony.

Witnesses, including workers laid off as the result of privatization of public services, provide an angry commentary on the impact of the IMF and World Bank “structural adjustment” policy. They link the relentless foreign debt repayment to the destruction of social services in Africa. “Pay or die, that’s the West’s lesson,” says one. Another rejects the talk about “free trade” and an “open world.” “We don’t live in an open world, African refugees are returned.”

Along those lines, a witness describes his efforts, along with 30 others, to enter Morocco to look for work. Moroccan forces picked up the group and left them to fend for themselves in the desert. “Then the Algerians shot at us.” The economic refugees walked for a week. One woman from Ghana, who had dressed up as a man, had to be left in the desert. “Only

ten survived without difficulty.”

Sissako interrupts his own film to present a brief “spaghetti Western,” starring Danny Glover (who helped finance the film) and Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, among others. A group of cowboys, on a “mission,” shoots up a town, in “Death in Timbuktu.”

Back at the trial, a professor denounces the consequences of 100 years of colonization. He asks, how is it possible that a leading gold-producing country could be poor? In Africa, with malnutrition, undernourishment, chronic unemployment, “We have reached the last threshold of the human heartbeat.” The “corrupt, rotten” administration in Mali is condemned too.

A female witness describes the Malian public railway system as having been “the victim of a conspiracy.” Privatize the rail system or cut the subsidies, ordered the World Bank. A country, she says, without transportation, communication or energy is not truly a sovereign country.

Fifty million African children are expected to die in the next five years, one of the lawyers “for Africa” alleges in his summation. The foreign debt is a millstone around the continent’s neck, amounting to \$220 billion in 2003. The major powers and the World Bank are “bringing Africa to her knees,” on behalf of “predatory capitalism.” Paul Wolfowitz, head of the World Bank, sheds “crocodile tears” for the world’s poor, but this is the “man behind the war in Iraq.” The final argument ends weakly, however, with a call to “civilize” the IMF and World Bank.

Meanwhile, the singer, Melé, has left for Senegal. Chaka, her husband, is driven to take desperate measures.

The work has many strong and honest moments, and striking images. The filmmaker does not idealize anyone, but neither does he indulge in cynicism or despair. *Bamako* suggests that the economic conditions have strengthened the resolve of some, engendered despair, and even depravity, in others. Many of the facts presented in the testimony are devastating, as are the presence and anger of a number of the witnesses.

Sissako has done well to suggest the various sides of African life, including the humorous and the intimate. This is in keeping with his previous feature films, *Life on Earth* and *Waiting for Happiness*, which managed to be both outraged and delicate, an unusual feat in this day and age. The director’s voice is one of the most articulate in the African cinema.

In a conversation in Toronto, I asked Sissako how he had arrived at this particular structure for his “trial.” He replied, “I think that the structure is driven by the fact that from the moment when one invents something improbable, one must give it a certain form to make it more accessible, less formal, so one doesn’t fall into a situation that is more or less a caricature.”

The modest house in the film, with a family's. To place the work there, adds the director, "is a way for me to say that what takes place here, the trial, belongs to the people. It belongs to the people because they are the ones who live daily with the consequences [of IMF-World Bank policy]. If they do not normally have the means to express themselves on this, the cinema can give this possibility to them." He also wanted to show "a society fundamentally and inevitably strong and dignified. I think this dimension is very important."

Sissako spoke of the general conditions facing the African population and the IMF-World Bank policy of "structural adjustment," under which money is lent to the various countries with many strings attached. He explained, "This principle of structural adjustment has reduced the capacity of the state to involve itself in education, in health, and thus, to render people poorer and poorer and also place them in an economically precarious situation. That is to say, one can finish one education, but not find work. The common result is the inability to get out of a crisis, to find work, to take care of one's health, and in some cases, even to mobilize oneself."

The filmmaker argued that "those who believe in solidarity, cultural, family, with their fellow creatures—they have less despair." If one, however, believes the government and social system cannot be altered, "one despairs, because one does not see the real possibility of a change."

He spoke of the terrible struggles of the young to survive and have a future. Those who try to emigrate, without documents, take "incredible risks, risks that human beings should not take. Because how does a youth of 20 or 22, who doesn't even know how to swim, agree to get into a little boat and cross the ocean for days. This form of collective suicide shows to what point the despair has reached."

I asked about the brief Western, starring Danny Glover, in the middle of his film. "The Western is something that has two meanings for me. The first is that I was making a film, not recording a trial. Thus it was necessary to assist the audience in accepting this form. The Western is a moment where we travel in an easier, more cinematic universe, but it was necessary that it had a meaning as well, a relationship to the situation. The meaning for me of the Western is that it is a mission ... the supposedly civilizing, pacifying, tranquil mission. [The 'cowboys,' black and white, in fact, shoot up the town.] Not simply white, but black too. We in Africa too have a share of the blame. This shows the co-responsibility, of those who accept."

What role can cinema play in the social process?

"When a person is confronted by himself," Sissako stated, "according to the principle of looking into a mirror, he asks questions of himself more readily. And, unhappily, the cinema doesn't exist very much in Africa. Every day people are confronted by images that are not their own, that do not reflect their lives. When that is the case, there is a process of acculturation. I think the cinema is very important. Because I can see that I am weak, but I can also see that I am strong. Thus, this conscious grasp of one's reality is so critical."

"The state of African cinema in general is catastrophic. Because there is already hardly an industry that exists, except perhaps in North Africa a little, or South Africa. When there is no industry it is very, very difficult to make films. It becomes very costly. I think perhaps the most difficult, the most regrettable, is the lack of vision—political vision on the part of the state. The state does not see culture as a part of development. And the fact

that the state is not conscious of that is proven by the cuts in funds for culture and arts. Culture is not financed. And so you have countries that in the course of 10 years make one film, or every 20 years, or that have not yet made a film. And that is a difficult situation."

Bamako contains both documentary and fiction elements. I asked, "Does that come from the urgency of the situation or from an artistic choice?"

The filmmaker said, "I think that it's both. It's an important question. But I have the impression that it's more a matter of the urgency. I had the desire to make a more direct film. It's as though the somewhat roundabout, poetic forms are a little complacent. Today one must dare, one must stick one's neck out. A film will not change the situation, but it's important that the West realizes that Africa is conscious of its situation. We can't change it perhaps, in the short-term."

I noted that one of the lawyers in the film, who spoke very passionately, very forcefully, called for the humanization of the IMF and the World Bank. I expressed my disagreement with this conception. "This will never happen," I said. "Capitalism is impossible for the world's population."

Sissako nodded in agreement, "This is clear. I believe in that. Humanity needs to take a real leap, because it's not right that two institutions [the IMF and the World Bank] direct the world, and direct the world on the basis of a failed vision—for the people, not for the banks of course, with the most terrible consequences for everyone. The world is not just, the world is not harmonious. There is not one world, there are at least two: the world of those who are rich and the world of those who are poor. And the reflex of these institutions is to defend their interests."

"I think a new international perspective is indispensable, and possible. We are trying to do something with this film, *Bamako*, in France, to make people sensitive and conscious of the situation. People begin to react because the questions are not African ones. I use Africa, because the consequences are more visible, but it is a global reality."

How could China not loom large in global cinema? *Bliss*, from Chinese director Sheng Zhimin (born 1969), is a somewhat melancholy, but intelligent glimpse at a few lives in the provincial city of Chongqing. A policeman, Lao Li, was left by his second wife years ago. His grown-up son, Jian-jun, a taxi-driver, is married to Xiao-hong. The cop has married a second time to Xiue, who also has a son by a first marriage: a teenager, Lei, who hangs around with "hooligans."

Jian-jun, we assume, has been affected by his mother's disappearance and his father's life as a policeman. A stifled soul, he hardly appears to react to events. If he does, it's to argue for the line of least resistance. He is one of those people whose anger at life and other people takes the form of hostile abstention.

In one of the film's earliest, but most significant scenes, Jian-jun tells his wife to accept the payment that her old employer is offering its workers. At the workers' meeting, Hong does just that. Others ask, "Why did you take the money? You betrayed us!" She's more isolated than ever, and resents her husband for it. She goes on to have an affair, but when Jian-jun catches her at it, he doesn't bat an eye.

His father meanwhile is searching for the right cemetery plot—whether for himself or for his ex-wife, it's not entirely clear. In any event, the ex-wife becomes ill, in a far-off town, and Jian-jun goes to visit her. We never learn what occurs during the visit, but his mother eventually dies.

At a dinner, the policeman and his second wife, their two children and the one daughter-in-law, are all in attendance. "We're all here, I'm so happy," announces Lao Li. Everyone looks miserable. They all leave, as soon as possible, one by one. Generally, people are not too comfortable with each other.

Hong, the son's wife, becomes pregnant. By whom? Her husband insists, "We're keeping this baby." It turns out to be a false pregnancy, but she comes down with a real illness, cancer of the uterus.

Father and son are now searching for gravesites. In hospital, Hong speaks up, finally, after years of marriage. She says to her husband, "Why

did you choose me? Because I'm simple and stupid." She complains that she never knows what's on his mind. Referring to the settlement with her old employer, she accuses him: "You told me to accept 3000 Yuan. None of them talk to me any more. Get out! I won't listen to your advice any more." He leaves, but he sticks by her, in his peculiar, emotionless manner.

Finally, a cemetery plot to their liking! The mother is buried. Lao Li reads out her sad last letter, "I'm in hospital ..." it begins.

The film has something to it, although the director's comments don't indicate any great interest in the social situation in China. Inadvertently or not, he has given an honest picture of people struggling to get by, with terribly little, materially or spiritually, to go on.

In *True North*, written and directed by Steve Hudson, Sean (Martin Compston), the son of a Scottish trawler's skipper agrees, with the connivance of his right-hand man, Riley (Peter Mullan), to smuggle two dozen undocumented Chinese immigrants from Belgium across the North Sea to Britain. The fishing boat is not doing well, not even catching enough to make payments to the bank. Sean doesn't tell his father (Gary Lewis) about the smuggling operation. One of the Chinese group, a young girl (Angel Li), doesn't make it to the hold; she hides and begins stealing from the galley.

The scheme looks to be easy money, except that once at sea, the skipper remains determined to haul in fish. The net keeps coming up empty, and the vessel stays out, while conditions in the hold, where the Chinese men and women sit in the cold, in the dark, without proper sanitation. Finally, one of the group dies, and Sean and Riley throw the body overboard. The skipper sees the operation, and the truth is revealed. A greater tragedy awaits.

One inspiration for *True North*, according to the director's statement, was provided by the deaths of 50 undocumented Chinese immigrants, locked inside a container on the back of a truck that had crossed from Ostend, in Belgium, to Dover. Another came from two visits that Hudson paid to Fraserburgh, in northeast Scotland, "a town that has lived from fishing for hundreds of years." During the second trip, two years after the first, Hudson learned that "half of the fishing fleet—more than a hundred ships—had been scrapped. The town is watching the only reason for its existence slowly die. We live in a world where survival is no longer a right."

Hudson's film is by no means flawless. As a director, he is prepared to place considerable confidence in his actors, including the very talented Peter Mullan, and that is not a bad thing. It does not come as a surprise, however, that the director (born in London in 1969) has a history as a performer himself. At times the dramatic confrontations become somewhat overwrought, nearly ends in themselves, and threaten to overshadow what ought to be the work's central concern, the plight of "economic migrants." Still, the filmmaker is obviously driven by important concerns, and has found a means of representing them, at least in part.

Director Lou Ye was officially banned from making films in China for five years for defying authorities and taking his *Summer Palace* to the Cannes festival earlier this year. This action on the part of the Chinese authorities is deplorable and Lou ought to be defended by anyone who cares about artistic freedom.

The film centers on two students in Beijing in the late 1980s, Yu Hong (Hao Lei) and Zhou Wei (Guo Xiaodong), who become passionately involved on the eve of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Students flock en masse to the protests, which are met by brute force. In Lou's film, one of the characters returns to the dormitory and denounces the authorities as "f---ing bastards."

Lou (*Suzhou River*, *Purple Butterfly*) has every right to depict these events, or any other, in any fashion he chooses. That's the side of the matter that involves democratic rights. As a film, however, *Summer*

Palace is a self-indulgent exercise, a paean to "amour fou," that feels deeply false. The repeated and explicit sex scenes may represent the breaking of some taboo in China, but they are pointless and dull. "As soon as love arrives, life is knocked off-balance," we are informed. Perhaps, but it ought not to disappear entirely, as it does in this film. In fact, although the 1989 events occur within the work's framework, one learns next to nothing about them.

It's all rather silly, and one grows especially tired of Yu's little unhappy face. The dialogue is sparse, intended to be meaningful; after a while it only seems a parody of a certain type of filmmaking without spontaneity or real engagement with life. This is one of those films intended to impress.

The Sugar Curtain and *The Silly Age* concern themselves with life in Cuba. The first is a documentary, directed by Camila Guzmán Urzúa (daughter of Patricio Guzmán, director of *The Battle of Chile*, on the military coup that overthrew the government of Salvador Allende), who grew up in Cuba. She contrasts her memories of childhood with the present-day realities.

"I grew up in Cuba in the seventies and eighties. I remember it was like paradise ... a place without anxiety, problems or violence. My friends and I were Pioneers and we had a peaceful lifestyle. We all felt equal and neither unemployment nor religion existed. Solidarity reigned everywhere and in the streets there was no publicity, no rush. I remember being very happy."

No doubt Guzmán's memories are colored somewhat, and she clearly grew up as part of the Cuban elite; nonetheless, her picture of the changes that have taken place in post-Soviet Cuba—the economic impoverishment, the political disillusionment—have the ring of truth. Along the way, she reveals the naïveté and unpreparedness of an entire layer of intellectuals and others whose politics were national in character and bound up with the existence of the Stalinist bureaucracy, directly or indirectly. She acknowledges, "I believed in perestroika," and rapturously greeted Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Havana. We were going to have a "more tolerant socialism."

Guzmán interviews members of her own generation, those relatively few who have remained in Cuba, as to the dramatic changes that have taken place in economic and even moral life since the early 1990s. She also speaks to workers and housewives, who explain that the minimum income still guaranteed by the state is not enough to cover the most elementary needs, "Nobody can get by. What do people do? They steal."

There is a tragic element to Guzmán's account. Moreover, the circumstances within which she was raised were not of her choosing. However, history has a coldhearted manner of exposing frauds, and the Castroite-Guevarist "road to socialism" was one such fraud. The day of this brand of national-revolutionary politics is long gone.

The Silly Age (directed by Pavel Giroud) takes place in Cuba in 1958, on the eve of the revolution that would bring Castro to power. Samuel (Iván Carreira), a ten-year-old, and his mother Alicia (Susana Tejera) have just returned to town, to live with the boy's cantankerous grandmother Violeta (Mercedes Sampietro), a photographer. The film follows the boy's growing interest in photography, and the opposite sex. It's sensitively and even sensuously done on the whole, but it has that slightly abstract air that many Cuban films have, as though only relatively distant, and ultimately inoffensive, approximations of life and society were permissible.

I have not been fond of Robert Guédiguian's films about working class life in Marseilles (*Marius and Jeannette*, *The Town is Quiet*, *My Father is an Engineer*, etc.). Formerly associated with the Communist Party, Guédiguian has seemed to me both moralizing and pessimistic, not armed with any real understanding of the roots of the present political and moral crisis of the French working class. Like a great many in and around the Stalinist milieu, he tends to imply that the present difficulties are the population's own fault.

A change of scenery can sometimes help. Armenia (*Le Arménie*) is not a major breakthrough, but this account of a Franco-Armenian woman's visit to post-Soviet Armenia is more varied and lively, less stagnant, it seems to me, than Guédiguian's Marseilles films. And it sheds a little light on the situation in that unhappy land.

German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff has fashioned an account of the origins of the Solidarity movement in Poland, in *Strike*, based on the life of Anna Walentynowicz, here renamed Agnieszka Kowalska, the worker at the Gdansk shipyards whose actions helped lead to the birth of the independent union movement.

Schlöndorff, who, one would have thought, might have known better, treats the role of the Catholic Church and the Pope, Lech Walesa and so on entirely uncritically. Given the present dangerous situation in Hungary, and political conditions in Poland are not so terribly different, a treatment of the downfall of the Stalinist regimes that does not take into consideration the political and economic disaster that has emerged verges on the intellectually irresponsible.

Concluded



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