

San Francisco International Film Festival 2007

Part 1: For honesty and urgency in filmmaking

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This is the first of a series of articles on the 2007 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 26-May 10.

The recent San Francisco film festival, its 50th edition, screened some 200 films (108 features) from 54 countries. The largest number of films from any individual country, by far, came from the US, followed by France, Germany, Italy and Canada. A relative handful of films came from Africa, some of them important, and a somewhat larger number from Latin America, whose cinema is showing new signs of life. Asia contributed its share, but without, in general, extraordinary distinction. There was one film each from Iran and Taiwan, reflecting in some fashion the impasse that the film industries in those countries have reached.

Festival organizers bestowed various awards on filmmakers Spike Lee and George Lucas, screenwriter Peter Morgan (*The Queen*), actor Robin Williams, film historian and preservationist Kevin Brownlow and documentarian Heddy Honigmann.

Well-known theater and artistic director Peter Sellars delivered the festival's annual "State of Cinema" address April 29. According to a press account, in his remarks, Sellars "came repeatedly back to the rise of fascism in Europe to underscore the challenges facing art and humanity today. Stressing how digital media empower global voices in the new century ... he ranged over millennia and continents in pursuit of his theme, touching perhaps closest to home with reference to California's runaway prison industry and draconian immigration policies, which Sellars laid out in the starkest and most chilling of terms.

"At this moment," he argued, "where all over the world governments are the problem not the solution, we need to create as artists another possibility for a new set of states to which we can belong, adhere, subscribe, and that does have something deeply to do with what we believe in, hope for, and care about." (*SF360*)

A day earlier actor Danny Glover appeared at a press conference before a public screening of *Bamako*, the indictment of IMF and World Bank policy in Africa directed by Mali's Abderrahmane Sissako, on which he served as executive producer (see WSWs review here). Glover spoke about "the growing debt, the growing inequality" in Africa and the devastation wrought by current "neo-liberal" economic policy.

In response to a question from a WSWs reporter about the current deplorable state of the American cinema, Glover praised such films as *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *Syriana*, then spoke about the need for a "real democratization" of the US film industry. He criticized those who were "married to a paradigm of success" that only measured box-office results. "We need to look beyond the media for a real picture of the world," he suggested.

The most interesting films at this year's San Francisco festival were the honest and urgent ones, works that attempt at least to show in an artistic fashion how people live and what they think and how they feel ("our life of three dimensions"), and what their strengths are and also their shortcomings.

The artists of course can do whatever they like, but to create work that has a profound impact and that endures, they need to bring important realities to bear, the truly indispensable realities. People are curious about everything, they love spectacle and drama. This can take morbid and cheap voyeuristic forms (and too often does at present), but it needn't.

One of the keen interests that people have, or can develop—if encouraged!—is a fascination with history and the nature of their own society. This may take the form of novels, plays or films that concentrate in their individual stories the most challenging moral dilemmas of the day.

Cinema at present often falls far short of satisfying or even addressing humanity's broader interests. We experience too much narrowness and self-involvement and egoism, lacking in depth and breadth.

Some of the more successful films in San Francisco included *Rome Rather Than You* (directed by Tariq Teguia) from Algeria; *The Old Garden* (Im Sang-Soo) from South Korea; *Strange Culture* (Lynn Herschman Leeson) from the US; *Love for Sale: Suely in the Sky* (Karim Ainouz) from Brazil; *Fish Dreams* (Kirill Mikhaylovsky) from Brazil-Russia-US; *Sounds of Sand* (Marion Hänsel) from Belgium-France; *Violin* (Francisco Vargas) from Mexico; *A Walk to Beautiful* (Mary Olive Smith) from Ethiopia-US and *The Rape of Europa* (Richard Berge, Bonni Cohen and Nicole Newnham), about the Nazi looting of European art.

There were remarkable moments in *After This Our Exile* (Patrick Tam) from Hong Kong-Malaysia and *The Yacoubian Building* (Marwan Hamed) from Egypt. *Singapore Dreaming* (Yen Yen Woo and Colin Goh) from, naturally, Singapore and *Fresh Air* (Ágnes Kocsis) from Hungary deserve some mention as well.

In *Rome Rather Than You*, Kamel and Zina are two young people in Algiers seeking a way out of a dysfunctional situation. "Come with me to Rome," he says. "Marseilles, Barcelona, Naples, America." He adds ironically, "Hurray for globalization!" She's more skeptical about departing. She works in a clinic, including doing the mopping up. In a restaurant, he reads a newspaper with the headline, "Massacre near Algiers." In the bloody struggle between the bourgeois nationalist

establishment and Islamic fundamentalists from 1992 to 2002, 160,000 people died. Nothing has been resolved.

The pair go looking for a man who can provide false travel documents. All they know is he lives in a house with “concrete pillars and a garage.” They drive around a non-descript suburb, where the houses look alike and many appear unfinished. There are no street signs because “they don’t put them up until everything is built.” They ask about the individual in question, adding, “We’re not here to assassinate him.”

Kamel goes into a bar, still searching for this man, while Zina waits in the car borrowed from his uncle. Kamel meets someone he knows. They talk about life. “The best thing is a drunken sleep on the shore.” “Who said that, Cheb Hasni [famed Algerian popular singer, murdered in 1994 by fundamentalists]?” “No, Rimbaud—they understood each other.”

Independent, even a little pouty, Zina wanders down to the sea, the two men approach her. Kamel upbraids her for not waiting in the car. She says, “We were going to the beach, but you brought me to this lousy neighborhood.”

In the best (and lengthiest) scene of the film, while sitting in a café, Kamel, Zina and his friend are descended upon by a bunch of policemen. They know that Kamel is looking for a smuggler and phony papers, although he admits nothing. The cops are bullying, insulting, they work as a team. Their leader wants to intimidate Kamel and Zina, but he also philosophizes. He asks rhetorically, “In your opinion, has America a point of view on the world, or only interests?” He goes on about the US, “Coca-Cola and *hijab* [woman’s head-scarf], Coca-Cola and tight jeans, but always Coca-Cola.”

The cops take the trio to the police station, and hold them there for a few hours. After their release, they drive around, lost. And there’s still a curfew. They stay the night at the house of someone they know. Everyone is at loose ends, or fairly depressed. An ex-journalist tells Kamel, “They don’t print my articles.”

When they’re alone, Kamel tells Zina, “Come on, be brave, and I’ll take you to Antwerp.” “I don’t want anything,” she says. The question of a forged Swiss passport comes up. Zina points out, “How can we be Swiss?” She goes on, speaking of emigrating to Europe, “Am I supposed to live there as an illegal?” He replies, “How do you live here?,” and she has no answer for that.

Kamel can be romantic too: “I want to hear your breathing. The breathing of a living girl.”

Out of the blue, or perhaps not, tragedy strikes.

Rome Rather Than You is intelligently and sensitively made. One gets a sense of the mood and feelings of a certain generation, or one portion of a generation: young people who want no part of either side in the civil war, and who perhaps want no part of Algeria either. Nor do they have great expectations of what they will encounter in Europe. The film doesn’t condemn or condone, it considers their difficult situation.

Director Tariq Teguia, in his notes, explains, referring to his two main characters, “No, the girls don’t all lower their eyes in the street; yes, many young Algerian men wish to get out! Not only for material reasons—work, housing—but as a rejection, even an unconscious one, of an imprisoning society.”

He also writes that the film is “as much about politics as girls, cigarettes and terrorism, false papers and water cut-offs, in the language of those who pass through it. All arranged in a disorderly fashion to better understand what the social situation prevents the characters from having ...”

It is not a demoralized work, although aspects of the situation it presents are potentially demoralizing: the oppressive atmosphere, the ubiquitous police, the fundamentalist Islamic presence, the lack of economic opportunity, the wasted *political* opportunities, the sense of being hemmed in and vulnerable to attack from any number of sides. In Algeria, the director explains, there is no “zone of open conflict. Violence is brief,

even if it so happens that it takes the bloodiest forms ... A daily event, violence is no less present. It is not extraordinary, it is the ordinariness of everyday life.” Nonetheless, Teguia speaks of his hope “of bringing to life the joy lodged under the weight of the violence.”

The characters and their words ring true. They speak directly, but not simplistically. A good deal is said or implied about their situation without shouting or straining. This Algerian film has a level of moral and social sophistication that is sadly lacking in most American and most European films at present.

Something similar might be said of *Love for Sale: Suely in the Sky* from Brazil. Its story is even simpler. Hermila returns to the town of Iguatu—in the extreme northeastern part of the country—from São Paulo, with her infant son in her arms. Her husband, Mateus, is meant to follow her. “It’s expensive in São Paulo, we decided to come back.” She stays with her somewhat disapproving grandmother and her aunt, waiting for Mateus to show up. She makes regular trips to the pay-phone: “I love you too. I miss you. When are you coming?” It becomes painfully clear to us, and later to Hermila, that he is not coming. In fact, he vanishes in the city.

Hermila tries to get by, washing cars and selling raffle tickets. She takes up with an old boy-friend, but that relationship holds limited promise. She too wants to get away, to another part of the country and make a fresh start (she asks at the bus station for the name of the farthest possible destination—“Write that down, please”). Her best friend is a prostitute, Georgina. Hermila decides to raffle herself off. The holder of the winning ticket will get “A night in paradise.” She adopts the name “Suely” and begins selling tickets around town. It causes something of a scandal, her grandmother throws her out of the house, but she’s determined to go through with it.

Here too are more or less straightforward events and a sympathetic approach. People’s great difficulties as well as their pleasures are taken seriously. Director Karim Aïnouz (*Madame Satā*) explains, “When I look around Brazil, one question haunts me: what kind of future awaits a young woman from humble means, especially if she also has a child to raise and a body bursting with desires and aspirations?”

He notes that “Iguatu is a place of intense heat, unforgiving sun and vast blue skies. It is a remote small city in the middle of an extensive, deserted plain. It is a city where more people leave than stay. It’s a place of passage where the 21st century seems to arrive in small pieces, in fragments that echo a distant future. For most, it’s a place of departure. ...

“I wanted to portray its daily life, without exoticizing it. The Northeast of Brazil [the director’s birthplace as well] is a region that is also notorious for the amount of people who leave. Since the quality of life there is not very favorable, a lot of its young population leave to Rio and São Paulo searching for work.”

Why is “Suely” (Hermila) “in the sky”? Because, writes Aïnouz, the sky “is a faraway place where anyone can be happy. The sky is everywhere and nowhere. The film is Hermila’s steps on how to get there.” That her hopes are mostly illusory and that things won’t be dramatically different in another town are not insignificant matters.

Also set in northeastern Brazil, though made by a Russian-born and US-educated filmmaker, Kirill Mikhankovsky, *Fish Dreams* takes the lives of its characters seriously as well. Jusce, a young fisherman and an orphan, dives every day 30-40 meters, illegally, for lobsters. He’s in love with Ana, a young woman desperate to leave. Ana and her family watch a favorite soap opera religiously.

The boss deducts expenses from their wretched earnings. The fishermen are angry. “It’s not fair.” He says, “I’ve got a family too.” Jusce is saving up to buy his own boat. At a meeting, an official tells the men, “Diving for lobster will continue to be illegal.” They say, “We have mouths to feed,” “If I stop diving, my life is over.” They go on breaking the law, dangerously. In fact, Jusce’s father died in the ocean.

His former friend, Rogerio, has a dune-buggy and a bit of money; he

attracts Ana's attention. Jusce has to take dramatic steps to win back her interest. Meanwhile one of his comrades dies in the water.

Again, there are clear and honest images in *Fish Dreams*. Things are not invented merely to impress or show off. We see people's believable acts and their believable consequences. This film is a little more distant from its characters, but this may be an inevitable result of the director's 'foreignness.'

Mikhanovsky says about his work: "Fishermen pushing a boat in the water introduces the film's key leitmotif—effort: it is through the efforts of Jusce, a young fisherman, both at work and in love (his *l'amour fou* extracting the greatest effort of all) that we tell a bigger story of one man's struggle that goes so far that the sense of one's acts is no longer discernible. ...

"I tried, to the best of my abilities as a director, to show the beauty and nobility of the work of fishermen by means of delving into their daily routines and rituals. The patient and respectful visual treatment of the specific details of their labor and their relationships was critical in order to convey the dignity and nobility of their profession and their lives."

In this at least he has succeeded.

Violin from Mexico is a more explicitly political work, a story of military brutality and popular ingenuity during the peasant revolts of the 1970s. Don Plutarco is an aging musician, who lives with his son, Genaro, and the latter's family. Plutarco plays the violin, Genaro the guitar and they make a meager living out of it. They also participate in the guerrilla struggle and when their village is taken over by the military, they have to devise a means of recovering the ammunition hidden in a corn-field.

Plutarco wanders back in the village, nothing but a harmless old man (missing part of an arm) with a violin. He engages the local army commander and his men with his music. The commander insists that he comes back every day to play. Meanwhile, Plutarco has to locate the ammunition and transport it to the fighters. Unfortunately, the military man is no fool.

Francisco Vargas has constructed a convincing drama, with a nonprofessional cast. *Violin* begins with a horrifying scene of torture carried out by the military against rebel prisoners. The film's sympathies are clear. The scenes in the town, where the weapons are obtained, are well done. Don Ángel Tavira, born in 1924 in Guerrero, a musician himself and from a long line of musicians, plays Plutarco with considerable dignity.

What inspired director Francisco Vargas to make the film? "I've always wanted to write a screenplay about an ignored reality in Mexico, what Luis Buñuel in 1950 called *Los Olvidados* [The Forgotten Ones]," he explains. Moreover, "Through its deliberate realism, the film does make reference to those guerrilla conflicts which frequented the Mexican political scene of the 20th century."

The film is not a tract, it offers a sobering view of Mexican social reality, past and present. The traditional music is haunting.

The filmmakers mentioned here, with the possible exception of Vargas, are reticent about making any general pronouncements. Aïnouz, in fact, goes out of his way to explain that he wanted to look at the Brazilian situation "without making any generalizations." Teguia also emphasizes the particulars, explaining that it was his intention to film "not a big story, just a landscape of events."

A kind of social-aesthetic dogmatism will not help anyone. It's good to be careful, but not to such an extent that one accommodates oneself to a bad atmosphere or a terrible social situation. These filmmakers are forthright and honest. They are not intentionally accommodating themselves to anything. The world disturbs them.

But one can also accustom oneself to the present political difficulties, the deep sense of a lack of an alternative to the status quo. In Algeria, the population seems trapped between the bankrupt secular bourgeoisie, corrupt and privileged, and the reactionary fundamentalist elements. Lula,

the champion of the Brazilian working man and woman, has turned out to be another defender of the rich and powerful. There is no immediate solution to the political impasse in Mexico and the cruelty of the present system.

The artists don't yet see a way out anywhere. So there is a tendency to treat the present situation—disastrous for the mass of humanity—as quasi-inevitable, as "life" itself, and the search for improvements or social progress as perhaps beside the point.

So, Teguia writes, "But, if one has to say tragedy, it is to be reminded that something persists, something consubstantial with disaster, life, nothing less. So making a happy film, what does that mean? A film without guilt, about the simple joy of being alive even if the life here only amounts to a supposed good mood of the characters who cross an urban desert."

In any event, there's no reason to speak about "guilt" and "the simple joy of being alive" is fine, but one should not cross the line where this process becomes a means of making a virtue out of necessity, or rather, what is precisely *not necessary*, the existing wretched social conditions.



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