

54th Sydney Film Festival—Part 1

Uneven responses to real human problems

Richard Phillips
4 July 2007

This is the first in a series of articles on the 2007 Sydney Film Festival, held June 8-24.

This year's Sydney Film Festival screened more than 200 movies from 54 countries, including 113 features and 86 documentaries. Organisers reported more than 60 sellout sessions which, hopefully, assisted the cash-strapped event.

As noted before, the 17-day festival receives little assistance from the New South Wales government and other state-funding bodies. It is under increasing pressure from major distributors, who would like the event to become a vehicle for pre-release promotions of their latest blockbusters. Despite this, the festival screened an extensive and varied collection of significant works, focussing in particular on Asian movies. There were features from Japan, Korea, China and India, which are usually represented, as well as films from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Recently-appointed festival director Clare Stewart told the media she wanted to "develop the taste for Asian cinema in Sydney". This is encouraging. Many countries, however, remain neglected. There was nothing from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Bangladesh, where filmmakers have to overcome all sorts of financial and political difficulties.

The festival screened new Turkish and Brazilian films, some important archival restorations from the US and Russia, and a strong selection of documentaries. In addition there were a number of new Australian dramas, children's films from Sweden, the Netherlands, France and Thailand, 18 rock documentaries and a John Huston retrospective.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously commented on a certain polarisation and leftward shift by a layer of filmmakers over the past four to five years. With some notable exceptions, this sentiment found only faint reflection at the Sydney festival. There is still much confusion, with too many filmmakers pre-occupied with secondary issues, or indifferent to important changes in popular consciousness—mass concerns about the eruption of war and imperialist aggression, social inequality, attacks on democratic rights, and a generalised disgust with the official political parties and institutions.

While this is hardly a surprise, given the nature of twenty-first century cinema—an art form and industry dominated by vast sums of money—the choice facing serious filmmakers and the key to more meaningful art is to challenge the cultural norms dictated by the giant film and media corporations. This requires deeply-felt and emotionally honest works that enlighten and sensitise, and which ultimately increase the artistic curiosity of audiences and make them impatient with superficialities.

For the film production monopolies and those prepared to accede to their market-driven demands, such an approach is unsettling. Serious artists, however, should welcome and embrace it.

One of the festival highlights was the early 1970s American movie, *Killer of Sheep*, an 80-minute black and white film, written and directed by Charles Burnett.

Made for \$10,000, as part of the director's thesis project at UCLA film school, Burnett's feature is set in Watts, Los Angeles and is probably one of the most poetic movies about African-American workers. It certainly marked a refreshing change from the "blaxploitation" gangster works produced at the time, which are currently fashionable among some critics and filmmakers.

Burnett's movie won the Critics Award at the 1981 Berlin Film Festival, was chosen by America's National Society of Film Critics as one of the 100 essential films of all time and was selected for preservation in the US Library of Congress's National Film Registry. Despite these accolades, it languished in obscurity for 30 years due to legal conflicts over its music soundtrack. These problems have now been sorted out and the movie, which was originally shot on 16 mm film, has been restored, converted to 35 mm and is currently on limited release in American cinemas, with a DVD due out later this year.

Killer of Sheep is a deeply sincere and realistic work produced a few short years after the August 1965 Watts riots, when more than 4,000 black Americans were arrested and 28 killed in six days of bloody clashes. While it makes no explicit reference to these events, the movie shows that life in the black ghetto a few years later remained essentially the same.

Burnett's movie is built around a series of poetic vignettes featuring Stan (Henry Gayle Saunders), a slaughterhouse worker, his wife (Kaycee Moore) and their family. Stan's job is to herd sheep onto the killing floor and clean up the resulting blood and gore. "I'm just working myself into my own hell," Stan tells one of his friends.

Numbed by his job and the all-pervasive poverty, Stan suffers from insomnia, but is proud to have a fulltime job because his family doesn't have to accept charity. There are tensions within the family, but his wife tactfully tries to help Stan overcome them.

Scenes of everyday life are played out. Alternating between anger, melancholy and wry humour, the dialogue is sparse but potent because Burnett has real feeling for his characters.

Stan's children, like others in Watts, make the best of their circumstances, playing in rail shunting yards and abandoned buildings, and generally getting up to mischief. Neighbours come and go, and a couple of shady characters make an appearance. Stan purchases a second-hand engine for his car, and there is an attempted visit to the racetrack to bet on a so-called certainty.

Stan and his wife slowly dancing to Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth," just after he has rejected her tender advances, is a remarkable scene, as is the extended vignette with Stan's six-year-old daughter sitting on the laundry floor quietly singing Earth, Wind & Fire's "Reasons". In fact, the entire movie is drawn together by a wonderful collection of classic gospel, blues, jazz and rhythm and blues songs. These include Elmore James's "I Believe," Little Walter's "Mean Old World," Louis

A poignant American movie

Armstrong's "West End Blues," Paul Robeson's "The House I Live In," and many others.

Burnett told one journalist that he decided to make *Killer of Sheep* because, although there were many student films made about American workers and the poor during the 1970s, "they had little real connection to their lives". I make films, he said "about people, their conflicts, their condition, their failures and successes, the things that resonate—things that seem simple, but have universal meaning. To share experiences—that's what art is for." More of this sensitivity and intelligence is needed today.

Some disappointing European features

By contrast, the four European movies I watched were, in varying degrees, unsatisfying: directors marking time with cold and/or inconsequential work (Jacques Rivette [*Don't Touch the Axe*] and Werner Herzog [*Rescue Dawn*]); avoiding crucial historical questions (Olivier Dahan [*Le Vie en Rose*]); or involved in deeply pessimistic and self-indulgent experimentation (Lukas Moodysson [*Container*]).

Jacques Rivette was one of the more experimental members of the French New Wave movement when it emerged in the late 1950s. A former film critic, most of Rivette's movies were notoriously long—many of them between three and four hours. *Out 1*, his 1971 feature, lasts 12 hours and 40 minutes.

By comparison his latest feature, *Don't Touch the Axe*, is just over two hours and based on Honoré Balzac's 1834 novella *La Duchesse de Langeais*. It explores an obsessive, but unconsummated and ultimately fatal, flirtation between a Parisian socialite, the Duchess Antoinette de Langeais (Jeanne Balibar), and Armand de Montriveau (Guillaume Depardieu), a French general and former war hero.

The festival program claimed that the movie "reminds the world of his [Rivette's] effortless storytelling prowess" but the veteran director only succeeded in strangling all life from the novella's tale of the claustrophobic, soul-destroying personal relations among the upper classes of Restoration-era France. While the movie's period costumes and settings are impeccable, the film is cold, academic and fails to engage.

Werner Herzog's *Rescue Dawn* dramatises the true story of German-born US navy pilot Dieter Dengler, who was shot down on a bombing mission over Laos in February 1966. Dengler, played by Christian Bale, is captured by Pathet Lao forces and tortured. He eventually escapes with another American prisoner, spending months in the dense tropical jungle. While his fellow escapee is wounded and then decapitated by villagers, Dengler flees back into the jungle and, after surviving against overwhelming odds, is eventually rescued by the US military.

The movie opens with scenes of the devastating American bombing raids on Laos—a war officially denied by the White House—but concentrates exclusively on Dengler. There is the usual Herzogian theme—the struggle for survival against the forces of nature—but the movie is little more than a potboiler adventure story. Herzog appears to be marking time, having already produced a detailed documentary about Dengler—*Little Dieter Needs to Fly*—in 1997. There are no new insights in *Rescue Dawn*.

In a decision which appeared to be commercially driven, *La vie en rose*, Olivier Dahan's biography of Édith Piaf, launched the Sydney Film Festival. Rather than assisting ground-breaking films that have little chance of local release, opening night has become a high-priced event to promote features already scheduled for local multiplexes throughout Australia.

La Vie en Rose, which was shot in the Czech Republic, France and the US for \$25 million, is a frustrating film. Marion Cotillard's performance

as Piaf is striking and has brought the actress well-deserved accolades. The movie, however, avoids any reference to the popular French singer's life during World War II and the Nazi occupation of France, when she lived and worked in Paris during the occupation. This glaring omission weakens the film.

Dahan, a former painter and rock music filmmaker who also wrote the script, told an American journalist that Piaf was "the perfect example of someone who places no barrier between her life and her art. The fusion between your existence and work is the very foundation of a true artist."

This is true, but entirely at odds with the movie, which flits back and forth between Piaf's childhood poverty, her love affairs, drug and alcohol problems, and her time in the US, but refuses to touch the war or its impact on the singer. Piaf was accused of being a Nazi collaborator, but secretly supported the Resistance. How this shaped her life and art is totally ignored. (See "Édith Piaf's life in *La Vie en Rose*: a modern biopic")

Swedish director Lukas Moodysson has been critically acclaimed for his first films—*Show Me Love*, *Together* and *Lilja4Ever*, the latter about a 14-year-old Russian girl drawn into the dark and brutal world of prostitution in Europe. That these accolades were overblown is demonstrated by *Container*, Moodysson's latest film. Many people walked out of its Sydney screening.

Moodysson's film attempts to dramatise how an autistic transsexual views the world. Shot in grainy black and white, with a whispered stream-of-consciousness narration by young American actress Jena Malone, the 74-minute work is confused and self-indulgent.

The movie features an overweight young man, who dresses at various times in a blonde wig, and an Asian girl. The two appear in disjointed scenes in run-down rooms and empty building sites with odd pieces of clothing, half-digested food, broken religious icons and bits of garbage, etc. The narrator gloomily ruminates about war, poverty, spirituality, sexuality, Britney Spears, Brad Pitt and other celebrities, pornography, drugs and other disparate subjects.

Perhaps Moodysson believes he is indicting contemporary culture and social life, but his movie only adds to the general, prevailing confusion. *Container* appears to have been designed to demonstrate the hopelessness of human existence.

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Some of the better movies I saw at the festival were *Still Life* (2006) by Jia Zhang-ke and *Indigènes* (2006) by Rachid Bouchareb, both already reviewed by the WWS ("The passive voice" and "*Indigènes*: The French army's exploited North African soldiers"); John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Fat City* and *The Dead*; and Sergei Loznitsa's *Blockade* (2006).

Among the Australian features premiered at the festival, two stood out: the low-budget *Boxing Day*, about an Aboriginal former prisoner trying to deal with alcohol and drug problems, and *The Home Song Stories*, a true story about the psychological breakdown of a Shanghai nightclub singer who immigrated to Australia with her two children in the 1970s.

Documentaries, such as *In Our Name*, a detailed examination about how the Bush administration has used the so-called "war on terror" to promote the use of torture, and *The Sugar Curtain*, a look back at Cuba in the early 1970s and the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union on that country, were interesting. Comments on these movies, as well as some new Turkish and Eastern European features, will follow.



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