

Edinburgh Film Festival: Solitary fragments or part of social experience?

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Blind Mountain by Li Yang, *Blackbird* by Adam Rapp, *Solitary Fragments* by Jaime Rosales

A number of films at the Edinburgh Film Festival considered individual tragedies. The following are very contrasting works and reveal sharply differing approaches to the social and historical roots of the crisis in which their protagonists find themselves.

In *Blind Mountain* director Li Yang takes a frank and angry look at sex slavery in rural China. The practice of buying wives was abolished following the Chinese revolution in 1949. By the late 1980s it had revived to the extent that many tens of thousands of women are annually sold as wives. Between 1986 and 1988, 48,100 women were sold in six counties of Xiuzhou region in Jiangshu Province alone. The Chinese government launched a crackdown in 1991, but the practice has not abated. A ready supply of available women is continually generated by the flood of young women into rapidly expanding urban areas seeking work.

Blind Mountain tells of student Bai Xuemei (Huang Lu) who is lured to an isolated village with the promise of a good life selling herbal medicine. She needs work and hopes to support her aging family. Instead, she is drugged, her ID stolen, and she wakes up to find herself sold to a village family as bride to their son. The family lock her up in chains. She is to be used as a beast of labour and for reproduction.

The film tells of her efforts to escape, to communicate with the world outside the forbidding mountain wall that surrounds the village, and her repeated frustration due to the tight network of patronage and cash relations holding together village life, at the centre of which stands the local Chinese Communist Party official.

Li Yang also criticises China's "one child" policy. The villagers find an unknown baby girl floating in a pond. Male children, particularly in rural areas, are preferable. As a result there is a considerable imbalance between the

sexes, estimated to be as high as 60 million across China as a whole, producing a lucrative market in kidnapped women.

Li Yang's previous film *Blind Shaft*—a mordant tale surrounding a deliberate mining disaster—was filmed illegally. This time, the director was forced to make up to 20 cuts, and film alternate endings, to satisfy the Chinese censor. He also had to seek funding outside China. The version shown at Edinburgh appears to be close to the original.

Because of its subject matter, *Blind Mountain* stands direct comparison with Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya4 Ever*. Both explore the explosive rise of the sex trade that has emerged as a direct consequence of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union and China. Both contrast the naïve enthusiasm of their leading protagonists with the cynical and cash basis of their betrayal. In Moodysson's work, the leading character's internal life plays a much more prominent role. The creation of empathy with Lilya, through the score, the cinematography and the leading actor's performance, gives the film an enduring impact. By contrast, Bai Xuemei never really emerges, beyond being indomitable.

In *Lilya4 Ever* the environment—the decaying Russian estates, an airport duty free shop, a barely furnished flat—directly contributes to the film. Li Yang never seems to come to grips with the forbidding and strange natural beauty of the location, to which he repeatedly returns, and the backwardness it hides.

But *Blind Mountain* is a warmer work. Bai Xuemei gets on well with the village children and teaches them. The only score is a memorably wild folk song. There seems to be a sense that the problems can eventually be overcome without recourse to Moodysson's God.

Blackbird batters viewers with the grim experiences of two homeless people in New York—one a veteran of the first Gulf War, the other an abused middle class teenage

runaway from Detroit. Some of the ground has been visited before—squats, sex clubs, rooms full of addicts, relentless urban isolation and misery, repeated betrayal, a brief relationship sprung out of mutual hurt. Prolific playwright and story teller Adam Rapp’s work (*The Year of Endless Sorrows*, *Red Light Winter*) is deeply pessimistic, although not at all without humour. His latest play *Essential Self Defense* apparently features a man working as an attack dummy in a women’s self defence class.

Leading actor Paul Sparks puts in an absorbing and convincing performance as former GI Bayliss. Sparks, who has toured with the film and play, imbues his character with a sense of angry and dignified frustration at the multiple afflictions and humiliations overwhelming his life. He is a heroin addict, has severe back pain, smokes incessantly, gambles and tries to keep himself together. He “hates the rich” and views himself as a “genuine has-been.”

Bayliss is much less critical of a radical and cynical gambling bunch who befriend and betray him, in turn driving him to betray “Froggy,” the young runaway girl with whom he falls in love and tries to protect. She is working as a lap dancer. Rapp’s exploration of relations between the jaded and wealthy gamblers and the basically decent Bayliss is fascinating. In one scene, Bayliss tries to play a hand of poker, aware that he must present a front, but also aware that he does not entirely understand this new and questionable crew.

Rapp’s pessimism overwhelms, however. The dismal conclusion even seems rather at odds with the plot and Bayliss’s bravery. *Blackbird* seems to take misanthropy as a given, something tempered only by unreliable reflexes of kindness or care from the most disoriented or isolated types.

Solitary Fragments: The title is a clue—a pleasant enough couple in a Spanish village split up. They have money problems but are not impoverished. She moves to Madrid—it could be any European city—with their young child, he stays in the village. She rents a flat. One of the flatmates has two sisters. The family of sisters have disputes over whether their mother and her lover should sell their flat. One of the sisters is ill, needs a hospital operation. Most of the film consists of domestic shots of these people cooking, arguing, tidying, going shopping, sitting in buses.

Director Jaime Rosales remarkably captures the rhythms of daily life and conversation. He frequently uses a split screen to allow two views of the same domestic time

passing. The film opens with Adela, (Sonia Almarcha) arriving at her flat with her child. From a number of static cameras, one inside the flat another looking in from an outside window, we observe her pottering about, twittering to the child, scolding Pedro, her lover and chief financial problem.

Rosales uses the same technique with conversation itself, which is sometimes quite startling and refreshing. Again with the split screen, we observe a conversation between two people. Suddenly we are cut directly into the conversation. The actor speaks straight to the camera, as if to the other participant in the conversation. There is no “shaky cam.” There is no need for talk to be appended by shots of the ceiling, the view out the window, or a cut to someone stubbing out a cigarette.

What matters is the person, the face, the conversation, all of which unfolds at a pace that gives the audience time to think, to update themselves on what has, or has not happened, instead of being bowled along by a visual assault. It also gives the actors time to explore relations between the characters. Dynamics between the sister and mother (Jesús Cracio) are carefully and naturally drawn.

It can also be, frankly, a little dull. This is contemporary Spain, and the core of this film is an event in which social and political tensions intrude dramatically on domestic life, yet which none of the protagonists discuss in any way beyond the directly personal consequences. Rosales seems to be saying that under the impact of tragic and confusing events people are driven further apart, into ever more isolated and lonely circumstances.

The film took four years to make. Over that time, in response to lies told over the likely origin of the 2004 Madrid bomb attacks, the then Popular Party government of José María Aznar triggered huge antiwar and anti-government demonstrations that forced his government from power. Tens of thousands of workers and young people mobilised. The movement also coincided with continual demands for renewed investigations of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War period.

Any reflection of this confused but real radicalisation is entirely absent from *Solitary Fragments*. Perhaps this is why Rosales is being hailed as a coming force in European cinema.



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