

San Francisco International Film Festival 2008

Part 4: Other stories, varying degrees of success

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29 May 2008

This is the fourth and final in a series of articles on the 2008 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 24-May 8.

The Filipino film industry, at a certain point one of the most robust in Southeast Asia, at least in terms of quantity, has recently been in the doldrums.

It was therefore an occasion for the festival to introduce a young Filipino director (born 1984) and his film *Huling Balyan Ng Buhi* (or *The Woven Stories of the Other*), a sensitive, provocatively-constructed work that ventures into civil war-torn Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

Director Sherad Anthony Sanchez explains that he was committed to presenting the “many wonderful stories and discourses about Mindanao,” despite issues of security and expense that usually discourage filmmaking efforts. His movie involves parallel tales of a village shaman with stigmata, a group of teenage guerillas in the New Peoples Army (the military wing of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines), a unit of the equally youthful Filipino army sporting US army fatigues, and two children wandering in the jungle.

Sanchez creatively interlaces the film’s various segments in a way that mimics the structure of the stories told by animistic shamans. He thereby underscores the spirituality of an indigenous people plagued by great difficulties. With an acute artistic eye, he allows Mindanao’s haunting traditions and culture to surface and take shape.

The preoccupation with the ethereal at the expense of the more concrete—with the ghosts of the terrain—is no doubt an artistic and personal choice. This is how Sanchez looks at and experiences the world. Nonetheless, his viewpoint has a material component—and consequences. The director is perhaps overwhelmed by a painful and complex political reality, from which he sees no way out at present.

It is, however, a reality of necessity touched upon by the film and alluded to by the filmmaker in a conversation with the WSWs in San Francisco: “When you go to any of the villages in the mountains you notice that there are no young people. It’s because they have either gone to live with relatives in the city

to escape poverty, or they join the insurgency against the US-backed military.

“The youth join either the Communists or the military at age 14. Some are even recruited by both sides as scouts as young as 10 years old. They do so because they get financial allowances. It’s also for brotherhood—among the Communists they have friends. Or they’ve experienced their families being terrorized by both sides. And you can say they have no place else to go.”

While the talented Sanchez proves that “*Stories* about Mindanao can be told in Mindanao and by those from Mindanao,” he tends towards the mythological and away from working through harsh political and social circumstances. But he is young and the political and social crisis of the Philippines is deepening. His film shows promise.

Lady Jane is a further step backward for French filmmaker Robert Guédiguian. His skepticism that social ills can be addressed seems to have reached a critical point, giving way to a serious cynicism.

Usually set in Marseilles with an ensemble cast that includes his wife Ariane Ascaride, most of Guédiguian’s previous films, for better and worse, were staunchly devoted to exposing problems facing the French working class. Their limitations in no small part stemmed from a pessimism endemic to those who come from the Stalinist Communist Party milieu.

In his latest work, all of his characters are nasty thugs—a trio of old pals who at one time were a sort of collective Robin Hood and then separated to run upscale and not-so-upscale businesses. Their mediocre lives get disrupted when a revenge killing for past misdeeds brings them together for an unholy finale. What could conceivably have been an interesting thriller is marred by a gross plot and character discrepancies—but mostly by Guédiguian’s barely disguised disgust for humanity.

In 2005, French filmmaker Alain Tasma made the remarkable *October 17, 1961*, a film about an important but little-known chapter in the Algerian struggle for independence against French colonialism. His new movie *Operation Turquoise* addresses the topic of the French military engagement in Rwanda from June to August 1994.

The stated purpose of the film is “to present carefully chosen

situations and a representative sample of characters, inviting them [the viewer] to ponder the ambiguities and profound contradictions inherent in humanitarian activity embroiled in a military-political situation.” Unfortunately, the same director who saw that France’s “military-political situation” in Algeria was *not* a case of contradictory humanitarianism, now stumbles over the role of French imperialism in Rwanda.

The film does mention that France continued to arm and support Rwanda’s French-speaking, Hutu-led government even after the genocide of a half million Tutsis and moderate Hutus began in April 1994. Moreover, *Operation Turquoise* hints that France or sections of the French elite had ulterior motives in carrying out its intervention.

However, the film, while scrupulous in regard to immediate detail, fails to bring out the real driving force of the new wave of “humanitarian interventions,” pioneered by Bernard Kouchner, formerly of Doctors Without Borders and the French Socialist Party and now a member of Nicolas Sarkozy’s right-wing regime, i.e., the new scramble for colonies.

It may be that the director means well, and simply can’t see any social force or political alternative to the present situation; nonetheless, the promotion or semi-promotion of neo-colonial interventions, ironically, will help produce new atrocities such as he depicted so graphically in *October 17, 1961*, when the French police murdered Algerian civilians in Paris. Such are some of the problems in contemporary filmmaking.

As difficult as it might be to make a film about present-day Cairo with no visual or narrative reference to the city’s extreme poverty and political and social crisis, Egyptian director Youssef Nasrallah has done just that.

His two well-heeled protagonists, Laila, a night-time radio call-in show host, and Youssef, an anesthetist, are obsessed with the secrets of others while suppressing their own. Fantasy sequences meant to dramatize their alienation and emptiness are simply foolish. There is much brooding and chaos.

But a flash of how much real life Nasrallah is avoiding is captured in his description of the malignantly socially-polarized Egyptian capital—“a brain-like labyrinth which destroys itself and never allows people to express their innermost feelings except when they are delirious [Youssef] or when they speak in conditions of anonymity [Laila].” Is this really the central problem in Egypt today?

Millions of children around the world are dying for lack of clean water. Twenty million people in the southwest United States have rocket fuel in their water supply. Forty percent of viruses and flus come from drinking water. Cholera from contaminated water is rampant in the poorest countries.

Tens of thousands of chemical pollutants in water enter the body through the skin, while the waste deposited in water by pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies is responsible for changing the body’s chemistry. Birth defects in Mexico are caused by bad water. Sex-shifting frogs and fish populate Paris’ Seine River. Chemicals designed as weapons of mass

destruction are unloaded into the water supply. In the US, the Number One contaminant in water is an endocrine disruptor called Atrazine, a chemical linked to cancer and the lowering of sperm count, an established fact denied by the government.

These are some of the alarming facts and allegations presented in *Flow: For Love of Water*, a documentary by US director Irena Salina. The world is running out of fresh water, argues Salina. It is a precious natural resource, known as “blue gold” to the corporate commodifiers, right behind oil and electricity as a source of global profits. But, as is the case with many such well-researched documentaries today that present valuable and horrifying statistics about an augmenting ecological disaster, the response advocated is paltry and exposes a petty bourgeois, “anti-globalist” outlook.

“The solution will be local,” argues the documentary, as it highlights a few successful community efforts in countries with vast water problems such as Brazil and India. Petitioning the United Nations to declare the right to water a universal human right is the film’s main demand. Production for profit is mentioned, but the word capitalism is conspicuously missing.

The “pros and cons” of government secrecy is the topic of the film by American documentarians Peter Galison and Robb Moss. “Secrecy explores the tensions between our safety as a nation, and our ability to function as a democracy,” says the film’s production notes.

Going back and forth among an array of right-wing to moderate talking heads, the filmmakers conclude that, on one hand, “secrecy is central to our ability to wage an effective war against terrorism.” On the other, “[s]ecrecy corrupts. From extraordinary rendition to warrant-less wiretaps and Abu Ghraib, we have learned that, under the veil of classification, even our leaders can give in to dangerous impulses.”

This is a hopeless liberal work that grossly underestimates the tense state of social relations in the US, as well as the level of public awareness. More than a third of the American public suspects that federal officials assisted in the 9/11 terrorist attacks or took no action to stop them so the US could go to war in the Middle East, according to a 2006 Scripps Howard/Ohio University poll. Since then, the population has grown savvier.

This film misses the point almost entirely. What it refers to as a “secrecy” issue is, in fact, an element of the breakdown of American democratic institutions in the run-up to enormous political and social upheavals.

Concluded



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