55th Sydney Film Festival—Part 2

Socially meaningful, but limited

Rain of the Children

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17 September 2008

This is the second in a series of articles on the 2008 Sydney Film Festival. Part 1 *was posted on September 16.*

Twelve movies were in competition for the Sydney festival's inaugural best film prize. Of those we saw, the best were *Hunger* directed by Steve McQueen, *Happy-Go-Lucky* by Mike Leigh, *Tokyo Sonata* by Kiyoshi Kurosawa, *Rain of the Children* (written and directed by Vincent Ward from New Zealand) and *Three Blind Mice* by young Australian actor Matthew Newton.

Others, such as *My Winnipeg*, a so-called "docu-fantasia" by Canadian director Guy Maddin, and the Italian feature *Quiet Chaos* (*Caos Calmo*), directed by Antonello Grimaldi and starring Nanno Moretti, failed to impress. An artistic revival in Italian cinema is a distant prospect if Grimaldi's conventional and unchallenging movie about a middle-aged media executive attempting to come to terms with the recent death of his wife in a freak accident, and how to raise his ten-year-old daughter, is anything to go by.

The last days of Irish republican prisoner Bobby Sands

Hunger, a first feature directed by Steve McQueen, won the competition. It is set in Belfast's infamous Maze prison in 1981, during the hunger strike to the death of Irish Republican Army (IRA) prisoner Bobby Sands. The festival jury applauded the movie for its "controlled clarity of vision, its extraordinary detail and bravery, the dedication of its cast and the power and resonance of its humanity." While much of this praise is well-deserved, the movie is a grueling experience and clearly establishes that the treatment of IRA prisoners criminally violated basic democratic rights and international law.

Hunger begins with the morning routine of one of the prison officers—Raymond Lohan (Stuart Graham)—and the induction of new IRA inmate, Davey Gillen (Brian Milligan). Gillen, in line with other IRA prisoners, refuses to cooperate with his jailers and joins the "blanket" and "no-wash" protest. Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender) does not appear until about halfway through the movie, when he is dragged from his cell by prison officers, who violently wash him and cut his hair.

The five principal demands of the protesting IRA prisoners were the right not to wear a prison uniform; no prison work; free association with other prisoners, including organising educational and recreational pursuits; one visit, one letter and one parcel per week; and full restoration of remission lost through prison protests. These demands were stubbornly denied by the British government and led to a series of politically desperate and self-destructive protests and ultimately to the death of Sands and ten other hunger-striking prisoners.

McQueen's movie meticulously dramatises the institutionalised brutality, which dehumanised IRA inmates and prison officers alike. *Hunger*'s most memorable and powerful moment, however, is a 22-minute discussion between a Catholic priest Dominic Moran (Liam Cunningham) and Bobby Sands. Moran tries to persuade the young man, who is leader of the IRA prisoners, not to go ahead with the hunger strike, arguing that it would amount to suicide. The scene is captured in a single shot and on a fixed camera.

McQueen, 39, is a well-known British artist whose film and video work was made, not for cinema, but to display in art galleries. In 1999 he won the prestigious Turner Prize and last year produced a series of facsimile postage stamps entitled *Queen and Country*, using the faces of British soldiers killed in Iraq. With the consent of the soldiers' families, he has been campaigning for the postal service to officially issue the images as Royal Mail stamps.

Deeply concerned about the increasing violations of democratic rights, McQueen told the British press that when he was approached to make *Hunger* in early 2003 there was "no Iraq war, no Guantánamo Bay, no Abu Ghraib prison, but as time's gone by the parallels [with the Maze] have become apparent. History repeats itself but lots of people have short memories and we need to remember that these kinds of things have happened in Britain."

This is commendable, but *Hunger* is limited by its lack of historical context. Apart from a few lines of text at the beginning and a later voice-over by British prime minister Margaret Thatcher refusing to grant the IRA inmates political status, the story unfolds in a political vacuum. The Thatcher government and state authorities therefore appear as an all-powerful force. In fact, the prisoners had mass support and Sands was elected to the British parliament during the hunger strike protest. These issues are not explored in the movie.

The death of Sands and other hunger strikers was a tragic waste and another reflection of the bankrupt nationalist policies of the IRA, which cynically used the protests to advance its political manoeuvres with the British government. It is doubtful whether Sands and other hunger strikers would have sacrificed their lives if they had known the future evolution of the IRA and Sinn Fein, its political party.

Unemployment in Japan

Japanese director Kiyoshi Kurosawa, who began making low-budget features in the 1980s, is best known for his horror movies. His latest

film, *Tokyo Sonata*, is something of a departure. It attempts to deal with the social and psychological impact of mass unemployment on a white-collar worker and his family. The movie is set against the ongoing destruction of Japan's so-called "lifetime employment" system, the imposition of casualised working conditions, and growing social inequality.

The extent of the social transformation currently underway is indicated by the following figures. In 1995, Japan had 10 million casual workers. This figure has now increased to over 17 million, or 33.7 percent of the workforce. Part-time workers' average hourly rates are 40 percent lower than those of regular employees and, according to recent figures, more than 5,000 casual workers are living in 24-hour internet cafes because they cannot afford to pay rent. The social impact of these changes is dramatic. During the past decade, they have seen over 30,000 people commit suicide in Japan, the second highest suicide rate in the industrialised world.

Tokyo Sonata's principal character is Ryuhei Sasaki (Teruyuki Kagawa), an administration director in a high-pressure Tokyo business. Ryuhei is made redundant, but refuses to tell his wife Megumi (Kyoko Koizumi) and their two boys—the eldest Takashi (Yu Koyanagi) and Kenji (Kai Inowaki). Each morning he leaves home dressed in his usual business suit, pretending that he still has a job. Ryuhei, however, spends his time looking for work, lining up for meals at charity soup kitchens or just generally wandering around until it's time to return home for dinner with the family.

We soon learn that Ryuhei's predicament is no aberration. In fact, he realises that scores of white-collar workers and professionals maintain this fictional existence. Ryuhei meets Kurosu (Kanji Tsuda), an old high-school friend, who is also jobless but has perfected the art of pretending he is still employed. Smartly dressed, Kurosu carries a briefcase and has set his mobile phone to ring at regular intervals so he can pretend to be talking about his work. He even invites Ryuhei over for dinner, telling his wife that he is a work colleague. Kurosu and his wife later commit suicide.

Ryuhei's search for work and the demeaning interviews he goes to for low paying, mainly manual jobs, are deeply demoralising. In one interview he is asked, "What can you do?" Misinterpreting the question, Ryuhei hesitantly replies that he can sing karaoke. Compounding his humiliation he is asked by the prospective employer to sing using a pen as a microphone. Needless to say, he doesn't get the job. He finally accepts work cleaning toilets at a shopping mall.

Tokyo Sonata dramatises Ryuhei's desperate attempts to "save face" and the spiritual and emotional emptiness of his family relations, which are austere and generally regimented. He comes home, eats, sleeps; his wife cooks, cleans and leads a mundane and unfulfilling life. There is little or no interaction between the couple, whilst the relationship between Ryuhei and his sons is even colder. The only time they interact is when he is berating them over some perceived indiscretion.

While these elements are well captured, the movie is weakened considerably by its tendency towards black humour and melodrama. This undermines the movie's emotional impact.

Unfortunately, Kurosawa does not appear to know how to end the film, so he keeps adding subplots to the story. Ryuhei, for example, happens across money from a bank robbery during his cleaning job, thus adding another diversionary strand. There are complex and not altogether convincing conflicts with his two sons—the older joins the US military and travels to Iraq, while the younger boy secretly takes music lessons in defiance of his father.

The movie ends on a strange note, with members of the estranged family returning home one morning. There seems to be a bit more warmth and understanding between family members, but there is no suggestion how this neat reconciliation has occurred.

Tokyo Sonata is not a successful work, but it has some interesting moments. To Kurosawa's credit, it is one of the few recent Japanese features that attempts to trace the source of people's unhappiness and misfortune in contemporary social conditions.

Dispatched to war

The Three Blind Mice—written and directed by Australian actor Mathew Newton—chronicles one night in the lives of three navy officers just before they are to be shipped off to the Iraq war. The three officers—Sam (Ewan Leslie), Dean (Toby Schmitz) and Harry (Mathew Newton)—are on shore leave in Sydney, but as their last night in Australia proceeds there is increasing tension and a sense of impending doom.

This is not a complex work, but the naturalistic dialogue and strong performances give Newton's low-budget movie some moments of real humour and drama, which effectively capture how military life can brutalise and dehumanize.

There is a rowdy dinner party at a Japanese restaurant with Harry and Dean and Dean's fiancée and her parents. Dean reveals that under orders he meted out punishment to his friend Sam by tying him to the sink, washing him with steel wool and then urinating on him. Sam's "crime" was failing to dry the officers' uniforms to their standards. Dean's future mother-in-law is devastated and exclaims that the horrible deed was an act of torture.

Meanwhile Sam has driven south of Sydney to the industrial town of Wollongong with his new girlfriend to visit his overbearing mother and grandfather. Sam's girlfriend is bright and extroverted and together with Harry's sharp wit, the two provide some of the movie's lighter moments.

Harry returns to Sydney and visits a bar in Kings Cross, Sydney's red-light district. He wants to have a quiet drink before returning to the ship, but instead comes across his former officer and tells him he has revealed the bastardisation of Sam. The former officer ominously tells Harry that he will make his life hell. When Harry reminds him that he is not his superior any more, the officer replies that it does not matter and leaves Harry to sit there alone. The brutality will continue. After all, they are about to embark on a trip to Iraq.

The Three Blind Mice, which was commended by the competition jury, indicates that Newton has some talent and has attempted to explore issues studiously ignored by other Australian feature filmmakers—the hopes and concerns of young men about to be sent into the Iraq war zone. Unfortunately, the movie does not do any more than this. It only scratches the surface.

In one media interview, Newton declared that *Three Blind Mice* was "an antiwar film" but then qualified his comment, declaring that he "didn't want to make a chest-beating political film. I wanted to make a personal film. I wanted to show three young guys, doing what I think young guys should be doing with their lives—getting things wrong, getting into trouble, getting themselves out of trouble, meeting partners, sorting themselves out and spending an evening away from what they're about to be forced to go and do."

Newton's so-called distinction between the "personal" and "political" is not a true reflection of reality, and it prevents him from exploring his subject with the intensity it requires. Hopefully he will recognise and overcome this shortcoming in future work.

Rain of the Children

Writer, director and actor Vincent Ward has been making movies since the early 1980s and is one of New Zealand's better known filmmakers. His features include *Vigil*, *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey*, *The Map of the Human Heart*, *What Dreams May Come* and *River Queen*.

Rain of the Children, his latest film, is a moving, if at times convoluted, documentary about the plight of the Tuhoe, one of New Zealand's Maori tribes, and the complex life history of Te Puhi Tatu, a female member of the tribe. Ward first met Te Puhi in the late 1970s, when he made a short film entitled *In Spring One Plants Alone*, about her relationship with Niki, her paranoid schizophrenic adult son.

Rain of the Children explores Te Puhi's past and lifts the lid on some of the bloody and brutal oppression, intrigue and poverty inflicted by New Zealand colonial authorities on the indigenous Maori population.

The Tuhoe were mainly located in the small mountain valleys of Ahikereru and Ruatahuna in New Zealand's north island. Their first major conflict with the colonial government occurred in the early 1860s and continued via a series of violent clashes and land dispossessions for almost a decade. The Tuhoe, like other Maori tribes, were subjected to a virtual scorched-earth policy by the colonial authorities and were eventually driven from their traditional homelands and onto harsher, less productive land.

Government forces killed, imprisoned and destroyed the homes and agriculture of the tribe, who responded by attempting to isolate themselves from the outside world, refusing to sell, lease or allow any the survey of their lands. Ward traces the influence of a self-professed Christian prophet and pacifist called Rua Kenana on the vulnerable survivors of the Tuhoe tribe in the early twentieth century.

In 1916, Rua was accused by New Zealand police of selling alcohol and discouraging his people from enlisting to fight in the First World War. Two men from the settlement, including Rua's son, were killed in clashes with authorities and Rua was jailed for more than two years. Aged 14, Te Puhi married Rua's son Whatu and fell pregnant. Accused of bringing bad luck, she was driven from the community. She married twice more, bearing 14 children of whom only Niki survived. This was why, until the age of 80 when she died, she took special care of Niki, fearing that she might lose him.

This is a complex and at times visually striking work, alternating between re-enactments, contemporary interviews, archival footage and Ward's own narration and contemporary footage of Niki and his mother. At times it morphs into more stylised, surreal forms, which tend to glorify Tuhoe mysticism. This weakens *Rain of the Children* and diverts from the fact that the persistence of religious superstition is a by-product of the decades of poverty and government oppression that the tribe has been forced to endure.

Life in London

Happy-Go-Lucky by veteran writer/director Mike Leigh centres on a few weeks in the life of Poppy (Sally Hawkins), a 30-year-old North London primary school teacher who seems to have decided that the only way to deal with the tribulations of daily life is by laughing and wise-cracking her way through every problem. In contrast to *Vera Drake*, Leigh's last movie, which is about an illegal abortionist and set in 1950s London, *Happy Go-Lucky* is optimistic and relatively lightweight. This is not meant to suggest that it is not an interesting and accurate social observation, or that the performances are not strong.

Happy-Go-Lucky, like most of Leigh's films, emerged from lengthy preparatory character improvisations with his actors. In fact, the movie is more a series of interconnected vignettes about Poppy and her immediate friends and workmates. Some of the most interesting moments involve Poppy and Steve (Eddie Marsan), her driving instructor, a deeply repressed, lonely and delusional young man. Poppy's irrepressible banter and silly jokes irritate him and yet he somehow begins to believe that she is attracted to him.

At first it appears that there is nothing substantial to Poppy, but as the movie progresses we are drawn more closely into her life and work, and see that behind her bubbly veneer is an intelligent and complex character. At school Poppy discovers a little boy bullying other pupils and calls in a social worker—Tim (Samuel Roukin)—to try to overcome the problem. The young boy is reacting to the fact that he is being beaten by his mother's de facto husband. It is not clear whether the problem is resolved or not, but Poppy strikes up a relationship with Tim and they begin a love affair, which precipitates an explosive reaction from Steve, the driving instructor.

The movie has some predictable Leigh social commentary—about the sterility of outer suburban life for Poppy's married and pregnant sister; and there is a late night encounter between Poppy and a homeless man.

All this sounds like a slim premise for a feature, but Leigh and his strong cast, headed by Sally Hawkins, create an intelligent and entirely believable portrait of contemporary life for young London workers. This is *Happy-Go-Lucky*'s strength. The real question, however, is why isn't Leigh developing more substantial work? He's certainly capable of it.