The political tone at this year's Tribeca Film Festival

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It is perhaps appropriate for a film festival that began nearly 10 years ago as a response to the September 11 attacks to orient its presentation with a consciously political tone. Although, of course, given the difficult cultural atmosphere and the limited level of understanding of complex political developments among artists, it is not surprising that confusion and misconceptions arise.

In addition to highlighting Arab film artists throughout the festival with segments before each screening, many of the films featured at the 10th annual Tribeca Film Festival (April 20 to May 1) in New York City showcased thematically relevant works that, to the programmers' credit, have a real bearing on the current state of affairs.

Not surprisingly, the stronger films were international in scope and origin. Serbia, Hungary, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Korea, France and Romania had the most interesting things to say by far.

Israeli director Alma Har'el explored the relic of the failed 1960's development boom in California in the documentary *Bombay Beach*; Egyptian filmmaker Hesham Issawi tells the story of a young Muslim girl struggling to carve out a better future in *Cairo Exit*; Hungarian David Dusa discusses a love affair between an Iranian activist and her apolitical suitor in *Flowers of Evil*; *The Journals of Musan* (Park Jung-bum) follows a marginalized North Korean defector trying to piece together a new life in capitalist South Korea, and so on.

A contemporary Romeo and Juliet story is at the center of *Fleurs du Mal* (*Flowers of Evil*), the visually striking debut feature by the Hungarian Dusa. The director borrows video-clips shot by participants during the post-election crisis in Iran in 2009 and mixes those with scripted action, giving otherwise familiar territory a refreshing historical character and a considerable dramatic urgency.

The film palpably occurs in the here and now. Rachid (Rachid Youcef) is a Muslim youth working a dead-end job as a bellhop in a fancy hotel overlooking the Parisian skyline. He practices parkour, a form of urban movement that involves scaling over walls, rooftops, and other street obstacles, in his spare time, and also, one surmises, to ease work-related stress.

Anahita (Alice Belaidi) is an upper class Tehrani exile. Her parents have sent her to France to keep her at a safe distance from the political turmoil back home. They meet on the job: Rachid takes her luggage, and offers to show her Paris. While Rachid is earthly and physical, Anahita is airy, wistful and somewhat lofty. Her attention is absorbed by moment-to-moment Facebook and Twitter updates from friends in Iran. As the pair falls in love, we are constantly reminded about the goings-on in the outside world; status updates from Iran appear intermittently across the screen throughout the movie.

For Rachid, an Algerian immigrant and orphan who has had to struggle to make a living on the streets of Paris, the political is vague. It's the only means he has, however, by which to interest Anahita, and he is soon googling images of protest and unrest on his laptop to further understand her. Anahita has mixed feelings about where she belongs. As a student in Paris, she is a free woman who drinks alcohol and indulges in behavior that would be considered illegal, and even deadly, for a woman in Iran. As a Muslim back home, she is an activist in religious dress, involved in illegal student protests.

Unlike Rachid, Anahita carries on in perfect conversational French, having gone to one of the best schools in Tehran. When we first see the couple, she is wearing an ostentatious fur wrap and sunglasses as he helps her pick up her luggage. Alongside some pseudo-intellectual banter, Anahita warmly shares the poetry of Baudelaire (hence the title) with him, which he incorporates into his rogue, street-smart rhetoric. The class nature of Rachid and Anahita's relationship is dealt with from the onset.

It is not clear to what extent the director intends Anahita's middle class background as a critique of the Green movement protests--very possibly he has no such purpose in mind. While the clerical regime in Tehran is widely opposed, the media-hyped "Green Revolution" was and is an effort to fashion an Iranian regime more congenial to the interests of the US and the West. It attracted support from the better off layers in Iran, such as Anahita's family.

Flowers of Evil has many attractive elements, and its navigation of the world of digital media is appealingly done. Youthful spectators may be drawn to the film, but will they understand everything about the events to which they are being drawn? Sweeping claims about "democracy" and "freedom" have been made in a number of anti-government movements, in Yugoslavia, in Ukraine and elsewhere, and the results for the population have been disastrous, while a thin layer oriented toward Washington and Wall Street has prospered. It is necessary to approach such subjects with a critical mind and a knowledge of historical experience.

Dusa says: "Current affairs in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Libya open the film to a much wider scale. It explores the power of the Internet in the hands of people to organize political protests and also in their intimate revolutions. The film is a tribute to a new generation of people back into action." Yes, but the mass, popular movements in Tunisia and Egypt are not the same as the movements in Iran and Libya, where the Great Powers are intervening with very definite agendas. Unclarity on this can create many problems. Filmmakers, too, have some responsibility to sort out complicated social and historical problems.

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Dusa has certainly paid considerable attention to many aspects of his production. Particularly courageous is the sound design by Emmanuel Crozet, Carole Verner, and Bruno Auzet, which takes the harsh sounds of the Iranian riots, but edits them over the scripted action in Paris. In one scene, Anahita looks longingly over the hotel balcony at the beautiful Parisian cityscape; we are tempted to enjoy the lush imagery, but the soundtrack belies any sense of complacency.

The editing work by Nicolas Houvver and Yannick Coutherton has an almost acrobatic quality. Together, they balance the raw, disturbing Iranian footage with the couple's love story. The two editors seamlessly integrate subtitles, Twitter texts and Facebook updates to create clever, intertextual relationships that comment on our hyper-linked society.

Dusa based the story on Youcef, a dancer he met in the casting process for another film. Unable to complete funding for that project, he switched gears and decided to film Youcef's life story instead. The film was shot in Youcef's apartment in Paris, and most of the scripted dialogue was drawn directly from Youcef's life experience. The performances by Alice Belaidi and Rachid are brave, subtle, and incredibly natural. Ironically, the filmmaker's deliberate and conscious dedication to presenting reality on an objective basis has blessed the film with a soaring, otherworldly, and quite magical quality.

In any case, the mix of engaging scripted drama and borrowed footage enforces the presence of the exterior world in an organic, stirring manner. It is clear that Anahita and Rachid's lives are affected by the world around them and that the fate of their relationship is bound, and sealed, by the conditions and social forces of the world in which they live.

The Journals of Musan and *Neds*

Director Park Jung-bum also borrows from reality in his performance as the uneasy protagonist in *The Journals of Musan*, a deceptively simple fish-out-of-water story based on the life of a personal friend. Jung-bum plays Seung-chul, a North Korean defector in capitalist South Korea, whose only friend is a stray puppy. His roommate, another defector, is a con artist who wants nothing else but to go to America. The object of Seung-chul's affection, his boss' daughter, barely acknowledges him.

The film presents Seung-chul's isolation in at times arduous real time, and the gritty, working-class neighborhood in which he lives takes on apocalyptic dimensions. The film's under-the-radar critique of the status quo is potent; it is clear that Seung-chul's eventual assimilation into the South Korean culture is not quite the happy ending one expects it to be.

In a question and answer session after the film, Park spoke about the dubious quality of the "grass is greener" mentality some defectors have: "Instead of worrying about the system, they clinch on to their desperate will to stay alive. But what reality will they see once they step on South Korean soils? They are forced to compete again for survival. In order to stay alive they have to live a life where they are trampled on again and have someone to trample as well." The director has clearly done his work, and has created an understated and well-thought-out film.

Neds (or, Non-Educated Delinquents), by Scottish-born director (and renowned actor) Peter Mullan, follows the downward spiral of a 10-year-old youth in 1970s' Glasgow. John McGill is an intelligent and shy student with an otherwise promising future, but his chances are few and far between. His father is an abusive alcoholic; his older brother, Benny, a brutal gang-leader. His teachers are no better--he, along with the rest of the students, are routinely punished and beaten by cruel instructors for showing any sign of genuine intelligence and individuality.

In the face of such overwhelming odds, a broken John turns to the sadism of his older brother's gang for guidance and respect. The rest of the film tracks John's seemingly inevitable transformation into a violent and merciless killer, singlehandedly created by the system. Mullan has a healthy amount of disdain for establishments. The family, the school, the prison system and the church are all attacked with vehemence, to varying degrees of success.

On the nature of John's transformation, Mullan said, "John becomes what he thinks society wants him to be." Though the filmmaker's intentions seem heartfelt, the film leaves quite a bit of room for defeatism and nihilism. There is almost no hope for John, and a "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" air permeates the entire proceedings.

Italy and the former Yugoslavia

The same can be said for Claudio Cupellini's *Una Vita Tranquilla* (*A Quiet Life*), a taut, well-crafted film limited by an unclear ethos. Rosario (Toni Servillo) is a former member of the Camorra, one of the most ruthless criminal organizations in the world. He has been living in Germany under a new identity for the past 12 years.

Now a father and the owner of a successful hotel-restaurant he runs with a German wife, Rosario is unsettled by the re-appearance of Diego (Marco D'Amore), the son he left behind. Clearly invigorated by Diego's return, but troubled by the deadly implications of an association from his past, Rosario does his best to integrate conflicting sentiments.

Cupellini says, "The film speaks the language of feelings, the ambiguous feelings that divide and unite a son, and a father who abandoned him to save his own skin: unresolved love and anger on one side; fear and guilt on the other."

The director is a talented filmmaker who has clearly mastered the technical aspects of the form. He is able to create compassionate and tense relations between his performers that are complex and compelling. However, the main thrust of the film, the issue of redemption, and "why people do bad things"--is not treated with the same level of attention. The film unfortunately delves into familiar "hide the body" territory, and leaves the more difficult questions aside.

There were a number of strong documentaries that are worth mentioning. *Cinema Komunisto*, by Serbian filmmaker Mira Turajilic, *Teta, Alf Marra* (*Grandma, a Thousand Times*) by Lebanese Mahmoud Kaabour, and *Our School*, by Romanians Mona Nicoara and Miruna Coca-Cozma, were particularly good.

The rise and fall of Yugoslavia and the struggle to preserve its postwar history through its film industry is the subject of *Cinema Komunisto*. The documentary uses rare archival footage from dozens of lost partisan Yugoslav films, and discusses Marshal Josip Broz Tito's love affair with cinema, as well as the memories of his personal projectionist, Leka

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Konstantinovic, who showed Tito films every night for 30 years.

Turajilic said: “I wanted to make a film about how film is used to write and re-write a story, about the use of smoke and mirrors to create the Official National Dream. The cinematic images remain a testimony, but it is also a deception, a construct, to be analyzed. How do we explain Yugoslavia, a country whose existence fits into a half century?” The film is touching in its presentation of a country that no longer exists, one whose remaining relics are now under threat of being completely eliminated.

Turajilic goes on: “This became an urgent film, a way to preserve a world that is being erased from official memory. When I look around for my childhood, every trace of it is gone, the street names changed. Fourteen cinemas have been sold and will most likely be torn down to build an elite business complex. As they disappear, I am not convinced the best way to move forward is to pretend the past never happened.” We learn that the government has asked the War Museum in Belgrade to shut down the exhibition covering the Second World War, declaring it “over-dimensioned and biased from a communist perspective.”

Disquieting, however, is the film’s not so subtle implication that Tito was a charming man because he was an aesthete. Though there are clips of the authoritarian enjoying a lavish lifestyle as the rest of the people make do with comparatively little, it is evident that the filmmaker has a healthy amount of longing for (or unclarity about) what is essentially a nationalist, Stalinist heritage.

Turajilic explains: “I enter this story as a member of a new generation of Yugoslav filmmakers. We come of age surrounded by the ruins of something that is nostalgically referred to as a golden era, but no one has yet offered me a satisfactory insight into how it was all thrown away. We were born too late, and missed the party, but we arrived in time to pay the bill.” Faced with current free-market misery and disillusionment, it is easy to see why Turajilic might look towards her (and the country’s) past for some inspiration. But the key, that what is needed is a complete break from all varieties of disastrous nationalist politics, is absent.

It is possible that the political tone of many of the films shown at Tribeca this year is a coincidence. It is more feasible that something in the air about the prevailing conditions is starting to strike a nerve with filmmakers around the globe.

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