

San Francisco International Film Festival 2013—Part four

The plight of African boat people in *The Pirogue*, and other films

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27 May 2013

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 25-May 9. Part one was posted May 16, Part two on May 22 and Part three on May 24.

The Pirogue

Veteran Senegalese filmmaker Moussa Touré's *The Pirogue* is a drama about West Africans who undertake a perilous ocean voyage in the hope of escaping that region's grinding poverty. Pirogues are wooden, outboard motorboats used in much of coastal Africa.

Baye Laye (Souleymane Seye Ndiaye) is reluctantly recruited to captain a pirogue bound for Spain. As a fisherman living near waters where fish are becoming increasingly scarce, he must risk death in an attempt to provide for his wife and child. All his passengers have similar motives, including his brother, an aspiring musician, who dreams about an illusory Spanish paradise.

Thirty people squeeze into the rickety vessel and endeavor to brave more than a thousand miles of the Atlantic Ocean. *The Pirogue's* postscript explains that between 2005 and 2010 some 5,000 people have perished out of an estimated 30,000 Africans who have attempted the journey. Director Touré, who has been making films since 1987, effectively dramatizes this horrific reality.

Despite the refugees' careful preparations, the odds are horribly stacked against them. The farther their pirogue gets from the African coast, the more the tensions build amongst them. One young man mentally unravels, while his boatmates demonstrate a fragile camaraderie trying to calm him. Harsh decisions are made when they encounter another pirogue at sea whose engine has failed and whose despairing passengers scream to be rescued. For those few able to survive the voyage, no nirvana awaits them at voyage end.

The Pirogue compensates for its relative simplicity by a remarkable cast, honestly directed to reproduce a vast social tragedy, for which the Great Powers, the former colonial countries, are responsible.

Good Ol' Freda

Good Ol' Freda is a charming documentary by filmmaker Ryan White about the Beatles' fiercely loyal secretary, Freda Kelly. The title comes from the group's 1963 Christmas message, aimed at their fans, in which

George Harrison first thanks their secretary in Liverpool and the four shout, "Good Ol' Freda!" The Beatles—Harrison, John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr [whom Freda affectionately calls "Richie" in the film]—was the most successful pop group in history, selling more than one billion records.

In 1962, Freda, then a shy 17-year-old Liverpoolian, was asked by the band's manager Brian Epstein to serve as its secretary. A devoted fan since the musicians' early days performing at the city's famed Cavern Club, Freda held the job for 11 years, until after the Beatles ended their 10-year relationship.

Freda arranged bookings, did the payroll and diligently answered fan mail, which at the height of Beatlemania escalated to between 2,000 and 3,000 letters a day. She not only had a personal friendship with the legendary artists, but also with their families. During the closing credits, Ringo says in a video testimonial, "Freda was like part of the family."

Director White comments in an interview: "The amount of personal attention and true affection that she served the Beatles' fans with—teenage girls, mostly—will probably go unmatched throughout music history." A number of amusing anecdotes prove the point.

Freda, who neither made money nor sought notoriety as a Beatles' insider, explains in an interview: "I didn't want to talk about it [her experiences with the group]. I was in a different life then. I closed the door."

The unassuming woman, now in her late 60s, has for the last 20 years worked as a secretary for a law firm in Liverpool. Wanting to explain the Beatles' chapter of her life to her grandson, Freda approached filmmaker White, a family friend, whose uncle Billy Kinsley had been in the Liverpool band, The Merseybeats. Like the Beatles, the group performed early on at the Cavern Club. White's aunt also worked with Freda for the Beatles fan club.

"I could have been a millionairess if I had kept things like photographs and autographs," she says at one point in the film. Instead, she handed them out to fans, always cognizant that she had been one herself.

Good Ol' Freda also functions as a lively and straightforward account of the relatively humble origins of the British pop music scene in the 1960s. The film's touching moments speak to the solidarity and generosity of spirit that characterized working class Liverpool at that time.

Because the music was an organic part of life, it would have never occurred to Freda to cash in on her "dream job." It is Kelly, with her many fascinating stories told with modesty and authenticity, that makes the documentary so endearing. She is cast from solid stuff, truly uninterested in celebrity and ego-boosting. Many friends and even family members were unaware of her unusual past: that, at one time, she was the world's most envied clerical worker.

In a recent interview with the *Daily Beast*, Freda was asked what she

hoped would be achieved with the film. “Clear the debt,” she said, speaking about the cost of making the film. “Seriously, I would like to walk away and have everyone get paid for what they’ve done, because they’ve all worked for nothin’ and worked flippin’ hard. They’ve worked so many hours, and you should be paid however much an hour—not a fantastic rate, but the going wage!”

Thérèse Desqueyroux

Thérèse Desqueyroux, an adaptation of the 1927 Francois Mauriac novel of the same name, is the final film by veteran French filmmaker Claude Miller, who died in April 2012 at the age of 70. Set in 1926 in Landes, an area in southwest France, the movie stars Audrey Tautou as Thérèse, who attempts to rein in her unconventional nature by marrying Bernard Desqueyroux (Gilles Lellouche), a Catholic landowner for whom tradition and upper-class mores are paramount.

Longing for Paris, Thérèse feels stifled by provincial bourgeois life. She is intellectually and emotionally dying on the vine. Driven by pressures that she claims caused an “imperceptible slope,” she attempts to poison her husband. Bernard survives and Thérèse is caught. To maintain outward appearances, Bernard helps his wife escape a prison sentence, only to disgrace and incarcerate her psychologically. Driven to near madness, she finally wins her long sought-after freedom. As she heads off to Paris, Thérèse shares with Bernard a moment devoid of social constraints and codes.

Thérèse Desqueyroux, with its more classical mis-en-scène, is a visually appealing film with an adept cast. Despite opting for a somewhat familiar storyline, Miller takes his time developing his characters, providing a number of devastating, climactic sequences. A quote by French author André Gide (1869-1951) is acknowledged in the movie as encapsulating one of its central themes: “*Let every emotion be capable of becoming an intoxication to you. If what you eat fails to make you drunk, it is because you are not hungry enough.*”

Chimeras

In *Chimeras*, Finnish documentarian Mika Mattila looks at China’s contemporary cultural scene. Following artists from two different generations, both post-Mao, the movie is a confused critique of what the filmmaker apparently perceives as potentially fatal threats to Chinese culture: globalization, the free market and massive Western investment.

The movie’s concerns are established in its opening, as excerpts of a letter from the Qianlong Emperor, ruler of China from 1735-1796, written to England’s King George III in 1793, scroll across the screen: “I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for ... manufactures of outside barbarians.”

Wang Guangyi (born 1956-57), a painter, is considered one of the fathers of contemporary Chinese art. He was a co-founder of the 85 Movement during the era of capitalist restoration under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s and is today the country’s most successful artist, with \$23 million in auction sales in 2008.

One gains the impression that Wang is traumatized by China’s complicated history and in particular the false promises and hardships of the Cultural Revolution, during which he worked for three years in a rural village. Like many Chinese artists and intellectuals, he appears to have little understanding of the Chinese Revolution and its history, which

fascinates and disturbs him. Wang refers somewhat incoherently to Hegel and creates Warhol-inspired pop art about the encroachment of what he disparagingly calls “Western materialism.”

The younger artist, photographer Lui Gang, views China’s “Westernization,” as more or less inevitable. Through his camera, he records the commercialization of daily life via foreign advertising. (In one shot, Tai chi is being practiced in front of a giant, illuminated Cartier sign.)

As “hot commodities” on the international art market, to which both artists have adapted, Wang and Lui have developed something of an identity crisis (“Who am I? What am I?”). In the case of Lui, a product of the One Child Policy, intense parental pressures come into play and he eventually chooses a less stressful, more mundane path.

Separately, Wang and Lui wander around and wonder about the country’s cultural prospects. (During the course of their musings, we see a great deal of interesting footage of China.) Their bewilderment is matched by that of director Mattila, who admits in an interview that “I don’t understand more about China now. I know more, but I don’t understand more.”

Leviathan

Filmmakers Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel have set their documentary on board a commercial groundfish trawler that operates off the coast of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, a reading of festival notes about the film is a must for this to be understood.

Leviathan is literally a lab experiment. It is a compilation of color, sounds and indefinable images—and the occasional flash of blurry water, fish, fisherman and boat. The melding of bits of the concrete with a mass of the intangible is visually fetching. But the overall monotony leads one to wish for a fast-forward button.

Self-consciously—almost narcissistically—the film pays tribute to an unglamorous, tough and dangerous profession. It is dedicated “to the memory of countless other vessels lost at sea off the New Bedford coast.” Nonetheless, *Leviathan* is mostly a test of the viewer’s nerves and endurance that imparts little knowledge about its ostensible subject matter.

To be continued



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