

Toronto International Film Festival 2013—Part 6

Disappointments, blind alleys and other problems

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This is the sixth and final part of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 5-15). Part 1 was posted September 20, Part 2 September 23, Part 3 September 27, Part 4 September 30 and Part 5 October 2.

The new film by Iran's Asghar Farhadi, director of the award-winning *A Separation*, comes as something of a disappointment. *The Past* takes place in Paris. Ahmad (Ali Mosaffa) arrives from Tehran to finalize a divorce from his French wife, Marie (Bérénice Bejo, *The Artist*), after a four-year separation.

The two greet each other in a relatively amiable manner but soon fall to quarreling. Marie, who has two daughters from another relationship, obviously harbors resentment against Ahmad, who left her to return to Iran. "Keep your promise for once," she barks at one point.

Her adolescent daughter Lucie (Pauline Burlet) has been acting particularly sullen recently and seems to have some cloud of unhappiness hovering over her. Marie is involved in a new relationship—one of too many, according to her daughter—with Samir (Tahar Rahim), who owns a dry cleaning establishment and whose wife is in a coma after trying to kill herself. Lucie strongly disapproves of her mother's plans to marry Samir. Although Ahmad attempts to keep his distance and make his visit simply a practical matter of signing some papers, he is inevitably drawn into the various family dramas.

As in *A Separation*, there are elements of deliberate ambiguity in *The Past*. It even becomes something of a detective story, surrounding the facts of the suicide attempt by Samir's mentally unstable wife. She found out about the relationship between her husband and Marie because someone forwarded her e-mails the lovers had exchanged. Was it this that drove her to try and end her life? Who was responsible for sending the e-mails? Who wanted them sent?

In *A Separation*, however, this element of uncertainty, and the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of establishing the *exact* truth about certain events, takes second place to the picturing of Iranian life and class relations.

As we wrote in March 2012: "*A Separation* is a realistic, hardly flattering portrait of Iran, a society beset by intense contradictions. The film is frank about all sections of the population. At the same time, each of the central figures is fairly and sympathetically treated, even the judge who has to rule on the conflicting claims. The individual degrees of guilt or innocence fade into the background, as the ultimate responsibility for the tragedy clearly lies with the profound social and economic tensions. In the end, as elsewhere, the more affluent couple retain the upper hand."

In *The Past*, unfortunately, secondary questions largely come to the fore. The tensions tend to take on a merely personal character. The various personalities have their weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, failings ("Everyone has his reasons" might as well be the film's motto), and those all combine

to create an apparently impossible, or at least an emotionally lacerating situation. Neither Iranian nor French society truly falls under the filmmaker's gaze. Even the "past," which figures so prominently, is more or less a private matter here.

As a result, the film is something of a long-winded melodrama, although it has truthful moments and circumstances and all the performers work diligently.

One senses that Farhadi is trying to make a point with his insistence on the relative and tentative character of truth. In the Iranian context, in the face of religious bigotry and fanaticism, that the director goes out of his way to suggest that there is no single, absolute view of things may have a certain element of social or ideological criticism. The final words of the film belong to a doctor, who, referring to the comatose wife and her prognosis, remarks that there's "room for doubt" and "You can never be sure." Whatever its immediate domestic significance or controversial character, this sort of agnosticism is not the strongest basis for important art.

Iranian filmmakers face very difficult circumstances, and no criticism can leave that factor out of account. There is, first of all, the repression and censorship enforced by the Islamist regime and its cultural thugs. The siren song of the Green movement in Iran, a stalking horse essentially for Western imperialist interests, is not a viable alternative.

Perhaps most importantly, the Iranian artists have been cut off from a left-wing critique of the regime and an orientation to the popular masses. This is largely thanks to the impact of Stalinism and the Tudeh Party, which assiduously worked for decades to subordinate the working class to discredited bourgeois politicians. An enormous political vacuum exists in Iran. The filmmakers appear largely bewildered and overwhelmed by events.

Jafar Panahi's *Closed Curtain* reveals some of these difficulties in an even sharper fashion. The director of numerous generous and socially critical feature films, *The White Balloon* (1995), *The Mirror* (1997), *The Circle* (2000), *Crimson Gold* (2003) and *Offside* (2006), Panahi ran seriously afoul of the Iranian authorities during the post-election protests in 2009-2010. An open supporter of the Green movement, the director was arrested in March 2010 and held until May 25. In December of that year, Panahi was sentenced to a 20-year ban on making or writing films. He has, nonetheless, managed to make two films while under house arrest, *This is Not a Film* (2011) and now *Closed Curtain*, co-directed with Kambuzia Partovi.

The repression of Panahi is grotesque and reactionary, but his recent films suggest that in his opposition to the Islamist regime he has relatively little to go on. In *Closed Curtain*, a screenwriter (Partovi) arrives at his villa on the sea, carefully closes the black curtains and generally attempts to seal himself off from the outside world. A couple arrives, apparently

pursued. “They’re arresting everyone.” The young man goes, and the writer is left alone with the woman, who later turns out to be a cop herself.

At a certain point, the realistic narrative disintegrates and Panahi, as a director, moves into the frame. His depression about his situation takes center stage. In his notes, Panahi writes, “Melancholy haunts this story, where each character reflects another and the line between fiction and reality is blurred.”

The dramatic effect of the self-conscious goings-on is weak. There is no one here to care terribly much about. It seems rather self-pitying. Above all, there is no indication of an interest in the fate of anyone other than screenwriters, directors and the like. What about the widespread social misery? What about the fate of the working class and the oppressed? If these problems are on Panahi’s mind at all, this film gives no hint of it.

A new film by Tavernier

The new film by veteran French filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier (*The Clockmaker*, 1974; *Life and Nothing But*, 1989; *L’Appât*, 1995; *Capitaine Conan*, 1996; *It All Starts Today*, 1999), *Quai d’Orsay*, is based on a comic book by Abel Lanzac (pseudonym for Antonin Baudry) and illustrator Christophe Blain. Quai d’Orsay, on the bank of the Seine in Paris, is the home of and associated with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Baudry was employed there for several years and wrote speeches for foreign minister and right-winger Dominique de Villepin (2002-2004), who went on to become France’s prime minister from 2005 to 2007.

The comic work follows the misadventures of Arthur Vlamincq (Raphaël Personnaz), a neophyte speechwriter working for an ambitious, self-centered and rather charismatic foreign minister, Alexandre Taillard de Vorms (Thierry Lhermitte), obviously based on Villepin.

Lhermitte, obsessed by Heraclitus and highlighters, among other things, is wonderfully amusing in his dizziness, phrase-mongering and self-contradictions. Niels Arestrup is equally persuasive as his long-suffering chief of staff, Maupras, whose job it is to clean up messes often created by his boss. In general, there are many sharp and entertaining moments in the film.

However, partway through *Quai d’Orsay* one comes to a sudden, rather chilling realization: this is a generally genial, *sympathetic portrait* of the French foreign ministry and Vorms/Villepin in particular. The foreign minister, goofy as he is, and the French government as a whole are depicted as having no selfish motives for their interventions around the world.

This point is underscored in a pivotal sequence. Over the dinner table with friends, Vlamincq specifically rejects the notion that oil and energy have any influence on his boss or on French policy. In the film’s final scene, and one truly has to rub one’s eyes, the foreign minister addresses the UN Security Council, an episode transparently based on Villepin’s speech in 2003 opposing US intervention in Iraq.

It is unfortunate, although not astonishing, given the trajectory of the French and European left, that Tavernier has ended up here. Other moments in the film suggest that the filmmaker retains a concern for the lives of working people and immigrants. However, in this day and age, to offer a more or less blank check to French foreign policy makers and their machinations around the world has implications Tavernier would surely have recoiled from at an earlier stage in his career.

From Egypt, *The Square* follows a group of mostly middle class activists from January-February 2011 and Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow to the summer of 2013 and the army coup against the Muslim Brotherhood regime of Mohamed Mursi.

As noted in the first part of this series, the most significant moment in this work is one of the final shots of a monstrous protest that took place in Cairo against the Mursi government. This sort of demonstration, in which millions mobilized themselves, and the revolutionary threat it represented led the army to take power as a preemptive measure.

Jehane Noujaim’s film is oblivious in general to the working class, its movement and its conditions, except in passing. *The Square* follows a number of individuals, including the actor Khalid Abdalla (*The Kite Runner*, 2007); Muslim Brotherhood supporter Magdy Ashour; musician and activist Ramy Essam; filmmaker-actor Aida Elkashef; legal advocate Ragia Omran; and the younger, poorer Ahmed Hassan, as they participate in the various street protests and political debates over the course of two and a half years.

The shots of the protests are compelling and some of the discussions revealing, but the film’s protagonists, well-meaning or not, pursue an utterly hopeless and impotent political line. There is much phrase mongering about the “revolution,” but this group of “revolutionaries” is not in any sense oriented to winning the working class to a socialist program and overthrowing Egyptian capitalism.

There is not a single reference in *The Square* to such a project, or anything resembling it. The assorted activists support exposures of the crimes of the various regimes and attempt to pressure whomever is in power to make certain social and political concessions, but that’s the sum total of it. Two of the central figures, according to the film’s official web site, belong to “a collective of individuals turning their cameras towards those in authority to hold them accountable for their actions in the square and beyond.”

The filmmaker’s biography is suggestive of a certain social type. Noujaim (*Control Room*, 2004) was born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Kuwait and Cairo. She attended the exclusive Milton Academy prep school and later Harvard University, graduating magnum cum laude in visual arts and philosophy. As the Milton web site commented at the time of her return to the campus to address the 2008 graduating class, “Jehane is not only a provocative, successful, young documentary producer and filmmaker; she is an international activist who believes passionately in the power of film to help move people toward global acceptance of diversity.”

The 50th anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy has brought us Peter Landesman’s *Parkland*, which has now opened in movie theaters, but it might just as well not have bothered. Landesman is a *New York Times* reporter whose more sensational allegations in a 2004 story about the sex-slave trade in the US were called into question by many.

The film treats many aspects of the assassination, except its source in the emerging crisis of postwar American capitalism and its significance.

Landesman blandly asserts that “I don’t think that I made a political movie or a movie that picks a fight with 50 years of conspiracy theory. I made a movie about individuals to whom a terrible thing happened and how they survived it.” In other words, the director set out to avoid politics in the treatment of one of the critical political events of the mid-twentieth century.

This was the 20th year of covering the Toronto film festival, and the experience continues to be fascinating, illuminating and maddening in perhaps equal measure.

Concluded



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