Tokyo Filmex 2013

Transit, *Ilo Ilo* and *Youth*: Three films that rise above the average

John Watanabe
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Tokyo Filmex, founded in 2000, is a film festival that features mostly new Asian releases. The 14th Filmex, held from November 23 to December 1, presented a number of interesting films that rise above the norm primarily through the social awareness of the various filmmakers. One hopes they represent something of a turn away from the prevailing self-absorption and self-consciousness in cinema.

Transit

Directed by Hannah Espia, *Transit* tells a story about Filipino workers in Tel Aviv and the impact of strict Israeli immigration laws on their families. It was the most powerful film I saw at the festival.

Janet (Irma Adlawan) is a single mother of a teenage daughter Yael (Jasmine Curtis). “Her father is Israeli. Let’s not talk about it, it was a long time ago.” Born and raised in Israel, Yael speaks little Filipino, feels Israeli and longs for acceptance. However, under a new law coming into force, she might be deported to the Philippines because Janet has overstayed her visa.

Janet’s brother Moises (Ping Medina) is also a single parent. He leaves his four-year-old son Joshua—also born in Israel and who speaks Hebrew—with Janet, because all immigrant children under the age of five are threatened with deportation. He plans to hide the boy indoors, at least until Joshua turns five. In regard to possible questioning by the police, apparently, “one of the first things children learn here is how to lie.”

A strong point of *Transit* is its realistic presentation of the relationship between the Filipino community and the mainstream Israeli society, in both individual cases and collectively. Janet works as a housemaid, and her female employer shields her from the intrusive immigration officials. Moises is a home-care nurse for the wheelchair-bound Eliav (Yatzuck Azuz), who teaches little Joshua to recite the Torah. Joshua wants to grow up, have his bar mitzvah and enter into adulthood like other boys.

A group that defends immigrants is collecting signatures in opposition to the new law, but Moises is too fearful of the authorities to get involved. We learn the going rate the police pay to Filipinos who snitch on their compatriots, in exchange for turning a blind eye to the informer’s own illegal status.

Through an effective narrative device, we watch as each character’s drama unfolds, with important scenes overlapping and adding additional layers to what has already been presented.

This technique is impressively employed in *Transit*’s culminating, heartbreaking scene when Joshua is finally discovered by the authorities and faces deportation, while his father begs for leniency. All of a sudden, the little boy starts singing the Torah in the middle of the detention center, to show just how “Jewish” he is and that he belongs in the country.

In the midst of the vile campaign against immigrants and refugees promoted everywhere by the media and political establishment, this humane work, which treats people who spend their entire lives uprooted and “in transit,” is especially powerful and welcome. Even though Espia’s *Transit* seems to have been intended as little more than a mild plea for acceptance and tolerance, its objective role is to criticize scathingly the attack on immigrants, as well as the irrational, outdated nation-state system and its human cost.

Ilo Ilo

Another film about Filipino immigrants, *Ilo Ilo*, this time set in Singapore, is a fine debut work from writer-director Anthony Chen (born 1984). The film is peopled by realistically-portrayed, contradictory characters, whose good and bad qualities emerge in connection with larger social processes.

The film focuses on a middle-class family—the Lims—in the midst of the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. The father (Tian Wen Chen) has lost his sales job, but keeps that a secret from

his pregnant wife (Yann Yann Yeo), as well as the fact that he has suffered a significant loss on the stock market.

The wife henpecks her husband, bullies and condescends to the family's newly hired Filipino maid Teresa (Angeli Biyani) and shows little patience for her 10-year-old son, Jiale (Koh Jia Ler). The latter is now mostly looked after by his "Auntie Terry"—who has left her own baby boy behind in the Philippines—and grows increasingly attached to her. This only fuels his mother's jealousy.

The impact of wider, economic pressures is treated with some success: Jiale's father hunts for work, eventually settling for a "lowly" warehouse job; his mother works as a secretary typing layoff notices and joins in whispered conversations with other staff about whether they are going to be affected this time around; meanwhile a suicide in the building next door shakes Terry. These episodes ring true and resonate strongly.

When, in the end, the financial strain becomes unbearable, the father opens up to his wife, and we realize she already knew he was out of a job. The maid will have to be let go, and the wife finally acknowledges Terry as a human being, showing feelings for the first time. Jiale meanwhile has undergone a believable change from a bullying, spoiled brat who craves attention, to a more sensitive, responsive kid, now forced to part with his nanny.

In a discussion after the Tokyo screening, Chen explained that much of the film is autobiographical. After many years on the job, his father was fired and has never found decent work again. Chen still cherishes the bond he had with his Filipino maid, with the family for eight years, but admits the only thing he remembers about her is that she hailed from Ilo Ilo (or Iloilo) province in the Philippines—hence the film's title.

Ilo Ilo subjects to criticism empty, middle-class aspirations and pretensions, which can poison even the most intimate human relations. The film seems to imply that by simply throwing these away and accepting our limitations, we can have more fulfilling and humane relationships—like the Lim family. Be that as it may, Chen's work is well worth seeing.

Youth

Set in Tel Aviv, and focusing on a secular, middle-class family, the central strand of *Youth* revolves around a botched kidnapping. Tom Shoval's film manages to stay realistic, revealing Israel's increasing social polarization and striking blows at stereotypes of Arabs as evildoers.

Even though their parents are hiding it, brothers Yaki (David Cunio) and Shaul (Eitan Cunio) sense their financial woes. Yaki has just been conscripted into the armed forces, and plans to do more with his assault rifle than just parade around with it. Dad is out of a job, and mom's and Shaul's odd jobs can't cover everything. The family are in danger of losing their flat to a creditor. So the brothers kidnap a rich girl, Shaul's schoolmate, and hold her in their bomb shelter for ransom. Nothing goes as planned, and they are forced to release the girl, while the financial problems remain unsolved.

In a notable scene, the frightened girl asks her masked attackers if they are Arabs. When asked about this sequence in Tokyo, Shoval specified that his aim was to expose the growing social divisions within Israel and counter the negative view of Arabs—and the scene is successful, in my view. The twin Cunio brothers give fine performances in their first acting effort.

Again, a good deal of autobiographical material finds its way into what is another debut film: in the first place, the financial hardships of the middle class and the impact on family relations. One has the impression that the filmmakers, in their effort to turn outward start from the most familiar settings and problems, and working through this territory are producing some intelligent, credible and engaging works. To find their bearings in regard to wider issues, however, a more thorough and consciously worked out artistic and historical perspective will be required.

Stray Dogs

While it has its moments, the latest feature from well-known Taiwanese director Tsai Ming Liang, *Stray Dogs*, is weak and hollow overall. It follows the daily routine of a homeless family, about whom we learn next to nothing in the course of 138 minutes. Stylistic devices such as a motionless camera, long takes and spare dialogue were perhaps fresh two decades ago, as a reaction in part against commercial film-making and its "attention deficit disorder." By now, all of this has grown seriously stale and self-conscious, leaving *Stray Dogs* with a clichéd form *and* little to say.

Tsai (*Vive L'Amour*, *The Hole*), who is only 56, indicates this will be his last film, and one has the impression the filmmaker realizes he is at something of an impasse. This is unfortunate, because Tsai has demonstrated sensitivity and even a certain social understanding in the past.

It may be a harsh thing to say, but there is no substitute for working through the big problems of the day to their source in history and social life.