

## San Francisco International Film Festival 2014

## Part one: There is realism, and then there is realism

David Walsh  
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*This is the first of several articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 24–May 8.*

The recent San Francisco film festival, its 57th edition, screened some 168 films, including 100 or so fiction or documentary features. Including the works we saw in San Francisco, WSWs reviewers have seen some 40 of the latter total. For better or worse, we ought to have some idea of the general drift of things.

A number of the interesting films we have already commented on, when they were presented in either Berlin, Tokyo or Toronto, including *The Great Museum* (Austria), *Salvation Army* (Morocco), *Trap Street* (China), *We Come as Friends* (Austria), *Blind Dates* (Georgia) and *Standing Aside, Watching* (Greece). The last named, the best of the recent Greek films, deserves a further comment.

Among the films that were new to us, the more compelling included *Bad Hair* from Venezuela (Mariana Rondón), *Tamako in Moratorium* from Japan (Nobuhiro Yamashita), *Three Letters from China* from Switzerland (Luc Schaedler) and *School of Babel* (Julie Bertuccelli) and *Eastern Boys* (Robin Campillo) from France. *The Reconstruction* from Argentina (Juan Taratuto) had some moving moments. Hong Sang-soo's *Our Sunhi* is an intelligently made film, but its unflattering portrait of upper middle class South Korean self-absorption runs along the director's all too familiar grooves.

It has to be said that while there were a number of genuinely sympathetic and urgent films, "independent" filmmaking and the festival circuit as a whole still tend to be dominated, at their most socially concerned, by a variety of rather tepid or timid "realism" (and that tendency even extends itself, to varying degrees, into many of the better works).

Realism about life in any meaningful sense surely involves more than simply turning on a camera.

Passivity and the inability or unwillingness to criticize or render serious judgment have all too often been passed off in recent decades as evenhandedness and "lack of bias." To look at the world with an artist's eyes and *draw no important conclusions* has nothing in common with genuine objectivity. The baleful influence of various ideological trends is felt here too. The artists have been instructed to dread "explaining" anything, much less setting out its "truth," god forbid. We are left, in far too many cases, with mere detail, the surface, fragments, the odds and ends of social life not worked up in a serious or coherent manner.

One is reminded of Trotsky's comment in 1933 about a certain type of historian: "He sincerely takes his blindness regarding the working of historical forces for the height of impartiality, just as he is used to considering himself the normal measure of all things. ... A blunting of sharp edges, even distribution of light and shadow, a conciliatory moralising, with a thorough disguising of the author's sympathies easily

secures for an historical work the high reputation of objectivity."

There may have been a legitimacy half a century ago in the reaction against a certain heavy-handed, sometimes overly pat style of documentary and social filmmaking, associated with the Stalinist- or Labour-influenced artistic circles of the 1930s and 1940s.

Some greater weight had to be given to spontaneity, free exploration, the accidental and unexpected in life. But whatever freshness there was in such a tendency has long since worn away, and indeed turned into its opposite. Now shallowness, a non-committal attitude toward the fate of masses of people and even, to be blunt, outright historical and social ignorance are often offered to the public as the latest word in "non-judgmental" filmmaking. The art that results from such efforts tends to be lukewarm, not terribly convincing, short-lived.

There is also a sociological basis for these problems. During more or less quiescent periods, the artist tends to be conservative in his or her approach to concrete reality, taking life as he or she finds it and considering "its foundations to be immovable." The current generation of artists has not seen mass opposition or upheaval for the most part.

Even those who sincerely feel for popular suffering have little sense at this point that the social situation could be altered dramatically. Given that, many well-meaning filmmakers sift through social life, searching a little desperately (or artificially) for moments of happiness, individual initiatives that seem promising, small causes for optimism and so forth.

One of the associated approaches that has serious dangers built into it consists of examining conditions of social misery and discovering that people, despite everything, "possess enormous inner wealth." The film writers and directors find that the very oppressed occasionally "smile and enjoy themselves." The spectator is encouraged to conclude, "life may be beautiful and people may be happy even in these circumstances!" Such conceptions easily slide into, or complement, complacency and prostration before the accomplished social fact.

A number of the films at San Francisco seemed inadequate from the point of view of digging into the heart of their respective subjects, settling for the self-serving, the glancing blow, or worse.

Directed by Tonislav Hristov, *Soul Food Stories*, about a small village in Bulgaria, seemed especially vulnerable to this criticism. The film, inevitably described by critics as "warm" and "clever," struck me as appallingly superficial and even callous. Much of the documentary is devoted to the comments of a handful of older men. Their comments seem to reflect the idiocy and backwardness of rural life, as well as the appalling ideological vacuum on the left produced by the crimes and betrayals of Stalinism, more than anything else. What do the young and the disaffected think? We are not enlightened as to that.

Worse still, Hristov interviews the local leader of the Ataka [Attack] party, the ultra-right movement that has encouraged racist pogroms

against Roma, without a word of commentary or a suggestion of criticism.

Bulgaria is a country mired in poverty. The WSWS wrote in 2013: “In the 24 years since the fall of Stalinism, nominally right- and left-wing governments have presided over a devastating social crisis bound up with their adherence to the demands of international financial institutions. Bulgaria’s population has declined from 9 million to 7.3 million due to emigration and a falling birth rate.

“The consequences of the global economic crisis and the austerity measures of the European Union, of which Bulgaria has been a member since 2007, have degraded the country to the status of poor house of Europe. Bulgaria has the lowest wages in the EU and at the highest levels of social inequality.”

Hristov’s film contains not a hint of any of this. “Talk” and “food” are supposedly the answer. We remain unconvinced.

### “Artisanal cinema”

Italian-born, US-based filmmaker Roberto Minervini’s *Stop the Pounding Heart* falls into the same general category. The camera follows two young people in East Texas, from contrasting backgrounds, and their tentative relationship. Quiet, thoughtful, 14-year-old Sara Carlson is one of 12 children in a family of goat-raising, fundamentalist Christians. She attracts the interest of Colby Trichell, also 14, a would-be rodeo bull rider from a more rough and tumble background.

The camera passively follows the young people and their families and acquaintances around. We get to know as much about them as such a trailing along permits, and that’s not terribly much. Again, the filmmaker accepts the prevailing cultural and social backwardness with only delicate indications of criticism. It is impossible, however, to begin to understand the Carlsons’ peculiarities, or Colby’s limited outlook and opportunities, outside of the social and intellectual crisis that besets American life. So the film alternates between exoticizing the circumstances and accommodating itself to them.

Minervini explains, “My work is the result of a laborious and unconventionally (un)structured process, which is highly experiential and very personal. It is what I call ‘Artisanal Cinema.’” The sincerity and effort of the filmmaker are not in question, but his social and aesthetic assumptions are.

In a revealing comment, Minervini explained to the Film Society of Lincoln Center that he was about to begin shooting a new film in West Monroe, Louisiana, “the land of the ‘new poor,’ where 60 percent of the population is unemployed and is forced to do whatever it takes to earn a few dollars. It is a film about resilience, and love— of the saddest kind.”

Not outrage and protest, but “resilience” and “love of the saddest kind” within the existing miserable set-up—in other words, the exhausting (and usually futile) effort to make the best of a desperately bad situation—this is what the filmmaker admires most in the population. Or all he can find at the moment, in any case. But he must look harder, and not only in the bleakest, most remote locations.

One of the biggest problems revealed by this limited type of work is that the artists have been “convinced” (or, which may be much the same thing, intimidated into believing) that in order to indicate sympathy for one’s protagonists or subjects it is necessary to *adopt or at least heavily borrow* their immediate view of things. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, this is a form of intellectual condescension, and an evasion. (In any event, if the artist-interviewer him or herself questions the official version of things and goes beyond the rubbish repeated in the media, he or she will often elicit a quite different and angrier popular response.)

No-one can deny that picking up a camera, or a paintbrush, is a

presumptuous act. After all, only a limited number of people do it, and they must have the conviction they have something out of the ordinary to convey. However, having set up the camera and having aimed it in a certain direction and for a certain period of time, our modern filmmaker suddenly halts in his or her tracks and tells us that he or she has nothing special to communicate, that making criticisms of any belief is “elitist.” that he or she has no interest in “imposing” ideas or views on anyone, etc. This false and unpersuasive modesty involves a clear case of dereliction of artistic duty.

What’s required is the ability to sympathize sensitively and deeply with the predicament of one’s characters or subjects *without adapting in any way* to the illusions or difficulties of those whose thinking inevitably reflects social and cultural oppression and the severe consequences of economic decay and decline. For that, though, the artist needs genuinely independent and oppositional ideas.

### Films from or about Spain, Oregon, Bhutan, Elliott Smith

Lois Patiño’s *Coast of Death*, a documentary about Spain’s Galician coast, is similarly standoffish about society and history. It does not therefore leave a deep impression. A series of attractive and “extreme wide-shots in which people frequently appear as small parts of the landscape; as parts of a greater whole” (San Francisco film festival program) does not add up to a great deal by itself.

In typical fashion, the festival program goes on to assert, “Although Patiño touches on the tempestuous relationship between people (and people’s machines) and nature ... this is not a film with a political or environmental agenda. *Coast of Death* refuses reductive polemics in favor of being nobly expansive in its presentation of a specific topographic point.” No “agenda,” no “polemics” (as though “reductive” ones were useful to anyone!)—this is meant to be high praise. But without “polemics,” nothing changes in society.

In *The Last Season*, Sara Dosa’s documentary about rare mushroom hunting in Oregon’s woods, a dying Vietnam vet (a former sniper) and a Cambodian immigrant, who suffered under the Khmer Rouge, end up in one another’s unlikely company. Something might be made of the tragic legacy of imperialist intervention in Southeast Asia. But, by and large, it is not.

French filmmaker Thomas Balmès, in *Happiness*, presents a nonfiction view of life in Bhutan, the small landlocked kingdom (population approximately 750,000) at the eastern end of the Himalayas. In a small village, a widow, too poor to support six children, leaves her young son at the Buddhist monastery to be raised a monk. “Be a good boy and a dedicated monk,” she tells him. Meanwhile, electricity is coming, and the possibility of television and the Internet.

We see something of Bhutan in *Happiness*, and that has a certain value, including the unpleasant, monotonous life in a monastery, which the small boy wants little part of. A commentator tells us that the film “illuminates the seduction of technology— as well as its rapid encroachment— on an ancient way of life,” but mostly one sees extreme backwardness and poverty.

Is the filmmaker really signifying a desire to hold on to “an ancient way of life”? One can only hope not. But it’s hard to be certain one way or the other in the face of such a passive, passive, passive approach.

Singer-songwriter and musician Elliott Smith, the subject of Nickolas Rossi’s *Heaven Adores You*, was an intermittently intriguing figure, whose (apparent) suicide in October 2003 in Los Angeles, at the age of 34, put an end to a promising career. Rossi’s documentary conscientiously includes interview material with a host of former

bandmates, family members, friends, managers, etc., as well as various bits of video footage.

All of it contributes to a picture of some of the immediate, painful difficulties—none of it, however, tends to indicate that Smith’s fate was anything other than a personal tragedy. Was there anything bigger or wider, anything at all, in the singer’s field of vision or experience in the 1990s that might have caused him to be so fatally depressed? If so, we don’t learn anything about it.

*To be continued*



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