

San Francisco International Film Festival 2014

Part two: *Tamako in Moratorium, Standing Aside, Watching, Three Letters from China: Greater urgency from Japan, Greece and China*

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This is the second of several articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 24–May 8. The first part was posted May 12.

Several films screened at the 2014 San Francisco film festival shed light on the dire physical and emotional impact of the global economic crisis on the lives of the general population. Especially notable in this regard were a documentary about China and fiction films from Greece (previously commented on in our coverage of the 2013 Toronto Film Festival) and Japan.

Of late, Japanese cinema has tended to avoid the elephant in the room—a stagnant economy and alienating society. There are, however, signs of change. “Japan is hopeless,” says 23-year-old Tamako (Atsuko Maeda) as she articulates her malaise in *Tamako in Moratorium*, directed by Nobuhiro Yamashita (born 1976). In a state of psychic suspension or moratorium, Tamako’s various stages of disconnection correspond to the movie’s division into four seasons.

After graduating from college in Tokyo, Tamako returns to her hometown of Kofu (65 miles west of the capital) to live with her divorced father Zen (Suan Kan), who runs a cramped sporting goods store attached to an even more cramped living space. He cooks and cleans for the listless girl, whose principal setting is sleep mode. Other times, Tamako stares blankly into space.

In the background, the television news takes note of the population’s disaffection with government. Indicative of her self-imposed isolation, Tamako’s cell phone usage is almost non-existent. She avoids former classmates, thinking of herself as a “disgrace.”

A boy, Hitoshi (Kiyoya Ito), crosses her path and evokes a response. Using his father’s photo studio and equipment, Hitoshi touchingly takes stills of Tamako as she would like to appear—lively and charming. Zen finds Tamako’s job résumé crumpled up in the wastebasket, evidence of her inability to craft a phony image for a prospective employer. A New Year’s meal is delivered to father and daughter by an aunt wearing a protective mask, perhaps warding off more than germs or pollution.

When Zen begins to date, the floodgates restraining Tamako’s insecurity and self-loathing burst. The crisis will presumably push her to make a change. After Hitoshi tells her that he and his girlfriend “drifted apart,” Tamako says to herself: “Drifted apart. I haven’t

heard that in a while.”

Tamako in Moratorium captures something emotionally suffocating about the post-tsunami, post-nuclear reactor-meltdown Japan, whose ruling elite is remilitarizing to offset the country’s decades-long economic stasis. The coldness, soullessness and bleakness generate the impression that capitalist Japan is indeed “hopeless,” particularly for the young. Though not living in material poverty, Tamako suffers from acute spiritual malnourishment.

An article that appeared in 2013 in Britain’s *Observer* newspaper was disturbing, even if it was somewhat sensationalized: “Why have young people in Japan stopped having sex?”

It reported that the “number of single people has reached a record high. A survey in 2011 found that 61 percent of unmarried men and 49 percent of women aged 18-34 were not in any kind of romantic relationship, a rise of almost 10 percent from five years earlier. ... Although there has long been a pragmatic separation of love and sex in Japan—a country mostly free of religious morals—sex fares no better. A survey earlier this year by the Japan Family Planning Association (JFPA) found that 45 percent of women aged 16-24 ‘were not interested in or despised sexual contact.’ More than a quarter of men felt the same way.”

Tamako in Moratorium effectively dramatizes this state of affairs.

Standing Aside, Watching (na Kathesai Kai Na Koitas)

Since 2010, wages in Greece have dropped by an average of 50 percent, and almost a third of all adults and two-thirds of young people are unemployed. Forty percent of workers have been cut out of the health care system. US and European banks and governments are systematically dismantling Greek society, reversing the social position of the population. They are the authors of an unfolding Greek tragedy.

Yorgos Servetas’ *Standing Aside, Watching*, captures the economic collapse and political corruption that afflicts provincial Greek life and their psychological ramifications.

The film’s protagonist is thirty-something Antigone (Marina

Symeou). After a failed career as an actress, she returns to her native seaside town. Its natural beauty is scarred by traces of decline: deserted beaches, shuttered factories and shops and vacant parking lots—modern Greek ruins. The town’s inhabitants are bitter, frustrated, and the rancid social relations are fertile ground for conflict and disaster.

As Antigone arrives, an old man at the empty train station predicts a coming storm. Providing an indication of the film’s general tone, the opening sequence refers to Athens in the 1980s, when “everything was quiet and stable” and “fascists of the future” were “driving SUVs and wearing slippers.” At one point, Antigone’s father speaks directly to one of the film’s themes: “It was stupid to come here ... This is not a place for you. It’s not a place for anyone. It’s easy for someone to turn into a jerk. To just stand aside, watching.”

Antigone finds a job alongside her old friend Eleni (Marianthi Pantelopoulou) and soon meets the younger Nikos (Giorgos Kafetzopoulos), who works at the local scrap yard run by the vile Nodas (Nikos Georgakis). In her implacable fight for the downtrodden, Antigone challenges the power wielded by Nodas and a corrupt cop. Business interests and the police combine to run the town and destroy everyone who defies them. Their victims include Nikos, Nodas’ unwilling lackey, and the grossly abused Eleni, a language teacher forced into prostitution. But the problems are deep-going and intractable.

Calling the town a “shit hole,” Antigone refers to “the faces of people pretending that everything is all right. Everything is going to hell. I’m not going to sit around, watching.”

The film is an angry, urgent glimpse into a “going-to-hell” reality that is less and less a Greek and more and more a universal condition.

Three Letters From China

The turn by the Chinese Communist Party to capitalist restoration from 1978 was a desperate bid to resolve mounting economic and political crises, which had their roots in the contradictory character of the 1949 Chinese revolution. The adoption of market reforms required active state repression and violence, spawning a small, privileged layer that enjoys enormous wealth at the expense of the vast majority of the population.

Exploring three diverse locales, Luc Schaedler’s *Three Letters from China* (original title— *Watermarks*) is a fascinating documentary snapshot of contemporary China and the tribulations of its people.

Schaedler states that since “the crushing of the democracy movement in 1989 [Tiananmen Square], I have followed the upheaval in China with equal parts amazement and irritation: the country looks like a huge construction site and seems to be involved in a precipitous search for itself. In this unstable present the protagonists are taking tentative but courageous steps in the future.”

In the parched, poverty-stricken north, an elderly couple, Wei Guancai and his wife, describe how water has disappeared from the area since 1986, making life nearly impossible. Six hundred kilometers away, their son Wei Jijua lives a harsh existence with his wife and son in a dust-laden industrial zone where he is employed at a coal-washing operation. “Drivers come here from all over China. They don’t have farm land anymore, so they come here to work.” One of Wei’s coworkers says that “our boss made tens of millions on this

coal-washing business ... the work makes your face black.” Other workers complain that “we can’t make money, but our boss sure can.”

With genuine sadness, Wei’s wife discusses the pain it causes her husband to be separated from his aging parents. When asked about her dreams, she replies: “What kind of dreams can I have under these conditions?”

Secondly, the filmmakers present an ancient rice-growing village in the south, in verdant Guangxi Province. It is an area of immense beauty whose residents carry on an inevitably confused conversation about the Maoist Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square.

The final sequence features the huge metropolis of Chongqing (six to seven million people in the city alone) on the Yangtze River in Central China. In the shadows of the city’s high-rises, a fisherman’s daughter, Chaomei, occasionally helps her parents on their boat. Against their insistence that she get an education, Chaomei prefers the city’s night life and working as a waitress.

Her story is jarring. Born in 1994, she was found abandoned by her adoptive parents and barely survived. Later, her father and mother were penalized by the state for rescuing her. She speculates that either her real parents were too poor to keep her or wanted a boy. Without a trace of guile, Chaomei, who dresses like a boy, explains that she would have preferred to be a “Chinese man ... People ask if I’m a boy or a girl, I sometimes say both.”

The movie ends with an interview with a Chongqing environmentalist: “Our country is facing an imbalance of wealth and social development. The rich are getting richer and they spend their money on luxuries. The poor are starving and struggling in poverty.”

With its sympathy for China’s oppressed, Schaedler’s moving film points, above all, to two linked realities: that popular discontent is widespread, not only in the urban working class but in the rural areas, and that this vast country represents a social powder-keg.

To be continued



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