

San Francisco International Film Festival 2014

Part three: *Bad Hair, School of Babel, South is Nothing: Struggling in a harsh reality*

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This is the third of several articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 24–May 8. The first part was posted May 12, the second part on May 16.

In German writer Georg Büchner’s fragment of a novella, *Lenz* (1836), the title character argues: “What I demand in all things is life, the potentiality of existence, and that’s that; we need not then ask whether it be beautiful or ugly, the feeling that whatever’s been created possesses life outweighs these two and should be the sole criterion in matters of art. As it is, we encounter it rarely, we find it in Shakespeare and it rings forth fully in folk songs, now and then in Goethe. Everything else can be tossed into the fire.”

Today it is difficult to conceive of a serious and truthful treatment of life that entirely avoids the economic realities and pressures relentlessly bearing down on the overwhelming majority of humanity.

The significant artist is often the one who examines these conditions (and their origins) in the light and under the influence of the highest artistic traditions of the past. A thorough immersion in both sets of facts, social and artistic, tends to produce the most intriguing results. The coming together of Shakespeare, so to speak, and everyday life ...

It is truly rare to encounter such art work at the moment. But we do meet artists who display a sensitivity for people and their lives.

From Venezuela’s Mariana Rondón, *Bad Hair* takes a look at the relationship between Marta (Samantha Castillo), a single mother with two boys, who lives in a giant working class housing bloc in Caracas. In fact, some of the film’s strongest images are of the massive tenements and the signs of life on the different balconies.

Marta has lost her job as a security guard, and refuses to take what she considers more menial positions. Her nine-year-old son, Junior (Samuel Lange Zambrano), is obsessed with straightening his curly hair and generally dances to the beat of his own drum. His black paternal grandmother, Carmen (Nelly Ramos), encourages his flamboyance and seems intent on turning him into a singer-entertainer through whom she can live vicariously.

The mother and the grandmother are involved in a struggle. The latter offers Marta money to have Junior come and live with her. Carmen suggests at one point, “One [child] for you, and one for me.”

Suspecting her son of sexual “abnormality,” Marta asks his doctor, “He’s going to suffer, right?” The doctor suggests showing him a male role model, so Marta has sex with her boss, in part to get her job back, in front of the boy.

Mother and son care for one another, but the tensions and strains, rooted in poverty and cultural deprivation, are too strong. In the end, she sends him off to his grandmother to live. Marta and Junior have

one final, difficult meal together, a breakfast of fried plantains. Of course he doesn’t want to go, but instead he says, “I don’t love you.” And she replies, just as untruthfully, “Neither do I.” The situation is very painful.

The critic for *Variety* insisted on seeing *Bad Hair* as a comment “on Venezuela’s failed sociopolitical experiment,” on the “crumbling” and “unraveling” of Hugo Chávez’s “Marxist Bolivarian Revolution.” Another ideologically driven commentator, at *Cine-vue*, chose to regard “Junior’s unwillingness to conform” as illustrating “a generation ready to move on from socialism.”

Director Rondón may have a political axe to grind, but, taken at face value, *Bad Hair* suggests more than anything else that “socialism” never remotely existed in Venezuela and that the poor there share the same conditions and concerns as their counterparts in Buenos Aires, Lima, Rio and elsewhere on the continent (and around the globe, for that matter). In the background, the television news refers to Chávez’s medical condition and prayers for a “miracle,” but this seems very removed from life in the massive housing estate, and that seems about right.

In an interview with *Indiewire*, the filmmaker commented: “The universe is vast and open, and what interested me the most was challenging the viewers to question their own prejudices. Just like it’s not a matter of judging the mother and saying, ‘Oh, she’s horrible.’ I never set out to create a ‘bad’ mother. She is a mother who struggles in a harsh economic reality. She also doesn’t have the mental resources to offer an adequate space for compassionate understanding. She’s frustrated and hurt by her circumstances.”

School of Babel

Julie Bertuccelli’s documentary film, *School of Babel* (in French, *La Cour de Babel* —a pun on *La Tour de Babel*, the Tower of Babel), treats one year in an “adaptation class,” a class for new immigrant students, in a secondary school in Paris.

There are more than twenty students and more than twenty nationalities, including Egyptian, Chinese, Senegalese, Moroccan, Irish, Romanian, Serb, Chilean and so forth. How could anyone not be moved by these lively, anxious and earnest children? Or their parents, in many cases?

“I was very sad to leave Belarus,” says one, in halting French. To

leave Brazil, says another, “I was happy and sad.” The guardian of an African girl who is acting up comes in and explains to the teacher she can’t read or write.

The mother of the Chinese girl, Xin, who is terribly shy and stifled at first, explains that she works long hours in a restaurant. Xin is left by herself at home, says her mother: “Not speak, all alone.” We learn that Xin did not see her mother for ten years.

The proud, slightly awkward father of Andromeda, from Romania, works outside Paris, so his daughter is alone a great deal too. The Jewish boy from Serbia describes persecution by neo-Nazis.

“Are you happy?” someone asks a fellow classmate. “I don’t think so.” A girl cries.

The students go swimming and video each other’s stories and make progress in French. They argue about religion and other matters in the new language. The teacher is very conscientious and hard-working. By the end of the year, one feels the students are making strides in various spheres of life.

Bertuccelli’s film does not delve into the troubling issue of why so many millions of human beings are obliged to leave their homes either to escape persecution and repression to earn a living, but it shows an important reality, with humanity.

The director told *Indiewire*: “I wanted to convey the turmoil that exile represents, especially at this key age, when childhood is close to an end. I wanted to know more about what they’d left behind ... How do they adjust to their new lives in France? What is their family situation? What is modeling their lives and imagination as teenagers? How do they feel about the integration that is expected from them, especially as they are simultaneously building an identity for themselves?”

South is Nothing

In *South is Nothing*, a fairly bleak film from Italy, 17-year-old Grazia (Miriam Karlvist) lives with her widowed father, Cristiano (Vinicio Marchioni), who runs a shop selling fish in Reggio Calabria, across the Strait of Messina from Sicily.

For reasons of her own, which filmmaker Fabio Mollo reveals as the work evolves, Grazia dresses like a boy. She seems sunk in lethargy and depression, apparently over the disappearance of her beloved older brother, Pietro.

The local mafia are trying to coerce Cristiano into parting with his business. A “friend” advises him to sell the fish shop and move to Turin, “Pepe is buying up everything in the area.” Cristiano says he has to think about it. Less “friendly” now, almost a warning: “What’s there to think about? I’m telling you this for your own good.”

Grazia’s grandmother sums up the thinking Mollo is criticizing: “If you don’t talk about things, they can’t hurt you.” Later, when Grazia asks her what happened to Pietro, the older woman replies, “Nothing. The south is nothing. Nothing happens [here].” And, later still, Cristiano’s sometime girl-friend implores him: “Tell me what we are.” “You’re right. We’re nothing. We’ve always been nothing.”

Grazia rebels against the passivity and fatalism, and the implied, offscreen brutality. She finds out about Pietro’s fate, and says to her father: “I’m not keeping quiet any more ... Not saying anything is how you protect me? ... No one says a word here.”

Mollo told an interviewer: “The inspiration for the movie is in its

own title, the ‘South is Nothing.’ It’s a provocation against that mentality of the code of silence and resignation in which many generations [in the south of Italy] have been educated. It’s a story of youthful anger and a break with that mentality.”

Something of a minimalist work, *South is Nothing* never amounts to an earthshaking drama, but the sincerity of the director and the performers is not in question, and the film has a certain emotional impact.

Eastern Boys and The Reconstruction

In *Eastern Boys* (directed by Robin Campillo, the longtime collaborator of French filmmaker Laurent Cantet [*Human Resources*, *Time Out*, *The Class*]), Daniel (Olivier Rabourdin) is a middle-aged, middle class gay Parisian. Intrigued by Marek (Kirill Emelyanov), one of a crowd of Eastern European young men, perhaps prostitutes, who hang around the Gare du Nord railway station, Daniel gives the youth his home address.

When Marek shows up, however, he comes with a gang, headed by the charismatic and thuggish Boss (Daniil Vorobyev), who have larceny on their minds. Daniel seems strangely turned on by the invasion and brazen criminality. Eventually, he and Marek have an affair. The film begins by considering both the plight of the eastern Europeans and the fantasies of well-to-do Parisians, but, in the end, settles for being a rather formulaic thriller.

From Argentina, *The Reconstruction* (directed by Juan Taratuto) introduces us to Eduardo (Diego Peretti), a taciturn, hard-bitten oilfield engineer. In the first scene, he drives by a woman desperately trying to flag him down at the scene of a car accident. This is clearly a man with a tough outer shell.

The film is set in Patagonia, in Argentina’s south, in wintertime. Eduardo is visiting a friend, Mario (Alfredo Casero), married with two daughters, as a favor. But when Mario dies during a medical procedure, Eduardo finds himself forced to take part in the family’s grieving and then in its ordinary, day-to-day activities. He comes back to life, at least to a recognizable extent.

Taratuto’s film is slight, but believable for the most part. Unfortunately, like other Argentine films of the self-consciously “matter of fact” variety, it overplays its emotional hand. We get the point about Eduardo after the first or second scene, and the next dozen grunts or grimaces are wasted on us. The film lacks the genuine simplicity and elegance it aspires to.

To be continued



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