

San Francisco International Film Festival 2014

Part four: *Manos Sucias*, *Freedom Summer* and others: Bitter social conflict present and past

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This is the fourth and final article 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 and the third part May 21.

In his first feature film, *Manos Sucias* [Dirty Hands], American writer-director Josef Kubota Wladyka offers us a rare view of life in poverty-stricken Colombia.

The movie centers on the country's pervasive drug trade in which brutal gangsters trap the penniless, using them as raw and expendable material in their criminal activities.

Shot on location (and somewhat roughly shot), the film captures beautiful jungle coastlines where drug lords operate and serene waters patrolled by military vessels. Two Afro-Colombian fishermen, estranged brothers, embark on a rickety fishing boat from Buenaventura, Colombia's biggest Pacific port and epicenter of the drug trade. The suicidal endeavor involves towing a submerged "narco-torpedo," loaded with 100 kilos of cocaine, to Panama. The cargo inevitably attracts numerous marauders, including desperate villagers and paramilitary vultures.

Handsome, savvy Jacobo (Jarlin Javier Martinez), an experienced smuggler, wants this mission to be his last—his ticket out of Buenaventura. Younger brother and aspiring rapper Delio (Cristian James Abvincula), a new father, is unprepared for an undertaking that will have fatal consequences.

In a published interview, director Wladyka explained that in 2010 he and a colleague "photographed and explored narco submarines and torpedoes confiscated by the Colombian Navy. What struck me most were the realities of those ensnared by this world. Over the next two years, I returned to the homes of these individuals and listened to their tales and deeply personal accounts of how their lives remain entrenched in the drug trade.

"A region known for political unrest and organized crime, it's no secret that the drug trade continues to have a staggering effect over its people. We documented numerous accounts of daily confrontations with paramilitaries, guerrillas and criminal drug traffickers. I asked a man from Tumaco if he could see an end to the turmoil in Colombia and he responded, 'Yes ... but only in my dreams.'"

In an email interview, Wladyka was kind enough to respond to questions from this reviewer.

Joanne Laurier: Why did you decide on this particular story?

Josef Kubota Wladyka: When I first traveled to Buenaventura I was exposed to a world and place that hasn't been represented before. It is a place so rich with culture and community, but is simultaneously plagued by so many deep-seated issues, one of them being drug trafficking. My

crew and I wanted to give a voice to the individuals caught in the cocaine trade. While existing as an international concern, very few people get a glimpse into the realities of this world.

JL: Can you discuss some of the challenges of filming in Colombia?

JKW: As one of the most hot and humid areas in the world, the physical act of making this film in Buenaventura was very strenuous and extremely difficult. Coupled with delicate subject matter, filming in boats, on the water, through thick jungles, and other rough terrain taxed us emotionally as well.

However, earning the trust of the communities to shoot in their homes proved to be the biggest challenge. We maintained open conversations to collaborate with the locals and community leaders on our intentions and creative direction for this film. Not only did we cast and hire a lot of local residents, we also established filmmaking workshops to give back to the community and leave them with tools to continue telling their stories. The film was a beautiful collaboration with the people of Buenaventura.

JL: The social conditions depicted in the film are horrific. How widespread are these conditions for the poor?

JKW: As a result of port development, ongoing disputes over territories and much internal and external unrest, Buenaventura holds one of the highest rates of displacement in Colombia, which fuels the unstable social conditions. While the effects of these horrific struggles were very palpable, what was equally felt was what we really worked to capture and convey: the joy, beauty, hope and creativity that is truly unique to this one part of the world.

JL: Are race and ethnic divisions used in Colombia to divide the population?

JKW: I can't speak for the whole country, but I can say that a great deal of racism and social exclusion exists in Buenaventura. It is definitely an issue there that is real, and blatantly present, which its own people are forced to confront everyday.

JL: Why do you make films?

JKW: It's my passion and something I love wholeheartedly. For me, filmmaking is just another form of communication, and sharing in this dialogue allows me to tell a story while connecting with people through my eyes and theirs. Being able to do this has always been my dream, and I'm grateful to be able to make films and hope to make more in the future.

Freedom Summer

Marking the 50th anniversary of the violent events in the summer of 1964 in Mississippi, *Freedom Summer*, a documentary directed by Stanley Nelson (*Freedom Riders*, 2010), chronicles a ten-week period in which more than 700 student volunteers and organizers, black and white, together with local black citizens, fought a ferocious battle in the most segregated state in the US to register black voters.

With shocking archival footage, exposing both the crushing poverty of the African American population and the domination of white supremacy in Mississippi, the film includes commentary by some of those who took part in the struggle. (“I would wake up every morning sighing with relief that I was not bombed.”)

The most backward elements were whipped into a frenzy by sensational reports that as many as 30,000 “agitators” were set to invade Mississippi. The racists were also outraged that white students were housed with black residents.

Most notorious during the summer were the murders in June 1964 of civil rights volunteers Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney in Philadelphia, Mississippi, by Klansmen and local police. The state of Mississippi refused to prosecute the conspirators, and those eventually convicted on federal charges received light sentences.

It is estimated that some 65 buildings were bombed or burned that summer. The documentary highlights the role played by Robert Parris Moses, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary and co-director of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO)—a coalition of the Mississippi branches of four major civil rights organizations. As the film reveals, Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi-born former cotton picker, became a fiery spokesperson for the cause.

The COFO-organized project established the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)—an alternative to the state’s Democratic Party—which sent a delegation of 68 members to attend the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in an effort to unseat the all-white delegation. President Lyndon Johnson and the political establishment worked, mostly behind the scenes, to undermine the effort.

According to the filmmakers, the campaign was a landmark in the civil rights movements—the most violent period in Mississippi since black reconstruction. The film essentially ends with the paltry results of the 1964 convention: a dirty compromise between the MFDP and the state Democratic Party, in which two of the 68 MFDP delegates chosen by Johnson would be made at-large delegates and the remainder would be nonvoting guests of the convention.

Nelson’s *Freedom Summer* leaves the big political questions open, but presumably the viewer is intended to draw generally positive conclusions about the Democratic Party, or elements within it, and the perspective of pressuring the federal government and Congress. The more discerning viewer, however, may do just the opposite.

Enormous courage and determination were devoted to the cause of establishing elementary civil rights for African Americans in the South. The ultimate sacrifice was made by Schwerner, Goodman, Chaney and many others. Life did change in Mississippi with the end of the vicious apartheid system, as did the relations between the races. However, the mass movement, thanks in part to organizations like the Stalinist Communist Party (whose role is not referred to in *Freedom Summer*), was never directed against the foundations of the capitalist economic order, the ultimate source of the racist violence and repression. Much of the energy was devoted to the entirely vain project of “reforming” the Democratic Party. Only the Trotskyists, supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fought for the political independence of the working class.

Many of the gains of the civil rights movement, including the 1965 Voting Rights Act, whose passage followed on the heels of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, are now in the process of being gutted by the US Supreme Court.

Nelson’s documentary will be broadcast in the US on PBS June 24.

Other films

Georgian writer-director Zaza Urushadze’s *Tangerines* takes place in an almost deserted village during the war between Georgia and Russian-supported Abkhazia in 1992. The story hinges on a longtime resident of the disputed Caucasus region who refuses to flee, eventually taking care of wounded fighters on opposite sides of the conflict. *Tangerines* is a well intentioned but narrowly focused work that gently and somewhat moralizingly pleads for tolerance between belligerent ethnicities—a division whose tragic exacerbation is bound up with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

From Uruguay, Manuel Nieto Zas’s *The Militant* is set in 2002, when the country was hit by major strikes and the universities were closed down. The protagonist is a 25-year-old leader of a university occupation in Montevideo. The most interesting part of the film is a segment depicting a hunger strike by meatpacking workers who begin to figure out that the union has made a rotten deal (“The strike should have ended long ago.”). For the most part, however, the movie rambles on in bleakness and passivity. Everyone—the clueless students and the martyr-like workers alike—is ineffectual. Only the selfish elements make gains.

In a small village in the mountains of Kazakhstan, a young boy fends for himself in Seric Aprymov’s *Bauyr* (*Little Brother*). Like many movies in which filmmakers deal in microcosms detached from a larger social context, the oeuvre becomes an exercise in fatalism and resignation. It’s painful to watch the clever, but essentially abandoned eight-year-old struggle to survive and carve out a space among adults who are either corrupt or barely surviving themselves.

It’s also frustrating to endure the film’s prostration before and acceptance of the accomplished fact. Passive realism is a poor avenue for protest in cinema. *Little Brother* apparently sees a situation in which only the most resilient and resourceful will inherit the earth. In this case, an appealing kid stands in for a probing of reality.

We began this series of articles by commenting on the continuing passivity and timidity of so much of today’s “social realism,” a phenomenon with objective roots and not the result of the filmmakers’ personal weaknesses. To understand the social and historical source of the problems, however, is not the same thing as accepting or condoning the situation.

We need more artists who work in the spirit of a van Gogh, who told his brother in a letter in 1882 that, although he was personally in the “depths of misery,” he was driven to produce the paintings he saw “in the poorest cottages, in the dirtiest corners...with an irresistible momentum.”

The painter went on, “Art demands dogged work, work in spite of everything and continuous observation. By dogged, I mean, in the first place incessant labor, but also not abandoning one’s views upon the say-so of this person or that.”

We need to do everything we can do revive this obsession with artistic truthfulness and integrity.

Concluded



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