

Toronto International Film Festival 2014—Part 1

Something different in filmmaking

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This is the first of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-14).

A number of remarkable films were screened at the recent Toronto International Film Festival, out of a total of 284 feature films and 108 shorts, from some 80 countries.

It is challenging to register changes from year to year, and make sense of them, at such a large and complex event. But something was different about the 2014 festival in the best films, something sharper, more focused ...

The uninterrupted growth of social inequality, the relentless drive to war and the lurch to the right by all the governments and official parties are having an impact, as they must, on a portion of film writers, directors and performers. For American filmmakers in particular this has involved getting over an infatuation with Barack Obama, whose administration has proven to be the most right-wing in US history.

As always, the recent festival was highly contradictory.

Of course, the Toronto film festival has a significance for the global film business. In a press release, officials noted that this year's festival set a new record for industry delegate attendance (5,000) and delivered "strong film sales. ...To date, 41 film sales have been announced in territories globally, which includes 24 major sales to U.S. distributors." The number of industry delegates from China, for example, jumped by 217 percent and from South Africa by 59 percent.

The layers involved in publicizing, buying and selling (and to a considerable extent, in making) films globally have their own agenda and their own social point of

view, which correspond to the more general, self-absorbed outlook of the upper middle class at this point. Personal identity, gender issues and unthinking support for imperialist intervention on "democratic" and "humanitarian" grounds in Syria, Ukraine and so on still seem to predominate. There were numerous films along these lines at this year's festival.

The film that won the People's Choice Award, which was quite widely promoted, *The Imitation Game*, directed by Norwegian-born Morten Tyldum and featuring Benedict Cumberbatch and Keira Knightley, is a case in point. It fictionally recreates the experiences of British mathematician, cryptanalyst and computer scientist Alan Turing (1912-1954), who worked for British military intelligence during World War II. The filmmakers sensitively treat Turing's homosexuality, including his eventual prosecution for "gross indecency." At the same time, the character of the second imperialist war and the role of the British military and figures such as Winston Churchill are dealt with in an entirely conventional and uncritical fashion. This is what we encounter for the most part.

On the other hand, there are those who take the world and their impressions of it more seriously. We will have more to say about some of these films in subsequent articles or at the time of their release to movie theaters.

Mike Leigh's *Mr. Turner*, about the last decades of the life of the English painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851), which the filmmaker has been attempting to make for some time, is a strong and fascinating work. In its own way, it is a quite radical film, which insists on Turner's humble origins and his estrangement from the upper echelons of British society, as well as the painting academy.

Significantly, in light of the current threats against

public art museums and galleries, the film also forcefully makes the point that Turner (Timothy Spall) rejected the private ownership of his work and desired it to be shown in a single body to the public free of charge!

Leigh told an interviewer, “Turner is a great artist: a radical, revolutionary painter. I felt there was scope for a film examining the tension between this very mortal, flawed individual, and the epic work, the spiritual way he had of distilling the world.”

One can point to what is not there, a greater appreciation of the broader historical and social currents that helped shape Turner (who entered the Royal Academy of Art schools in 1789), for instance, but what Leigh does present is visually stunning, deeply human and often very moving.

Iranian-American Ramin Bahrani’s *99 Homes*, with Andrew Garfield, Michael Shannon and Laura Dern, powerfully evokes the foreclosures crisis in Florida through the story of a young man (Garfield) forced to make a pact with the “devil,” the real estate broker and developer (Shannon) who organized the foreclosure of his family home.

Actor Paul Bettany directs his wife Jennifer Connelly, along with Anthony Mackie, in *Shelter*, about two homeless people in New York City. We were not able to see *Time Out of Mind*, directed by Oren Moverman, with Richard Gere as a man forced into a homeless shelter.

Ethan Hawke plays a leading role as a drone pilot, presiding over killings 7,000 miles away from a US Air Force base in Nevada, in *Good Kill*, written and directed by Andrew Niccol (writer of *The Truman Show*). The film has genuine weaknesses, and makes certain unwarranted concessions, but it also contains some greatly disturbing and moving sequences.

In *Tigers*, Bosnian-born filmmaker Danis Tanovic (*Circus Columbia, An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker*) takes on the conglomerates who continue to market baby formula to mothers in impoverished parts of the globe, leading to the death of countless numbers of infants.

Swiss-Iraqi filmmaker Samir (*Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs—The Iraqi Connection*) has made another intriguing documentary, this time in 3-D, *Iraqi Odyssey*. The film covers 50 years of family and national history. A number of Samir’s relatives were

members of the Iraqi Communist Party and the film, inadvertently or not, stands as an indictment of the disastrous Iraqi Stalinists’ policy of allying themselves with one wing after another of the Iraqi military and bourgeoisie.

Two serious films from Germany treat Nazism and its consequences. *Phoenix*, directed by Christian Petzold (*Barbara, The State I Am In*), centers on a disfigured concentration camp survivor (Nina Hoss), who undergoes plastic surgery and searches for her husband in the rubble of postwar Berlin. *Labyrinth of Lies*, from Italian-born director Giulio Ricciarelli, is an account of the events leading up to the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1963.

From veteran Mauritanian-born director Abderrahmane Sissako (*Life on Earth, Bamako*) comes *Timbuktu*, about a cattle herder in northern Mali who comes into conflict with Islamic fundamentalists. Sissako continues to be a poetic and serious filmmaker.

César Fierro, the oldest living Mexican on death row in the US, has been in a Texas prison for 30 years. *The Years of Fierro*, directed by Santiago Esteinou, examines the case against Fierro, his family tragedy and the brutality of the Texas legal system.

And there were other interesting works, from France, Israel and elsewhere ...

Virtually every one of these films has flaws, even serious flaws, but each is a serious attempt to present a picture of life. And, after all, spectators have the right—to borrow a phrase from Trotsky—to demand filmmaking that gives them an aesthetic, transforming interpretation of that which troubles them as social and moral personalities.

To be continued



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