

Toronto International Film Festival 2014—Part 5

***99 Homes, Shelter* and harsh American realities: Filmmakers inch their way toward important truths**

Director Ramin Bahrani: “The villain is the system”

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This is the fifth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 4-14). Part 1 was posted September 18, Part 2 on September 24, Part 3 on September 26, and Part 4 on October 2.

The dominant view in contemporary cinema and criticism, unstated or not, is that art and social analysis are to all practical purposes mutually exclusive, that the dramatization of social problems, including the conditions under which vast numbers of people live, is not conducive to the creation of “genuine art.”

Over the past two decades in particular, the intellectual and political crimes of Stalinism and the demise of the USSR have dishonestly become part of the justification in artistic circles for social indifference and downright middle class selfishness. So-called “artistic films,” for the most part bereft of artistry or any outstanding quality except a devotion to the concerns and anxieties of the social layer that produces them, are obliged by an internal command to avoid the problems facing the mass of the population, lest they be branded didactic or propagandistic.

The reality, however, is that the source of enduring drama lies in the artistic treatment of the most pressing problems and contradictions that confront humanity at a given historical moment, in the painstaking search for the aesthetic means of concentrating, in striking images, these problems and contradictions. “A great poet is great only because he is the organ and mouthpiece of his time, his society, and, consequently, mankind.” (Plekhanov)

Several works screened at the festival indicated that the more thoughtful filmmakers are inching their way, a little roughly and more than a little blindly, toward a concern with burning social ills.

99 Homes

In *99 Homes*, Iranian-American writer-director Ramin Bahrani (*Man Push Cart*, 2005, *Chop Shop*, 2007, *Goodbye Solo*, 2008) has created a compelling work that puts flesh and blood on the foreclosure epidemic.

Set in 2010, the movie opens in a blood-spattered bathroom in an Orlando, Florida home where a man has killed himself rather than undergo eviction. Viewing the carnage while sucking on an electronic

cigarette, real estate agent and developer Rick Carver (beautifully played by Michael Shannon), is annoyed that the death will delay his resale plans for the dwelling.

As a foreclosure shark, Carver, with local police in tow, shows no mercy as he carries out innumerable dispossessions on every segment of the population—young families who are victims of the recession, the elderly who believe they are safe from homelessness because they have signed up for schemes such as reverse mortgages, even the well-to-do. Some of the movie’s strongest scenes depict the plight—and subsequent wrath—of people from a range of social milieus being pushed over the edge. Vampire-like, Carver feeds from a seemingly bottomless pool of social misery.

One of Carver’s victims is an underemployed construction worker, Dennis Nash (Andrew Garfield), a single dad living in his family home with his son and his mother (Laura Dern), a hairdresser. He has been futilely fighting eviction through a corrupt legal system that favors the Carvers of the world.

When his family is forced to move to a fleabag motel, Nash, in his desperation, begins working for Carver’s eviction assembly line, which also involves a variety of grifts, like stealing air conditioners from foreclosed properties and billing the government for their replacement with other stolen units. Carver tells him, “When you work for me, you’re mine.” And, speaking of the failing housing industry, “They build homes—I own homes.”

Bahrani effectively and systematically portrays the awful things people will do, betraying themselves and others, faced with impossible economic conditions. Nash is transformed into someone unrecognizable, at least for a time.

Carver is a human being too, and Bahrani does not treat his situation without sympathy, or at least understanding. The real estate agent tells Nash that his father was a roofer, and that he also used to be in the business of building houses until it became an economic liability. The system is rigged, Carver explains, it only bails out “the winners.” Indeed, America is now a country “of the winners, by the winners and for the winners.”

In the end, Carver is only a bit player succeeding or failing at the behest of his overlords: giant real estate conglomerates, who don’t pick off people one at a time, but, like 500-pound bombs, wipe out entire communities.

Bahrani’s film is well done, despite a few narrative flaws or shortcuts in

its final portion. Shannon, Garfield and Dern perform with commitment, contributing to the movie's cohesive and appropriately angry tone. It is a work pointed in the right direction.

At a Toronto press conference for *99 Homes*, Bahrani made conspicuous reference to the grotesque fact (cited numerous times by the WSWS) that the 85 richest people in the world have the same wealth as the bottom 3.5 billion. Lead actor Shannon noted approvingly that the director had a "social conscience" and "bravely observes what's going on." As for himself, the actor explained, "I don't care about real estate, [but] I did care about what was happening to these people." Dern pointedly added that "perhaps we should bail out those who are damaged" and presumably not simply the banks. Finally, responding to a question about Carver's villainous role in the film, Bahrani commented that "the villain is the system."

Shelter

Well-known British actor Paul Bettany (*A Beautiful Mind*, *Master and Commander*, *Wimbledon*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Margin Call*, etc.) has written and directed a film, *Shelter*, that examines the trials and tribulations of two homeless people in New York City. He ends his movie with the dedication: "To the couple who lived outside my building."

Imagining what the situation of this homeless pair might be, Bettany came up with story of Tahir (Anthony Mackie) and Hannah (Jennifer Connelly--Bettany's wife). Tahir is an undocumented Nigerian immigrant who busks for a living on plastic-bucket drums. Upon release from prison for a minor crime, he tries to track down his stolen possessions, which brings him into contact with Hannah, a heroin addict who has lived on the streets since the death of her physician husband. After Tahir thwarts her suicide attempt, their relationship grows from a common interest in basic survival to genuine love.

Happening upon an unlocked apartment, whose wealthy owners are on vacation, the couple enjoy intimacy in the deluxe refuge, with Hannah eventually kicking her drug habit. But when they return to the streets, Tahir and Hannah are beset by freezing temperatures and serious illness, and she is forced to prostitute herself.

Bettany's film is a sincere effort to depict the extreme vulnerability of those who live without shelter, in many cases dying because they are excluded by a vicious system without any kind of social safety net. There are a few moments in the film, however, that strain credulity, such as when Tahir and Hannah luxuriate in a Manhattan penthouse, pretending to be a respectable middle class couple. Nonetheless, Bettany and Connelly obviously felt driven to make a statement about a terrible social plague.

In an interview, Bettany said: "I've lived in NYC for over ten years and have seen the number of people on the streets increase at an alarming rate. Also, heroin is back on the streets with gusto. If you live in NYC you can't help but see it. I didn't want to make a film about homelessness being bad or drug addiction being bad because of course it is—I get it, it's bad. I wanted to find out if there was something else to say."

The Years of Fierro

César Fierro, a Mexican citizen who has spent thirty years in a Texas prison awaiting his sentence of execution by lethal injection, is the subject of a sympathetic and painful documentary, *The Years of Fierro*, by Mexican-born filmmaker Santiago Esteinou.

In 1979, a cab driver in El Paso, Texas was killed. The following year, under duress, Fierro confessed to the murder and was sentenced to death. Over the intervening years, the case against him, involving police corruption, torture and perjury, has unraveled. Notably, at no time after his arrest was César informed of his right under international law to contact and communicate with his consular representatives. Throughout his incarceration, Fierro has maintained his innocence.

In 1995, an El Paso district judge recommended a retrial after reviewing new evidence of gross police misconduct. But in 1996, a Texas appeals court refused to follow that recommendation, even though the court unanimously agreed that the confession was coerced and that the lead detective had committed perjury to conceal the truth.

The filmmakers spend a great deal of time with Fierro's younger brother, Sergio, a homeless man who often sleeps in an amusement park in Ciudad Juárez. Sergio is an endearing, tragic figure, whose own life has been devastated by César's unjust confinement.

The documentary spotlights an appalling case, but it is far from unique. As the WSWS has noted: "According to the Death Penalty Information Center, as of March 14, 2014, there were 140 foreign nationals on death row in the US. At least 30 foreign nationals have been executed since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976. Texas has executed 12 of these individuals, including 10 Mexicans, 1 Dominican and 1 Canadian."

Love and Mercy

"I keep looking for a place to fit/Where I can speak my mind/I've been trying hard to find the people/That I won't leave behind/They say I got brains/But they ain't doing me no good/I wish they could," Brian Wilson sings in "I Just Wasn't Made for These Times," a song on The Beach Boys' seminal album, *Pet Sounds*, released in 1966.

Wilson was, in fact, very much made for "these times," as his remarkable music and the widespread popular response to it over the years so clearly demonstrate. However, he was definitely not made to conform to—or escape intact—the soul-crushing music industry in "these times."

Attempting to tackle the pop genius' complicated history, director Bill Pohlad's biopic *Love and Mercy* divides Wilson's life into two different phases: the early Beach Boys years, including the artist's acute mental collapse, and the more recent decades when Wilson is rescued from the clutches of a Machiavellian psychiatrist by his future wife Melinda. The movie cuts back and forth between the two periods. The younger Brian is played by Paul Dano, while Wilson's older self is played by John Cusack. Elizabeth Banks plays Melinda and Paul Giamatti is the manipulative Dr. Eugene Landy.

The film is at its most interesting and creative when it tries to dissect Wilson's inner turmoil. The scenes featuring Dano are more intricate and convincing than those with Cusack, which tend to be rather conventional, even superficial. Unfortunately, *Love and Mercy* makes little effort to grapple with the postwar social climate and conditions in America that produced such an extraordinary figure. This helps account for the movie's relative thinness.

To Pohlad's credit, he does capture something of Wilson's manic search for musical perfection. A segment in *Love and Mercy* corresponds to the statement Wilson has posted on his web site: "I would have the musicians keep playing over and over again till the sound made sense. I worked overtime on that; I worked hours to get it right. If the sound didn't make any sense, then I wouldn't know what to do—I'd be lost! It's instinct that tells me. I have an instinct for music, or a feeling about it, and I'll have my feelings guide my hands."

Miss Julie

In the introduction to his play, *Miss Julie*, written in 1888, Swedish dramatist August Strindberg (1849-1912) described its central theme: “The problem of social rise or downfall, of who is higher or lower, or who is better or worse, whether man or woman, is, has been and shall be of enduring interest.”

Directed by iconic Swedish actress Liv Ullmann, the new film adaptation of the Strindberg work features Jessica Chastain, Colin Farrell and Samantha Morton.

Ullmann sets her film in the north of Ireland in 1890, as opposed to its original Swedish location, because, as she explained at a question-and-answer session following the movie’s screening in Toronto, Ireland is currently the scene of immense conflict and loss of life.

Miss Julie (Chastain), the daughter of an aristocrat, seduces a servant (Farrell). Inevitably, there are far-reaching consequences for the unforgivable act of breaching the class barrier. Ullmann and the three leads do a credible job with Strindberg’s masterpiece, despite the occasional lapse into unnecessary tour de force by Chastain and Farrell. Ullmann’s use of Schubert and Bach in her score adds an elegant element.

Strindberg’s play strikes a deep chord, filled as it is with intense dissatisfaction about class society. It contains such lines as: “A dog can lie on her ladyship’s sofa, a horse can have his nose stroked by a young lady’s hand, but a servant ...,” or “You stood for the utter hopelessness of ever rising out of the class where I was born.”

Bertolt Brecht described Strindberg, at his best, as “one of the great educators of modern Europe.” Ullmann’s film supports this assessment.

Madame Bovary

French-born Sophie Barthes offers up another film version of Gustave Flaubert’s renowned 1856 novel, *Madame Bovary*, about the unhappy wife of a provincial doctor driven to emotional extremes. Barthes strives for realism in scenery and costume, to positive aesthetic effect, but the work as a whole is rather uninspired and flat. Mia Wasikowska is competent as the tragic heroine. But it is Rhys Ifans playing the merchant of fancy goods that fuel Emma Bovary’s relentless desires, who brings much needed energy and vitality to the movie.

By comparison, Vincente Minnelli’s 1949 *Madame Bovary* is an inventive and entertaining interpretation of Flaubert’s work. Jean Renoir (1934) and Claude Chabrol (1991) also directed adaptations of the famed novel.

In his essay on Flaubert (1821-1880), literary critic Edmund Wilson wrote that the novelist “seems always to see humanity in social and historical perspective.” Relating this to *Madame Bovary*, Wilson argues that “all is meanness, mediocrity and timidity. The villain here is, of course, the bourgeois”—an assertion more dramatically substantiated, or at least hinted at, in Minnelli’s film than in Barthes’, with its feminist leanings.

To be continued





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