

Toronto International Film Festival 2015: Part one

The physical and emotional toll that capitalist society takes

David Walsh
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This is the first in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 10-20).

“The tragedy of our period lies in the conflict between the individual and the collectivity, or in the conflict between two hostile collectivities in the same individual.” Trotsky

We recently attended the 40th Toronto International Film Festival (the event was known as the “The Festival of Festivals” from 1976 to 1993), which screened some 285 feature films and 110 shorts from 71 countries.

A number of the most widely publicized films presented at the festival, including *The Martian* (Ridley Scott), *Sicario* (Denis Villeneuve), *Black Mass* (Scott Cooper), *Anomalisa* (Charlie Kaufman) and *Spotlight* (Tom McCarthy), will make their way, or have already made their way, into movie theaters.

It is not a given that these films, individually or as a group, will be less interesting than smaller, so-called independent or art works from around the world, but undoubtedly the presence of a large studio and a large budget in many cases places further obstacles in the path of artistic and social truth-telling.

Every edition of the festival poses the following question, in one form or another: to what extent has a section of film artists chosen to look beyond their noses, reject the prevailing social indifference and self-absorption, and align themselves with important objective realities?

The world presents itself today increasingly as a set of interconnected and multiplying crises. International tensions, focused on the Middle East, Ukraine and East Asia, have reached unparalleled levels. The flood of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere, fleeing the calamities produced by imperialist interventions and machinations, is unlike anything since World War II. The United States proceeds like the global gangster that it is, bombing, invading and devastating country after country, region after region. The world’s stock markets tremble and shake, only waiting, so to speak, “for the other shoe to drop.”

As the WSWs recently noted, “Crisis is not the exception, but the rule. The very speed of events, with virtually no intervals of calm between the storms, denotes an intensifying and profound general crisis.”

Artistic consciousness inevitably lags behind, and the more rapidly the objective situation develops, the greater the lag. And the artist has never been less prepared in the modern era than at present, following decades of political reaction, dominated by blather about the “end of socialism,” “good-bye to the working class,” and more.

Nonetheless, the orgy of violence directed by the great powers against Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen, the build-up of police state measures in all the advanced capitalist countries, the economic devastation of wide layers of the population... this has not gone unnoticed. The problem is that generally the artists do not possess the social and

historical perspective with which to make full and convincing sense of the events passing before them. As a result, they can only catch glimpses and pass on impressions, some of them more illuminating and satisfying than others. To put it somewhat crudely, if one were to stitch together a unified picture of contemporary life from the most insightful individual bits and pieces, something valuable would no doubt emerge, but even so its essential social dynamic or driving force would still be absent.

The writers and directors, as insulated as they may be, do not live in a separate universe from everybody else, nor are they simply the mouthpieces for the corporate interests who employ them in many cases. There are thoroughly dishonest and deplorable individuals in the film world, but they are a minority. The wealth available no doubt has a harmful influence, encouraging selfishness and careerism. More to the point, however, is the weight of decades of intellectual stagnation in which the working class has been unable to play an independent or politically decisive role and the accumulated pressure of cultural and intellectual regression bound up with this.

The writers and directors do not live in a separate universe. Whatever illusions and confusion may exist, one of the distinguishing features of contemporary social life is the discrediting of virtually every leading institution, political party or movement, individual political leader. Where today is there a politician in any part of the world with a *genuine* mass, popular following? Governments and their leading figures, along with bankers, CEOs and generals, are more likely to be looked on with disgust, even horror, by wide layers of the population. At the same time, a mass alternative to capitalism has yet to emerge.

A growing sense of the gravity of the present situation and the threat it represents to humanity tended to take the following intimate, individual form in the more observant films in Toronto: a sensitivity to the toll the aggression (present or past) by the authorities, their armies, their police and their auxiliaries takes on the bodies and minds of the innocent.

One was struck by the number of films dealing with torture and official cruelty and abuse in various forms. Lars Kraume’s *THE PEOPLE vs. FRITZ BAUER* deals with the legacy of Nazism in 1950s West Germany and the heroic attempt, against the efforts of many in the government and judiciary, of attorney general Fritz Bauer to bring the fascist criminals to justice.

That two films about Bauer have appeared in the past two years (coincidentally, Giulio Ricciarelli’s *Labyrinth of Lies* opened in the US on September 25), along with Christian Petzold’s *Phoenix*, also about the Nazi past, is presumably not accidental. The reemergence of German imperialist aggression and efforts to relativize the crimes of the Hitler regime are producing a reaction.

In addition, the Toronto festival presented German filmmaker Florian Gallenberger’s *Colonia*, a frightening account, based on true events, of a

pro-Nazi Christian cult leader (played convincingly by Michael Nyqvist) whose compound in the south of Chile was used by the dictatorship following the 1973 coup for torture and murder. Chilean director (and Salvador Allende supporter) Patricio Guzmán's *The Pearl Button*, whose overall outlook is deplorable, treats as well some of the horror meted out by the US-backed dictatorship to political opponents.

Jonás Cuarón's *Desierto* [*Desert*] is the fictional treatment of a real phenomenon, the activity of fascist-minded vigilantes on the US-Mexican border, hunting down immigrants. Jeffrey Dean Morgan, as an ex-military marksman targeting the undocumented for death, belongs to the gallery of quite terrifying representatives of oppression whose portrayal was one of the more compelling features of the festival.

In *Meghmallar*, a mild-mannered and apolitical chemistry teacher (Shahiduzzaman Selmin), thanks to a case of mistaken identity, is subjected to torture and, ultimately, murder during the upheavals in East Pakistan (the future Bangladesh) in 1971. Director Leyla Bouzid's *As I Open My Eyes* [*À peine j'ouvre les yeux*] follows the life of a young middle class Tunisian woman on the eve of the 2011 uprising. At one point, Farah (Baya Medhaffer) falls afoul of the authorities and into the hands of the police, on account of the lyrics of her songs, and the latter abuse and molest her.

In Mai Masri's *3000 Nights*, a young Palestinian woman (Maisa Abd Elhadi) picks up a hitch-hiker and finds herself accused of aiding terrorism. She is tortured by the Israeli military before being sentenced to eight years in prison.

The psychological "collateral damage" produced by imperialist war finds expression in *Thank You for Bombing* (Austrian director Barbara Eder), in which an insatiably ambitious American journalist (Manon Kahle) covering the Afghanistan war is nearly raped by US soldiers, and in Terence Davies' *Sunset Song*, in which a Scottish soldier home from the front in World War I brutalizes his own wife. *Price of Love*, from Ethiopia's Hermon Hailay, also includes sexual violence of the powerful against the powerless. McCarthy's *Spotlight* takes on the Catholic Church's cover-up of widespread child molestation within the Massachusetts priesthood.

Two documentaries treat military and police criminality. In *Guantanamo's Child: Omar Khadr* (Patrick Reed and Michelle Shephard), Khadr, the Canadian citizen seized at age 15 by American forces on the battlefield in Afghanistan in 2002, who languished in the hellhole at Guantanamo for a decade, is allowed to tell his own painful story. *The Hard Stop* (George Amponsah) considers the police murder of Mark Duggan, the North London young man whose brutal killing ignited riots in 2011.

One could add to this pictures of social misery in Guatemala (*Ixcánul*, Jayro Bustamante), Ethiopia (*Price of Love* and *Lamb*, Yared Zeleke) and Slovakia (*Koza*, Ivan Ostrochovský), social inequality and official corruption in China (*Mountains May Depart*, Jia Zhang-ke and *A Young Patriot*, Du Haibin) and the ruthless practices of big business in the US (*In Jackson Heights*, Frederick Wiseman). Religious and social oppression saturate *Mountain* (Yaelle Kayam), about an Orthodox Jewish woman living with her family in a house in the Mount of Olives cemetery in Jerusalem.

Some of these films are quite startling, some quite scathing, at least about particular social trends or events. In general, the level of artistry, of sincerity, is serious. None of the works is earthshaking, socially or aesthetically, but the cumulative effect is disturbing, affecting. The writers and directors have taken aspects of the contemporary reality and brought them partially to life. Of course, the question remains: what then?

As a side note, it should be mentioned that documentarian Michael Moore, a favorite at the Toronto film festival, has directed a travesty, *Where to Invade Next*. The very title is misleading. Moore essentially tells the Pentagon to "stand down," he will do the "invading" from now on,

picking and choosing features of various societies around the world that he approves of. Moore has essentially gone silent (his last film came out in 2009) under Barack Obama, whose right-wing policies he supports, along with the rest of the liberal left, and this film would have been better off left unsaid as well.

Given the general aversion to official public life referred to above, and the lack as yet of any confidence in an alternative to the status quo, the filmmakers often turn at present to studies of figures who are more appealing. i.e., they turn to their fellow artists. There is a search going on for humanity, warmth, sensitivity—a search that is perhaps somewhat superficial and a little "safe," but no doubt well-intended.

The number of films, documentary and fiction, about popular music figures is significant. Those figures include Janis Joplin (*Janis: Little Girl Blue*, Amy Berg), Keith Richards (*Keith Richards: Under the Influence*, Morgan Neville), American soul/funk singer Sharon Jones (*Miss Sharon Jones!*, Barbara Kopple), the Canadian band Arcade Fire (*The Reflektor Tapes*, Kahlil Joseph), American singer Princess Shaw and Israeli viral-video artist Kutiman (*Thru You Princess*, Ido Haar), Argentine tango legends Juan Carlos Copes and Maria Nieve (*Our Last Tango*, German Kral)—all of these are documentaries. One might also include Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog*, which takes up, among other things, the death of her husband, pop singer Lou Reed.

Country singer Hank Williams (*I Saw the Light*, Marc Abraham) and jazz musician Chet Baker (*Born to be Blue*, Robert Budreau) are the subjects of new fiction works. Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad, perhaps looking for something positive in the current situation in the Middle East, has directed a fiction film, *The Idol*, about Mohammad Assaf, the Gazan wedding singer who became a worldwide celebrity after winning the live-singing competition *Arab Idol* in 2013.

Other films in Toronto looked at the Bolshoi Ballet, Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble, Canadian poet Al Purdy, American blacklist victim, writer Dalton Trumbo, the famous 1962 conversations between filmmakers Alfred Hitchcock and Francois Truffaut, the life of legendary Australian-born Hollywood costume designer Orry-Kelly, Afghan and Colombian cinephiles, and the Icelandic painter Georg Gudni.

We will be looking at some of the more intriguing films in detail in upcoming articles.

To be continued



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