

## Toronto International Film Festival 2015: Part Five

# Eight films from Africa, the Middle East, China, Latin America and Eastern Europe: Contemporary social realism

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*This is the fifth and final part in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 10-20). The first part was posted September 26, the second part October 1, the third part October 3 and the fourth part October 8.*

A number of films at the recent Toronto film festival sought, with varying degrees of persuasiveness, to present pictures of modern life with an emphasis on social relationships.

It needs to be hastily added, of course, that these efforts were outnumbered at the festival by trivial and self-absorbed works created by representatives of the more or less comfortable middle class in every corner of the globe, but that is an ongoing, objective problem that we have discussed many times.

It is not possible to analyze in detail the eight films that come immediately to mind (no doubt there were others we were unable to see), but I will try and provide a flavor of each one, including comments by the filmmakers themselves.

From Ethiopia, *Price of Love* follows the relationship between a taxi driver and a prostitute in Addis Ababa. When Teddy witnesses Fere trying to free herself from the grasp of a wealthy, middle-aged man, Marcos, who turns out to be some sort of criminal big shot, he comes to her defense. This leads to disaster for the driver, when Marcos organizes the theft of his taxi—Teddy's only source of income—and holds the vehicle "hostage," demanding that Fere be returned to him.

Hermon Hailay's film, made with a small crew and on a small budget (\$10,000), is sincere and convincing. The image of the humiliated Fere, in her make-up and green dress, sitting in the back seat of the cab with tears in her eyes as they drive through the city streets is a moving one. "Don't look at me, just drive." She later tells Teddy, "No one looks out for me ... I'm a poor girl. I don't have a home."

Hailay, who produced *Price of Love* with her own money, comments: "Due to limited budget I had to focus on a story that was simple but had themes that were universal. Growing up close to prostitutes, I knew them as young beautiful women, mothers, sisters, friends. I always wanted to make a story about them, showing the sensitivity of human beings. ...

"We had a crew of just seven, all untrained Ethiopians. Our cast also had no acting experience. This actually helped the production as everyone on set had creative input and it shows the enormous amount of natural talent we have in Ethiopia. I hope that with the international exposure the film is receiving it can help develop the young film industry in Ethiopia."

The central character in Palestinian filmmaker Mai Masri's *3000 Nights* is Layal, a young Palestinian woman in the occupied West Bank in 1980. She and her husband are preparing to leave for Canada and "a new life." Falsely accused of aiding a terrorist, Layal is sentenced to eight

years in a high-security Israeli prison. The Palestinian political prisoners are housed with Israeli criminal inmates and the latter are egged on to harass and provoke the Palestinian women. Prison officials pressure Layal and the others (with success, in one case) to cooperate with the Israeli authorities by informing on their cellmates.

Layal discovers she is pregnant and gives birth in prison. At a crucial moment, the authorities threaten to take her child away from her if she does not abandon the hunger strike the Palestinian women have launched. One of the more interesting characters in *3000 Nights* is an Israeli addict to whom Layal shows some humanity and who shows humanity to Layal in return. In this fashion, the shared condition of the oppressed of every nationality reveals itself. Intriguingly, the addict is perhaps the most developed and complex character in the film. The Palestinian women, whether heroic, suffering or otherwise, are presented somewhat stiffly.

In her director's statement, Masri explains: "The film explores the meaning of motherhood, love, and betrayal, focusing on the imagination, creativity and solidarity of the women prisoners that empowers them to survive and endure. Prison is a metaphor for the condition of the Palestinian people and Palestinian women in particular. ... I am drawn to this story because it allows me to explore the complex relationships that take place within the intimacy of a confined, hidden space of a women's world and to go beyond the relationship of conflict into the realm of the unexpected bonds that can arise between captive women at war."

A slow-building, well-done, rather melancholic film, *Mountain* (Yaelle Kayam) treats the life of an Orthodox Jewish woman, Tzvia, whose family lives in a dwelling adjacent to the Mount of Olives cemetery in Jerusalem. Her life mostly involves self-repression and self-abnegation ... and housework. Tzvia's husband is cold and almost entirely absorbed with his own concerns. Even her own children seem distant from her.

Tzvia lives surrounded by the dead. One of her few contacts with life comes through brief conversations with a Palestinian gravedigger, who has seven children but no love in his marriage either. He uncomplainingly reveals his situation: "I have relatives in Ramallah ... they can't come here and pray [at the Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam]." One night Tzvia comes upon sexual encounters taking place in the cemetery. She is fascinated. She even begins bringing food to the pimps and prostitutes. Ultimately, Tzvia is overwhelmed by her quiet, helpless misery and takes drastic action. One feels the tragic conclusion is not contrived.

Yaelle Kayam responded to a question from a *Ni simazine* interviewer about her conception of the relationship between the Orthodox Jewish woman and the Palestinian gravedigger by noting that Hitham Omari, who plays the Palestinian, was "a great actor." However, she noted,

Palestinians were often portrayed in Israeli films as villains, for example, in Yuval Adler's *Bethlehem* (a deplorable work).

Kayam went on: "So I really wanted to take this man [Omari], who in this film [*Bethlehem*] gave an amazing performance of a very cruel and scary man. And it's amazing how he can transform. He is the only one that really notices the main character [Tzvia] and seems to sympathise with her emotions. The woman keeps playing with the boundaries, but she has a lot of boundaries in her head as well and at the end of the day there is a chance there and she can't break free from her own boundaries to take that step."

As for the wider, political implications of her film, Kayam told the same interviewer that like one of her previous films, *Diploma*, a short, "*Mountain* also came from a very emotional and personal place in a way. I was also exploring another way of just breaking this image, if there is a Palestinian man, there is going to be a bomb at the end. Just to show, that actually, there are so many people that are just people. I wanted to sort of break that and also this barrier between this woman who is religious, which is even a bigger barrier, and this man who is actually really gentle."

In *Ixcanul*, 17-year-old Maria, a Kaqchikel-speaking Mayan girl, lives with her parents in Guatemala in the foothills of a volcano. The family lives under primitive conditions. The father works on a coffee plantation. Maria wants to marry a young picker on the plantation, Pepe, but her parents have one of the plantation managers in mind. Pepe plans to make the long trek to the US, where he has been before. (MARIA: "What's in the United States?" PEPE: "Big houses, with gardens. People have cars. The electricity works all the time. Even the streets are lit. They sell the fruit peeled and everybody speaks English.")

More or less coerced into sex by Pepe, who promises to take her to the US if she is "nice" to him, Maria ultimately finds herself abandoned and pregnant. Efforts to get rid of the baby before the parents' favored suitor finds about it fail ("It's his destiny to live"), and Maria travels with her mother and father to the city to have her child. She is told by hospital authorities that her baby has been born dead, but Maria discovers a more terrible reality.

The film is quite stunning to look at. And its sincerity and seriousness are unquestionable. Maria's extraordinary face registers, without dramatic changes, a range of complex emotions. Especially memorable as well is her busybody, grasping, but not entirely unkind mother. *Ixcanul* has the ring of truth.

The director Jayro Bustamante (born in 1977) observes: "I spent my childhood in the Guatemalan highlands, land of the Maya, surrounded by volcanoes and ancient indigenous traditions. As a child, I crossed the mountains with my mother on her medical campaigns, which consisted of convincing Mayan mothers to vaccinate their children. ... In most cases, the Mayans didn't speak Spanish and the mountains were unsafe due to the armed conflict that was ravaging the country at the time.

"Years later, my mother shared her outrage with me, when she found out that some public health employees had been involved in the abduction of Mayan children, contributing to the breakdown of the bonds they'd struggled so hard to create. This was the jumping-off point for this story and it is where it will come full circle."

Bustamante set up workshops in the Mayan community "to discuss the social problems that concerned them. Drawing from these real-life stories, meetings and one testimony in particular, I wrote the narrative. Also during this process, I trained members of the community to be actors in the film. It was an eye-opening experience for me."

Slovakia, we are told by its propagandists, "is an attractive country for foreign investors mainly because of its low wages, low tax rates and educated labour force." A series of right-wing, "free enterprise"-loving governments has imposed brutal austerity measures ordered by the European Union and the financial institutions that stand behind it. The financial crisis of 2008 had a severe impact on the country. As the WWSW

noted, "The Eastern European 'tiger,' as Slovakia was dubbed due to a growth rate of over 10 percent in 2007, fell apart completely. Economic output fell by 13 percent in 2009."

Social misery figures largely in Ivan Ostrochovský's *Koza*. Peter 'Koza' Balaž, a former Olympic boxer, and his girlfriend Misa live in a rundown housing estate, barely able to make ends meet. Misa finds out she is expecting a baby and wants to terminate the pregnancy. Koza, who has not boxed in years, convinces his former coach, Zvonko, now running a scrap metal yard, to organize a series of matches. Koza loses bout after bout, taking life-threatening blows to the head; plus, his manager and "friend" Zvonko puts the fee money in his own pocket.

Ostrochovský got to know the real-life Koza Balaž and decided to make a half-fiction, half-documentary film out of his story. Most of the actors are non-professionals in this bleak film. Bleak, but not sentimental. Koza is still fighting with life by the end. Ostrochovský and his cinematographer shot the film with a static camera and in long shots to give, as the director explains, the audience "a bit of a psychological distance and emotional freedom in the film."

In an interview, Ostrochovský remarked, "Koza really is a former Olympic boxer, living in a Gypsy ghetto, having almost no money at all. A few years ago, he and his partner Misa were expecting a third child, which they really couldn't afford. Koza called me and asked for help—not only he didn't have money to raise another kid, he couldn't even pay for the abortion, which usually costs 300 to 400 euros in Slovakia. That was the first impulse to write the script."

Jia Zhangke is a well-known Chinese film director (*Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World*). His *Mountains May Depart* takes place in three different years, 1999, 2014 and 2025. In the first section, a small-town dance instructor, Shen Tao, has two suitors, a shy coal miner and an up-and-coming "entrepreneur." She chooses the latter and eventually gives birth to a son named "Dollar."

Fifteen years later, Shen Tao is wealthy and not happy. She helps out the miner, who is ill, and his wife. She divorces her husband ("a real capitalist"), who emigrates to Australia with their son. In 2025, her ex-husband, wanted for economic crimes in China, is still living in Australia with "Dollar." The latter takes up with an older, middle-class woman. He barely remembers his mother. She is still in China. We last see her out in the snow performing a dance ...

The most interesting character, because he is the most human of them all and his situation is the most compelling, is the coal miner, Liangzi. Unfortunately, we lose sight of him part-way through *Mountains May Depart*. Jia is a very perceptive observer, but he has little sense of the axis of social life. Characters and episodes are largely individual, unconnected in an important way.

Reflecting the confusion, Jia comments in his director's note: "China's economic development began to skyrocket in the 1990s. Living in this surreal economic environment has inevitably changed the ways that people deal with their emotions. The impulse behind this film is to examine the effect of putting financial considerations ahead of emotional relationships. If we imagine a point ten years into our future, how will we look back on what's happening today? And how will we understand 'freedom'?"

"Buddhist thought sees four stages in the flow of life: birth, old age, sickness and death. I think the ultimate point of this film is to say: Whatever times we live through, none of us can avoid experiencing those stages, those difficult moments.

"*Mountains may depart*, [but] relationships may endure."

Also from China, *A Young Patriot* (directed by Du Haibin) is a documentary that follows three years in the life of 19-year-old Zhao, a "flag-waving, slogan-shouting 'patriotic exhibitionist'" who dresses up in an old military uniform and Mao cap. His father is a factory worker and the family lives in a run-down courtyard with outdoor cooking and

washing facilities. Zhao goes off to university and various experiences challenge his “old-fashioned Maoist patriotism,” including the corruption of village officials who tear down Zhao’s grandparents’ home (“It took two years to build and 40 minutes to demolish,” someone bitterly complains) as part of a scheme that will enrich the local hierarchy.

The documentary has revealing moments, including the confrontation between Zhao’s family and the local bosses. *A Young Patriot* also hints at the extreme nationalism that is being whipped up by the Beijing regime, a thoroughly reactionary response to the offensive of American imperialism and its allies in the region. But the film meanders a good deal of the time, and it is not at all clear that the director knows what to make of current developments.

Du Haibin explains in his notes that he met Zhao in 2009, parading around in his Maoist get-up and waving the national flag. “Astonished by Zhao, I wondered what I was doing when I was 19. I recalled that there were a few years when I was insanely indulging myself in the once fashionable culture of hip hop dancing. ...

“What are young people thinking, when society has reached a point where information flourishes in an excessive manner? What does ‘nation’ mean to them? How do they perceive their country? In what ways do they love their country? Are they real patriots?”

Finally, *As I Open My Eyes* (Leyla Bouzid) from Tunisia focuses on a middle class young woman and her friends, some of them members of a band, on the eve of the social explosion in 2011. Farah has applied for medical school, but her real love is singing. This brings her into conflict with her strict and anxious mother. Some of the band’s lyrics are critical of the Ben Ali regime and refer to the deprived (“The gums of the poor are toothless”), and even hint at upheaval (“I dream of a spark which reddens the sky”). Eventually, an informer in Farah’s crowd tips off the police and she is picked up and frighteningly, abusively interrogated. The aim is to intimidate and silence her.

Bouzid’s film has authentic moments, but, again, it orients itself in a less compelling direction to a certain extent. The somewhat self-centered Farahs of this world, whether they are the targets of repression or not, are not the key to the future, even if the filmmakers think they are.

## Social realism

These films, and others like them, collectively raise a number of questions. First of all, is there a value in artistic depictions of social conditions, problems of social life? I hope the descriptions and comments posted above suggest that there is.

If one wants further proof, the interview posted yesterday on the WWSW with Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage provides some.

Referring to the 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka, Vithanage explains, “War is an operation of capital, based on profits, and so the media always presents the opinions of the ruling class on this subject. Artists, however, have the capacity to tear away these dominant views and expose the reality of military conflict.”

The director then notes the response of the government to two anti-war films made by other Sri Lankan filmmakers. “The authorities responded by banning both films. Military officials branded the filmmakers as ‘terrorists’ and even threatened them.”

The instincts of the Sri Lankan authorities were correct ones. Artists do “have the capacity to tear away these dominant views.” Artistic truth represents a threat to the propaganda and machinations of the ruling elite. Does anyone seriously think that if an American or European filmmaker were genuinely to take on the issue of social inequality, searingly indict the rich for their crimes, cut through the lies of the “war on terror,” and

accomplish all that in an artistically developed, convincing and accessible fashion, that it would have no impact on broad layers of people, and that the authorities would be unworried?

It has been a recurring commonplace in “avant-garde” artistic circles in the 20th century that representations of life as it is are “conservative,” “contemplative” and “passive,” or mere “reportage.” Art’s task, said the Soviet Futurists, among others, was not to understand or know life, but to “construct” it. This Nietzschean, subjectivist and impatient viewpoint leaves out the moment of cognition, of reflection.

Trotsky responded brilliantly to these positions in *Literature and Revolution* (1924): “To reject art as a means of picturing and imaging knowledge because of one’s opposition to the contemplative and impressionistic bourgeois art of the last few decades, is to strike from the hands of the class which is building a new society its most important weapon. Art, it is said, is not a mirror, but a hammer: it does not reflect, it shapes. ... If one cannot get along without a mirror, even in shaving oneself, how can one reconstruct oneself or one’s life, without seeing oneself in the ‘mirror’ of literature?”

Soviet critic Aleksandr Voronsky explained, in his essay “Art as the Cognition of Life, and the Contemporary World” (1923), that the serious artist’s images of life were far from passive or arbitrary. “The artist ... focuses his attention on one thing, not wishing to notice anything else. Volition enters into the act of cognition as an indispensable element. ... The reader who apprehends the results of this creativity must of necessity, one way or another, reproduce the work of the artist, relive in a weakened, more distant form the main stages of this work, otherwise he will not understand the work. ... Man first cognizes, then he acts, ‘he builds.’ No one has yet discovered a science where the process of cognition has been made auxiliary.”

Is it possible for what might be described as social realist films to be passive and fatalistic? Absolutely. And this is one of our principal criticisms against so many of the works in this genre in our day. Too many are tepid and timid. Contemporary social realism tends to restrict itself to careful reproductions of social details, to nothing but individual lives and circumstances. Almost to a man or woman, the makers of such films, historically and ideologically on the defensive, will deny that they have any universalizing intentions, or if they do, the latter are of the most modest sort.

One could argue, without being overly severe, that many cinematic pictures of life in the most oppressed countries, for example, tend to lie on the same historical or intellectual plane as the global network of NGOs, various “human rights” campaigns, “progressive,” national-based trade unionism and the general application of pressure on the powers that be to reconsider or soften their austerity and brutality.

The passive reproduction of everyday life has a very limited value. Other elements need to be present. In the first, some genuine oppositional sentiment! One has to be depicting the present state of affairs from the point of view of encouraging critical thought and outrage. That will have all manner of implications for filmmaking, from the writing to the shooting to the editing. There is such a thing as fatalistic or resigned aesthetics. We see a good deal of it at present, what has become something of a cliché: the static camera, the endless long shots. Such imagery strongly suggests: this is the forlorn way things are, and nothing can be done about it!

Voronsky argued that the techniques introduced by various impressionistic and individualistic schools—“the sharpness of perception, the dynamics and refinement of artistic devices, the rich impressionability, the new forms, the style and the ‘shock effect’”—could not simply be ignored. “The whole question for art right now,” he asserted, “is how, using the extremely sharp, individual and subjective devices developed earlier, to achieve the most objective portrayal of the world ... so that at the same time these artistic discoveries of the world can be united with

deliberate activity, with goal-directedness, with powerful, creative, social desires.”

Decades later, the problem is posed far more sharply.

*Concluded*



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