Best films of 2015

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier
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It is difficult to choose "best" films, or even favorite ones, under any conditions. Various factors come into play for anyone who views filmmaking as something more than a purely formal exercise. There are works that, despite their social blind spots, contain elements—or sometimes only flashes—of real drama or psychological insight. There are others that have more of a historical or sociological significance, in spite of aesthetic shortcomings. At present, there is often an unhappy "trade-off," a compromise. In general, however, we agree fully with Plekhanov that a *false idea cannot find beautiful form*, except in a limited sense.

2015 was an eventful year, full of threat and promise.

In September, in response to the Toronto film festival offerings, we wrote that "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."

We argued that while wealth and careerism no doubt had a harmful influence on filmmakers, even more to the point was "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."

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—"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."

This seems a reasonable summary of some of the best films in 2015.

Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* treats the case of a part-time poet, folk singer, political activist who gets swept up in India's legal system on the ludicrous charge that one of his angry protest songs drove a sewer cleaner to commit suicide.

With great objectivity, the film follows the various participants in the case—defense lawyer, prosecutor, judge. As we noted, *Court* reaches "its social and emotional peak" when the sewer worker's widow takes the stand. "Under questioning, a picture of abject social wretchedness emerges. The dead man drank, and therefore beat his wife and kids, to work himself into a condition where he could go into the stinking sewers every day without safety equipment of any kind."

The woman's dignified, unimpeachable court appearance, only a few minutes long, contains more truth than the vast majority of the films that came out in 2015 combined.

Iraqi-Swiss director Samir's *Iraqi Odyssey* is "an elegantly composed documentary … which attempts to interweave the complex saga of the director's own family with the larger history of Iraq over the past half-century or more." The middle portion of the film, "perhaps its most compelling, concerns the tumultuous events in Iraq in the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. What emerges strikingly is the centrality of the Iraqi Communist Party in the country's post-World War II history."

In *99 Homes*, Ramin Bahrani, the Iranian-American filmmaker, "has created a compelling work that puts flesh and blood on the foreclosure epidemic." An unemployed construction worker, whose family is kicked out of their home, becomes the instrument of a ruthless real estate agent and developer. "Bahrani effectively and systematically portrays the awful things people will do, betraying themselves and others, faced

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with impossible economic conditions. Nash [the worker] is transformed into someone unrecognizable, at least for a time."

Giulio Ricciarelli's *Labyrinth of Lies* deals with the prosecutors who fought for and organized the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials in 1963-65, the first time Nazi officials were brought before courts in the German Federal Republic (West Germany). The film, we wrote, "successfully dramatizes the events leading up to hearings that helped illuminate the truth about the death camps and had a strong impact in particular on a younger generation of Germans." A number of films about fascism and its consequences came from Germany, including *Phoenix*, *THE PEOPLE vs. FRITZ BAUER* and *Colonia* (the latter two not yet distributed in the US).

The recent film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* , directed by Justin Kurzel, was quite moving: "The performances and the dramatic tension leave a distinct imprint. Even if it stumbles somewhat over its historical appreciation of Shakespeare's drama, this *Macbeth*, at its best, conveys a genuine sense of the corruption and barbarism of our own times."

There is obviously some significance to the fact that a few relatively hard-hitting works about American politics and social life came out in 2015: *99 Homes*, *The Big Short*, *Spotlight* and *Good Kill*.

So these are the films that appeared in a movie theater in North America in 2015 that we thought were the most interesting:

Court—Chaitanya Tamhane
Iraqi Odyssey—Samir
99 Homes—Ramin Bahrani
Labyrinth of Lies—Giulio Ricciarelli
Macbeth—Justin Kurzel
The Big Short—Adam McKay
Salvation Army—Abdellah Taïa
Janis: Little Girl Blue—Amy Berg
Spotlight—Tom McCarthy
Phoenix—Christian Petzold
Good Kill—Andrew Niccol

Documentaries:

Iraqi Odyssey—Samir
Janis: Little Girl Blue—Amy Berg
In Jackson Heights—Frederick Wiseman
The Wrecking Crew!—Denny Tedesco
Killing Them Safely—Nick Berardini
We Come as Friends—Hubert Sauper
The Wolfpack—Crystal Moselle
What Happened, Miss Simone?—Liz Garbus

Films not yet distributed in the US (seen at film festivals):

THE PEOPLE vs. FRITZ BAUER—Lars Kraume
Colonia—Florian Gallenberger
Guantanamo's Child: Omar Khadr—Patrick Reed and Michelle Shephard
Price of Love—Hermon Hailay
Mountain—Yaelle Kayam
3000 Nights—Mai Masri
Thank You for Bombing—Barbara Eder
Koza—Ivan Ostrochovský
The Gold Bug—Alejo Moguillansky
Desierto—Jonás Cuarón

From WSWS writer Hiram Lee

The best films I saw in 2015 were:

The Boda Boda Thieves—Donald Mugisha and James Tayler
Murder in Pacot—Raoul Peck
Tell Spring Not to Come This Year—Saeed Taji Farouky/Michael McEvoy
Iraqi Odyssey—Samir
Every Thing Will Be Fine—Wim Wenders
Phoenix—Christian Petzold
Labyrinth of Lies—Giulio Ricciarelli
Trumbo (with the necessary reservations)—Jay Roach

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