

Toronto International Film Festival 2016: Part 1

How well does filmmaking reflect present-day life?

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27 September 2016

This is the first in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 8-18).

This year's Toronto International Film Festival screened some 400 feature and short films from 83 countries at 1,200 public screenings. The festival attracts nearly half a million attendees each year over the course of 10 days, along with thousands of film professionals and journalists.

The film festival is a large event, held in a major metropolitan center in an advanced capitalist country, with sides and features to it that inevitably conflict and clash with one another. To reply to the issue posed in the headline of this article demands as much concreteness as possible. The question cannot be answered in a few words—the only serious response lies in the process of analyzing the current film industry and, above all, the various works themselves.

If, as the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov argued, the development of the world determines the development of art, one is obliged to point to the particular contradictoriness of that process in writing or speaking about the Toronto film festival.

In the first place, the festival is a large commercial undertaking—it is big business. In some cases, film studios and production companies are seeking to launch expensive products (this year, for instance, *The Magnificent Seven*, a remake of the 1960 film), which they hope will win awards and earn tens of millions of dollars at the box office. The fates of companies and careers may be at stake.

A considerable portion of the activity going on behind the scenes in Toronto involves the purchasing and selling of films, many of them nominally “independent.” One festival official notes that “hundreds of representatives from theatrical distributors, broadcasters, digital platforms and other acquisition teams will be in town looking for new films to buy.”

A great deal of commerce is carried out in Toronto. The atmosphere is not especially edifying.

And, moreover, according to *Variety* (“Toronto Film Festival to Open Amid Wary Buyers, Smaller Field of Distributors”), the atmosphere is increasingly tense. The trade publication points to “a throb of anxiety and uncertainty undercutting this year's festival, a nagging feeling that the film industry is in flux, the star system in decline, and the avenues available to push a film into profitability more difficult to navigate than ever before.”

The article goes on: “There is a sense that Toronto appreciates a type of film that is at odds with the general cultural direction of the movie business. In the past, Toronto served as a key stop for Oscar winners like *Birdman* and *Spotlight*—films that critics love, but not the ones most executives are eager to greenlight. Major studios have largely abandoned the mid-budget dramas and character pieces that the festival celebrates in favor of comic-book movies that play well in China and other emerging markets.”

Variety concludes: “Those who wait for Toronto [to do business] will need endurance and an appetite for taking risks. It's a game that plays out in an exhausting swirl of meetings and deal-making, unfolding in hotel lobbies, bars, and suites.”

And the problems of criticism and intellectual life today mean that the discussions among the so-called artistic elements are not a great deal more elevated. We have been going to the event for 23 years, first for the *International Workers Bulletin*, and subsequently the *World Socialist Web Site*. In all those years festival officials have not organized any serious, sustained discussions on the state of the world or the state of cinema, or the relation between the two. To be frank, the general level remains extremely low, pragmatic, shortsighted, narrow.

The movies that get made and shown in Toronto have had to go through numerous processes, many of them vetting procedures of one sort or another. Financial considerations, political and social pressures and, unhappily, a good deal of self-censorship... all of this has to be taken into account. The physical act of assembling a major film still takes time and effort—and money. Some of the movies have been years and years in the planning (or re-planning) and making. Of course, there is the not unimportant fact that films are written and directed, for the most part, by a definite, petty bourgeois social layer, which has its own prejudices and historical-intellectual baggage—and these days, very limited knowledge and perspective.

All that notwithstanding, intriguing films do get made, which only underscores the correctness of Plekhanov's observation. The development of the world does *ultimately* determine the development of art.

There are hundreds of feature films presented in Toronto. We make the effort, generally speaking, to see the ones that seem promising, socially engaged, artistic and dramatic. We will speak for the most part about films we admired. But that gives a slightly false picture. There are many mediocre or worse films screened in Toronto, including many self-involved, trivial works. The large-budget films generally have little to say. Stars of diverse magnitudes are increasingly present on the red carpet. The celebrity culture is alive and well there.

One must point out as well that there were no works this year that seriously took on US and European (and Canadian) militarism and aggression (aside perhaps from *Snowden*), the endless wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, the refugee tragedy in the Mediterranean, or police violence and the widespread social misery in America.

Moreover, there are the propaganda pieces, about Syria and Ukraine, for example, or films that strongly press identity politics. (And, God help us, there was another “biopic” about the future war criminal Barack Obama, *Barry*, directed by Vikram Gandhi.) The films from Eastern Europe and Russia continue, by and large, to be poor, dominated by anti-communism or simply disorientation. Twenty-five years after the collapse of Stalinism,

a truly incisive critique of what has been done to the respective populations is rare.

All in all, however, we felt there was a certain deepening, a more critical and complex edge to the more interesting films. And that the more interesting films came largely from North America and Europe represents something of a shift.

We will write in more detail about some of these films (and others) in upcoming articles. We will write about some of them later on when they come to the movie theater.

The Chosen

Spanish filmmaker Antonio Chavarrías has written and directed a valuable, honest film about the assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940. It was not presented to the public or the press, but I was able to attend a screening.

Snowden

The WSWS has already posted a review of Oliver Stone's *Snowden*, his film about NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Marija

Marija, about a Ukrainian woman immigrant in Dortmund, Germany, is a sincere work from Swiss-born director Michael Koch. The filmmaker wants to communicate something about the conditions and burdens of immigrants.

Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District, the 1865 novel by Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, is transposed to the north of England in William Oldroyd's film, *Lady Macbeth*. A young woman, Katherine (Florence Pugh), has essentially been bought by a wealthy family to produce heirs.

In Dubious Battle

Actor-director James Franco has chosen to adapt John Steinbeck's 1936 novel, *In Dubious Battle*, about Communist Party or IWW members leading a fruit-pickers' strike in California.

Death in Sarajevo

Death in Sarajevo is set in that horrific city on the anniversary of the assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist, the event that immediately triggered World War I.

A Quiet Passion

In *A Quiet Passion*, British filmmaker Terence Davies has made an ambitious work, a film biography of American poet Emily Dickinson (Cynthia Nixon). Davies has attempted to recreate the day-to-day life and behavior of the reclusive Dickinson (1830-1886) and her family, who lived in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Past Life

From Israel, *Past Life*, directed by Avi Nesher, is set in 1977. The central characters are two sisters. One is a singer. After a recital in Berlin, an older woman approaches her, and accuses the girl's father of being a murderer. The sisters begin to investigate.

Sami Blood

Swedish-born director Amanda Kernell's *Sami Blood*, set in the 1930s, involves the oppression of the indigenous people in Sweden, the Sami. A teenage Sami girl, Elle Marja (Lene Cecilia Sparrok), wants desperately to become part of Swedish society.

Loving

Jeff Nichols' *Loving* is based on the story of Richard (Joel Edgerton) and Mildred Loving (Ruth Negga), the working class couple from Virginia whose interracial marriage in 1958 and subsequent legal battle ended up striking down the anti-miscegenation laws in the US.

American Pastoral

Actor Ewan McGregor directs and stars in an adaptation of Philip Roth's 1997 novel, *American Pastoral*. The life of a Newark businessman disintegrates in the late 1960s when his daughter turns toward Weathermen-like terrorism.

Without question, some interesting subjects!

To be continued



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