

Toronto International Film Festival 2016: Part 4

***Sami Blood* from Sweden, *Werewolf* from Canada, *Park* from Greece: Society's cruelty to its youngest members**

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This is the fourth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 8-18). Part 1 was posted September 27, Part 2 on September 29 and Part 3 on October 1.

There are films that are painful and pleasurable at the same time. Amanda Kernell's *Sami Blood*, from Sweden, is not an easy film to watch. It creates considerable unease and anxiety, reflecting the internally conflicted, nearly impossible situation of its central character. It was also one of the most moving and authentic films shown in Toronto this year.

The film, Kernell's first feature-length work, is set in Sweden primarily in the 1930s. Elle Marja (Lene Cecilia Sparrok), 14, is a reindeer-herding Sami girl, who is sent to a state boarding school aimed at "civilizing" its students.

The Samis are an indigenous people inhabiting northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Like other indigenous peoples, they have long faced racism and oppression.

One of the early scenes is memorable. Elle Marja is rowing herself and her younger sister, Njenna (Mia Sparrok), across a beautiful, tranquil lake. They are on their way to the boarding school, leaving their mother and everyone they know behind. Njenna cries quietly. "I don't want to go," she says simply, while her sister pulls the oars.

Elle Marja is a bright, ambitious girl. She wants very much to assimilate into the Swedish population. She sharply tells her sister, "You must speak Swedish." Meanwhile local farm boys call them "dirty Lapps," although one seems to be Sami himself.

One day, officials come to the school in a car and the girls and boys line up in their native costumes. The event starts out like some sort of stuffy but harmless bureaucratic ceremony. Horrifyingly, the officials are there to measure and photograph the Sami children, as part of research into "racial characteristics."

Elle Marja wants to continue her education, she starts dreaming of another life, but her teacher (Hanna Alström) somewhat regretfully lets her know that "You people don't have what it takes" to get by in the wider world. Eventually, Elle Marja takes off, for Uppsala, a large city. She tries to impose herself on the family of a Swedish boy she has met. Every effort to fit in ends in awkwardness for her, if not humiliation. At one point, a young guest at the family's house, an anthropology student, asks her patronizingly to perform a traditional Sami singing style.

In any case, she needs money to pay for her schooling. She goes back home and demands a sum of cash. In an outburst, she tells her mother: "I don't want to be here. I don't want to be with you. I don't want to be a f—— circus animal."

Kernell's film is made with great sensitivity and attention to detail. The director was born in 1986 in the far north of Sweden to a Swedish mother

and Sami father. *Sami Blood* was reportedly inspired by the experiences of Kernell's grandmother. The filmmaker told an interviewer that the treatment of the Samis was an "untold" story and a "dark chapter" in Swedish history. The film, she said, is about someone "leaving what you're from, becoming another." What are the consequences for Elle Marja when she "cuts all ties"?

The worst part of the story is that in order to make a life for herself, Elle Marja has to absorb into herself elements of racism and contempt for her own people. This is what Swedish society does to her. In one especially difficult scene, Elle Marja, who is trying to pass herself off as a "normal Swede," is obliged to shoo away her own beloved sister, pretending not to understand what she is saying and blurting out, "Get away, you filthy Lapp." Njenna may never forgive her for this.

The drama is remarkably intimate. We know at times almost more than we want to know about Elle Marja's predicament. Kernell also provides hints of broader social processes—the concern with "race" and eugenics, for example. In the same interview, she said that she did not want to "explain" anything, but simply tell the story.

This is not the occasion to enter into a polemic on that score once again, especially in regard to a film that, for the most part, is moving and clear-sighted and a filmmaker who is obviously conscientious and humane.

However, it is one thing to recognize that artists for the most part are more expert at "showing" the world than explaining it, that they are seized by powerful impressions that have a strong element of intuition. It is another to make a positive program, as so many artists do today, out of "not explaining." In our view, the filmmaker or novelist requires "high intellectual powers," in Aleksandr Voronsky's phrase, and cannot make progress without "immense, very persistent and complex rational activity."

Sami Blood is an extraordinary, deeply felt film. But it is probably the sort of work that can only be done once. Even as it is, its strong emotional content should not blind us to certain tendencies that may endanger Kernell's development: the relative narrowness, the intense immediacy.

The treatment of the Sami is a political and social question, like the treatment of the Aboriginal people in Australia or the Native Americans in North America. Sweden in the Depression, like everywhere else, experienced economic and political shocks. Unemployment rose sharply, wages fell, and by 1931, as one historian ominously notes, "Communist agitation had also been rising, and that year labor unrest and the use of strikebreakers resulted in bloodshed."

In response to these dangers, Swedish ultra-nationalist and fascist movements attracted considerable support from middle class layers (including Ingvar Kamprad, the future founder of IKEA, and film director

Ingmar Bergman) hostile to socialism and revolution. Racial purity or homogeneity, anti-Semitism and anti-communism were features of such movements. One of Sweden's far-right politicians, Per Engdahl, for example, "embraced anti-Semitic sentiments," revealed "a streak of 'Blood and Soil' mysticism" and described "his formative teenage years during the early 1920s as characterised by fear of the implications of the Russian Revolution," according to one commentator.

The first governmental research institute in the world dedicated to the study of "racial biology" was established in Sweden (in Uppsala, in fact) in 1922, by another reactionary figure, Herman Lundborg. Amanda Kernell makes passing reference to this institute in the interview mentioned above.

According to "Selling Eugenics," by Maria Björkman and Sven Widmalm, Lundborg's world view "was radically right-wing, and he emphasized the genetic superiority of the 'Nordic' race and of social elites within that race (believing proletarians, for example, to be degenerate). ... [H]e was careful not to appear anti-Semitic, but in private he did flaunt anti-Semitic opinions and was, as early as 1924, clandestinely supporting a National Socialist group in Sweden."

The oppression and scapegoating of the Sami and the rise of modern racist theories, along with the whipping up of nationalist sentiment, were elements of the tense social circumstances in Sweden at the time.

Once or twice, as noted, *Sami Blood* hints at these issues, but it would have only strengthened the film, and not taken anything away from its emotional power, to have "explained" by artistic means broader circumstances that would help clarify Elle Marja's tragic dilemma.

Werewolf from Canada, Park from Greece

Canadian filmmaker Ashley McKenzie has written and directed *Werewolf*, about impoverished young people in her hometown of New Waterford, Nova Scotia. The town, a former coal-mining community, has an official unemployment rate of 15 percent "or higher." The last coal mine closed down in 2001. There is almost nothing left. Many young people have moved away.

McKenzie's fiction film deals with two young people who have stayed, Nessa (Bhreagh MacNeil) and Blaise (Andrew Gillis). Drug addicts, now on a methadone program, the couple eke out an existence mowing lawns with their ancient, rusty machine. They sleep outside in the summer. "How far do you want to go?," he asks her. "Far," is the answer.

The film is a rarity, a Canadian film about the working class, the poor. The vast majority of Canadian films come from the complacent or identity politics-obsessed middle class in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. They are mostly uninteresting and unmemorable.

Blaise is an unpleasant figure, self-pitying and explosive. The young woman, Nessa, on the other hand, is a deeply sympathetic human being. Quiet, with a sad, weary, somewhat fearful face ("with eyes of wood always under the axe," in André Breton's line), she is one of those people who "don't count" in Canada—or anywhere—and who, in fact, count for a great deal. Her situation and story are more important and intriguing than those of a thousand self-important, affluent petty bourgeois in Toronto who think they are the pinnacle of modern civilization, with their bicycles, "Green" habits and nice orderly lives.

When, in one of his more compassionate moments, Blaise tells some bureaucrat or government official, "She's only nineteen years old," and we see her face, which does not betray a single trace of self-pity, it is a heartbreaking moment. Only nineteen, and she has been through all this. ...

Werewolf is only partially successful. Whether or not Nessa breaks with Blaise, whether or not she keeps a low-paying job at a soft ice cream shop,

her problems remain. The social situation and the economic devastation are still there. What's to be done about that?

Sofia Exarchou is the director of *Park*, which follows the lives of several young people who spend most of their time in the now abandoned village of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. The leader of a gang of boys, Dimitri (Dimitris Kitsos), and a slightly older girl, Anna (Dimitra Vlagkopoulou), begin a relationship in the disorder and rubble. Eventually, they move out into second-rate resorts and interact, for better or worse, with foreign tourists.

It is a somewhat rambling, repetitive and occasionally tedious work, but *Park* is one of the few from Greece that gives some idea of the dismal and dispiriting conditions produced by the foreign banks, with the collaboration of Syriza.

The director says: "Through the intersecting stories of the kids of the Olympic Village, 'Park' tries to create the portrayal of a lost generation that has been deprived of its future. Among the abandoned sport facilities, the ruins and the new-money tourist resorts, the film crosses Greece's 'glorious' past with the decadence of today, depicting a society unprepared for the brutal fall. In this remnant from the past, the kids' need to belong is vital and their efforts increasingly violent and futile."

Boo Junfeng's *Apprentice* is an oddity. A young prison guard, Aiman (Fir Rahman), seems ready to do anything to be transferred to death row in Singapore's most maximum-security prison. His ambition is to become "apprentice" to the chief executioner, Rahim (Wan Hanafi Su).

Why? We learn that Aiman's father was hanged in the prison years earlier, in an execution carried out by Rahim. Aiman is obsessed with the event. His Australia-bound older sister (Matsura Ahmad), on the other hand, wants nothing to do with the prison or the memory of her father.

Rahim, the hangman, is an efficient technician, dedicated to his accursed profession. He tells his apparent disciple, "Nowadays, no one is tough enough for a job like this," and, later, "I'm good at killing people—so what?"

Aiman, by a series of accidents, finally ends up in Rahim's position. Will he pull the lever or not?

The director, who spent five years on the film, says he wanted to explore "the point of view of an executioner." He even interviewed two of them, one a "grandfatherly" figure. Boo Junfeng tells journalists that "I have a stand against the death penalty, but I didn't want to go in judgmental. ... I simply wanted to understand the human psyche—and by extension, the humanity—behind the job of a modern-day executioner."

Whatever else it might be, *Apprentice* ought to be an indictment of the barbaric practice of capital punishment in Singapore, where people can be put to death for piracy, treason, perjury in certain cases, kidnapping or robbery that results in death, and serious drug offenses. Singapore had the second highest per-capita execution rate in the world between 1994 and 1998, although the rate of executions has now fallen sharply.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, in the course of his "personal journey," the director became all too even-handed. The film ends up a somewhat murky psychological character study and not much more.

To be continued



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