

Toronto International Film Festival 2016—Part 6

Marija, Past Life, Ember: Facing life, in different ways

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This is the sixth and final part of 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, Part 3 on October 1, Part 4 on October 5 and Part 5 on October 7.

“One must face life as it is. ...” This is the best possible advice, although it does not immediately solve all—or perhaps any of—the problems of today’s film writers and directors. Many of the latter think they are facing life as it is, but their notions of reality are very limited or distorted by their social prejudices and background. Perhaps it would be better to say, “One first needs to understand life deeply, and *then* face it as it is. ...”

There are differences, of course, even among those who take a critical look at society today. Some examine things more profoundly, some stop partway at this or that point, some give way at the critical moment, some are too satisfied with or intimidated by prevailing opinion.

In this series of articles we have already pointed to a number of films that we considered the most honest and deep-going: *Loving, Sami Blood, Lady Macbeth* and others. Michael Koch’s *Marija* is another serious work.

Koch is a young, Swiss-born, German filmmaker. (See accompanying interview.) *Marija* follows the life of a Ukrainian woman immigrant in Dortmund. We first meet Marija (Margarita Breitreiz) cleaning hotel rooms, with what we eventually learn is her customary energy and even ferocity. Soon she is accused of stealing and loses the job. She has been setting money aside to open her own hair salon. Now that plan is threatened.

Marija comes to a sort of arrangement with her landlord, Cem (Sahin Eryilmaz). The latter, a Turkish immigrant who has been in Germany for some years, functions as a liaison between the district’s newer immigrants, mainly Eastern and Central Europeans, and the German authorities. Cem of course always skims something off the top for himself. “If you don’t screw them, they’ll screw you” is his credo.

Marija is smart and determined, and she has language skills. She graduates to a job working as a translator and negotiator for Georg (Georg Friedrich), who is organizing a business deal with some shady Russians. Now she makes 400 euros a week.

In one of the most telling scenes, Marija spies immigration police approaching and runs through a worksite, yelling “Inspection!” at the top of her voice. The husband of her friend Olga (Olga Dinnikova) is picked up and kicked out of the country. The pregnant Olga plans to follow him. Marija is appalled and uncomprehending: “To throw your life away for a guy, I don’t understand it.” She follows a different logic, financial success and “independence” at any cost.

When Marija later has to choose between “a guy” and her dream of opening a salon, she has no hesitations, no qualms.

Much of the film rings true. Koch, born in Lucerne in 1982, tries to take reality on directly, without self-consciousness or affectation. All the

performers sincerely pursue that goal as well. The writer-director wants to show a woman who, as he told an interviewer, “has to take a lot, but can also dish it out.” She is “always on the go and looking ahead. ... She even decides against her feelings.”

Not only against her own feelings, but sometimes against other people too, if necessary. There is no need to idealize Marija or people like her. They are not the most advanced in their thinking. They can be selfish and individualistic. It is understandable that emigration and harsh economic realities make people, including oppressed people, act in anti-social or self-centered ways, but it is not a model of behavior.

Koch’s film is a bit unusual in that it allows the viewer to draw critical conclusions. The ending is ambiguous or open-ended, in a positive sense. Koch leaves it up to the viewer to decide whether launching a small business (which remains at the mercy of bigger businesses and banks, and which may fail next month) and losing every relationship in the process is the definition of “success.” By the end of the film, Marija has grown a very hard shell around herself. How she sees her progress and how we see it may be quite different.

As I told the director in a conversation, the film reminded me *thematically* (not in any other sense) of another German “Maria,” the central character in R. W. Fassbinder’s *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), about a woman in postwar Germany who sacrifices a great deal for a misplaced dream of prosperity and security, and loses everything important in herself along the way.

Sad to say, if it had been a contemporary American film, *Marija* would probably have ended in a very different fashion, with a rape, a murder or multiple murders, some violent disaster. Throwing blood in the audience’s face merely serves to evade every serious, more pertinent question. In this film, Marija accommodates herself to the conditions and survives, but are they conditions that one should have to accommodate oneself to?

Past Life

Avi Nesher’s *Past Life*, from Israel, is an intelligent, convincing film for the most part, inspired by a true story. It takes place in the late 1970s.

Aspiring composer Sephi Milch (Joy Rieger) is in Berlin to sing with her choral group when a woman approaches her after a concert, and upon hearing her name, calls her father a “murderer.” The woman seems to be Polish, and wears a crucifix around her neck.

Sephi and her older sister Nana (Nelly Tagar), who has an axe to grind against her stern father, set out to look into the matter. Nana works for a

leftist magazine of some kind and has arguments with her father about Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. When we first see her, she is condemning Israelis for “robbing people of their land” and for justifying “our crimes by crimes committed against us.” Her father, a gynecologist, will hear none of it.

The sisters, with Nana (“I hate secrets”) in the lead, uncover painful facts about their father’s life in Poland during World War II, when he hid in a farmer’s basement from the Gestapo. Eventually, against his better judgment and against his wife’s wishes (“Why bring up the past?”), Baruch Milch (Doron Tavory), reads to his daughters his wartime diary, a diary of “hell.”

The story is complicated by the woman Sephi met in Berlin, Agnieszka Zielinska (Katarzyna Gniewkowska), and her son, Thomas Zielinski (Rafael Stachowiak), a composer with whom Sephi develops a friendship. Why is the Polish woman so convinced Dr. Milch is a murderer? Can a victim of the greatest crime in history have committed inexcusable acts?

There are many complications and intricacies in this story. There is even an element of “suspense.” Some of the situations seem unlikely, but they are apparently rooted in fact.

Nesher, a veteran director, comments, “World War II ended in 1945 and it took the world seven decades but finally everyone seems to have moved on—everyone, that is, except for the sons and daughters of those Holocaust survivors, the very people who constitute the vast majority of the population of my homeland.”

He continues: “Slippery politicians know only too well how to press the Holocaust button and activate reactions that would do Pavlov proud. ... [The Holocaust] is a deeply rooted trauma that is very difficult to overcome, but overcome it we must if our children are to have a future.”

Nesher, however, seems to have a limited notion of what “overcoming” the past would mean. It seems simply bound up with “forgiveness,” “reconciliation” and similar concepts. He has set the film when he did for a reason. *Past Life*’s production notes explain: “1977 is the same year Egyptian president Sadat decided to break the shackles of history and bravely embark on a peace process with Israel. In many ways this is exactly what the two sisters need to do as they travel throughout Europe, bent on uncovering the past and getting to the truth behind their parents’ darkest secret.” This is a poor comparison on every score.

The desire to promote reconciliation as such perhaps helps explain the somewhat unconvincing, pat final scenes, during which various attempts are made to bring Dr. Milch and his wife together with Agnieszka Zielinska.

For the most part though, the film is intensely and richly written and performed. The sense of historical nightmare hanging over the various characters is palpable. Tavory is particularly memorable.

Past Life is inspired by Dr. Baruch Milch’s autobiography *Can Heaven Be Void?* Milch’s diary was brought to Nesher’s attention by Milch’s daughter, Ella Sheriff. Sheriff explained to an interviewer: “It was terrifying to know that our parents had a secret, but never knowing what it might be. In fact, the atmosphere was consistently grim. There was never a feeling of a happy childhood. We could not share our own distressing experiencing with our parents, either, and yet on the other hand we girls were always overprotected, especially by our father, and we could not understand where this anxiety was coming from, the constant fear of loss.”

Shedding light on the mentality of many of those who emigrated to Israel after the war, Sheriff pointed to her father’s personal “Ten Commandments,” which include: “Thou shall have no other Gods before yourself,” “Do only that which benefits you, and do not sacrifice for others,” “Toughen your heart and do not heed it,” “Do not get too close to people, and do not bring them closer to you,” and “Do not be gullible, and trust no one.”

Ember, Noces, Moonlight

Ember is a film from Turkey, written and directed by Zeki Demirkubuz. It’s an odd film, with a lot of intensity and three interesting performances, but somewhat dull or blunted in its outlook and impact.

A singular “love triangle” includes Emin (Aslihan Gürbüz), an Istanbul seamstress, Cemal (Caner Cindoruk), her husband who, when the film opens, has gone to Romania leaving debts behind him, and Ziya (Taner Bırsel), her husband’s former boss.

With Cemal away, Emin turns to Ziya for help paying for her son’s surgery. The suave, cultured Ziya has always been in love with the beautiful woman. She is grateful. One thing leads to another. Cemal’s return then complicates matters. He demands to know how the expensive medical bills were paid for, and beats the answer out of his wife.

Ziya eventually hires Cemal to a good position. Meanwhile, the jealous husband demands a divorce. Ziya has a serious accident. Emin and Cemal may be stuck with one another, after all.

As noted above, the goings-on are intense, but what larger point is being made? The “proletarian” Cemal is bitter and impotent in his rage, Ziya seems opportunistic and Emin passive. If Demirkubuz is getting at the general impasse of Turkish society, its overall incapacities, his conclusions are unclear and take a long time coming.

Written and directed by Stefan Streker, *Noces* (*A Wedding*) takes on the question of “honor killings.” The film centers on a teenage girl, Zahira (Lina El Arabi), belonging to a Pakistani immigrant family in Belgium.

Zahira’s parents, who mean well for her, insist that Zahira marry a man of their choosing. Zahira is a fully “Europeanized” adolescent girl, who has no intention of doing any such thing. She even has a Belgian boy friend. She turns to a trusted friend and to her beloved brother for help. Everything goes horribly wrong.

But it goes horribly wrong in fairly predictable and limited fashion. Streker, basing himself on a 2007 case, explains: “I tried to keep the narrative as far away as possible from the notion of ‘the good’ on one side and ‘the wicked’ on the other. As a filmmaker, I felt it was important to give each character the chance to win our sympathy. The judgement remains in the eyes of the spectator.” Streker approaches matters intelligently, but also somewhat blandly. In any case, he misses the point. “Honor killings,” as repugnant as they are, are not the driving force behind anti-Muslim bigotry, the geopolitical ambitions of the US and the European powers are.

The film festival highlighted a number of films from Lagos, Nigeria, this year, including *Green White Green* (Abba Makama) and *Oko Ashewo* (*Taxi Driver*, Daniel Emeke Oriahi). (Joanne Laurier has already briefly commented on 76, directed by Izu Ojukwu.) The two former films seemed relatively slight, but the performances reveal a liveliness and earthy sense of humor. No doubt there is great talent in Lagos. Like every other cinema, Nigerian cinema faces the challenge of investigating deeply and challenging the status quo.

Barry Jenkins has directed *Moonlight*, set in Miami in three acts. The film follows a black youth living in the slums, as a child, a teenager and a young man. He is played by three actors. Drugs, bullying, poverty and complex sexual longings all come into play. Mahershala Ali, a gifted performer, makes a memorable appearance as a mentor of sorts. The film is sensitively done, and when it comes out, we will write a proper review.

Likewise, we will review Terence Davies’ *A Quiet Passion*, James Franco’s *In Dubious Battle* and Ewan McGregor’s *American Pastoral* when they become generally available.

All in all, an interesting year.

Concluded



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