

San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 3

War (*The Stopover*), scientific progress (*Marie Curie*), the police (*The Force*) and other issues

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This is the third in a series of articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 5-19. The first part was posted April 26 and the second on April 29.

“... Burning farms, wasted fields, shrieking women, slaughtered sons and fathers, and drunken soldiery, cursing and carousing in the midst of tears, terror, and murder. Why does the stately Muse of History, that delights in describing the valor of heroes and the grandeur of conquest, leave out these scenes, so brutal, mean, and degrading, that yet form by far the greater part of the drama of war?” — Thackeray

The reality of the past quarter-century of wars, much less the threat of even greater ones, is a subject still rarely treated by filmmakers. And when it is treated, even excluding the obviously dishonest, jingoistic and nationalistic movies, the approach is often limited or wrongheaded. Honest films about the character and impact of the brutal neo-colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and elsewhere, are extremely hard to come by.

The Stopover (Voir du pays)

One such sincere work screened at this year’s San Francisco film festival was French filmmakers Delphine and Muriel Coulin’s *The Stopover (Voir du pays)*, a fiction film dealing with a French unit of young soldiers given three days of “decompression leave” after a tour of duty in Afghanistan.

The movie’s production notes explain that since 2008, French soldiers returning from war zones are taken to five-star hotels to undergo programs devised by army psychologists. It is part of an effort to eradicate or at least minimize the effects of psychic trauma before the service members are sent home.

The Coulin sisters’ film is set in Cyprus. The “decompression” involves the individual soldier reliving his or her worst experiences guided by therapists who manipulate “virtual reality” video imagery to correspond to the soldier’s narrative.

During their down time, the unit members intermingle with rich young tourists, and, in the case of two female soldiers, Aurore (Ariane Labed) and Marine (Soko), venture outside the hotel grounds to party with the locals. Fun in the sun for the body and

psychological computer games for the mind “won’t make us forget the war,” one says. The damaged psyches containing bottled-up horrors eventually explode, leading to an appalling incident between platoon members. Despite “going from burqas to thongs,” the question commonly asked is, “What the hell was I doing in Afghanistan?”

During one session, a soldier describes how “for days and nights on end” an Afghan man was tortured. “When they stopped, the guy went mad, and their f—ing 3-D images can’t show that.”

In the production notes, the directors, acknowledging that these young people are totally unprepared for what awaits them on the front lines, assert that we “have forgotten Afghanistan, almost forgotten Iraq, just as we would like to forget Syria. But these wars cannot be waged without consequences. It is impossible—and perhaps not really desirable—to forget war, these wars, whether we have participated from near or afar. We are reminded of this every day. *The Stopover* addresses this issue: how can we manage to live despite having experienced such a violent episode?

“Wars are spreading and multiplying everywhere. The inhabitants of countries at war are seeking asylum, passing through Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus. There is a link between these wars that we have waged and our current situation, which we refuse to see.”

This is a serious effort.

Marie Curie

Directed by French filmmaker Marie Noëlle, *Marie Curie: The Courage of Knowledge* treats six years in the life of the renowned physicist and chemist Marie Skłodowska Curie (1867-1934).

Having gained access to Curie’s diaries, the director has crafted an intelligent, engaging movie about a pioneer in the discovery and study of radioactivity, the first woman to win the Nobel Prize and the first person to win it twice. As the film makes clear, both Marie (Karolina Gruszka) and her husband Pierre (Charles Berling) were determined that their groundbreaking work should be used in the treatment of diseases such as cancer (“explore the healing force of radium”), proclaiming that “we’re scientists, not profiteers.”

The film's central drama occurs after Pierre's untimely death in a traffic accident. Being Polish and a woman, Marie perseveres against all obstacles in the male-dominated French scientific establishment.

This was the period of the anti-Semitic Dreyfus affair, which shook France from 1894 to 1906, during which right-wing elements attempted to whip up every ounce of chauvinist and xenophobic backwardness to counter the growth of socialism in the working class. The reactionary press speculated that Curie was Jewish, which she was not, and she was later attacked as a foreigner and an atheist. She once commented, "After all, science is essentially international, and it is only through lack of the historical sense that national qualities have been attributed to it."

In Noëlle's film, Curie has further cause to stand up to the scandalmongers when she unrepentantly begins an affair with a married colleague and mathematician, Paul Langevin (Arieh Worthalter). Shocked, the Swedish Nobel Academy insists that she forgo making the journey to Stockholm to receive her second Nobel award.

An encounter with Albert Einstein (Piotr Glowacki) is a charming moment in the film.

In an interview, the filmmaker Noëlle observed that when "World War I started, she rebuilt and repurposed cars into mobile X-ray labs and went to the front line. This way, she saved the lives of many soldiers and spared them from amputations. She had to fight for that because many doctors didn't want to have a woman on the front line. Curie even brought her 16-year-old daughter with her, who also worked there."

The movie's postscript notes that Marie's daughter, Irène Joliot-Curie, and her son-in-law, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, went on to jointly win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1935. These were all remarkable figures.

The Force

Other lesser films at the festival include *The Force* by Peter Nicks, a documentary about the Oakland, California police force. Embedded in the police department from 2014 to 2016, the filmmakers were "following these cops around and trying to understand who becomes a cop and why, which was the central question of the initial concept of the film," according to Nicks.

His diffuse liberal outlook, however, proves thoroughly inadequate in the face of Oakland's high levels of poverty and the anger of its residents against their treatment at the hands of the police. Nonetheless, the only protests his camera manages to capture are those led by the middle class racialsists of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The movie's screening in San Francisco was followed by a question-and-answer session in which a number of the policemen featured in the film, as well as a clergyman, who was shown preaching non-violence, were brought onto the stage as sort of Blue Lives Matter heroes. Missing were any of the family members of the numerous victims of law enforcement.

From Spain: the most notable and intriguing features of Chico Pereira's *Donkeyote* are its clever title and the donkey around which the story revolves.

Manolo, a 73-year-old man in northern Spain, has a plan to spend his retirement years following the 2,200 mile Trail of Tears (the series of forced removals of Native American populations in the American South during the 1830s). But the problem is how to bring along Manolo's adorable donkey, Gorrión. It's possible that the filmmaker intended to make a statement about the irrationality of borders, among other issues, but if so, the message does not come across especially loudly or clearly.

Somewhat more substantial is *The Cinema Travellers* from India by Shirley Abraham and Amit Madheshiya. The documentary's subject is the Indian phenomenon of mobile tent cinemas, which attempt—apparently without a lot of success—to show movies in far-flung and poor villages. The traveling cinemas now face extinction and the protagonists trying to eke out an existence in this cottage industry with a long tradition are not always the most savory human specimens, a reality that makes the movie less emotionally accessible.

Jem Cohen's *World Without End (No Reported Incidents)* is a picturesque but condescending documentary focusing on a few quirky residents—Cohen's direction, in many cases, undoubtedly makes them appear more quirky than they are—in Southend-on-Sea, forty miles east of central London.

Filmed in the seven years since the massive, deadly 2010 earthquake, Owsley Brown's *Serenade for Haiti* is a well-intentioned, but politically and socially blunt documentary about a Port-au-Prince music school and its impact on a ravaged population.

And *Half-Life in Fukushima* is a passive nonfiction film by Mark Olexa and Francesca Scalisi about the life of a Japanese farmer who attempts to salvage his property in the deserted "radiation red zone" five years after the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Images of the lifeless, post-catastrophic landscape are chilling.

To be continued



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